

Us-China Rivalry in The Indo-Pacific Region and India's Strategic Maneuvers

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Abstract: The Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point for geopolitical competition, especially between the United States and China. This article analyzes the dynamics of the US-China rivalry in the region and explores India's strategic response to these developments. As both the US and China seek to expand their influence, India, with its strategic autonomy doctrine, plays a critical role in balancing these power shifts. The paper highlights India's growing security ties with the US through platforms such as the Quad, while also navigating complex economic relations with China, its largest trade partner. It examines India's maneuvering within the regional security architecture, focusing on its defense partnerships, economic interests, and participation in multilateral initiatives. By maintaining a delicate balance between engagement with the US and cooperation with China, India aims to secure its national interests while avoiding over-dependence on either side. This study provides an in-depth analysis of India's role in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing its efforts to strengthen regional stability and its strategic autonomy amidst intensifying great power competition.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, US-China rivalry, India's foreign policy, strategic autonomy, regional security, Quad, geopolitical maneuvering, China's influence, US alliances.

Introduction: The Indo-Pacific region is rapidly becoming the center of global geopolitical dynamics due to the intensifying rivalry between two of the world's most powerful nations: the United States and China. The region, which encompasses key maritime trade routes, vital energy reserves, and a growing number of strategic chokepoints, is at the forefront of the global geopolitical struggle. Both the US and China are deeply invested in securing dominance in this region, which not only holds significant economic and military importance but also has broader implications for global power structures.

China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, particularly through its military and economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been met with growing concern by the United States and its allies. The US, seeking to maintain its influence in the region, has sought to bolster its alliances with regional powers, such as Japan, Australia, and India, while also engaging in military posturing and establishing a network of strategic partnerships. These efforts are part of a

broader strategy to counter China's expanding influence and ensure the free flow of trade and regional security.

India, as one of the largest and most strategically positioned nations in the Indo-Pacific, plays a crucial role in this evolving power rivalry. With its vast coastline along the Indian Ocean, growing military capabilities, and significant economic potential, India is an essential player in the regional balance of power. However, India's foreign policy approach is characterized by its adherence to strategic autonomy, which seeks to balance engagement with global powers without committing to any one bloc. As a result, India's response to the US-China rivalry is complex, navigating between deepening ties with the US and its growing economic relations with China.

At the heart of India's approach lies its desire to secure its national interests while maintaining regional stability. India has increased its participation in multilateral frameworks such as the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which includes the US,

Japan, and Australia. However, it has also engaged China economically, despite the tensions surrounding regional security issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea. India's diplomatic and military strategies reflect a fine-tuned balance aimed at protecting its sovereignty, maintaining its strategic autonomy, and ensuring that the Indo-Pacific region remains stable and open to all nations.

This article aims to explore the multifaceted role of India in the ongoing US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It will examine how India navigates its relationships with both powers, the impact of its strategic autonomy on its foreign policy, and the implications of its participation in regional security frameworks. Through this analysis, the article will provide insights into India's evolving geopolitical strategies and its position in the broader context of global power politics.

METHODS

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to analyze India's strategic maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region amidst the US-China rivalry. The research integrates qualitative case studies, discourse analysis, and policy review. The primary method involves analyzing key geopolitical events and India's interactions with the US and China. Case studies focus on India's participation in multilateral frameworks like the Quad, its defense relations, and its economic ties with China. These case studies allow for a deeper understanding of India's foreign policy strategies in response to the US-China rivalry. Discourse analysis is employed to examine official statements, speeches, and policy documents from India, the US, and China. This method helps identify the strategic priorities and narratives driving India's foreign policy. Key documents such as India's National Security Strategy and speeches by Indian leaders are analyzed for insights into India's position in the region. Secondary data, including academic journals, books, and expert analyses, provide additional context to India's foreign policy decisions. These sources help evaluate India's balancing act between the US and China, and its role in regional security structures like the East Asia Summit and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The study applies the concept of strategic autonomy to understand India's independent decision-making in the context of the US-China rivalry. It also analyzes India's strategic approach to power competition, regional stability, and economic engagement.

