



**India's Role in the Indo-Pacific Region in the post-
COVID 19 World Order**

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Abstract

With the Indo-Pacific becoming the new arena of the great powers' power projection, India's role as a chief actor in the region has also become increasingly significant. India's unique strategic location and its increasing influence in international politics make it a significant player in the region, making India's position a determining factor in the formulation of various countries' foreign policies, such as the United States of America, Australia, and Japan. They see the area strategically important enough to decide the future of the current world order and COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the dynamic geopolitical shifts, which were already in the making, forcing India to develop its maritime space proactively. This paper will look at three aspects. First, India's Indo-Pacific understanding vis-a-vis other stakeholders of the region. The second section will focus on India's geopolitical challenges in defining the Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in the post-COVID world order. The third section will look at how India plans to approach the Indo-Pacific strategy in the post-COVID world through diplomatic ties and partnerships.

Keywords

India, post-COVID, world order, diplomacy, China, foreign policies

Introduction

As the Indo-Pacific region becomes the new area of contention, India's role in the region also becomes significant, especially because of its geographical location and its growing international role and influence. Thus, making it a determining factor of the foreign policies of the various countries, such as the United States of America, Australia, and Japan who see the area as strategically important enough to decide the future of the current world order. We are witnessing a time when revisionist states are trying to shift the axis of power and the existing global architecture, including in the maritime domain. Recent incidents in this new domain have highlighted the revisionist intents of China. Even if geographically, this region extends from the eastern shores of the African continent, which opens to the Indian Ocean, to the eastern end of the Pacific oceans, as a construct, it is dynamic as different stakeholders have their understandings of the Indo-Pacific. China's offensive maneuvers in the present nuclear age can be observed in the Indo-Pacific, both as a construct and a region. As China rises and expands its areas of influence through diplomatic, economic, and military engagements across the globe, the strategic realities of the countries with the intent of maintaining the status quo are changing rapidly. As China rises and turns its head toward the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the South Asian neighbours, India must actively harness its multidimensional national power, including naval power, shaping its strategic approach toward the Indo-Pacific in an environment increasingly impacted by Chinese aggressiveness.

Many countries, especially Australia, Japan, and the United States, consider India an influential player in the Indo-Pacific Region. However, because of its impending continental threats, India has not entirely concentrated on its maritime security issues, which are now becoming strategically more critical (Baruah, 2020). India has now added Indo-Pacific in its foreign policy doctrine as a new domain area. As India was testing the waters for further involvement, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the dynamic geopolitical shifts forcing India to develop its maritime space more proactively.

This paper will look at three aspects: First, India's Indo-Pacific understanding vis-a-vis other stakeholders in the region. In this section, the paper will trace the development of the

geopolitical construct within the various countries' official narratives since the inception of the term 'Indo-Pacific'. The second section will focus on India's geopolitical challenges in defining the Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in the post-COVID world order, which is witnessing an accelerated pace of strategic changes in the security architecture. The third section will look at how India plans to approach the Indo-Pacific strategy in the post-COVID world through diplomatic ties and partnerships. It will also look at the scope of India's diplomatic outreach, keeping in mind the economic and military resources at hand. This section will also highlight the diplomatic efforts in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which, in terms of energy resources and geopolitical and security architecture, is a priority area for India for applying its hard and soft power capabilities.

Indo-Pacific: India vis-a-vis other stakeholders

The geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific has been gaining prominence for the past few years. One can observe the increasing consensus on the geographical, economic, and strategic scope of the construct. This region has witnessed a never seen before convergence between two oceans, in this case, that of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which has strategically linked the fates of the regions surrounding these oceans. The fates are so intertwined that an event taking place in one ocean consequentially influences the other's developments. Several chokepoints across the region are vital for global trade, especially energy resources. There is also the matter of the growing interests of major powers, including India and China, in both oceans' strategic equilibriums. Since the early 2000s, there has been an increasing interdependence between geo-economics and security architecture in the global order. E.g., dependence of the countries in East Asia on West Asia and Africa for energy resources through the Indian Ocean. The US was also involved in the region, particularly through their Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)¹ against the sea-borne proliferation of WMDs in West Asia and Northeast Asia. This interconnectedness led analysts and scholars to look for an appropriate terminology to refer to the region. After dabbling with many, "Indo-Pacific" seemed to be an acceptable term. In this context, Gurpreet Khurana in 2007 first used

