



CLASH OF THE TITANS & INDIA'S ASIA PACIFIC PREDICAMENT

Subhadeep Bhattacharya¹

Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata

Abstract:

The strategic notion of the Indo-Pacific revolves primarily around the perception of China's assertive rise and the potential decline of the US-led liberal international order, triggering strategic competition and rivalry between rising and dominant powers. Unlike the term 'Asia-Pacific', which emerged in the 1960s and emphasised the partnership between the economic giants of the time, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has more strategic and political connotations. India is considered an important component of this strategy. The USA wishes to involve India in its grand 'Indo-Pacific' strategic design, especially to counter the Chinese challenge in the East Asia/Pacific region. To this end, it has promoted India's growing association with its East Asian and Pacific allies. However, the nature of the strategy suggests that it is more Pacific than 'Indo', and India has limited scope to contribute significantly, given its preoccupation with handling the geostrategic challenges emanating from its belligerent neighbours in South Asia.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, India, USA, China, geopolitics.

Titulo en Español: *El choque entre titanes y la difícil situación de la India en Asia-Pacífico*

Resumen:

La noción estratégica del Indo-Pacífico gira principalmente en torno a la percepción del ascenso decidido de China y el posible declive del orden internacional liberal liderado por Estados Unidos, lo que desencadena una competencia estratégica y una rivalidad entre las potencias emergentes y las ya dominantes. A diferencia del término «Asia-Pacífico», que surgió en la década de 1960 y hacía hincapié en la asociación entre los gigantes económicos de la época, el término «Indo-Pacífico» tiene connotaciones más estratégicas y políticas. La India se considera un componente importante de esta estrategia. Estados Unidos desea involucrar a la India en su gran diseño estratégico «Indo-Pacífico», especialmente para contrarrestar el desafío chino en la región de Asia Oriental/Pacífico. Con este fin, ha promovido la creciente asociación de la India con sus aliados de Asia Oriental y el Pacífico. Sin embargo, la naturaleza de la estrategia sugiere que es más «Pacífico» que «Indo», y la India tiene un margen limitado para contribuir de manera significativa, dada su preocupación por los retos geoestratégicos que plantean sus beligerantes vecinos en el sur de Asia.

Palabras Clave: *Indo-Pacífico, Asia-Pacífico, India, EE. UU., China, geopolítica.*

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¹ Subhadeep Bhattacharya is a freelance academic and Adjunct Researcher at the Asia in Global Affairs, Kolkata.
E-mail: <subhadeepb2013@gmail.com>
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1. Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific?

States usually frame definitions of regions to suit their own purposes. The Asia-Pacific region is generally understood as encompassing countries of the Pacific Basin from the coast of Russia and China in the west to USA and Canada in the east and shores of Japan and the Korean peninsula in the north to that of Australia and New Zealand in the south covering Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island countries. This heterogeneous geographic entity was given a concrete shape by bringing all these countries under banner of Asia Pacific Economic Community or APEC forum to promote extensive and sizable economic relations. India was perceived as an outsider to this Asia-Pacific grouping. India attempted to join the APEC since 1989 but only in vain since it was not seen part of the Asia-Pacific regional identity and also because its economy was not 'liberated' enough for the economic integration that APEC aimed for. Besides, most East Asia/Asia Pacific countries found little reason with India at strategic level. India also initially did not show much strategic interest in East Asia until the end of Cold War and especially at the turn of the new century when both sides began to take strategic interest in each other. These endeavours got a renewed boost with the unveiling of the Indo-Pacific strategy by many East Asia/Pacific countries including USA. However, question arises how much 'Indo' is USA's Indo-Pacific design and how far India can be a fillip to the strategy?

Is the term 'Asia Pacific' fast slipping into obscurity with the introduction of the 'Indo-Pacific'? Apparently, it looks the term struggles to remain relevant but only in its economic format under the APEC banner. The Indo-Pacific term is the successor of the Asia-Pacific as a maritime geostrategic notion merging the China-centric grand geostrategic design of the Asia-Pacific region to that of the Indian Ocean maritime zone. Former Japanese premier Shinzo Abe first merged the two adjacent maritime regions as a common geostrategic platform in his address to the Indian Parliament in 2007, "*The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A "broader Asia" that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form.*"²

The term Asia-Pacific dates back to 1960s and 1970s when the term was floated by USA, Australia and Japan to link East Asia with wider Pacific region just to legitimize US' role in the larger East Asian geopolitical affairs since it cannot describe itself as an East Asian country. The term 'East Asia' is geographically limited and excludes important players like USA and Australia. USA played its part in establishing the concept of Asia Pacific.³ However, some scholars claim that the term Asia-Pacific was pushed by Japan and Australia in the 1970s and 1980s fearing possible US unravelling from the regional geopolitical scene following the Vietnam War fiasco.⁴ Therefore the Asia-Pacific term bore geostrategic deliberations in the East Asian theatre while Indo-Pacific term extends that same towards further west after it was proposed by the USA in 2018. This was underlined specifically by then US Defence Secretary James Mattis who, while renaming US Asia-Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command, said, "Over many decades this command has repeatedly adapted to changing circumstance and today carries that legacy forward as America focuses West."⁵ The term 'Indo-Pacific' is classified as

² 'Confluence of Two Seas', Speech by H.E Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of Republic of India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 22 August 2007, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>, emphasis added

³ McDogall, Derek: *Asia Pacific in World Politics*, Boulder, USA, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007, p.6, at

⁴ Brewster, David, 'Australia's view of the Indo-Pacific concept', India Foundation, 5 January 2021, at <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/australias-view-of-the-indo-pacific-concept/>

⁵ Martinez, Luis: 'US Pacific Command renamed Indo-Pacific Command', *ABC News*, 31 May 2018, at <https://abcnews.go.com/US/us-pacific-command-renamed-us-indo-pacific-command/story?id=55539935>



an amalgam of Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region into an expanded theatre of power competition.⁶

However, this renaming could hardly ride out brickbats. *Global Times* claims that what USA “refers to as the “Indo-Pacific” is essentially what people commonly call the “Asia-Pacific.”⁷ China expostulates with this latest incarnation of the region and sticks to its previous term.⁸ Even Russia also refuses to acknowledge the ‘Indo-Pacific’ term saying it never existed.⁹ On the other hand the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ is viewed by a section in the academic circle as narration of convergence of two great oceanic systems along with their communities and cultures, transcending the conventional geostrategic discourse.¹⁰