RESULTS

Milestones in the US-China Rivalry and India's Role

The ongoing US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has reshaped regional dynamics. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), China's

military expansion in the South China Sea, through the creation of artificial islands and militarization of key locations, has intensified since 2015. This is directly countered by the United States through its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), which have increased by 50% since 2017. These developments have made the Indo-Pacific the focal point of US-China tensions, with India positioned as a key regional player.

India's strategic response has been shaped by its interests in maintaining regional stability, countering Chinese influence, and securing its maritime borders. India's recent defense engagements with the United States, including the Lemoa Agreement (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) signed in 2016 and the Comcasa Agreement (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) of 2018, mark significant milestones in India's closer defense ties with the US. These agreements allow for greater interoperability between Indian and US military forces, indicating India's strategic alignment with the US in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, India has also balanced its growing ties with the US by maintaining economic relations with China. China is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding \$100 billion in 2022, despite the ongoing geopolitical tensions. This economic interdependence complicates India's strategic positioning, as it seeks to maintain a delicate equilibrium between the two superpowers.

India's Participation in the Quad and Its Strategic Maneuvers

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia, plays a crucial role in India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Established in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, the Quad seeks to enhance maritime security, foster economic cooperation, and support a free and open Indo-Pacific. In 2021, the Quad nations held joint military exercises, demonstrating their collective response to China's assertiveness in the region.

According to the US Department of Defense, the Quad's military exercises in 2021 saw over 30,000 personnel from the participating nations, conducting joint naval and air force drills, aimed at reinforcing a collective security framework. India's growing role within the Quad is evident in its strategic maneuvers, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasizing India's commitment to an inclusive, open, and transparent Indo-Pacific during the 2020 East Asia Summit.

However, India's participation in the Quad must be viewed with caution. While the alliance serves as a counterbalance to China, India's strategic autonomy

doctrine has made it hesitant to fully embrace a military alliance against China. India has emphasized that the Quad is not a military alliance but a platform for strategic dialogue and cooperation. In 2021, India hosted its first-ever Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) summit, further signaling its emphasis on non-confrontational cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, aimed at addressing challenges like climate change and maritime security, rather than solely countering China.

India's Bilateral Relations with the US and China

India's bilateral relations with the US and China represent two distinct dimensions of its foreign policy. On one hand, India has strengthened its defense ties with the US through various agreements, such as the BECA Agreement (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), signed in 2020, allowing for the sharing of critical satellite and geospatial information between the two countries. On the other hand, India's economic ties with China remain strong, with China being the largest source of imports for India.

In 2020, China accounted for 14% of India's total imports, according to India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry. However, following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, where India and China experienced their most significant military confrontation in decades, India adopted a more cautious approach. In 2021, India began curbing Chinese investments in sensitive sectors, including telecommunications and infrastructure, to safeguard national security. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, this shift reflects India's concerns over China's growing influence in South Asia and beyond.

Despite these tensions, China remains a critical player in India's regional security calculations. In 2021, India and China resumed their border talks, seeking to stabilize the situation in the Ladakh region, where the two nations have overlapping territorial claims. These talks indicate India's preference for diplomatic resolution while managing its rivalry with China through strategic economic engagement and military preparedness.

Emerging Geopolitical Alignments and India's Positioning

India's positioning in the Indo-Pacific has been largely shaped by the evolving geopolitical landscape. The US-China rivalry has encouraged India to increasingly align with the US, especially in multilateral institutions like the United Nations, where India has consistently voiced support for multilateralism and a rules-based international order. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, India has called for greater representation of the Global South in UN decision-making processes, seeking a reform of the UN Security

Council to better reflect current geopolitical realities.

