

## **Re-Contextualizing India in the Indo-Pacific: Decrypting the Evolution, Emerging Dynamics, and Navigating the Way Forward in a Post-Pandemic International System**

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### **Abstract**

As a protean coherent strategic space translating inter-connectedness despite sub-regional dissimilarities into an epicenter of economic activities, infrastructural investments, naval deployments and supply chain resilience, the Indo-Pacific region has evolved into a new arena of geopolitical contestation, where maritime security has been the *raison d'être*. Ever since the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue and 2019 Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit, India's luminous Indo-Pacific vision centered around its teleological commitment to ASEAN centrality, wherein the primacy of a rules-based liberal international order predicated on multilateralism is emphasized on the fidelity of a free, open, inclusive maritime order, advocating cooperation, stability, collaboration, equity and fairness of globalization while respecting territorial integrity, national sovereignty, right to freedom of navigation and pacific resolution of disputes following International Maritime Law. China's pyrrhic rise and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the escalation of U.S.-China tariff wars, and maritime territorial disputes have catalyzed the ascendancy of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) vis-à-vis India, Japan, USA and Australia as an effective deterrent to Chinese hegemony, where India has been playing a proactive role in promoting cooperative security, vaccine collaboration, maritime transport, trade, connectivity, capacity building and capability development, resource-sharing among others. The paper highlights the evolution and emerging dynamics of Indian foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific and India's ascending strategic autonomy in a post-COVID19 international order, where India has subverted its past aversion to alliances during the Great Powers' contestation for regional hegemony.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security, Geopolitical Contestation, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Strategic Autonomy, Regional Hegemony, COVID-19, Indian Ocean

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## **Research Objective**

The paper attempts to anatomize and highlight the emerging dynamics of Indian foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific Theater while demonstrating the history, evolution of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, outlining India's vision and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. The chief emphasis is placed on the historical accounts of several geopolitical thinkers while focusing on the contemporary multifaceted trends and transformations, and the paper also seeks to speculate the way forward for India's foreign policy dispensation vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific, in a Post-COVID-19 international system.

## **Research Methodology**

The paper follows a qualitative approach and is entirely predicated on secondary sources of knowledge and information. A compendium of information gathered from multiple research papers, journals, online articles, books, and YouTube videos constitutes the edifice of the study.

## **Introduction**

The centrality of geography in the construction of international systems is a well-established historical notion, and in this regard, it can be said that international politics in the twenty-first century will be defined by the dialectical interplay of three distinct geographies, namely, the Indo-Pacific maritime system, the Eurasian landmass and the Arctic Ocean (Tharoor & Saran, 2020, p. 268). On account of massive political and economic rebalancing in the post-Cold War period, the relative dilapidation of the U.S.-led alliance system and weakening of the Western multilateral framework, coupled with the ascendancy of China as a geoeconomic superpower, and China's burgeoning maritime influence, the significance of the Indo-Pacific as the global fulcrum of geopolitical contestation, cooperation and the growth underbelly of international relations, gradually catalyzed (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2020). Despite contested cartographic imaginations, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a strategic space of paramount importance, with state powers in the region, namely India, Australia, the United States of America, and Japan, collectively constituting the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), giving it a coherent shape and definition (Mathur, 2021).

India's strategic geography is centered on the Indo-Pacific, which in terms of geo-spatiality, refers to the interconnected space, the broad continuum stretching across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, joined together by the principal trading channel, the Strait of Malacca. While

its stretch is argued to extend from the eastern shores of the African continent to the U.S.A.'s western coast, the growing interdependence and interconnectedness concerning the convergence of two distinct maritime spaces, is a byproduct of the expanding forces of economic globalization, changing trade equations, and diversification of supply chains (Das, 2019). A plethora of geopolitical shockwaves, emerging tectonic shifts in the geostrategic and geoeconomic landscape of the international system, propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, has necessitated the emergence of the Indo-Pacific in contemporary times, which captures a diverse region covering South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Littoral nation-states of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), as strategic competition is likely to be associated with the maritime and blue economy in the subsequent decades, with the rise of China's territorial expansionist designs, and heightened U.S.-China trade and technological decoupling (Jha Bhaskar, 2021).

The Asia-Pacific as an ideational framework, antecedent to the vision of the Indo-Pacific, appeared to be anachronistic in nature with respect to the evolving international political trends and transformations, thereby manifesting limitations. Plagued with restrictions in its limited scope, the Asia-Pacific as a construct, thus failed to respond effectively to contemporary economic engagements and emerging geopolitical requirements (Raghavan, 2019). The global economy is thus being structured around the Indo-Pacific region, akin to the Trans-Atlantic in the 1980s, and India, spearheading the Quad, is likely to emerge as a significant player amidst the protean power equations. Witnessing a quantum jump from the heydays of Nehruvian idealism and Non-Alignment, India has managed to shed its past revulsion towards alliances, while seeking to enlarge its strategic autonomy, remaining fiercely independent, fully determined about its exceptional status and interests in the international arena (Menon, 2018, p. 201).