Even though the ‘Indo-Pacific’ term is used boisterously, its focus seems more on the East Asia/Pacific region. In his speech at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, the US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, while underlining Donald Trump administration’s emphasis on augmenting the deterrence capacity of its Indo-Pacific allies, narrated USA’s burgeoning defence ties with Asia-Pacific countries, mainly Japan, the Philippines and Australia. He also mentioned about maritime security consortium or MARSEC (with Southeast Asia) to build and sustain maritime-domain awareness to deliver real operational effects by employing unmanned aircraft and vessels.¹¹ Ely Ratner (US Assistant Secretary to the Defence Department for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs between 2021-2025) writes how USA crafted alliance throughout ‘Indo-Pacific’ (during the Cold War period when the term was not even coined) while referring to its security pacts with the Asia-Pacific countries-Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia.¹²

Indeed, USA has been ubiquitous throughout the Asia-Pacific defence alliance network it meticulously constructed since the last world war. The San Francisco System (SFS), as the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region is commonly known, originated through the post-World War II peace treaty with Japan at the San Francisco Conference in 1951. One of its key features was to shape bilateral security alliances with the major Pacific nations through a hub-and-spokes network.¹³ From South Korea and Japan in the north, to Australia and New Zealand in the south, Asia Pacific eventually ensconced itself within the US defence network through

⁶ Doyale, Timothy, Dennis Rumley: *The Rise & Return of the Indo-Pacific*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.5

⁷ ‘The Asia-Pacific does not need zero-sum ‘single answer question’, *Global Times Editorial*, 20 July 2025, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202507/1338829.shtml>

⁸ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference on August 29, 2025”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202508/t20250829_11698363.html

⁹ ‘Indo-Pacific Region Never Existed, Made Up to Drag India Into Anti-China Schemes’: Russian FM Lavrov’, *The Wire*, 31 May 2025, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/indo-pacific-region-never-existed-made-up-to-drag-india-into-anti-china-schemes-russian-fm-lavrov>

¹⁰ See Doyale, Timothy, Dennis Rumley, *op cit*

¹¹ ‘United States New Ambitions For Indo-Pacific Security’, Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Defence, 22nd Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, First Plenary Session, Saturday, 31 May, 2025, at file:///C:/Users/HP%20PC/Downloads/sld2025_firstplenarysession_pete-hegseth_as-delivered-9.pdf. The US Defence Department announced MARSEC, a new public-private initiative focused on transforming maritime security in Southeast Asia in November 2024, at ‘DoD Launches Industry-Government Maritime Security (MARSEC) Consortium to Advance Maritime Security Across Southeast Asia’, at <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3968018/dod-launches-industry-government-maritime-security-marsec-consortium-to-advance/>

¹² Ratner, Ely: “The Case for the Pacific Defence Pact: America Needs a new Asian Alliance to Counter China”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 4 (July/August 2025), p.39

¹³ Tow, William T. & Acharya, Amitav: “Obstinate or Obsolete? The US alliance structure in the Asia-Pacific”, Working Paper 2007/4, Canberra, 2007, Published by Department of International Relations, Australian National University, at <file:///C:/Users/amarq/Downloads/Tow-AcharyaWorkingPaperObstinateorObsolete.pdf>, p.41



bilateral security agreements by the middle of the Cold War period. The strategic interests of these allies were congruent to that of USA and that was meant to contain communist China's threat hovering over East Asia.

The traditional balance of power theory suggests that states will join alliances to avoid domination by stronger powers. The weak states feel to curb a potential hegemon turning too strong since otherwise they put their existence at risk.¹⁴ This was indeed the driving force behind the construction of the SFS system where the weak Asia-Pacific powers were scared of Sino-Soviet dominance and thus joined US-led alliance network. On the other hand, according to some theorists the great powers bear the responsibility to uphold international peace and stability, which the weak powers cannot perform, even when the driving force behind such motive remains promotion of national interests.¹⁵ USA is performing this responsibility in Asia-Pacific. Throughout the Cold War period and till the first decade of this century USA was the dominant Asia-Pacific power in terms of both economic and military strength which neither China nor Japan could challenge even with region-wide interests.

Asia-Pacific region has been the spotlight of USA's strategic formulation. And the reason is embedded in the presence of then ideological and now economic and military adversary China, hovering strongly over the major East Asian flash points-Korean Peninsula, East China Sea, Taiwan and South China Sea. International relations of the Asia-Pacific have been dominated by the Sino-US confrontation since the 1950s after China fell to the communists and became an ally of the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Such hostility has now taken a new form with the rise of economically powerful and militarily stronger China. A combative China will send the initial wave to the shores of the East Asia and the Pacific with simmering flash points -Taiwan and the South China Sea. Thus when US Defence Secretary Hegseth accuses China of attempting to 'fundamentally alter the status quo of the region',¹⁷ he presumably refers to these flash points in the Asia-Pacific region. General opinion, therefore, suggests Washington should intensify a consistent U.S. naval and air presence in the South and East China Seas, and accelerate the U.S. ballistic-missile defence posture in the Pacific.¹⁸ There is proposal to augment the U.S. deterrence capacity vis-à-vis Chinese military modernization mission by formulating Pacific Defence Pact binding Asia-Pacific countries-Japan, the Philippines and Australia-to U.S deterrence network.¹⁹ Thus, the 'Indo-Pacific' focus of both at the American government and the academic circles currently centre on the Asia-Pacific which is truly a potential zone of major conflict. The concept of Indo-Pacific is China-centric, especially in the context of East Asia and the Pacific region, triggering strategic competition and rivalry between USA and China.

Therefore, the term 'Indo-Pacific' appertains to broader Asia-Pacific geostrategic calibration gravitating the Indian Ocean region geostrategically towards the Asia-Pacific zone. And the motive behind this integration is to pitchfork India to the Asia-Pacific geopolitical

¹⁴ Cited in Walt, Stephen M.: "Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power", *International Security*, Vol 9, n° 4 (Spring 1985), p.6

¹⁵ Odgaard, Liselotte, (2007): *The Balance of Asia-Pacific Security: US-China Policies on Regional Order*, London, Routledge, p.44

¹⁶ However, at the time of the World War II, USA expected China (then under the nationalists Koumintang led by Chiang Kai-shek) to replace vanquished imperial Japan in East Asia and thus allowed Nationalist China permanent seat at the newly formed United Nations Security Council but was disappointed by the rise of communist China which it considered a fillip to the Soviet Union. MacDougall, Derek, *op cit*, p.12

¹⁷ United States New Ambitions for Indo-Pacific Security', Pete Hegseth, *op cit*

¹⁸ Blackwill, Robert D., Tellis Ashley J.: "Revising U.S Grand Strategy Toward China", Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report n° 72, March 2015, at https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Tellis_Blackwill.pdf

¹⁹ Ratner, Elly, *Foreign Affairs*, *op cit*, p.38



scene. This was underlined by the USA in 2018 when the first Trump administration, unveiling Indo-Pacific Command, said that USA lies in the east and India in the west of the Indo-Pacific region which includes China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, Oceania, Australia and New Zealand.²⁰ So the geostrategic focus remains unaltered, only US' Asia-Pacific strategic network is expanded to add a new ally, an ecumenical attempt against a common strategic challenge. This was not the first attempt however.