¹ See, *The Origin of 'Indo-Pacific' as Geopolitical Construct- Insights from Gurpreet Khurana*. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

the term² in an article titled “Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation” where ‘Indo-Pacific’ referred to the maritime space stretching across the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean, lining the littorals of East Asia and West Asia. The term was however, first used by German geopolitician Karl Haushofer in the 1920s in his work, “Indopazifischen Raum”. References to the “Indo-Pacific” are now a common occurrence in the official documents ranging from defense white papers to national security strategies, maritime security strategy, and others.

For India, Indo-Pacific expands from Africa to the Americas, covering the Indian and the Pacific oceans, much in tandem with Japan’s understanding. For the United States of America, this strategic construct coincides with the recently named Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). It thus extends only up to the imaginary maritime boundary between India and Pakistan. This is also the area of more active cooperation between Indian and the U.S. navies, signifying a high degree of strategic convergence, which is reflective of the fact that the existing power equilibrium in that region suits both countries.

The US Navy’s Central Command (CENTCOM) begins from the west of the Indo-Pacific Command. Still, the western side of the waters have huge significance for India’s security considering the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China’s use of Gwadar port, Djibouti, and others. The Gulf has a strong US naval presence that safeguards its allies’ interests; however, with the U.S. becoming more energy independent by relying on its own resources of shale oil and gas, the exposure of the U.S. in the Gulf can wither. Although the U.S. will try to maintain its ascendancy as a maritime power across the globe, even in the Gulf, its withdrawal will give rise to India’s security concerns. The 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* by the U.S. Department of Defence stated that China is the most serious challenge to the existing international maritime order.

China is using its military and coercive power to strong-arm the smaller countries, while also utilising its flagship project, the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), as an instrument for its diplomatic advantage by manipulating countries into debt-traps, as well as to build its own

² *ibid.*

version of the regional security architecture. China still avoids using the term Indo-Pacific and sticks to the old terminology of “Asia-Pacific,” which stretches from the east of the Eurasian landmass to the Pacific Ocean. China’s critical energy supply line extends from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Hence, to safeguard its energy imports, China has continuously desired a strategic naval presence on these routes until an alternative is found. The island nations of Maldives, Sri Lanka, and others are significant from a strategic point of view as they can act as buffer zones and platforms for efficient transportation of goods and people during periods of conflict, thus becoming essential for securing the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs). They can function as bases for nations to tackle piracy and terrorisms in the open seas and act as choke points in naval movements. Therefore, China’s rising power in this region is an obvious cause of concern for the various other stakeholders.

This shift in geopolitics in favour of China has been observed by many, including India, which has forced the latter to bolster the current maritime order in the Indian Ocean, which is favourable to India’s security outlook. India seeks to assert its dominance in the region, especially the Indian Ocean Region, which India considers highly critical. Owing to geographical, cultural, and civilisational linkages, India occupies a significant role in the Indian Ocean. The Prime Minister elucidated India’s Indo-Pacific position in his Shangri-La dialogue speech in 2018. To achieve the objectives of its Indo-Pacific vision to achieve a ‘free, inclusive and open’ maritime order, India has been engaging extensively at regional and sub-regional levels, with countries and organisations such as ASEAN, South Korea, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, the USA, the island nations of the region. China’s approach towards this region, which has become even more aggressive during the COVID-19 pandemic, is seen as disruptive of existing equilibrium by a vast number of countries, including India. India also believes that the region’s progress and prosperity are based on cooperation among the nations; hence the concept of SAGAR (“Security and Growth for All the Region”) for the Indian Ocean region was articulated during his visit to Mauritius in 2015. To facilitate the ‘COVID Relief Mission’ to the Indian Ocean Region’s island nations, India also launched ‘Mission Sagar.’