Despite its recognition within the global strategic networks in contemporary international relations, the Indo-Pacific, however, is devoid of an analogous economic framework, as an evolution in geoeconomics from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, like the security and strategic dimensions, is yet to take a cogent form (Mathur, 2021). Nevertheless, accounting for the new global security architecture, the Indian foreign policy dispensation's perception of the Indo-Pacific as a free, open, inclusive and prosperous region, committed to a rules-based maritime order, predicated on democratic values, necessitated the structural alteration of India's strategic priorities, focusing on well-coordinated issue-specific partnerships, burden-sharing models, and convergence of strategic goals for broader Indo-Pacific cooperation (Das, 2019).

## **Anatomizing the Indo-Pacific**

### **Historical Origin and Evolution in International Relations:**

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has gained traction among academic and policy circles in recent times, re-orienting discourses on account of epistemological and ontological shifts. The anachronistic Asia-Pacific concept was previously employed to scrutinize regional peace and security issues, essentially denoting a collection of nation-states, ranging from the Asian states in Northeast and Southeast Asia to countries like Canada, Australia, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, the U.S.A., and Peru, also been variously identified as Pacific Rim and Asia and the Pacific. As peace and security studies in the contemporary period became increasingly region-specific, in a post-Cold War era, the focal point of international affairs shifted from Europe and America towards Indo-Pacific Asia (World Economic Forum, 2019). In this context, Nye & Lynn-Jones maintain that policymakers and scholars in the field must seek and ensure wider expertise in the politics of particular regions, while Ken Booth's assertion that the field, bereft of area studies, is primarily ideating in a lacuna, speaks volumes about the paradigmatic shift (Mishra, 2014).

It is a well-known fact that hyphenated geospatial constructs, especially those enjoying maritime connotations, have been insurmountably difficult to define, as their nature, scope and extent vary from one particular scholarly definition to another divergent epistemological interpretation (Kuo, 2018). Before getting popularized in the geopolitical lexicon, as a chiefly equatorial maritime pendulum along the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean's long continuum, the term 'Indo-Pacific', to be more precise, Indo-West Pacific, was used extensively by myriad bio-geographers in their respective descriptions of the region's distinct and unique marine ecology (Avdaliani, 2020).

Historically, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has been associated with the eminent German geopolitical thinker and major general Karl Haushofer's works between the 1920s and 1930s as a prescription for Germany's strategic imperatives and vision of international politics, to galvanize an Asian counter-hegemonic narrative as opposed to the Western colonial domination, as a maritime route out of Germany's interwar quandaries (Raghavan, 2019). Haushofer adopted a quasi-scientific 'Geopolitik' framework while using the term 'Indo-Pacific Region' in order to describe a uniquely interconnected space characterized by geostrategic salience, owing to its robust economic linkages, vibrant networks of

transportation, hinterland potential, and significant maritime connectivity (Mishra, 2014).

Haushofer's vision was predicated on a comparative analysis of the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis Indo-Atlantic's geopolitical space, while simultaneously promulgating an alliance system that consisted of Japan, China, Russia and India, in order to challenge the regional hegemony of Western colonial powers (Kaushiki, 2021). Karl Haushofer had thus conceptualized the Indo-Pacific with significant normative and substantive force, leveraging it with a strong anti-colonial vision of the political resurrection of South, East, and Southeast Asia during the geopolitical conundrums associated with Germany's interwar period, informed by sources of Sinology and Indology (Pulipaka & Musaddi, 2021). Li (2021) contends that Haushofer was the brainchild behind advancing an amalgamated framework by politicizing oceanography, philology, and ethnography for realigning the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as an integral maritime space. Sempa maintains that, as an organic and indispensable space prepped with political consciousness, Haushofer constructed the oceanographic edifice of the Indo-Pacific while incorporating empirical evidence from philology and marine sciences, thereby legitimizing it as a coherent social and political space, vital for remaking the international order (Das, 2019).

Additionally, several eminent geopolitical thinkers have advanced their respective narratives associated with the Indo-Pacific from time to time. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, in his seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783* expressed maritime power-centric ruminations while panegyricizing and disparaging in equal measure, thereby displaying a distinct Indo-Pacific bias (Holmila, 2020). Sir Halford J. Mackinder, who had advocated the Heartland theory, typified that as the Eurasian heartland was surrounded by four marginal regions accessible to shipmen, these regions served as the coincidental spheres of great religions like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and two of these southern regions shared mutual connectivity, thereby orienting to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, or as Mackinder described, the 'Eastern Inner Crescent' (Mainardi, 2021). The founding father of the Rimland theory in geopolitics, Nicholas John Spykman asserted that after the Second World War, the grand strategic plot in world politics will transcend the rigid continental-maritime binarization and will lie along with the littoral space or the rim, where the interplay of sea and land mediums exhibiting an unbroken umbilical connection for naval power's deployment, particularly along the marginal seas enwinding the Eurasian heartland, will necessarily determine the geopolitical interactions. Spykman managed to extend this

proposition to argue that the Indo-Pacific connect in the future would assume greater importance over the Atlantic-Mediterranean-Indian Ocean Rimland, at a time when the Indian and Chinese quotients' pyrrhic rise to strategic prominence will change the course of international politics (Holmila, 2020).