2. India in U.S' Asia-Pacific strategy

All the US administrations, since the turn of the new century, have been attempting to integrate India in the larger US defence network of the Asia-Pacific region. India-U.S strategic relations were distant and often strained throughout the Cold War period. This was because, apart from India-USSR strategic partnership, India refused to accept predominant role of the USA in then international system while Washington was reluctant to cede predominance to India in South Asia. The scene changed with the end of the Cold War and the relation was boosted further during the presidency of George W. Bush. The Bush administration wanted to raise India as a counterweight to China and thus resolved to push India's rise as great power. One CIA report termed India as the 'most important swing state in the international system.'²¹ There were attempts to integrate India to the grand US' Asia-Pacific geostrategic design since the end of the Cold War. The Hawaii-based U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) engaged with Indian military in early 1990s establishing Executive Steering Groups to coordinate cooperation between the three services of the two countries. The USPACOM (now Indo-Pacific Command) had its jurisdiction extending to the western border of India.²² One of the leaked US Defence Department reports of the time quoted an anonymous American admiral saying that USA should view Indian military power as a future hedge against China in the Asia-Pacific region.²³ In May 2002, US Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, Douglas Feith, convened 'US-India Defence Policy Group' in Washington to formulate strategic cooperation on issues including joint naval patrol in the Malacca Straits.²⁴ As a part of this joint patrolling, Indian Navy ships, *Sukanya* and *Sharda*, helped escort US ships through Malacca Straits in support of 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.²⁵ It is, however, to be remembered that the 9/11 tragedy had diverted the Bush administration's attention towards combating terrorism and resultantly relegated the China factor in its priority list. India regained its position in US' Asia-Pacific strategy after Barrack Obama entered White House in 2009 and unveiled his 'Asia Pivot Policy'. The "pivot to Asia" was a foreign policy initiative of Obama administration to shift strategic focus and resources from Europe and West Asia (Middle East) to East and Southeast Asia. And the new administration was looking forward to India in its mission. This was underlined by President Obama himself in his speech he delivered to the Indian Parliament in 2010;

²⁰ 'Indo-Pacific over 'Asia-Pacific' reflects India's rise: US Official', *The Economic Times*, 11 July 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indo-pacific-over-asia-pacific-reflects-indias-rise-us-official/articleshow/61519684.cms?from=mdr>

²¹ Brewster, David (2012): *India as an Asia Pacific Power*, London, New York, Routledge, p.50

²² *Ibid*, pp.-53-4

²³ Tow, William T. & Acharya Amitav (2007), *op cit*, p.14

²⁴ "Joint Statement on India-US Joint Defense Policy Group, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India", 23 May 2002, at

<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7570/Joint+Statement+of+IndiaUS+Defense+Policy+Group>

²⁵ 'Navy's escort mission to US ships still on', *Times of India*, 17 July 2002, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/navys-escort-mission-to-us-ships-still-on/articleshow/16204626.cms>. Operation Enduring Freedom was the official name used by the U.S. government for both the first stage of the war in Afghanistan and related military operations during broader-scale global war on terrorism.



“Today, the United States is once again playing a leadership role in Asia-strengthening old alliances; deepening relationships, as we are doing with China; and we're reengaging with regional organizations like ASEAN and joining the East Asia summit-organizations in which India is also a partner. Like your neighbors in Southeast Asia, we want India to not only "look East," we want India to "engage East"-because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations.”²⁶

That the Obama administration wants India more in its larger Asia-Pacific game was hinted by its Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, William Burns, who in 2010 lamented that India sometimes had hard times to realize how far its influence and interests have taken it beyond its immediate neighbourhood.²⁷ The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in its 2010 report to the US Congress underlined that “China is interested in being a prominent extraregional actor in Southeast Asia in order to balance influence from the United States, Japan, Australia, the European Union, and India.”²⁸ In this way, while the report acknowledged India's prominence in Southeast Asia it also instantly integrated it with that of USA and its Asia-Pacific allies' interests in the region. China's growing shadow over the East Asian geo-economic structure, especially South China Sea, indeed triggered trepidation drawing the India and USA closer. The unveiling of the Indo-US Joint Strategic Vision at the twilight of the Obama era in 2015 emphasized on regional maritime security and freedom of navigation in and around South China Sea with a silent reference to the growing footprints of China in the maritime zone.²⁹ The fact that the projects under Chinese Maritime Silk Road³⁰ network pushing regional connectivity and infrastructure would pass through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean is enough to rattle both New Delhi and Washington. Therefore, the Joint Strategic Vision was interpreted as an acknowledgement of the need for collective security between India and USA amidst the emerging security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region³¹ with focus on Chinese activities in East Asian scene.

The first Trump administration, enthroned in 2016, articulated the boundary of the 'Indo-Pacific' for the first time in its 2017 National Security Strategy report where it said that the region runs from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States.³² In this report the administration, while attacked China's growing geopolitical aspirations in the what it calls Indo-Pacific region, maintained that it seeks to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India.³³ As mentioned earlier, next year in 2018, the Trump administration

²⁶ “Full text of Obama speech in Parliament”, *India Today*, 8 November 2010, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/obama-visit/latest-updates/story/full-text-of-obama-speech-in-parliament-85230-2010-11-07>

²⁷ Cited in Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.62

²⁸ ‘2010 report to Congress on US-China Economic and Security Review Commission’, November 2010, at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2010-Report-to-Congress.pdf, p.120

²⁹ “U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region”, Office of Press Secretary, White House, 25 January 2015, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>

³⁰ The Maritime Silk Road (launched in 2013) contributes to China's maritime renaissance and serves China's core interests. These include expanding its \$1.2 trillion blue, or maritime-based, economy, improving food and energy security, securing sea lines of communication and furthering its international discourse power. For details see Ghiasy, Richard, Fei Siu, Lora Saalman: ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, SIPRI Executive Summary, at

https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/the_21st_century_maritime_silk_road_executive_summary.pdf

³¹ Baruah, Darshana M.: ‘India-U.S Joint Strategic Vision: A New Regional Role for Delhi?’, *RSIS Commentary*, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, n° 20, 2 February, 2015, at <https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CO15020.pdf>

³² ‘National Security Strategy of the United States of America’, December 2017, at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, pp.45-6.