Japan shares a similar vision of the Indo-Pacific as that of India. Its official pronouncement can be traced back to Prime Minister Abe's speech at the Indian Parliament on 'Confluence of the Two Seas' in 2007. The conception is similar to that of the USA and reflects the importance of ASEAN centrality. Japan's policy towards the Indo-Pacific is also influenced by China's presence in the region, and one can observe specific policy developments to strengthen strategic cooperation in the maritime domain with the U.S., Australia, and India.

The 2013 Defence White Paper of Australia for the first time mentioned the convergence of the Indian and the Pacific oceans through Southeast Asia. Australia too takes a similar approach to that of the USA as it focuses on ASEAN centrality and keeps Southeast Asia at the center of the construct, with regards to areas of maritime cooperation which they all agree should be in accordance with the recognised principles of international laws, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" guides ASEAN member nations' engagement with the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region. This document lists maritime cooperation, connectivity, meeting U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, and economic cooperation as the significant areas of collaboration in the region. The term 'Outlook' denotes a certain tentativeness which acts as a guide allowing the member states to mould their policy approaches according to their interests. This document represents the reaction of the member states to the initiative and efforts of other countries, such as the United States of America, India, Japan, and Australia.

European Union (E.U.) does not have a common Indo-Pacific strategy; however, member states are coming up with their approach to deal with the Indo-Pacific. France can have a naval presence in the region through its overseas territories in the Indian and the Pacific oceans. Realising the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the regional construct of Indo-Pacific, in 2018, France announced their 'French Indo-Pacific Strategy' in Sydney. France has also recognised India as one of its Strategic Partners in the region too. Although Germany does not have any territorial claim in the region, in November 2020, the defence minister of Germany, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, announced their warship would patrol

the Indian Ocean Region. The intention behind this move has been highlighted through the elaboration of the fact that a German naval presence in the Indo-Pacific will help safeguard the rule-based world order³. The Netherlands, following the French and the German, has also come up with a policy document on the Dutch Indo-Pacific strategy, which focuses on the need for cooperation between the E.U. and the countries in the region. Its policy document supports free passage and maritime safety. It also states that the E.U. must be vocal regarding the developments in the South China Sea and the violation of the UNCLOS. Unlike the French, German, and the Dutch, the British Foreign Secretary announced U.K.'s "Indo-Pacific tilt" to indicate its increasing interest in the Indo Pacific; it aims to highlight the U.K.'s three foreign policy objectives, which are, protecting the rules-based international system, promoting prosperity and being a "force for good."⁴ It is both for dealing with the concerns of China's aggressive rise and grabbing the various opportunities that the region has to present. India's Indo-Pacific vision, which is based on international law and is inclusive in approach, is understood by Russia as well. However, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD, which India's EAM Jaishankar referred to as the Australia-India-Japan-United States Consultation in his opening remarks at the second Quad Ministerial Meeting in Japan, is of concern to Russia, as it feels that such forums aim for China's encirclement according to U.S. strategic script.

Geopolitical Challenges

Although India was engaged in defining the meaning and value of the Indo-Pacific region, it tread carefully with its engagements and the use of specific terminologies. India was aware of the opportunities that the region offered but also cautious about being projected as a Western nation-led coalition against China. Although both China and Russia think India is now "aligned" to the US, India favours multi-alignment. This is because India supports a security architecture that can enable a multipolar order both globally and in Asia, and multi-alignment is the most appropriate approach to achieve this goal. The primary challenge for India was to define and lay out an approach towards the new construct, which will ultimately help in achieving its strategic goals.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ See, *Global Britain': The U.K. in the Indo-Pacific*. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/global-britain-the-uk-in-the-indo-pacific/>

The Covid- 19 pandemic created a new set of geopolitical challenges for India, which stemmed from its neighbours because of the hyperactive Chinese diplomacy in India's neighbourhood, compelling it to look closely at its relationships with the neighbours.