Additionally, in 1948, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) had made a reference to the term 'Indo-Pacific', while creating a regional council on fishery affairs, naming it the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council. Further, the Indo-Pacific as a distinct geopolitical construct and terminology was also used throughout the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s in Australian foreign policy deliberations and debates among diplomatic circles (ORF, 2021).

However, the term 'Indo-Pacific' and its application in the geopolitical lexicon, soon became a victim of oblivion's curse, gradually evaporating from policy circles and the international arena for a while. Following the horrifying Boxing Day Tsunami of December 2004, there was the emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as an informal ad hoc strategic grouping of India, the U.S.A., Japan, and Australia, intended to mobilize disaster aid, and secure humanitarian cooperation. It was accompanied by the increasing politico-military assertiveness, territorial expansionist designs underlying China's aggressive "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean littoral region, raising security concerns among the present Quad members, especially, India and Japan (Kuo, 2018).

As different democratic nation-states, alerted by the unilateral revisionist hegemonic behavior of China in the maritime domain, envisaged their respected visions of the Indo-Pacific, build upon the edifice of a rules-based maritime order, while adhering to international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, and peaceful resolution of disputes, the notion of the Indo-Pacific gradually emboldened by acquiring a cogent strategic currency, following the erstwhile Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe's celebrated "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech before the Indian Parliament in August 2007. Shinzo Abe, while making a historical analogy with the famous Mughal prince Dara Shikoh's 1655 Sufi text, *Majma-ul-Bahrain* ("Mingling of the Two Oceans"), which envisioned a common ground between Islam and Hinduism, outlined the vision of a 'Broader Asia', where he asserted that in the contemporary era, the Indian and the Pacific Oceans are heralding a dynamic coupling as the seas of prosperity and freedom, thus transcending geographical boundaries and crystallizing the notion of a broader Asia in a distinct coherent form (Panda, 2021).

## **India and the Indo-Pacific: Historical Perspective**

Prior to the emergence of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in the Geopolitical lexicon as an integral tool to assess the protean quality of elusiveness associated with the shifting geostrategic contours, its intellectual origins be traced to the ancient times, as the Indian Ocean had constituted the first epicenter of maritime activities by bringing its rim and much of the Pacific Ocean region closer to each other through robust commercial linkages and cultural bonds (Naidu, 2014). Panikkar (1945) asserted that way before the development of seafaring in the Aegean waters, oceanic navigation became normalized with the coastal people of Peninsular India, and as the first naval and oceanic tradition developed in the Arabian Sea washed lands, the Indian Ocean became the pivot of oceanic interactions owing to monsoons and earlier growth of civilization, constituting the boisterous thoroughfare of cultural and commercial traffic hundreds of years before Columbus and Magellan’s oceanic expeditions.

As international relations practically existed in and around the Indo-Pacific region since ancient times, it thrived as one common united region for more than two thousand years prior to the onset of colonialism, interacting closely with multiple sub-regions benefitting from each other, constituting the chief conduit and epicenter of global activities much before the Atlantic’s burgeoning prominence following the Industrial Revolution, the pyrrhic rise of the European metropolitan powers, and the ascendancy of the U.S.A. at the turn of the twentieth century. The transmission and gradual diffusion of skills and knowledge, accompanied by the dynamic cultural, civilizational, economic, linguistic, ideational, and religious interactions throughout the entire region, reflected the stretch of Indianized kingdoms of the Sri Vijaya and Sailendras in Indonesia to myriad kingdoms in Myanmar and Thailand, and from Champa in South Vietnam to the Khmers in Cambodia, illustrating the expansive intra-regional exchanges (Naidu, 2014). Consequently, taking cues from the south Indian Chola kings’ maritime expeditions in the tenth century, and Admiral Zheng He’s overseas naval journeys during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the British colonial dispensation managed to secure and reinvigorate the ancient maritime trade links that existed within the Indian Ocean rim, and the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis their prolonged imperial domination, emboldening the region’s strategic and economic significance (ORF, 2020).

India’s geopolitical and strategic thinking managed to revivify the Indo-Pacific, as in the closing stages of the Second World War; Jawaharlal Nehru speculated that the Pacific region would emerge as the global geostrategic epicenter with India playing an integral role in its

regional dynamics, and it took few more decades for the Nehruvian assertion to materialize, owing to the Cold War-era bipolarity-induced aberrations in international relations (Mishra, 2014). Nehru had predicted that in the near future, the Pacific will constitute the nerve center of international politics by replacing the Atlantic, and as India will exercise a huge degree of influence in the region, it will develop as the nucleus of political and economic activities in the Indian Ocean region. It is noteworthy that India's geostrategically advantageous and economically significant position, extending from South-east Asia to the Middle East, accords enormous strategic importance in the international system (Nehru, 1944, p.536). The centrality of India in the Asian strategic space can be attributed to the direct historical linkages of the Indo-Pacific conception with Indian nationalism, necessitating geo-historical narratives about the perception of the Indo-Pacific as a new regional entity. During India's freedom movement, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose advocated the view that fascist nation-states like Italy, Germany, and Japan ought to have been the natural allies of pre-colonial India during British imperialism in the late 1930s, and Netaji even had a rendezvous with Karl Haushofer in Munich in 1934, forming an amicable bonding with him in order to eventuate a meeting with Adolf Hitler later on (Kaushiki, 2021).