³³ *Ibid*, p.46



renamed US Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command to project an integrated power competition theatre (with India) focusing on Chinese challenge in the Asia-Pacific region. This was hinted in the report saying, “Our vision for the Indo-Pacific excludes no nation. We will redouble our commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners that share respect for sovereign-, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law... We will expand our defense and security cooperation with India, a major defense Partner of the United States and support India’s growing relationships throughout the region.”³⁴ The US’ continued attempt to integrate India into the Asia-Pacific strategy was articulated with revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or ‘Quad’ when the Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held talks with his counterparts from USA, Japan, Australia in New York in September 2019 ‘deepening of our cooperation to advance openness and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, according to US State Department.’³⁵

3. Asia-Pacific in India’s Strategy

India was not considered a factor to reckon with the Asia-Pacific geostrategic equation throughout the Cold War period. This was partly because of India’s internal challenges and its negative equations with its neighbours in South Asia which shackled it to the South Asian confinement and constrained it in its international role in terms of power projection.³⁶ Besides, Indian geostrategic deliberations, for long, had been continental in character. This continental mindset emanated from the British India’s defence policy which was predominantly land oriented. The British had concentrated on securing the land border from the Russians in the west. Besides, Indian subcontinent has historically been subject to invasion via land route from the west. After the transfer of power in 1947, sovereign India inherited this British defence policy securing its land border against the newly founded hostile-state Pakistan in the west and later China in the north of its border. The fact that India is not only a land but a maritime nation as well did not occur to the policy makers because of these threats which kept their defence perceptions land oriented. It is also pertinent to mention here that since 1947, India’s defence formulations were focused mainly on defending the subcontinental land border thus failed to come up with an all-encompassing national strategy defining a holistic approach to the maritime zone around it. If history had its role in shaping India’s land-based defence orientation, the lack of ‘expansionist military tradition’, as mentioned by George Tanham, inhibited any aggressive design beyond the Indian subcontinent. Tanham writes that because of its rich resources India (historically) developed within its own boundaries and its people along the vast Indo-Gangetic plains became increasingly involved in their internal affairs and thus lacked an incentive to expand.³⁷ He writes that independent India sees itself as continuing this tradition of non-aggression and non-expansion outside the subcontinent.³⁸

The vast maritime zone around it remained outside serious Indian defence deliberations throughout the Cold War period and it only started featuring with the onset of the economic liberalization in the post-Cold War era. India now embarked on the new mission of economic growth boosting commercial contacts with East Asia through its Look East Policy. Therefore, securing sea lanes of communication between Indian and the Pacific Ocean became a priority. And this priority pushed India for defence and strategic collaborations with the Southeast Asian

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp.46-7

³⁵ ‘Readout of U.S.-Australia-India-Japan Ministerial’ (“The Quad”), U.S Department of State, New York, 26 September 2019, at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/readout-of-u-s-australia-india-japan-ministerial-the-quad/>

³⁶ Gordon, Sandy: ‘India’s rise as an Asia-Pacific power: Rhetoric and reality’, Strategic Insights, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 2012, p.3

³⁷ Tanham, George K.: “Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay”, National Defense Research Institute, Rand Corporation, Issue 4207, p.54

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.55



countries. Thus, India started periodically holding joint naval exercises with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the Indian Ocean region since 1991, later joined by Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. In 1995 these exercises matured into the annual event of *Milan* series of naval manoeuvres. These initiatives not only showcased India's naval capabilities but also augmented interoperability with regional navies.³⁹ Besides promoting defence diplomacy through naval exercises, India boosted its engagement with the larger Asia-Pacific platform via ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) networks reaching out to the Asia-Pacific powers. This was highlighted by then Deputy Chairman of India's Planning Commission Jaswant Singh at the 31st ASEAN Ministerial Conference in Manila in 1998 where he said; "*Our Look East Policy will be integrated into a larger regionalization strategy which encompasses South Asia, the Indian Ocean Rim, Bay of Bengal and the Asia Pacific.*"⁴⁰ Thus India became full dialogue partner of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) sharing dais with Japan, China, Australia and of course USA. This was dramatic shift in India's policy which was previously apathetic towards multilateral security fora.⁴¹

To facilitate its projections towards Asia-Pacific, at the turn of the new century the Indian Navy focused on upgrading its base network. In 2005, the Far Eastern Naval Command was established at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago located at the mouth of the Malacca Straits linking the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. The Command's airfields brought the Malacca Straits, portion of the South China Sea within the operational radius of Indian fighter jets like Sukhoi SU-30K and SEPECAT Jaguar.⁴² India also embarked on bilateral naval exercises with Southeast Asian countries like Singapore (SIMBEX), enhanced defence cooperation with Vietnam with regular discussions between the defence ministers since 2000, established strategic partnership with Indonesia in 2005, agreed in 2005 on coordinated maritime patrols with the Thai Navy and signed defence agreement with the Philippines in 2006.⁴³

India, however, did not remain confined to the Southeast Asian frame and expanded its reach to the larger Asia-Pacific platform. At the turn of the new century, India extended the scope of its Look East Policy throughout the Asia Pacific encompassing the region 'extending from Australia to East Asia', as was narrated by then Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha in 2003.⁴⁴ Not even a member of larger East Asia Summit grouping, India was determined to expand its foothold in the Asia-Pacific zone. Thus Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared in his 2002 Singapore Lecture that geography and politics make India an

³⁹ Ladwig III, Walter C.: "India and the Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific", *Joint Force Quarterly*, n° 57 (April 2010), pp. 111-119

⁴⁰ "Statement by Deputy Chairman Planning Commission of India Jaswant Singh on the Occasion of ASEAN 31st Post Ministerial Conference (PMC 9+10) Plenary Session", 28 July 1998, Manila, at <https://asean.org/statement-by-deputy-chairman-planning-commission-of-india-jaswant-singh-on-the-occasion-of-the-asean-31st-post-ministerial-conferencespmc-910-plenary-session-july-28-1998-manila/>, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Ladwig III, Walter C.: 'Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East" and India's Emerging Influence in Asia-Pacific', *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, n° 2 (2009), p.94, Throughout the Cold War era, India was against defence collaborations like U.S sponsored Western defence alliance SEATO or CENTO in Asia. India welcomed the British withdrawal from 'East of Suez Policy' in late 1960s which guaranteed British security guarantee in Southeast Asia with military bases in Singapore and Malaysia. While visiting Southeast Asia in 1969 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi insisted that local players rather than super powers should fill the resultant power vacuum if created due to the British withdrawal. India emphasized on economic cooperation to resolve problems faced by then Southeast countries. See Bhattacharya, Subhadeep (2016): *Looking East Since 1947: India's Southeast Asia Policy*, New Delhi, KW Publishers Pvt Ltd., p.55