China Challenge

Increasing Chinese engagement in the Indian Ocean Region has caused concerns in India's security quarters. China's bold moves in the region are suggestive of China's real intentions, which are more than just the safeguarding of energy resources. China's aggressiveness in implementing its flagship 'Belt and Road Initiative' even by using the 'debt-trap' diplomacy involving India's neighbours, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, has become a cause for great concern, as many experts see it as the execution of China's encirclement strategy. This also adversely affects the economic and political stability in the already fragile countries in India's neighbourhood. It also makes the challenge of a stable maritime order even more complicated if the concerned countries of this maritime order become unstable or fragile. These actions indicate that China is using its BRI projects to create its foothold in littoral South Asia. With the backdrop of India-China clashes in eastern Ladakh during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, India is aggressively pursuing plans to secure the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean. India's decision to invite Australia for the 2020 Malabar exercise right after India's stand-off with China in the Himalayas was a move to showcase India's ever-increasing stakes in the existing maritime order, which is threatened by China's aggressive moves. China's first-ever overseas military base in Djibouti has further added to the concerns of India and other like-minded countries. This military base will not only help China to expand its footprint in the region but will also help in dominating the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. That is possible as primarily its location in the Horn of Africa gives China a strategic advantage to influence the geopolitics concerning the SLOCs in that region, including the continental dimension and the Arabian Sea.

India and her neighbours

Through the BRI project, China's entry into the region challenges India's pre-eminent role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Many of India's neighbours are undoubtedly attracted to investments from Beijing due to their infrastructure deficit. Although China had made its entry

in 2013, it was only in 2017 that India voiced its opinions against the BRI. The primary concern for India's opposition to the BRI project was the strategic impact it might have on India's neighbourhood and also in the wider Indian Ocean Region. The growing presence of China has complicated India's policy choices towards both its continental and maritime neighbours. Although these neighbouring countries have mostly pursued a policy of balancing between these two competing powers of Asia, China's expansion in the region has increased India's complications. With new opportunities and lucrative initiatives from China, such as the BRI projects, linkages with political parties, growing commercial and defence partnerships, and others, India faces more significant political uncertainties that threaten its strategic interests. Another concern for India was the military tension with China during the Ladakh LAC stand-off. India must prove and assert its dominance in the region by re-engaging and strengthening its relations with the neighbouring states, especially the island nations. Hence through soft loans and Lines of Credit (LOCs) for development and capacity-building projects across continents, India's Government has undertaken several connectivity projects in its immediate and extended neighbouring states.

In the hour of crisis, New Delhi alertly used the opportunity to implement its 'Neighbourhood First' policy during the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen relations by providing medical assistance to the small and economically weaker nations. As part of 'Mission Sagar,' India sent its Naval Ship 'Kesari' carrying medical assistance team, COVID-related medical supplies, and food supply to the Maldives, Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles. This move indicated how India perceives the Indian Ocean Region through its policies. It also highlighted that the island nations were at par with immediate continental neighbours in India's foreign policy priorities. All assistance was provided upon request showing India's willingness and capacity as a first responder even when facing a similar crisis at home.