Similarly, in 1942, the foreign secretary to the British government of India throughout the Second World War, Sir Olaf Caroe, was instrumental in founding a study group that examined the strategic imperatives and the role of an independent India as a component of a British-led Commonwealth system, and the group stressed on the notion of India at the center of an Asiatic system, ensuring the continuance of the Great Game on the other hand (Panda, 2021). Additionally, the great geopolitical thinker and naval strategist Sardar K.M. Panikkar offered geopolitical reasoning and arguments integral to the nascent contemporary ideational underpinnings of the Indo-Pacific, and Panikkar promulgated the notion of the Indian Ocean as a 'closed system', maintaining that India must form a 'steel ring' by effectively controlling the farthest stretches of the Indian Ocean (Kaushiki, 2021).

K.M. Panikkar's seminal work, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (1945) embraced British imperial thought regarding India's necessity of asserting control over the total Indian Ocean region vis-à-vis maritime checkpoints and major ports in between, and Panikkar while studying the geopolitical treatises of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan on independent India and the Indian Ocean, held that India's security was fundamentally contingent upon those who were controlling the strategic oceanic realm stretching from the Gulf of Aden on the west to the South China Sea in the east, thereby

insisting that the Indian Ocean must truly remain entirely Indian, focusing on the urgency of forward presence (Raghavan, 2019). While promoting the system of forward bases in the vicinity of the Indian chokepoints like Sri Lanka and Mauritius, Panikkar recognized the centrality of geopolitics in constituting the necessary foreign policy foundation in a post-colonial independent India, rather than relegating it to the domain of pseudoscience like Jawaharlal Nehru (Tharoor & Saran, 2020).

According to K.M. Panikkar, if there is the creation of a steel ring around the Indian landmass, with suitable air and naval bases at necessary points within this specific ringed territorial demarcation, a strong navy can be created to defend its home waters, and subsequently the waters necessary for India's security imperatives can be shielded and converted into a realm of safety, and thus, the Bay of Bengal's islands by efficaciously equipping and protecting Singapore, Mauritius, Socotra near Aden, with a naval presence strong enough in its home waters, security can safely manage to return to that portion of the Indian Ocean which has a high degree of importance to India (Panikkar, 1945, p. 84). Panikkar's vision also foresaw future challenges of India's maritime security in the form of threats from the Soviet Union and China, apart from apprehending the emergence of the United States as a key rival in the region, owing to its growing interest in the oil shipment from the Persian Gulf, and thus Panikkar advocated the notion of a special international organization for Indian Ocean security, which will be predicated on a council of regional powers helmed by India, while keeping Great Britain, South Africa, and Australia in important positions (Kaushiki, 2021).

Similarly, eminent Indian historian Kalidas Nag and British anthropologist Augustus Henry Keane managed to employ anthropology, art, archeology, socio-cultural norms, political linkages, maritime economics, and commercial concepts as the key variables in defining a distinct 'Indo-Pacific Domain', in their writings between 1880 and 1945 (Mishra, 2014). Associating the nomenclature with a cultural and civilizational entity, Kalidas Nag's version of the Indo-Pacific was used to trace India's historical commercial, cultural, religious, and trade links with the maritime universe. In his famous 1941 book, titled *India and the Pacific World*, Nag mentioned that the Indo-Pacific was referred to as 'Australasia' by the British, 'Oceania' by the Continental scholars and experts, and Nag asserted that this particular region could be termed as 'Greater India' (Panda, 2021).

Thus, myriad historical accounts and strategic thinkers have offered multiple narratives regarding the Indo-Pacific from time to time, and the notion of the Indo-Pacific crystallized

and there has been a resurgence in the contemporary times, on account of a series of transformations in the geopolitical landscape, especially with the forces of economic globalization, remarkable strides in transportation, connectivity, and communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (World Economic Forum, 2019).

### **Decoding India's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Theater**

#### **Background: The Indian Ocean and Its Significance in India's Indo-Pacific Approach**

The Indian civilization's rich maritime history throws light on the centrality of the Indian Ocean in shaping its strategic posture for several centuries. As the Indian Ocean serves as India's lifeline which is integral to its security and prosperity, India is surrounded by it on three sides, having a coastline of 7500 km, an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covering 2 million square km, 1380 islands, rocks, and 13 coastal states, and thus India's security domain essentially possesses a strong maritime dimension, apart from possessing 13 major, 200 non-major ports, and 200,000 fishing vessels (Gupta, 2018, p.286). Constituting the world's main trade artery, the Indian Ocean consists of six sea lanes and choke points for the passage of maritime traffic, which include the Straits of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Aden, the Malacca Straits and Indonesia establishing a linkage between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea with the Pacific Ocean, Sunda, Lombok, the Ombai and the Wetar Straits of Indonesia effectively (ORF, 2020).