⁴² *Ibid*, p.95

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp.96-7

⁴⁴ "Speech by External Affairs Minister Sri Yashwant Sinha at Harvard University", 29 September 2003, Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/4744> (accessed on 08.12.2025)



important part of the Asia-Pacific community and does not require formal membership of any regional organization for its recognition or sustenance.⁴⁵ India extended its defence diplomacy with East Asian countries conducting joint naval exercises with South Korean navy in 2000, 2004 and again in 2006.⁴⁶ In 2007 South Korean defence minister visited India which was the first ever visit of any South Korean defence minister. India strengthened its partnership with Japan conducting reciprocal naval exercises in 2005 in both Indian Ocean and Sea of Japan. In 2006 the three service chiefs of the Japanese Self Defence Forces visited India while Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Tokyo to sign agreement to promote defence exchanges.⁴⁷ India tightened its 'Look East Policy' knot further with the Asia-Pacific through boosting its strategic ties with Australia.

Getting over the tensed bilateral tensions following the incandescent posture of Australia on India's nuclear test of 1998, Canberra acknowledged the growing importance of India in the geopolitical scene of the Asia-Pacific at the dawn of the new millennium. Canberra's eagerness to improve relations with India was reflected with its government's decision in 2011 to remove prohibition on sale of uranium to India. Besides, India's growing presence in the Asia-Pacific scene through its relations with Australia's Pacific neighbours, including Japan and Singapore, should also be considered in this context.⁴⁸ The two countries concluded several security related bilateral agreements including agreement on terrorism in 2003, memorandum on defence cooperation in 2006 and defence information sharing in 2007. Strategic cooperation between the two sides were boosted further with India-Australia Foreign Ministers Dialogue since 2001, annual meeting between the two defence ministers and the Annual Defence Policy Talks since 2010.⁴⁹

Growing importance of India, both economically and strategically, and expanding Chinese shadow beyond East Asia to the west eventually forced the East Asian leaders stop viewing South Asia and East Asia as two distinct strategic theatre. This was underlined by Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong who said in 2005; "*With the rise of India it will be less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theaters interacting only at the margins.... Reconceptualizing East Asia holistically is (a) strategic imperative.*"⁵⁰ As an articulation of this realization India was inducted in the East Asia Summit in 2005 and ASEAN Defence Ministers grouping ASEAN+ in 2010.

4. U.S-India Asia-Pacific strategy converges on China factor

The development of Indo-U.S strategic partnership since the dawn of this century transformed India's position in Asia-Pacific region paving the way for similar affiliation with U.S allies and friends in the region potentially legitimizing a direct security role for India in the area.⁵¹ The above mentioned series of initiatives taken by India to integrate further with the larger geostrategic landscape of Asia-Pacific if juxtaposed with the simultaneous developing grand U.S Asia-Pacific strategy underlines the fact that India and USA were on the same page in containing the 'rise of China.' In its 2006 report to the U.S Congress, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission expressed grave concern about China's 'seeming posture as a

⁴⁵ Cited in Mohan, C. Raja, (2012): "Samudra Manthan; Sino-India Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific", Carnegie Endowment, p.95

⁴⁶ Ladwig III (2009), *op cit*, p.98

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.100

⁴⁸ Brewster, David: *The India-Australia Security Engagement: Opportunities and Challenges*, Mumbai, Gateway House Research Paper n° 9, 2013, Indian Council of Global Relations, p.33

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp.33-4

⁵⁰ Cited in Mohan, C. Raja, *op. cit.*, p..96, emphasis added

⁵¹ Brewster, David (2012), *op cit*, p.17



potential counterweight to United States' including in East Asia.⁵²The report also expressed concern over the modernization of Chinese military saying that the People's Liberation Army 'is becoming a force capable of challenging the U.S military in the western Pacific and beyond.'⁵³

On the other hand, China has turned into a strategic challenge for India which it cannot handle single-handedly. However, India never wanted to invite any direct conflict with its northern neighbour since the geostrategic balance of its South Asian neighbourhood got severely disturbed since the 1962 border conflict with China and the subsequent rapport between China and Pakistan. India's bilateral relations with China are very complicated which cannot be viewed only in the context of border conflict. Both are aspiring great powers. However, the two countries have come to view each other warily for reasons which go beyond the bilateral quarrel.⁵⁴ As great powers they are bound to be rivals since great powers are fated to mistrust each other. Besides, both India and China are now attempting to expand into each other's 'area of influence' and it is an uncomfortable situation for both. This strategic fact is acknowledged by India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in his celebrated book *The India Way* where he says; "Getting used to each other's larger footprint will not be very easy for either nation. Just as China seeks to raise its profile in South Asia, India to will gradually do so in South-East Asia and East Asia."⁵⁵ Also, the rivalry emanates from power dynamics. The veto-bearing permanent membership at the United Nations Security Council (which China holds) is a token of great power status which Beijing refuses to endorse for New Delhi.⁵⁶ As Jaishankar points out how open China will be about India's claim for permanent membership at the Security Council will be a factor, from India's perspective, denoting level of Beijing's accommodative posture towards its southern neighbour.⁵⁷ Chinese thinkers, when place their country in the same league as USA, China does not see India as a fellow Great Power (which India herself does not claim yet) and has periodically referred to it as 'important power'. In China's hierarchical world view under *Tienxia* (ancient Chinese philosophy of tributary systems where dominant power would receive tributes from smaller powers⁵⁸) India is another small neighbour on the periphery of China, featured best in second tier Asian country, not even globally.⁵⁹ China, with its superior position, has often been assertive and insensitive towards India which has made India stand firm against Chinese challenge.⁶⁰

However, from classical Indian strategic or Kautalyan point of view, China should be regarded as rival. In his *Arthashastra*, Kautilya, the ancient Indian strategist, insists that a neighbouring king should be treated as an enemy and should be conquered and subjugated.⁶¹ Although India does not pursue any aggressive foreign policy vis-a-vis her neighbours, but at the same time, neither India nor China is disposed to be accommodative. When China, from a position of strength, does not feel the need to accommodate, India feels she cannot afford to do so risking her strategic autonomy.⁶² India's relationship with China, in the words of former

⁵² "Report to the Congress of the U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission", November 2006, at <https://www.uscc.gov> , p.6

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.8

⁵⁴ Bajpai, Kanti, (2021): *India Vs. China: Why They are not Friends?* New Delhi, Juggernaut Books, p.181