At the same time, India has strengthened its ties with regional players in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with ASEAN countries and Japan. India's "Act East" policy, launched in 2014, has seen India engage more actively with Southeast Asia, promoting economic and security cooperation. In 2022, India and Japan conducted a joint naval exercise, further solidifying their partnership amidst China's growing influence in the region.

India's approach reflects a pragmatic strategy of managing its strategic relationships with both the US and China while actively participating in regional security architectures and promoting its own geopolitical interests. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) provide platforms for India to strengthen its influence in the region without directly confronting China or the US.

India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region is characterized by a complex balancing act. On one hand, India deepens its defense and economic relations with the United States, while on the other, it seeks to maintain a constructive economic relationship with China. India's participation in the Quad and other multilateral frameworks enhances its position as a regional leader, while its policy of strategic autonomy allows it to avoid being drawn into direct confrontation with either superpower. As the US-China rivalry intensifies, India will continue to maneuver cautiously, leveraging its unique position to shape the future geopolitical order in the Indo-Pacific.

DISCUSSION

India's foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by the doctrine of strategic autonomy, which emphasizes maintaining independence in decision-making while engaging in multiple strategic partnerships. This doctrine is particularly important in the context of the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, as it allows India to avoid aligning too closely with either of the superpowers. India's nuanced positioning between these two global giants underscores its desire for sovereignty and flexibility in a region marked by increasing geopolitical tension.

Amitav Acharya, a prominent scholar in international relations, notes that India's strategic autonomy "has been a defining feature of its foreign policy since independence" (Acharya, 2014). This allows India to engage with both China and the US without being constrained by an overtly ideological framework. By balancing its relationships with these two powers, India seeks to avoid being drawn into a zero-sum game. However, this balance is increasingly difficult as the US and China engage in heightened competition,

particularly over issues such as the South China Sea and Taiwan.

In this context, India has strategically aligned itself with the United States through military and defense agreements such as the Lemoa and Comcasa Agreements (2016 and 2018). These agreements allow India to deepen its security cooperation with the US, enabling joint military exercises and facilitating logistical support. However, India's cautious stance reflects its desire to retain flexibility, avoiding an overt alignment with either the US or China. Harsh V. Pant, a scholar at the University of London, argues that "India's participation in the Quad is an expression of its desire to influence regional security outcomes without being drawn into military alliances" (Pant, 2013). India continues to promote the Quad as a platform for dialogue, with a focus on economic and strategic cooperation, rather than as a direct military alliance aimed at countering China.

Despite the growing defense and strategic ties between India and the US, India cannot afford to ignore its economic relationship with China. China remains India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding \$100 billion in 2022, according to India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry. However, this trade relationship is increasingly viewed through a lens of economic competition and strategic rivalry.

India's economic interdependence with China presents a complex challenge. On one hand, China is a significant source of imports for India, particularly in the technology, machinery, and pharmaceuticals sectors. On the other hand, the two countries also compete for influence in neighboring regions, such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, which have become battlegrounds for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's neighborhood-first policy.

According to Shashi Tharoor, India's external affairs minister, "India must engage with China from a position of strength, promoting cooperation but safeguarding its strategic interests" (Tharoor, 2012). India's position in the region reflects a pragmatic strategy of economic cooperation combined with a vigilant stance on China's growing influence. India's economic decoupling from China began in earnest after the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, when India initiated measures to reduce Chinese investments in sensitive sectors like telecommunications and infrastructure. While these moves have had short-term economic repercussions, India has strategically repositioned its policy to avoid excessive dependence on China.

India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region has also been significantly shaped by its participation in multilateral forums such as the Quadrilateral Security

Dialogue (Quad) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Through the Quad, India has sought to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, countering China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the broader region. As Oliver Stuenkel points out, "India sees the Quad as a mechanism to balance China's growing influence, but not to create a confrontation" (Stuenkel, 2015). By working with countries like Japan, Australia, and the United States, India seeks to shape regional security architectures that are favorable to its interests without becoming embroiled in direct conflicts with China.