Notwithstanding its enormous geostrategic significance, there is a vast array of challenges and maritime concerns for the Indian foreign policy dispensation in the Indian Ocean region, which involve the safety and security of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC); terrorism, radicalization, drugs, and human trafficking; illegal fishing activities in the Indian waters; security of trade; migration; pollution of the marine ecosystem, the impact of climate change, tsunamis, and associated weather-related events (Gupta, 2019). However, foreign policy shifts during Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi's era diluted the geostrategic potential of the Indian Ocean, as the Indian navy was reduced to low-profile, emasculated, and neglected Cinderella-like service, representing a position of weakness by establishing itself as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP) (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 182).

Before the definitive articulation and subsequent crystallization of the notion of 'Indo-Pacific' in policy circles, there was a seismic shift in the first decade of the 21st century, as the Indian Ocean was perceived as presenting geography of opportunity for India, and in this regard, a

new geographical paradigm for the Indian foreign policy dispensation was ‘extended neighbourhood’ which was used officially and formally by the erstwhile Prime Minister Inder Gujral in 1997, subsequently pushed in the 2000s, and thus within the framework of ‘Omni-directional diplomacy’, a special Look East Policy managed to take India across the Bay of Bengal, while a Look West drive took India across the Arabian Sea, thereby extending India’s initial strategic interest of engagement in the northern Indian Ocean into the southern Indian Ocean (Scott, 2015, p.468). The Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Front (UPA) government in 2007 categorically declared that the principal area of Indian maritime interest extended from the Persian Gulf in the north to Antarctica in the south, and further, from the Cape of Good Hope and the Horn of Africa in the west to the Malacca Straits, Malaysian archipelagos, and Indonesia in the east (Doyle & Rumley, 2019).

As such maritime interests contributed to increased Indian Ocean naval operations, the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as a temporary coordinating arrangement prioritizing maritime security, meant for mobilizing disaster aid and humanitarian assistance following the Tsunami of December 2004, constituted an important milestone in the subsequent materialization of the vision of a free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific (Borah, 2021). Consequently, India’s erstwhile Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh maintained that India’s strategic footprint extends to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean, and such an ontological perception will determine India’s strategic behaviour and defence planning in the near future, thereby generating leadership claims that the Indian navy ought to be the most significant maritime power in the Indian Ocean region (ORF, 2020).

Eventually, important naval formulations heralded geopolitically-informed transformations, as the Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2004 and India’s Maritime Military Strategy of 2007 signalled a quantum jump of India’s maritime imagination from a tiny coastal-hugging dormant brown-water fleet to a gigantic ocean-going blue-water fleet, holding the potential of significant power projection throughout the Indian Ocean littoral region, and thus the Indian Ocean was chalked out as the region of primary strategic interest for India’s foreign policy establishment, with variegated diplomatic, combat, and constabulary roles assigned to the Indian navy (World Economic Forum, 2019). Apart from reinvigorating epistemological insight from Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett’s writings, these naval publications categorically placed an emphasis on geopolitics and geoeconomics as the key determinants in influencing India’s maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean (Scott, 2015).

Additionally, India has played a proactive role in establishing Indian Ocean maritime frameworks, while pursuing comprehensive military modernization of its naval forces, enhancing diplomatic engagement with the nation-states of the Indian Ocean littoral region, thereby attempting to restore maritime connectivity since the dawn of the new millennium. For instance, India has managed to establish formal trilateral maritime cooperation arrangement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2014; aided countries like Mauritius and Seychelles to bolster their coastal security; secured active cooperation with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles for the improvement of maritime logistics; constructed the Chabahar port in Iran to strengthen connectivity with Central Asia and Afghanistan; introduced robust cooperation dialogues with France and Thailand following the India-European Union (EU) summit meeting in October 2017, aiming at improving maritime cooperation; provided drinking water provisions and humanitarian assistance to the Maldives in 2015; conducted anti-piracy operations vis-à-vis the Indian navy's patrolling activities off the coast of Somalia; undertook evacuation and naval rescue operations of Indians and foreigners from conflict zones (Gupta, 2018).

Further, the Indian Navy regularly conducts joint naval exercises with the navies of the U.K., the U.S.A., Japan, France, and Russia while providing training to foreign sailors. In this context, at the service level, the multilateral 'Milan' naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal have been orchestrated by India since 1995, and by 2014, it managed to encompass vital actors in the Indian Ocean region, ranging from the Maldives, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mauritius, Seychelles to Brunei, Vietnam, and the Philippines, eventually becoming a political statement and valuable networking exercise for asserting India's strategic and diplomatic interests across the Indo-Pacific maritime space, unhindered by regional hegemons like the U.S. and China (Scott, 2015). Moreover, the re-emergence of the Quad has reinvigorated the 'Malabar' joint naval exercises involving the naval forces of India, the U.S.A., Japan, and Australia in recent times (The Wire, 2019). Attempting to complement its military hard power presence with diplomatic soft power persuasion vis-à-vis the micro-Island states and major littoral states around the Indian Ocean Rim, India has managed to strengthen its maritime diplomacy by spearheading and being a vociferous member in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since 1997, to foster distinctiveness of Indian Ocean-based identity and extend cooperation in different issue areas. Also, at the government level, India established the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008, while asserting its unofficial degree of pre-eminence within the forum (Jaishankar,

2016).