⁵⁵ Jaishankar Subrahmanyam (2020): *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, Noida, UP, Harper Collins Publishers India, p.150, emphasis added

⁵⁶ Bajpai, Kanit, *op cit*, p.49

⁵⁷ Jaishankar, Subrahmanyam, *op cit*, p.150

⁵⁸ Bajpai, Kanit, *op cit*, p.51

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.55

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.183

⁶¹ Shanbhag, D.N.: 'Foreign Policy of Kautilya', in Jha, V.N. (ed), (2009), *Kautilya's Arthashastra and Social Welfare*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, p.240

⁶² Bajpai, Kanti, *op cit*, p.183



Indian foreign secretary and Indian envoy to Beijing Nirupamna Rao, 'is a watchful one, marked by both detente and deterrence...'⁶³ Thus in this situation, India, even after concluding 'Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity' with China in 2005 but conscious of the power gap with it, views USA and the West as potential allies to contain it.⁶⁴

There is a general view in India that China, notwithstanding its claim of 'peaceful rise', is a long-term economic and military competitor of India.⁶⁵ India is uncomfortable with the gradual expansion of the periphery of the Chinese activities beyond the Pacific waters into the Indian Ocean region where India is the resident power. The construction of ports with Chinese money in India's neighbourhood, termed as 'String of Pearls',⁶⁶ are a strategic concern for New Delhi. In this situation thwarting China at its own backyard in the East Asia/Pacific region is a prudent policy. On the other hand, the continued naval cooperation between India and the China-wary East Asian and Pacific countries when augments interoperability of the regional navies can also be a helping hand for the USA which insists on sharing burden of containing China.

India has always been viewed as counterweight to China in East Asia. The legendary Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew had strong conviction that Southeast Asia needs India to cope China.⁶⁷ The induction of India in East Asian geopolitical forum like East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 denotes this fact. To many Indian commentators, India's inclusion in Asia-Pacific regional fora like EAS was a recognition that India was needed to prevent Beijing from dominating the institution. Despite Chinese opposition, South Korea championed India's inclusion in East Asian regional fora.⁶⁸ One of the reasons enhancing cooperation between India and Japan was that both considered China as a potential rival for primacy in broader region. China's military build up triggered trepidation in both New Delhi and Tokyo with experts commenting that China's military will overtake Japan in northeast Asia.⁶⁹ Mutual concerns about China's rise also pushed India and Australia come closer. Canberra's concern over growing Chinese activities in the Pacific waters, including South China Sea, converges with New Delhi's strategic calculations vis-a-vis China.

5. India's Predicament vis-a-vis US' Asia-Pacific Policy

This growing bonhomie between India and the Asia-Pacific allies is welcomed by USA which undoubtedly endorsed and promoted the gradual integration of India in the larger Asia-Pacific geostrategic domain. The best example of this endorsement is the formulation of the Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which brings in traditional US allies in the Asia-Pacific-Japan and Australia-with India and USA on the same platform. These direct and indirect efforts underline that fact that USA wants India to integrate further into the US-led 'hub and spokes' system in the Asia-Pacific region. However, it is easier said than done. The main hurdle in Indo-US relations is their respective vision about international relations which are contradictory. India's vision of multilateral world order free of super power domination challenges US' hegemonic position which, the latter views, is challenged by the rise of China.

⁶³ Rao, Nirupama: 'What Kind of Power Will India Be? Debating New Delhi's Grand Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 5 (July-August, 2025), p.187

⁶⁴ Bajpai, Kanti, *op cit*, p.45

⁶⁵ Ladwig III, Walter C., (2009), *op cit*, p.89

⁶⁶ 'String of Pearls' is a geopolitical hypothesis referring to the Chinese military and commercial facilities to facilitate its sea lanes of communication between Port Sudan and Chinese mainland with strategic maritime centres in Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

⁶⁷ Datta-Ray, Sundanda K., (2009): *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India*, Gurgaon, Haryana, India, Penguin Books, p.5

⁶⁸ Ladwig III, Walter C., (2009), *op cit*, pp.98, 99

⁶⁹ Ladwig III, Walter C., (2009), *op cit*, p.99



The idea of liberal international order rests on four key elements: free trade, post-war multilateral institutions, the growth of democracy, and liberal values.⁷⁰ USA upholds each of these elements and considers China as a challenger to them. The international order that was gradually constructed by the USA since the end of the last World War providing it hegemonic leadership—anchoring the alliances, stabilizing the world economy, fostering cooperation and championing ‘free world’ values- is now in crisis.⁷¹ There is a ‘decline thesis’ circulating in the academic circle which claims that US’ position and role in the world affairs is declining.⁷² USA is convinced that China, along with Russia, ‘is challenging the longstanding rules of the international system as well as US primacy within it’.⁷³ Thus USA has unveiled the ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy (which, as already mentioned, is more ‘Pacific’ than ‘Indo’) to contain China in its own neighbourhood in the Pacific with the help of the China-wary countries of the region. It wants an alliance of the ‘like-minded’ countries of the region to help it thwart this growing Chinese challenge.

However, there is a growing disappointment and irritation in USA over India’s apathy for formal defence alliance and its inclination for nonaligned status. Ashley Tellis, senior advisor to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs under Bush administration, has opined that, ‘If India wants to constrain Beijing, it will therefore need Washington’, but has complained that “India does not want to be part of any defence arrangement. Instead, it will zealously guard its nonaligned status.”⁷⁴ He has even accused India of not wanting a world in which USA is perpetually the sole super power and aims to thwart USA or any other power, including China, to aspire singular hegemonic dominance.⁷⁵ The American diplomat, while acknowledging India has realist inclination, says that it expects the support of USA and others to balance against China but without ‘having to make any onerous compromises to secure such assistance.’⁷⁶ In a way, Tellis is referring to the traditional USA’s peremptory alliance policy and wants India to be part of it.