The COVID-19 pandemic, although a crisis, had provided an opportunity for India to position itself once again as a key security actor in the Indian Ocean Region. "The Indian Ocean is important to India and being located at the heart of the region," India is pursuing far more

proactively its objective of “mov[ing] beyond ‘sea denial’ to ‘sea control’ approach and given the present situation and opportunity, to develop robust maritime diplomacy.”⁵

India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

Since 2015, Indo-Pacific has been a part of India’s discussion, but its Indo-Pacific Strategy got a framework only in 2018 after the Indian Prime Minister’s Shangri-La speech. This speech gave a geographic definition of India’s understanding of the Indo-Pacific as “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas”. Four key points were put forth at that address explaining the priorities, concerns, and challenges. As stated by Baruah (2020), the first, being the “importance of partnerships and collaborations.” Second, to be mindful of any “alliances of containment” while also recognising the value of strategic partnership. Third, to recognise that a new security architecture is emerging through a significant shift in global power. Fourth, while acknowledging the new order, India pledged its support to regional groupings placing ASEAN at the core of its vision for the Indo-Pacific Region. India sees itself as one of the new world order shapers, and in all this scheme, Indo-Pacific gives India a strategic opportunity. In his keynote address at Shangri-La, Modi’s main message was to articulate India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific region, which was highlighted to be a single strategic space.

On the contrary, Chinese critics believe that Indo-Pacific, as a concept, only increases tensions without any strong foundation of itself. They also argue that the concept acts as a divisive element for the ASEAN. Whereas Modi emphasised that the ASEAN unity and centrality were at the core of the Indo-Pacific construct, China has been downplaying it. In a further elaboration of the concept of Indo-Pacific, India’s Prime Minister launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the 14th East Asian Summit held on 4 November 2019. “The IPOI is aimed at furthering practical cooperation as an open, non-treaty-based global initiative. It has seven pillars that address different aspects of the challenges that the international community faces. They range from Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building and Resource Sharing to Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, Science, Technology and

⁵ See, *The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Available at <https://icsin.org/blogs/2020/12/>

Academic Cooperation and finally Trade, Connectivity, and Maritime Transport. The IPOI is an inclusive and open initiative, seeking to manage better, conserve, sustain and secure the maritime domain.”⁶ In 2020, India moulded its Indo-Pacific vision into a concrete framework and prioritised it as a new domain as it provided better opportunities.

The inability of the traditional supply chain to provide for in the times of the pandemic led to a recent proposal by Australia, India, and Japan to build a resilient supply chain in the Indo-Pacific region. The Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (RSCI) proposal discussed jointly by the three countries on 1 September 2020 has hinted towards a shift in the global economic order post-COVID 19. The initiative intends to drastically change the geographical structure of the already existing trans-border supply chain networks. The lockdowns had stopped the supply chain productions and disrupted the global supply of intermediate and end products. With excessive dependence on China, the major economies of the region were impacted severely. Therefore the deep and organic economic dependence on China had to be curtailed to avoid future disruptions. Besides the economic imperatives, there was also a political motive behind such a proposal due to the worsening relation of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States with China. The security risks associated with the supply chain production connected to China also made it necessary for the Indo-Pacific economies to restructure the supply chains away from it. The apparent reason for this systematic effort to evolve a partnership of like-minded countries to deal with an ever-assertive China in the region.

Since the very inception of the Indo-Pacific vision, partnerships and collaborations have acted as a cornerstone. In this pursuit, Australia, Japan, the United States of America, and France became natural allies of India in its Indo-Pacific partnership along with the island countries of the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean; the continent of Africa; countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Oman; and organisations like ASEAN and E.U.

The India-US relationship has developed to an unprecedented scale despite the COVID-19 pandemic as they culminated into a “comprehensive global strategic partnership.” Deputy

⁶ See, *EAM's remarks at CII Partnership Summit 2020*. Available at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33309/EAMs_remarks_at_CII_Partnership_Summit_2020

Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Laura Stone, during the US-India 2+2 framework held on 27 October 2020, told the PTI that, "despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, our bilateral ties have expanded considerably over the past year. Among the many highlights are our deepening government-to-government dialogues, our shared vision of the Indo-Pacific, regional cooperation, defence and security ties, and ability to respond to unexpected challenges."⁷ She also highlighted that the U.S. and India share a similar lens to view Asia, which is reflected in their Indo-Pacific vision. The two countries have signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), which has bolstered their defence ties. They have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic through extraordinary cooperation and collaborations. On the phone call between the then President-elect Joe Biden and PM Modi, according to the tweet of PM Modi, they "discussed regional issues and [their] shared priorities. [They] also agreed to further [their] cooperation against climate change. [They] are committed to a rules-based international order [and] look forward to consolidation [the] strategic partnership to further peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond."⁸ President Biden's support for strengthening the US-India partnership makes India one of the few countries that could get bipartisan support. The COVID-19 pandemic has also allowed Japan and India to strengthen their economic relations through cooperation in areas of "software development, modern technology, infrastructure, and manufacturing, according to a report."⁹ As Japanese companies are in the process of moving their supply chains to countries like "India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar,"¹⁰ and out of China, the report suggested that India must bring in policy reforms to be able to "reap the benefits."¹¹

As far as India and Australia's relations are concerned, 2020 has been a watershed year. It began with the Australia India Business Exchange (AIB-X), which was of particular significance

⁷ See, *Namaste Trump' to 'Legion of Merit': India-US ties record several milestones in 2020*. Available at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/dec/22/namaste-trump-to-legion-of-merit-india-us-ties-record-severalmilestones-in-2020-2239581.html>

⁸ See, (@narendramodi) "Spoke to @POTUS @JoeBiden and conveyed..." *Twitter*. Available at <https://mobile.twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1358831326602817537?lang=en>

⁹ See, *COVID-19 provides opportunity to India, Japan to further strengthen ties: Report*. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/covid-19-provides-opportunity-to-india-japan-to-further-strengthen-ties-report/articleshow/78217167.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

because it was “the largest trade mission to India in the past five years.”¹² It was followed by a virtual summit between the two prime ministers, which was of considerable importance as the bilateral relationship was elevated to ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ The Indo-Pacific holds a special place in their relationship as it signifies the convergence of both India and Australia’s strategic interests. This can be seen through their participation in the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative led by Japan and their grouping in the QUAD, along with the U.S. and Japan. The recent participation of the QUAD countries in the Malabar exercises indicates their shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Even during COVID times, the India-France relationship has only grown stronger since the announcement of the “French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”¹³ Their shared commitment towards an “inclusive, rules-based Indo-Pacific”¹⁴ and a vision for a multipolar world in the post-COVID era has further enhanced their cooperation. Emmanuel Bonne, the diplomatic advisor to the French president, conveyed that the president would like to strengthen further the ties between the countries as it is believed that their cooperation will be central to overcoming the global challenges of 2021, such as universal access to vaccines against COVID-19, fight against climate change and protecting biodiversity, and others. Recently, France has again lived up to its words and has shown full support for India’s bid for a permanent seat in the UNSC.

PM Modi personally assured India’s continuous support to the presidents of various African countries, such as Egypt, Uganda, South Africa, to name a few, in their combat against the COVID-19 virus. India has actively extended medical assistance to Africa. India has continued its vital pharmaceutical supplies to the African continent even as it handles the domestic crisis. India is leveraging its historical and cultural ties to increase its foothold in Africa, where the already established players like China face a backlash due to recent pandemic. “COVID-19, in

¹² See, *Australia and India Economic Relations: The Stars Have Aligned*. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/australia-and-india-economic-relations-the-stars-have-aligned/>

¹³ See, *The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France*. Available at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/>

¹⁴ See, *India, France firm on inclusive Indo-Pacific, equal access to Covid-19 vaccines*. Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-france-firm-on-inclusive-indo-pacific-equal-access-to-covid-19-vaccines/story-S0gU2QYXtZKT992Y24gzBO.html>

particular, seems to have propelled greater Indian outreach to the continent.”¹⁵ External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has emphasised that Africa is “India’s priority”¹⁶ as it believes that without the complete emergence of Africa, the global rebalance will be incomplete. India has been providing medical assistance teams (MAT) and training to many island nations; some of the first to receive them are Mauritius, Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, and Seychelles.