It is noteworthy that while India's EEZ stretches till 200 nautical miles from its coastline, India has submitted an official claim to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for expanding its continental shelf by extending its EEZ up to 350 nautical miles, apart from being assigned specific areas in the Indian Ocean for deep-sea mining purposes. As far as the regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific is concerned, the 'blue economy' constitutes the new site and arena of growth which involves fishing, sea mining activities, the advancement in marine technology, sustainable fishing activities, the safe harnessing of ocean energy, and safe utilization or sustainable exploitation of oceanic resources, whereby India has managed to champion capacity-building and confidence-building measures in these issue areas across the Indo-Pacific, while fostering robust cooperation with other states in the region (The Wire, 2019). An integral component of India's maritime activities involves building coastal connectivity while connecting several coastal towns to the hinterland, and as a result, the multi-million dollar 'Sagarmala' project has been sanctioned in order to upgrade the Indian ports, bolster coastal shipping, and strengthen connectivity to the hinterland effectively (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2019). The Indian Ocean's paramount importance in shaping India's strategic posture and foreign policy imperatives is thus unparalleled, wherein its underlying ethos is essentially a consultative one, characterized by pluralism and syncretism.

### **Indian Foreign Policy and the Indo-Pacific: Evolution and the Emerging Dynamics**

The de facto multipolar liberal international order is characterized by diffused power equations, fractured geopolitical lines and tectonic shifts in the regional balance of power, wherein the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are getting inextricably linked due to the rapid growth of trade, China's territorial expansionist designs underlying its assertive behavior towards its neighbors, thereby giving a coherent shape to the new geopolitical concept of the 'Indo-Pacific', and in a transformed security landscape, the South China Sea and the East China Sea, lying just beyond the Straits of Malacca, have been witnessing a revival of geopolitical turbulences due to the meteoric rise of China, reflected in its push for military modernization, improvement of its geoeconomic capabilities, and its burgeoning naval outreach, thereby contributing to a volatile security environment (Gupta, 2018).

The art of mastering a cogent Indo-Pacific approach essentially rests on perfecting a coherent Indian Ocean strategy, which is integral to India's security interests, by focusing attention on maritime neighbours; securing relationship-building as expressed in terms of political transparency, increased cooperation, trust-building, and confidence-building; advocating an integrated view of trade, infrastructure, tourism, environment, blue economy and security imperatives; promoting capability-building vis-à-vis the provision of radars, vessels, coastal surveillance equipment, aircraft, and establishing maritime infrastructure (Jaishankar, 2020, p.189).

In the contemporary period under Narendra Modi, the Indian government's security policy has been predicated on three underlying assumptions, namely becoming a 'leading power', acting as a 'net security provider' efficaciously, and effectively realizing the notion of 'SAGAR' or 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (Hall, 2019, p.131). Intended to advance strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, Modi's 'SAGAR' concept, constituting the edifice of India's Indo-Pacific approach and embracing an open, inclusive, and pluralistic ethos, which was initially outlined in his speech in Mauritius in March 2015, appropriated the American, Australian, and Japanese notions of a 'rules-based order', linking it into a more diverse story about India's rich maritime past, ancient civilizational linkages, and the teleological pursuit underlying India's economic ambitions surrounding a 'New India' (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2019). As Narendra Modi emboldened India's Indo-Pacific approach through the 'SAGAR' maritime doctrine, the aspiration of which is contingent on the promotion of prosperity for all stakeholder countries in the region; driven by norms; governed by rules; adherence to democratic principles like the freedom of navigation and overflight, Modi's keynote address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2018, outlined his vision of promoting regional security in the maintenance of a democratic rules-based international order in the free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, advocating the importance of espousing the notion of strategic autonomy from India's perspective (Carnegie Live, 2020).

In contemporary international politics, India's version of the Indo-Pacific essentially extends from the western coast of North America to the eastern shores near the Horn of Africa, constituting a highly heterogeneous region with different nations having divergent degrees of development (Panda, 2021). Mastering the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision vis-à-vis forums like 'SAGAR' and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), India secures proactive

engagement with its partners in the Indo-Pacific region bilaterally and by virtue of various multilateral, plurilateral, and minilateral platforms, in a plethora of domains like Blue Economy, maritime security, naval connectivity, disaster management, and capability-building, subsequently establishing a distinct Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) division in April 2019, intended to amalgamate the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of India, the U.S.A., Japan, and Australia into one common Indo-Pacific umbrella (Saha & Mishra, 2020).

