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Policy Brief

Economic Competition or Containment? India's Role in Anti-China Indo-Pacific Alignments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

Indo-Pacific and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) often construed from the prism of geographic coupling of Pacific and Indian Oceans, and maritime security are, in actual geopolitical developments reflecting the competitive tendencies in region. India is exploiting the competitive tendencies in Indo-Pacific region to reinforce its footprints and also to counter balance China's advancement to Indian Ocean and South Asia. India as part of the US led regional structures like Quad and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) is trying to limit China's regional influence. India's exploration of oil and gas in South China Sea, deployment of warships to the Sea and promotion of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) narrative on the Sea are provocative gestures targeted at China. India's participation in region's maritime exchanges alongside with navies of ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia and the US point towards India's emerging role in region's security. India has also launched diplomatic initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) to promote its narrative on maritime security.

Policy Recommendations

- Indo-Pacific is a geographic depiction of a strategic concept. In backdrop of the power dynamics in region, involving China-US competition and India's trans-regional ingress in East Asia, Pakistan needs to pro-actively engage with the countries of the region.
- China's engagement with South Asia in context of regional connectivity is in alliance with Pakistan's narrative of geo-economics. This unanimity of interest between Pakistan, China and South Asia needs to be exploited at diplomatic and academic channels.
- Pakistan's economic cooperation with Bangladesh is recommended. Gwadar seaport can be an attractive destination for Bangladeshi businesses to reach out to the adjoining regions. Likewise, Bangladesh's proximity with ASEAN region can provide Pakistan with an easy access to Southeast Asian markets.

- Pakistan needs to build its economic ties with ASEAN countries. The ‘Vision East Asia’ policy needs to be pursued and efforts are needed at political front to secure the Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) status with ASEAN.
- Pakistan needs to step-up think tank cooperation with Quad countries. This is essential to counter India’s false narrative on terrorism blaming Pakistan (ref-Pahalgam terror attack discussed at Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting, Washington July 1, 2025). Pakistan’s Missions in Quad countries need to facilitate the Pakistani think tanks in connecting with relevant think tanks in Australia, Japan and the US.

Economic Competition or Containment?

India's Role in Anti-China Indo-Pacific Alignments

Overview

India's strategic partnerships with the US, Japan and ASEAN countries are to counter balance China's emerging role in India Ocean. India sees the regional seaports (Gwadar, Chittagong, Hambantota, Kyaukphyu) as its encirclement. While, China looks at India's ingress in East Asia as part of the US led strategy to contain China. To deter India from the South China Sea affairs, China has established administrative districts in Spratly and Paracel islands.

Issue to be Analysed

India's stance on South China Sea and membership of Quad all point towards an anti-China alignment. India's adaptation of an anti-China policy can primarily be linked to China's growing influence in Indian Ocean and engagement with South Asia. The policy brief looks at India's regional manoeuvering towards the Indo-Pacific region, amidst the power dynamics involving the US-China competition.

Analysis

India's Vision of Indo-Pacific

India's Far Eastern Command is stationed at Andaman and Nicobar islands.[1] India has also deployed coastal surveillance radars to Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles.[2] India's defence and security cooperation with the Indian Ocean island states is to promote its image as a "preferred security partner"[3] in region. Indian Navy alongside with regional navies of Asia Pacific (Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, Japan and the US) participates in waters of Pacific Ocean, South China Sea and Bay of Bengal.[4] India is also a part of region's minilateral arrangements including

[1] Adil Rashid, "Maritime Security Dynamics in Indian Ocean: Pak-China-India" in *Major Powers' Interests in Indian Ocean: Challenges and Options for Pakistan* (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2014): 121, http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Indian-ocean.pdf.

[2] Viraj Solanki, "India Steps Up Defence and Security Engagement with its Island Neighbours," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), April 23, 2025, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/04/india-steps-up-defence-and-security-engagement-with-its-island-neighbours/.

[3] Solanki, "India Steps Up Defence and Security Engagement with its Island Neighbours."