However, to the Indian circle such querulous comments of Tellis look unconscionable. India’s former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao argues that India is not a delusional, as Tellis argues, but a liminal power ‘standing on geopolitical threshold deliberately navigating ambiguity to preserve flexibility and autonomy in a global order that is not simply cleaving in two but fracturing in more complicated ways.’⁷⁷ Commenting on Tellis’ criticism of India’s aversion to formal alliances, Rao says India’s policy is based on her Cold War experiences, particularly its ability to maintain autonomy amid competing super power pressures.⁷⁸ The Indian academia counters the aversion charge by pointing at US reluctance, under current Donald Trump administration, to engage in alliance-like commitment even with its long-

⁷⁰ Acharya, Amitav, ‘After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of Multiplex World Order’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 31, n° 3 (2017), p.271

⁷¹ Bhattacharya, Subhadeep: ‘Electoral Politics in the Maldives amid Shifting Asian Geopolitics’, in Mukherjee, Jhumpa, Singh Priya, Sengupta Anita (eds) (2025): *Electoral Politics in Asia: Transregional Dynamics*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, p.190

⁷² Acharya, Amitav (2014): *End of American World Order*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p.2

⁷³ ‘US faces ‘fragile world order amid Russia and China threat, intelligence chief warns’, *The Guardian*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/11/us-intelligence-china-russia>

⁷⁴ Tellis, Ashley, ‘India’s Great Power Delusions: How New Delhi’s Grand Strategy Thwarts its Grand Ambition’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 4(July/August 2025), pp. 54, 59

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.54

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.60

⁷⁷ Rao, Nirupama (2025), *op cit*, p.186

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.187



standing treaty allies.⁷⁹ It is argued that India is working to preserve a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific by deepening security and diplomatic cooperation.⁸⁰

The balance of power ensures that power is distributed in such a way that no single state gets scope to dominate others. Major powers prioritize maintenance of the balance of power to preserve the states system.⁸¹ In the Asia-Pacific scenario, USA is still the dominant power with its military prowess outmatches combined military power of China, Japan, Russia and India, part from its technology prowess and inventiveness.⁸² However, power balancing is not achieved by mere relative capabilities but needs diplomatic skills.⁸³ Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar has opined that; “*Balancing requires all major relationships to remain positively so that they can be used to make gains in the other.*”⁸⁴ The current Trump administration, even when accused of pondering to abandon US allies, insists that it ‘must work with our treaty allies...to align the actions of our allies and partners with our joint interest in preventing domination of any single competitor nation.’⁸⁵

This power balancing in the Asia-Pacific region is crucial for India also, primarily in the context of China’s rise. Balancing against China is a major imperative for India since an imbalance of power in China’s favour creates prospect for bipolar regional order with power divided between USA and China or even Chinese predominance in the event of US withdrawal from the region. Either situation will be considered inimical to India’s strategic interest.⁸⁶ Even Japan’s promotion of Indo-Pacific vision, when is premised on continuation of alliance with USA, also invests on coalition with Australia and India to compensate for a relative decline of USA and its possible retreat from Asia.⁸⁷ Therefore, India’s strategic aspirations compel it to work with USA and balance against China in the Asia-Pacific.⁸⁸ However, there are limitations to India’s level of engagement in US mission in the Asia-Pacific.

First and the foremost limitation is India’s security obligation in South Asia. India lives in a belligerent neighbourhood. A country’s security policy evolves through continued dialogue between its internal and external factors, especially true for a heterogeneous country like India with ‘turbulent frontiers.’⁸⁹ Since transfer of power in 1947, sovereign India encountered internal threats in the form of separatism in different pockets of the country which sometimes was sponsored by Pakistan, as in case of Kashmir today and in Khalistan rebellion in Punjab in the 1980s. Besides, the border conflict with China in 1962 and its eventual strategic bonhomie with Pakistan opened a new frontier for India forcing the Indian strategists to prepare for two-front war. Therefore, the strategic deliberations and military preparedness in India are mostly directed to India’s security in South Asian region. India’s strategic concern has traditionally been focused on how to achieve the strategic unity of the Indian subcontinent and protect it from incursions of outside powers.⁹⁰ Also, being the largest and dominant power of South Asia, India is compelled to exercise its ‘Monroe Doctrine’ successfully in the region which is

⁷⁹ Jaishankar, Dhruva: ‘The Nimble Power,’ *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 5 (July-August 2025), p.188

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.190

⁸¹ Odgaard, Liselotte, *op cit*, p.25

⁸² *Ibid*, p.46

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.26

⁸⁴ Jaishankar, Subrahmanyam, *op cit*, p.92, emphasis added

⁸⁵ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, November 2025, at www.whitehouse.gov

⁸⁶ Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.146

⁸⁷ Bajpai, Kanti: ‘Shinzo Abe and Indo-Pacific: Beyond a Quasi-Alliance’, Sanjaya Baru (ed) (2023): *The Importance of Shinzo Abe: India, Japan and the Indo-Pacific*, Gurgram, Haryana, Harper Collin Publishers, p.169

⁸⁸ Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.146

⁸⁹ Gordon, Sandy: ‘Domestic Foundation of India’s Security Policy’, in Babbage, Ross, Sandy Gordon (eds) (1992): *India’s Strategic Future: Regional States and Global Power*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, p.6

⁹⁰ Cohen, Stephen P. (2002): *Emerging Power: India*, Oxford University Press, p.10



seriously challenged by Sino-Pak rapport. Thus, India cannot afford to align too closely with USA which might entangle it with great power conflicts or retaliation from regional adversaries (China and Pakistan). Unlike USA with borders buffered by oceans, India's borders are live fault lines which compels India pursue a detente-deterrence policy vis-a-vis China to manage competition without conflict.⁹¹ India is well aware of the risk associated with the coalition of USA and its allies provoking China in South Asia and Indian Ocean region⁹² and thus avoids any militaristic approach via Quad. Given the geostrategic reality of South Asian belligerent neighbourhood, such a situation is undesirable for India. Therefore, India wishes to expand its strategic weight in the Asia-Pacific region without colliding with China openly.⁹³

Another limitation is India's strong inclination for upholding its strategic autonomy. It cannot afford to be marked as junior partner of a super power like USA. This passion for strategic autonomy highlights India's traditional foreign policy inclination for non-alignment. Its first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who is considered as the framer of sovereign India's foreign policy principles, insisted that India should not forsake its freedom of action by entering into alliances which would demand adherence to uniform policies.⁹⁴ India has always maintained this principle and thus avoided joining any defence alliance. There has always been a lack of understanding and appreciation in consecutive US administrations about this principled approach of Indian foreign policy. John Foster Dulles, President Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, called India's nonalignment policy as immoral.⁹⁵ There has not been much change in US perception since then. Thus buying oil from Russia amid its current war with Ukraine, when denotes exercise of India's strategic autonomy to the Indian strategists, USA punishes India with tariffs on the latter's exports to US market. However, India can hardly forsake its independence of action in international affairs. India's current policy is viewed as a new nonaligned role in developing Asian strategic order. India is considered as destined to be a 'fencesitter' in Asia being a relative equidistant and nonaligned between the two poles of China and USA coalition.⁹⁶

Another factor that works against any febrile involvement of India in USA's Asia-Pacific balance of power strategy is its reception by the lesser powers of the region, especially the ASEAN countries. Many Southeast Asian countries are not ready to take costly steps against China by joining any balancing act. On the contrary they want a balanced distribution of power through developing balanced role for extra-regional powers.⁹⁷ Besides, on the question of thwarting China's rise, the ASEAN is a divided house. When the Philippines is currently excited about U.S' 'contain China' policy, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore prefer low-profile and balanced approach. Singapore is clearly in favour of balancing China only within ambit of competing interests of several big powers in the region rather than on linking its fortunes to one overbearing power. According to former prime minister of the City-State Lee Hsien Loong; "The big powers can keep one another in check and will prevent any one of them dominating the entire region and so allow small states to survive in the interstices between them."⁹⁸ Such an approach is both prudent and acceptable to these small China-wary ASEAN countries. Thus, they prefer multilateral approach with China via ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit with China as member which promote dialogues.