Consequently, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, Prime Minister Modi had launched the IPOI, whereby its prime motive was to secure stability, peace and prosperity of the maritime realm as an extension of India's SAGAR vision while acting as a mechanism for developing cooperation among like-minded nations in their pursuit towards 'free, open, inclusive, prosperous, and rules-based Indo-Pacific', constructed on the edifice of India's Act East Policy (stressing on the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific) and the Act West Policy (emphasizing the Western Indian Ocean) (Jaishankar, 2020). Furthermore, an Oceania division was introduced within the MEA in September 2020, in order to channelize India's diplomatic and administrative focus on the region extending from the Western Pacific to the Andaman Sea. Essentially, India's Indo-Pacific strategy is predicated on certain important pillars, namely maritime security; maritime ecology; littoral resources; capacity-building, capability-building, resource-sharing and information-sharing; disaster risk reduction and disaster management; trade, connectivity, and maritime transport; science, technology, cultural, and academic cooperation (Jha Bhaskar, 2021).

Recognizing the emerging dynamics of international politics, India's Indo-Pacific imperatives involve its closest neighbors viz. all South Asian nation-states, and its outer neighborhood, i.e. Gulf countries in the west, ASEAN and Southeast nation-states in the east, as India manages to develop partnerships, seek collaboration with like-minded nations in the region characterized by shared beliefs, common goals, and effective operational outcomes – ranging from the Islands in the Pacific Ocean to the archipelagos of the western Indian Ocean and off the eastern shores in the Horn of Africa; to multiple networks like the Quad with the U.S.A., Japan, and Australia, the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with Japan and Australia as member-states, and the India-France-Australia, India-Australia-Indonesia, and the India-Japan-U.S. trilateral arrangement mechanisms (ORF, 2021).

As India perceives the Indo-Pacific as a vast geographic and strategic expanse where the ASEAN acts as a bridge in connecting the two great oceans, at the crux of this vision lies the elements of inclusiveness, openness, transparency, unity, and ASEAN-centrality, whereby sustainable connectivity initiatives advocating mutual benefit is continually promoted (Chatham House, 2021). Additionally, acknowledging the nested security dilemma vis-à-vis maritime contestation in the form of Credible Chinese threat perception, exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic-induced developments, the unilateral withdrawal of the U.S.A. as the global policeman state, weakening of multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), security in the Indo-Pacific region is maintained through freedom of navigation and overflight; constructive dialogue; unhindered commercial and trade relations; a common rules-based maritime order; peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law (Mathur, 2021). Recent challenges necessitate a significant re-orientation of India's foreign policy approach, with increased security and strategic threats emboldening the renewed significance of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the Indo-Pacific is filled with maritime territorial disputes extending from the Persian Gulf to the mid-Indian Ocean Chagos Archipelago, to the Southwest portion of the Pacific, coupled with nebulous and highly elusive agreements on sustainable fishery management; China's increased presence and assertive posture in the Indian Ocean littoral region owing to its aggressive "String of Pearls" strategy endangering India's security interests in the Indo-Pacific, accentuated by contentious Sino-Indian geopolitical developments involving the 2017 Doklam standoff between the Indian Army and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), the 2020 Galwan river valley skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Eastern Ladakh region; budgetary constraints on the allocation of funds for the Indian Navy, negatively affecting its capability development, coordination and building of synergies between multiple stakeholders (Saha & Mishra, 2020).

Further, socio-economic inequalities accentuated by the COVID-19 Pandemic will hamper complete economic integration and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific, while reversing decades of India's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), severely damaging the health sector, nutrition, education, and political institutions while dissolving commitments, leveraging capabilities, disrupting logistics, blocking supply chains, increasing trust deficit, heightening legitimacy and accountability crisis (The Institute of World Politics, 2020).

India's perception of the Indo-Pacific is essentially a conceptual framework rather than a regional organization, thereby focusing on cohesiveness, economic and security interdependence, and thus with the dilapidation of multilateralism and the proliferation of plurilateral and minilateral groupings like the Quad, the future of the Indo-Pacific, spearheaded by India vis-à-vis the Quad and other Quad Plus frameworks, will be predicated on mitigating climate change, managing responses, containing the COVID-19 Pandemic, as the formal inaugural summit of the Quad nations on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2021 propounded a joint statement for the promotion of a free, open, inclusive rules-based order, grounded in international law to foster security and prosperity while deterring threats in the Indo-Pacific region, and extending their cooperative agenda to include vaccine collaboration; climate change mitigation; critical and emerging technologies; semiconductors; cyberspace and critical materials; supply chains; connectivity among others (Pulipaka & Musaddi, 2021).

Additionally, the Indo-Pacific is witnessing the unfolding of several minilateral formations like the India-Japan-U.S.A. and India-Japan-Australia to promote diplomatic and security cooperation, apart from the proactive role of various forums like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, the East Asia Summit Forum (EAS), intended to function as a bridge between multiple Indo-Pacific's sub-regions (Avdaliani, 2020). In recent times, India's two-plus-two Defence and Foreign Minister-level dialogues with Japan, Australia, and the U.S.A. reflect the increasing institutionalization tendencies among the liberal democratic nation-states in the Indo-Pacific region (ORF, 2021). The necessity to revivify the global supply chain resilience in an era of segmented globalization has been internalized by the Quad nations, as India, Japan, and Australia have teamed up for the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI), reiterating the normative quotient of the Indo-Pacific by coming together to foster economic cooperation for their mutual benefit, while India and Australia have emphasized the significance of SCRI in their two-plus-two ministerial meeting's joint statement in September 2021 (Pulipaka & Musaddi, 2021).