[4] Ravi Shankar, "Quad Nations Join Indian Navy in Malabar 2024 Naval Exercise," Bharat Shakti, October 9, 2024, https://bharatshakti.in/quad-nations-join-indian-navy-in-malabar-2024-naval-exercise/.

the ‘India-Japan-US Dialogue,’ the ‘Australia-India-Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue’ and ‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue-Quad’ (comprising of Australia, Japan and the US).[5] In March 2024, US and UK warships while passing through Indo-Pacific region docked at India’s Chennai Port (Bay of Bengal) for maintenance and repair. This shows that the West sees India as a maritime centre for the maintenance of vessels in the Indo-Pacific region.[6] At the diplomatic front, India has launched initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)[7] and IPOI (Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative) to promote its narrative of collective governance and maritime security.[8] Within the IPOI framework, India is cooperating with Australia, Japan, Indonesia[9] and Vietnam.[10] India also has presence in multilateral platforms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA),[11] Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF).[12] IPEF is widely seen as an alternate to China’s led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and BRI.[13]

India’s Quad Membership and Anti-China Element

India, alongside Japan, Australia and the US is part of region’s Security Dialogue, ‘Quad’. Quad countries vividly promote India’s role in maritime cooperation in region.[14] Quad addresses maritime security challenges.[15] Looking at India’s Quad membership

[5] Suyesha Dutta and Suvolaxmi Dutta Choudhury, “Balancing Tides: India’s Competition with China for Dominance of the Indian Ocean Region,” Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, April 24, 2024, https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/balancing-tides-indias-competition-china-dominance-indian.
[6] Dutta and Choudhury, “Balancing Tides: India’s Competition with China for Dominance of the Indian Ocean Region.”
[7] Yogendra Kumara and Probal K. Ghosh, “The Indo in the Indo-Pacific – An Indian View,” Article 7, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, (Spring 2020): 64, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8114&context=nwc-review.
[8] Gagan C and Santosh Kumar, “From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Shifting Geopolitics f the Asia Pacific,” International Journal of Political Science and Governance, Vol. 7, No. 6, (2025): 12, https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i6a.553.
[9] Gagan and Kumar, “From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment: India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Shifting Geopolitics of the Asia Pacific.”
[10] Premesha Saha and Abishek Mishra, “The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India,” Occasional Paper 292, *Observer Research Foundation* (December 23, 2020): 3-6, https://www.orfonline.org/research/indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-towards-coherent-indo-pacific-policy-india/.
[11] Kumar and Ghosh, “The Indo in the Indo-Pacific – An Indian View,” 64.
[12] Kumar and Ghosh, “The Indo in the Indo-Pacific – An Indian View”.
[13] Riya Shah, “What the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Is and Isn’t,” Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, September 15, 2022, https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5830.
[14] Chengxin Pan, “The Indo-Pacific and Geopolitical Anxieties about China’s Rise in the Asian Regional Order,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, Issue 4, 454-460, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.884054.
[15] “Maritime Security: The Cornerstone of the Quad’s Strategic Focus,” *Center for Security Policy Studies*, George Mason University, January 7, 2025, https://csps.gmu.edu/2025/01/07/maritime-security-the-cornerstone-of-the-quads-strategic-focus/.

vis-à-vis China's likely inclusion in Quad, China's naval prowess coupled with vast deployments across the region (Yellow Sea to East China Sea to Strait of Taiwan and to South China Sea) make China a strong candidate in context of maritime security.[16] However, China's absence from Quad clearly manifest opposition to China in region. It reinforces the perception that Quad is another US led structure to counter China in region.

Quad's initiative "Ports of the Future" aims at building of sustainable ports infrastructure in Indo-Pacific. India hosted the initiative's inaugural regional conference at Mumbai.[17] Such initiatives by Quad profess the idea of maritime connectivity. However, seeing Quad's initiatives in comparison to China's vision of regional connectivity, China in backdrop of BRI is the lead country in infrastructural development and building of seaports in region. Again the question arises that why Quad led regional connectivity initiatives are in isolation with China. It is indicative of the fact that India, Japan, Australia and the US as part of Quad are promoting regional connectivity, and maritime cooperation on lines that are in conflict to China's led BRI.[18]

Quad member states launch of 'Quad Critical Minerals Initiative'[19] is another attempt to challenge China's lead role in mineral supply chains. China dominates multiple supply chains globally (60 per cent lithium, 65 per cent cobalt and 90 per cent graphite).[20] The Quad countries are trying to setup a parallel system of mineral processing and refining, and weaken China's control of the rare earth supply chain in region.[21]