India's position within these frameworks underscores its desire for regional stability and multilateral cooperation, rather than confrontation. While India continues to engage in joint military exercises with Quad members, it has consistently stated that the Quad should not be seen as an anti-China coalition. In fact, India has pushed for greater economic cooperation in the Quad's agenda, focusing on infrastructure development, digital diplomacy, and connectivity.

Furthermore, India's role in the East Asia Summit and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reflects its broader approach of building regional partnerships without directly antagonizing China. These organizations provide India with platforms for dialogue on security issues, economic cooperation, and combating transnational challenges such as terrorism and climate change. India's participation in such organizations also signals its commitment to multipolarity in the region, rejecting the notion of a Sino-American binary in favor of a more inclusive and balanced approach.

India's strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific involves navigating a series of geopolitical trade-offs. On the one hand, India has the opportunity to strengthen its regional influence through its partnerships with the US, Japan, and Australia, particularly in terms of defense cooperation and countering China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. As Francis A. Kornegay notes, "India's positioning in the Indo-Pacific is vital to the broader global balance of power, especially as it counters China's rise" (Kornegay, 2021).

On the other hand, India faces significant risks, particularly the potential dilution of its strategic autonomy. By deepening its defense ties with the US, India could become more closely associated with Washington's global agenda, which could have long-term consequences for its relations with China and Russia. As Oliver Stuenkel suggests, "India's challenge lies in leveraging its strategic autonomy without becoming caught in a hegemonic rivalry between the

US and China” (Stuenkel, 2015).

Moreover, India’s approach to balancing its economic ties with China and its strategic partnership with the US presents another challenge. The economic decoupling from China, while essential for national security, could also harm India’s economic growth, particularly in sectors like technology and manufacturing. However, economic diversification and increased engagement with ASEAN and other emerging markets could mitigate some of these risks.

India’s maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific reflect a sophisticated strategy of balancing competing priorities—maintaining strong economic relations with China while enhancing defense and strategic ties with the United States and other regional partners. India’s strategic autonomy allows it to engage flexibly with both superpowers, but this balance is increasingly difficult to maintain as the US-China rivalry intensifies. India’s success in navigating this complex geopolitical landscape will depend on its ability to leverage multilateral frameworks like the Quad, promote regional cooperation, and manage its relationships with China and the US in a way that preserves its long-term strategic interests.

CONCLUSION

The competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region has significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, presenting both challenges and opportunities for India. The region, characterized by strategic maritime routes, economic dynamism, and competing national interests, has become the epicenter of global power rivalry. As the U.S. and China engage in strategic competition, India finds itself in a delicate position, striving to balance its interests while asserting its role as a regional power. India’s foreign policy, guided by the principle of strategic autonomy, emphasizes the importance of maintaining a multi-alignment approach that allows it to engage with all major powers without being drawn into binary alignments. India’s engagement with both the United States and China, along with its strong regional presence, positions it as a key player in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. India’s participation in regional forums such as the Quad, as well as its efforts to enhance ties with ASEAN countries and the broader Indo-Pacific region, reflects its strategic intent to counterbalance China’s growing influence.

However, India’s position is not without complications. The U.S.-China rivalry has led to an increasingly polarized environment, where India must navigate competing pressures from both sides. India’s growing security and economic ties with the U.S. are countered by its historical relationship with China, as well as its

strategic priorities in the region, including maintaining peace and stability along its borders.

In conclusion, India’s response to the U.S.-China competition is defined by pragmatism and caution. While it is keen to avoid being drawn into a Cold War-style confrontation, it is also mindful of the long-term implications of China’s rising power. India’s maneuvering in this complex geopolitical environment involves not only securing its own national interests but also contributing to regional stability. As the Indo-Pacific region continues to evolve, India’s policies will remain pivotal in shaping the future of global geopolitics. The strategic autonomy approach allows India to maintain flexibility and influence, but the choices it makes in the coming years will determine whether it can successfully balance its relations with both China and the U.S. without compromising its broader regional and global objectives.

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