### **Navigating the Way Forward Amidst Challenges**

India's past disavowal of alliances has undergone a paradigmatic shift in recent times, owing to its quest towards strategic autonomy, promotion of issue-specific strategic partnerships, multi-alignment vis-à-vis plurilateral and minilateral groupings, thereby emboldening a plurilateral posture of engagement, stressing not only on ASEAN-centrality but also on

sustainable infrastructure development, economic cooperation, connectivity, and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific region (ORF, 2021). Transcending multifaceted challenges, it is imperative for India to craft a coherent Indo-Pacific strategy for discerning the highly competitive, contested, and hyper-transformative region, for the sake of maximizing its economic opportunity, strengthening maritime security, and maintaining regional stability (Carnegie Live, 2020).

While doing so, India can engage in experimentation with the forms of alignment, viz. bilateral, minilateral, and plurilateral with the nation-states in the region, simultaneously addressing the key drivers, obstacles, and inhibitions within nation-states or sub-regions in a highly focused manner, and this will necessarily involve advancing stronger integration with Southeast Asia; deep strategic partnerships with other state actors like France, Australia, Japan, the U.K., and the U.S.A.; deterring China's belligerence; investing actively in maritime infrastructure and logistics; diminishing barriers to trade and investment; improving and bolstering regional economic governance through regional and bilateral trade agreements; securing and safeguarding the Indian Ocean (Jha Bhaskar, 2021). As the future of the Indo-Pacific will involve a convoluted range of forces interacting on a regular basis, it will constitute a vital determinant in shaping India's relationship with China and India's partnership with the West, influencing India's ties with Japan, the ASEAN, Australia, and thus holding the potential of opening up new possibilities of diplomatic engagement with Russia, whose maritime interests will expand with Arctic commerce's viability (Jaishankar, 2020).

Mastering a cooperative, consultative, and inclusive framework underlying India's Indo-Pacific strategy, will be a necessity in the future, whereby a diverse spectrum of policy proposals and initiatives ranging from government-to-government dialogues and workshops to people-to-people, civil society, institutional and organizational linkages, increasingly informal conversations to full-fledged institutionalized cooperation following bottom-up and top-down approaches, like bolstering inter-ministerial coordination and promoting infrastructure development, and connectivity in the maritime domain, will mitigate traditional and non-traditional security challenges (Saha & Mishra, 2020). Considering India's vast territorial expanse, gargantuan size, widening strategic interests, resource capabilities, innate capacities, India is likely to spearhead the herculean task of post-pandemic global revival, especially in the maritime realm, domain of climate change mitigation, and vaccine diplomacy (Chatham House, 2021).

Macroscopically, while India will continue to promote stability, maritime security and prosperity; support and maintain the rules-based international and regional order; contribute proactively towards a free, open, inclusive, pluralistic, and resilient Indo-Pacific; promote equity and fairness of globalization in the near future, it is very likely to continue developing robust issue-specific partnerships as per its SAGAR and IPOI vision, while strengthening freedom of navigation and overflight in compliance with International Maritime Law, thereby providing active assistance for capacity-building and capability development (ORF, 2021).

In the future, India's broad approach towards the Indo-Pacific must involve enhancing cooperation to address challenges like terrorism, cyber and illicit trafficking, piracy, organized crime, migration; collaboration on disaster resilience and management; pro-actively contributing on climate, new technologies, health, employment and the development of the Blue Economy; bolstering security, defence, and naval cooperation (Carnegie Live, 2020). India must advance a resilient development paradigm in mitigating the ramifications of the pandemic-induced humanitarian crisis by increasing its institutional competence, fostering economic diplomacy by encouraging domestic and foreign policy reforms, establishing a harmonious balance between cooperation and competition, aspirations and the achievable targets, and regional and global imperatives, and thus build substantial intellectual capital, secure market integration and capacity-building across governments, business organizations, and finally develop sophisticated knowledge bases in the Indo-Pacific nation-states (The Institute of World Politics, 2020).

Thus, the ideal way forward for India in the future must involve promoting a multi-layered approach of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region while building inter-trade facilitation centers, using technology to construct responsive processes through an improvement in industrial development, trade policies, negotiation, and bargaining power. Also, India's capacity to construct new engines of growth and productivity like pharmaceuticals, automobile, and telecommunications sector, India's capability of dynamic engagement at granular and macro levels, and effective institutional mechanism for coordination and leadership, will be integral in shaping its future policies in the Indo-Pacific (Menon, 2021, p.354).

## **Conclusion**

The paper comprehensively highlighted the historical evolution of the concept of 'Indo-Pacific' in International Relations, describing the accounts of several eminent geopolitical thinkers, while focusing on the genesis and historical development of India's Indo-Pacific vision vis-à-

vis the centrality of the Indian Ocean in India's foreign policy dispensation. Subsequently, the contemporary multifaceted trends and the emerging dynamics of India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific Theater was underscored, while navigating the way forward for India's future interests in the Indo-Pacific, in a post-COVID-19 international system.

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