COVID-19 had devastated the Indian Ocean island nations because their primary source of revenue, which was generated by the tourism sector, was shut down due to social-distancing policies. During such an hour of crisis, India’s ‘Mission Sagar’ provided much-needed assistance.

During the virtual 17th ASEAN-India Summit, Prime Minister Modi “announced \$1 million aid to ASEAN COVID-19 Respond Fund.”¹⁷ This year’s virtual summit was significant because India and ASEAN both were trying to find ways to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. ASEAN expects the COVID-19 vaccines and related formulation to be led by India. Further, as the pandemic is happening globally, ASEAN and India must cooperate at a more extensive level to find a collective solution. With the QUAD picking pace, Indo-Pacific gaining strategic importance, and ASEAN’s centrality as a part of India’s Indo-Pacific Vision, it is time for India-ASEAN to strengthen their relationship and take on global challenges to create their place in the coming new world order in the post-COVID era.

To a great extent, the various critical partnerships emerging are shaping the security architecture at large. China’s actions have also become a determinant factor in shaping the new architecture. What Beijing has failed to acknowledge is that India’s strategic role has also gained tremendous significance with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic allowing it to not only emerge as a key player but also as a strategically important actor of the Indo-Pacific Region with a vision of its own and the ambitions of achieving the same in the post-COVID world order in the making.

¹⁵ See, *How COVID-19 is shaping India-Africa ties*. Available at <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/how-covid-19-is-shaping-india-africa-ties-5916911.html>

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ See, *India announces \$1 million aid to ASEAN Covid-19 Response Fund*. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-announces-1-million-aid-to-asean-covid-19-response-fund/articleshow/79207359.cms>

India's Indo-Pacific Maritime Cooperation, Dialogue, and Exercises

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for India to become proactive in the region and also provided a much-needed push to India's strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. We can see that the security architecture of the "Asia-Pacific" was limiting for India, whereas "Indo-Pacific" is providing India with the opportunity to move beyond the role of a "middle power." India's active role during the COVID-19 crisis in the Indo-Pacific region has provided a boost to various foreign policy instruments, such as "Act East Policy," "Extended Neighbourhood Policy," "Neighbourhood First Policy," and closer ties with ASEAN.

Through COVID vaccine diplomacy, India reached out to its South Asian neighbours to strengthen its presence in the region where China's influence is increasing. As of 22 January 2021, the first batch of vaccine doses was sent to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Myanmar, Mauritius, and Seychelles will also receive supplies of vaccines. India has promised to supply vaccines to other countries as well, such as Brazil, South Africa, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ India had difficulty competing with China's investments in the neighbourhood's infrastructure development as a part of the Belt and Road Initiatives. However, the rising demand for vaccines in these countries has pushed them to look towards India as China could not deliver on its vaccine promises to countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh; this has allowed India to gain its strategic ground at China's expense. India is leveraging its strength in science and pharmaceuticals to further its foreign policy and strategic interests.

One could observe a rejuvenated and strengthened QUAD at play during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as QUAD, restarted after negotiations in 2017, is an informal strategic forum between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. However, some political observers see this as threatening India's multi-

¹⁸ See, *Vaccine Diplomacy: How India is gaining edge over China with supplies to neighbours*. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/vaccine-diplomacy-how-india-is-gaining-edge-over-china-with-supplies-to-neighbours/articleshow/80390314.cms>

alignment policy as concrete institutionalisation of this partnership would mean aligning with the West, with the USA taking the lead. However, the strategic efficacy of the QUAD came under question, especially in light of the recent development of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which has been described as the “largest” regional trade agreement to this date, with the confirmed membership of China which also includes Australia and Japan among the 15 member countries and from which India walked out after seven years of negotiation. The fact that Australia was selectively involved after the signing of RCEP was intended as a message to China, thus further cementing the idea of QUAD in the 2020 exercise that concluded on 20 November 2020 as a “non-contact, at sea only” exercise in light of the COVID 19 pandemic.