[16] Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: Quo Vadis in 2017" *Pacific Focus, Inha Journal of International Studies* XXXIII, no. 2 (August 2018): 186-187.
[17] Devasmita Dutta, "India and the QUAD: Strategic Balancing or Containment of China?" *Centre for Security and Strategy Studies*, August 8, 2025, https://www.cescube.com/vp-india-and-the-quad-strategic-balancing-or-containment-of-china.
[18] Robert Mizo, "The Quad's Deepening Maritime Cooperation," *Toda Peace Institute*, October 9, 2024, https://toda.org/global-outlook/2024/the-quads-deepening-maritime-cooperation.html.
[19] Imran Khurshid, "India, the Quad, and China's Shadow: Building a Coherent Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Diplomat*, July 3, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/india-the-quad-and-chinas-shadow-building-a-coherent-indo-pacific-strategy/.
[20] Genevieve Donnellon-May, "The Critical Minerals Race: Can the Quad Catch China?" ThinkChina, July 24, 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/economy/critical-minerals-race-can-quad-catch-china.
[21] Mohanasakthivel J, "The Quad, Africa, and Competition for Critical Minerals," *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, New Delhi, Issue Brief, July 18, 2025, https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/the-quad-africa-and-competition-for-critical-minerals.

India's Anti-China Posturing in Indo-Pacific

India has labelled the seaports in region (Gwadar, Chittagong, Hambantota, Kyaukphyu) as 'strings of pearl strategy' targeted at encircling India. While, China has called it as "Western media's far-fetched imagination."[22] The seaports and economic corridors' linking South Asia with East and Central Asia are a practical manifestation of regional connectivity and economic integration. India has objected to CPEC, the corridor linking South and East Asia. CPEC will enhance China's economic outreach to Indian Ocean and will position Pakistan as a trading hub. Both these developments will make India a less influential player in region. In backdrop of the regional dynamics in South Asia and Indian Ocean due to regional connectivity, India's political outlook towards ASEAN region and larger Asia Pacific could be termed as a counter balancing to China's economic advancement in South Asia / Indian Ocean. India's ingress in ASEAN region, in particular involvement in South China Sea is to capitalise upon regional disputes and provoke competitive tendencies against China. India alongwith Vietnam has been involved in exploration of oil and gas in the South China Sea.[23] India has also deployed three warships to the South China Sea.[24] In response, China has adopted the Anti-Access Anti-Denial (A2/AD) strategy to deter foreign interference (India) from entering the island chain in the area of Chinese influence.[25] China has also established new administrative districts in the Spratly and Paracel islands.[26]

India's partnership with Japan in backdrop of Quad membership, and China factor has emerged strong. India and Japan, both have conflicting claims with China. The Senkaku islands (known as Diaoyu islands in China) in East China Sea have been a

[22] Captain Abraham Samuel, "Emerging Indo-Pacific Geopolitics: Challenges and Opportunities for India," Indian Ministry of Defence (July 2018): 96, https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/SSG/review/8-1-s/8-1-6.pdf.
[23] "India rebuffs China's objections to oil exploration in South China Sea," *The Indian Express*, September 15, 2011, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/print/india-rebuffs-chinas-objections-to-oil-exploration-in-south-china-sea/.
[24] Suyesha Dutta, "Explainer: What's Behind India's Shift from Non-Alignment to Strategic Alignment in the Indian Ocean?" *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, January 29, 2025, https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/explainer-whats-behind-indias-policy-shift-in-Indian-Ocean-Region.
[25] David Lai, "Asia Pacific: A Strategic Assessment," (US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute-SSI, 2013): 8-11, http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/.
[26] Saha and Mishra, "The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India," 10.

source of rift between Japan and China.[27] While, India has a territorial dispute with China along the Himalayan border.[28] Indian political leadership has openly censured China's position on Arunachal Pradesh. Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Japan said about China: "an 18th century expansionist mindset: encroaching on another country, intruding in others' waters, invading other countries and capturing territory."[29]