⁹¹ Rao, Nirupama, *op cit*, p.186-7

⁹² Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.146

⁹³ Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.23

⁹⁴ Sagar, Rahul, 'State of mind: what kind of power will India be?', *International Affairs*, Vol.85, n° 4 (2009), p.803

⁹⁵ Cited in Cohen, Stephen P., *op cit*, p.271

⁹⁶ Brewster, David, *op cit*, p.22

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.147

⁹⁸ Cited in *Ibid*, p.147



This 'engage to contain' policy suits more to India's preference rather than any gung-ho approach against China. India's democratic and consultative world view matches with that of ASEAN. Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar thus hails ASEAN's balancing tactic responding to extra-regional powers and establishing new equations with intra-regional ones insisting that the focus must be on getting understanding with multiple partners.⁹⁹ The minister highlights the centrality of ASEAN and asserts that India's strategic interests warrant that this centrality is preserved if not strengthened.¹⁰⁰

6. Conclusion

U.S Under Secretary of Defence, Elbridge Colby, expressed the view that, as a USA ally, India should be regarded as an independent and autonomous partner, and that the USA needs more allies like India that are less dependent on it.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the current Donald Trump administration has been insistent on such an approach where the allies do not expect overwhelming US assistance in handling their security threats. The National Security Strategy of the administration underlines that the US allies 'must assume primary responsibility for their regions and contribute far more to our (US) collective defense.'¹⁰² Going by this condition, India's primary security responsibility lies in the South Asian domain where India has traditionally discouraged any involvement of external powers. Asia-Pacific comes second in India's security priority list. Therefore, even when USA insists New Delhi to contribute to Indo-Pacific security through Quad partnership with US, Japan and Australia to prevent 'domination by any single competitor nation',¹⁰³ given India's current geostrategic compulsions, it might not be able to live up to the US expectations in the Asia-Pacific domain.

Besides, India's inclination for a multipolar world order contradicts basic US world view. The American viewpoint expostulates with India on the issue. In the context of growing power of China, the American opinion suggests India's vision of more disbursed global power distribution under a multipolar order giving India more global influence is unrealistic.¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, it is argued that seeking such order benefits China and Russia who, as American viewpoint goes, want to overturn the international norms which have maintained peace in Indo-Pacific for last fifty years.¹⁰⁵ Undoubtedly, the US-led treaty-based defence alliance network in the Asia-Pacific is referred to here. USA sees growing China as a challenge to its order in Asia-Pacific region. The matter is pertinent in the context of the gathering storm over the Taiwan issue. There is a growing assumption in the West of imminent Chinese invasion of the self-ruled island claimed by China. Referring to Chinese President Xi Jinping's assertion of 'reunification' of Taiwan to China as integral to China's rejuvenation by 2049 (centenary of Beijing's collapse to Chinese Red Army and foundation of People's Republic), it is argued that China is preparing for invasion.¹⁰⁶ It is also reported that the tone of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese army officials is turning more assertive lately advocating overtly for Chinese invasion of the island.¹⁰⁷ The classical power transition theory of the realist school argues that as states grow wealthier and more powerful, they seek greater worldwide influence and if necessary wage hegemonic war to reverse the established order.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, it is assumed in the

⁹⁹ Jaishankar, Subrahmanyam, *op cit*, p.198

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.172

¹⁰¹ Cited in Jaishankar, Dhruva, *op cit*, p.188

¹⁰² "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", November 2025, *op cit*, p.12

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.21

¹⁰⁴ Curtis, Lisa: 'The Quad Power', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, n° 5 (July-August, 2025), p.191

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, pp.191-2

¹⁰⁶ Campbell, Charlic: 'Edge of Invasion', *Time Magazine*, 10 November 2025, p.134

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p.134

¹⁰⁸ Schweller, Randall L., 'Managing the Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory', Jonston, Alestair Iain, Robert Ross (eds), (1999): *Engaging China: The Management of Emerging Power*, Abingdon, Routledge, p.3



West that China is challenging US-led international norms. However, this theory is challenged arguing that even if the rising power gains ability to alter existing order to its liking it will opt not to do so since it has more stake in the order.¹⁰⁹ Whatever the argument and counter argument suggests, the fact is USA considers Taiwan a Chinese target and hence is determined to deterring a conflict over the island territory because of its strategic location astride Northeast and Southeast Asia. Therefore, it emphasizes on augmenting military preparedness capable of denying aggression anywhere near First Island Chain but also underlined that USA cannot do it alone and expects its allies to spend more for collective defence.¹¹⁰

It is argued that India should reaffirm US-led rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific to thwart Chinese hegemony and that India can fend-off Chinese aggression and ensure stability in its neighbourhood through Quad.¹¹¹ India's current policy does not approve any assertive stance of this US-led 'Indo-Pacific' group against China for reasons mentioned before. Nor it goes with India's foreign policy principle to promote single-power dominated global order. Moreover, Indo-Pacific does not constitute an alliance per se and it only intends to avoid head-on direct confrontation (with China).¹¹² Nonetheless, if situation complicates with Beijing resolving to invade Taiwan sending ripples in the Asia-Pacific shores, it might put India in a fork in the road situation given its current 'detente-deterrence' policy vis-a-vis China and its association with USA. India needs USA as a strategic balance against China in broader Asian scene when USA requires India as a logistic and other support it can use when needed. Noteworthy, the US' Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, had to join in US mission in Iraq and Afghanistan under Bush administrations 'global war on terror'. Therefore, it will be intriguing to see what direction future India-US-'Indo-Pacific/Asia-Pacific' strategic understanding takes in the context of growing Sino-US tussle in the Asia-Pacific platform.

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¹⁰⁹ Chan, Steve (2022): *Rumbles of Thunder: Power Shift and Danger of Sino-American War*, New York, Columbia University Press, p.207

¹¹⁰ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", November 2025, pp.23-4

¹¹¹ Curtis, Lisa, *op cit*, p.192

¹¹² Bajpai, Kanti, *op cit*, p.167



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