The first Indo-Pacific Trilateral Dialogue held on 9 September 2020, during the pandemic among India, Australia, and France, was a one of a kind meet that mainly focused on enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region while also discussing the various economic and geo-strategic challenges, especially with the backdrop of COVID-19. They deliberated on practical cooperation¹⁹ at both trilateral and regional levels, primarily through organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Indian Ocean Rims Association (IORA). The 2+2 Ministerial dialogue between India and the United States of America was held on 27 October 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the signing of BECA that will allow India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership to realise its full potential, was another significant dialogue during the pandemic. India’s decision to hold the SAARC Summit virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic was another diplomatic move to refocus its leadership role in the region.

Conclusion

As John F. Kennedy once said, “The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis’. One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognise the opportunity.” Similarly, the COVID-19 crisis, although engulfing the world in

¹⁹ See, *Indo-Pacific trilateral dialogue held*. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indo-pacific-trilateral-dialogue-held/article32565087.ece>

a state of dangerous uncertainty, it also opened doors for new possibilities and opportunities. During such a time, India must rise to the occasion and moulds this crisis to its advantage. With China's increasing engagement in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially with India's South Asian neighbours, it becomes pertinent that India actively makes use of its national power, more importantly, the naval power, as it is moulding its strategic approach toward the Indo-Pacific in a security environment shaped by China's actions. In April 2019, the Ministry of External Affairs established a new Division for the Indo-Pacific due to the "increasing salience of the Indo-Pacific concept in global discourse."²⁰

Although until recently, India was testing the waters for further involvement, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced India to pursue its maritime space aggressively. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a lot to speculate upon, not only in the public health sector but also geopolitically. India has been engaging both at the regional and sub-regional levels, to achieve its Indo-Pacific vision of a 'free, inclusive and open' maritime order. China's aggressive approach towards this region during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a threat to India's vision but not its own alone. By re-engaging and strengthening its relations with the neighbouring states, especially the island nations, through offers of soft loans and Lines of Credit (LOCs) for development and capacity-building projects across continents, India is proving its leadership in the region once again.

This pandemic has made the world realise that some challenges cannot be solved in isolation but require a global approach. In this context, one can justify that multilateralism will serve the new world order's needs, a vision that India has favoured as reflected in its multi-alignment foreign policy. To a great extent, various critical partnerships are emerging which are shaping the security architecture at large. One could observe a rejuvenated and strengthened QUAD at play during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only created an opportunity for India to become proactive in the region but has also provided a much-needed push to India's strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. Playing a significant role during the pandemic will also allow India to have a leadership role in actualising a new world order that

²⁰ See, *Indo-Pacific Division Briefs*. Available at https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf

should be multipolar. India's decision to hold the SAARC Summit virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic was a major diplomatic initiative to reposition itself as a leadership role in the region.

It has been to India's advantage that as the world is getting increasingly anxious about procurement of the vaccines, India has been able to come to assistance, thus creating favourable public diplomacy across the globe. With prowess in medicine and pharmaceutical research, India can resurrect itself during a global pandemic and emerge as a strong security actor in the new world order. India's "Mission SAGAR" and its "Neighbourhood First" policy played a significant role in boosting India's image during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sheer magnitude of the pandemic's disruptive effect on global and regional geopolitics has led to the further strengthening of strategic trends concerning India. It has also opened up the space for India for a more robust international role to pursue its national interest on a much more expanded geopolitical canvas. The effective diplomatic moves outlined in this paper could put India in a significant position to shape the post-COVID order in its wider neighbourhood regions with truly global ramifications.

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