India's alliance with the US in Indo-Pacific signifies India's anti-China outlook. Although China's engagement with South Asia, the building of seaports and corridors are opportunities for the region to connect economically and progress. Contrarily, India in pursuance of its hegemonistic policies is opposed to region's political growth and wants to limit China's economic role in South Asia. On part of the US, China's economic manoeuvering carries the potential to challenge the US global supremacy. Thus, US's bid to thwart China is in alliance with India's strategy to countervail Beijing's influence in Indian Ocean. India has intensified security cooperation with the US by signing of agreements, Communication Compliance & Security Agreement (COMCASA)[30] and Basic Exchange & Cooperation Agreement (BECA).[31] These agreements enhance the interoperability between the militaries of India and the US. Both the militaries can share geospatial intelligence and topographical data for long-range navigation and missile targeting.[32] The US defence cooperation with India aims at improving India's strategic ability to counter China. While, India is exploiting the US-China competition to its advantage and gaining from the US military advancement.

[27] Sohini Nayak, "Maritime Opportunities Awaits the India-Japan-France Trilateral," Special Report, no. 133, (March 2021), *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, https://www.orfonline.org/research/maritime-opportunities-await-the-india-japan-france-trilateral/.
[28] Chietigj Bajpaee, "China full-circle in the Sino-Indian Relationship," *Lowy Institute for International Policy,* September 12, 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coming-full-circle-sino-indian-relationship-0.
[29] Danielle Rajendram, "India's New Asia Pacific Strategy: Modi Acts East," *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, December 2014, 5,6, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/indias-new-asia-pacific-strategy-modi-acts-east.pdf.
[30] Huseyin Korkmaz, "Analysis – China-India Border Clashes and US Strategy in Indo-Pacific," Analysis, *Asia Pacific*, June 26, 2020, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-china-india-border-clashes-and-us-strategy-in-indo-pacific/1891028
[31] S.M. Hali, "BECA – A New Indo-US Bilateral Agreement," *The News*, November 2, 2020, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/737917-beca-a-new-indo-us-bilateral-agreement.
[32] Ankit Panda, "What the Recently Concluded US-India COMCASA Means," *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/what-the-recently-concluded-us-india-comcasa-means/.

Major Conclusions

- Regionally, India and China are treading conflicting paths. China through BRI is becoming an influential player in Indian Ocean while India in alliance with the US, Japan and Australia is trying to position itself in East Asia.
- The Quad countries perception of Indo-Pacific political construct will remain in conflict with that of China. China would be posed as a dominating player in region while India will be projected as a balancer.
- India not in a position to directly confront China on military or economic grounds is likely to play the role of a catalytic agent in Indo-Pacific power equilibrium. India's membership of Quad and participation in regional platforms like IPEF, IORA and IONS are steps in this direction.
- India's success in downplaying China in South China Sea affairs will largely depend upon the response of regional countries. Vietnam and Philippines might look up to India over the South China Sea affairs. However, the ASEAN countries cannot altogether be a part of an opposing bloc to China as the latter's economic muscle is an attraction for ASEAN and region at large. Thereby, the regional countries will try to opt for a mid-path between China and India.

Policy Recommendations

- Indo-Pacific is a geographic depiction of a strategic concept. In backdrop of the power dynamics in region, involving China-US competition and India's trans-regional ingress in East Asia, Pakistan needs to pro-actively engage with the countries of the region.
- China's engagement with South Asia in context of regional connectivity is in alliance with Pakistan's narrative of geo-economics. This unanimity of interest between Pakistan, China and South Asia needs to be exploited at diplomatic and academic channels.
- Pakistan's economic cooperation with Bangladesh is recommended. Gwadar seaport can be an attractive destination for Bangladeshi businesses to reach out to the adjoining regions. Likewise, Bangladesh's proximity with ASEAN region can provide Pakistan with an easy access to Southeast Asian markets.
- Pakistan needs to build its economic ties with ASEAN countries. The 'Vision East Asia' policy needs to be pursued and efforts are needed at political front to secure the Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) status with ASEAN.

- Pakistan needs to step-up think tank cooperation with Quad countries. This is essential to counter India's false narrative on terrorism blaming Pakistan (ref-Pahalgam terror attack discussed at Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting, Washington July 1, 2025). Pakistan's Missions in Quad countries need to facilitate the Pakistani think tanks in connecting with relevant think tanks in Australia, Japan and the US.