



THE PANKAJ KUMAR JHA
CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES | **ISSUE BRIEF**

DECEMBER 2024

ANALYSING THE ROLE OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY IN INDIA'S STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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IB241203

Introduction

In the last decade, global politics has witnessed a shift in power from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region. Earlier referred to as the ‘Asia-Pacific Region,’ the rise of China and a multipolar world from the second decade of the 21st century has led to the region now being referred to as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region. As a geopolitical construct, the region is described as a strategic theatre linking the Indian and Pacific regions. Although many scholars and nations have different notions of the Indo-Pacific region's geographic space, generally, it refers to the regions between the Eastern coast of Africa and the Western shores of the USA¹. India by virtue of its geographic location and growing economic and military stature, is a major stakeholder and has the opportunity to play an increasingly leadership-oriented role in the region.

From a geostrategic perspective, the region first gained prominence in 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered his speech ‘The Confluence of Two Seas’ at the Indian Parliament. In the speech, he emphasised the shared values and strategic interests that India and Japan shared and highlighted how their democratic values could usher in a more open and prosperous Asia. He further stated that “as maritime states, both India and Japan have vital interests in the security of sea lanes. It goes without saying that the sea lanes to which I refer are the shipping routes that are the most critical for the world economy”². The speech was also delivered at a time when the USA was occupied in West Asia during its ‘war on terror’, which allowed China to capitalise on its strayed attention to build up its maritime presence and military strength. While the rise of China created a new geopolitical landscape in the region, which compelled countries such as the USA, Japan, Australia and various ASEAN nations to develop strategies to contain Asia, India has been more careful in pursuing such strategies. This stems both from India’s historical position of staying away from alliances and India being more concerned with its immediate area of concern, which was primarily only the Indian Ocean.³ It was only in 2015 that India first gave a joint statement

¹ Mishra, A. (2021). Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa. *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/reflections-on-the-indo-pacific-perspectives-from-africa>.

² MOFA: Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at the Parliament of the Republic of India “*Confluence of the Two Seas*” (August 22, 2007) <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

³ Baruah, D.M. (2020). India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theater of Opportunity. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/06/india-in-the-indo-pacific-new-delhis-theater-of-opportunity?lang=en>.

with Japan on the Indo-Pacific. While the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the QUAD first began as a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) oriented partnership between India, Japan, Australia and the US in 2004, it was only from 2017 onwards that the QUAD 2.0 began taking shape⁴. Here, there was a renewed focus on security convergences between the nations and the strengthening of bilateral ties between the nations.

Defence Diplomacy

Diplomacy, which refers to peaceful negotiations in the conduct of relationships between states to safeguard and expand the national interest has played an important role in growing India's footprint in the Indo-Pacific Region. The Look East Policy of 1992 was the first pivot of India towards the region when it sought to bolster its trade engagement with Southeast Asian Nations. Subsequently, the Act East Policy of 2014 added a strategic dimension to our ties with these nations with a focus on military cooperation and expanded our interests to more countries in the Pacific region. India's vision of the Indo-Pacific is a "free, open and inclusive" region⁵. This is also reflected in India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine or its vision for the Indo-Pacific. India is also mindful of a growing Chinese footprint in the region, especially around India's near seas such as ports in Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar. Additionally, India also needs to contend with the Chinese Naval presence in the Coco Islands in Myanmar, which lies approximately 88 kilometres from India's tri-service command at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Military construction, such as a new runway and radar station, has heightened tensions for both India and the USA, given its proximity to both Taiwan and the Strait of Malacca⁶. Thus, India's strategic imperatives in the region are 1) To promote an Indian outlook in the construction of the regional environment, 2) to Collaborate with like-minded countries, and 3) To counter the Chinese footprint out of a strategic

⁴ Mehra, J. (2020). The Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral: Dissecting the China Factor. *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-australia-india-japan-us-quadrilateral-dissecting-the-china-factor>

⁵ Distinguished lectures details. (n.d.). *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?852>

⁶ Ratcliffe, R. (2023, May 1). Military construction on Myanmar's Great Coco island prompts fears of Chinese involvement. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/01/military-construction-on-myanmars-great-coco-island-prompts-fears-of-chinese-involvement>.

Compellence. As India takes on a more assertive stance in the region, *the strategic nature of the region has required a growing contribution of India's armed forces in its diplomatic endeavours, referred to as 'defence diplomacy'*.

According to Cottey and Forster (2004), defence diplomacy has the following dimensions

1. Appointment of defense attaches
2. Bi/multi-lateral defence cooperation agreements
3. Training exchanges of personnel
4. Joint exercises/ port calls
5. Provision/ aid of defence armament materials
6. Provision of defence-related expertise⁷

When accessing India's defence diplomacy activities in the region these are the parameters the paper will focus on. Further, defence diplomacy can be divided into two types- while Coercive diplomacy uses the threat of use of force or a threatening posture to induce compliance⁸, cooperative diplomacy entails looking at shared security interests that foster collaboration.

Joint Exercises, Training and Port Calls

In the Indo-Pacific region, joint exercises, especially those pertaining to the navy, play an important role in sending messages of deterrence to China for India. Meanwhile, port calls by the Indian Navy to other nations are not just a symbolic gesture of cooperation for adversaries but also important for logistical reasons such as emergencies and provisioning in the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, Chinese port calls to ports mentioned above in India's near seas pose similar anxieties for us.

⁷ Cottey, A. and Forster, A. (2004). Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance. *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. [https://www.defence.lk/upload/ebooks/Reshaping%20Defence%20Diplomacy%20New%20Roles%20for%20Military%20Cooperation%20and%20Assistance%20\(%20PDFDrive.com%20\).pdf](https://www.defence.lk/upload/ebooks/Reshaping%20Defence%20Diplomacy%20New%20Roles%20for%20Military%20Cooperation%20and%20Assistance%20(%20PDFDrive.com%20).pdf).

⁸ Levy, J. S. (2008). Deterrence and Coercive Diplomacy: The Contributions of Alexander George. *Political Psychology*, 29(4), 537–552. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00648.x>.

The most notable regional joint exercise has been the Malabar Naval Exercise. Although ongoing between India and the USA since 1992, it saw the participation of Japan (2015) and Australia (2020). Its latest edition was in 2024, held at Vishakhapatnam, India. The exercise focuses on building “combat readiness, maritime integration, and interoperability”⁹ as well as promoting shared values in the maritime domain. The Malabar exercise is a concrete manifestation to promote India’s vision of SAGAR. At the same time, while the QUAD ostensibly refrains from directly targeting China, its aim to promote a just, rule-based maritime order in the seas and the oceans and then showcasing military drills and naval synergies does send a message to China.

The Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) spearheaded by the US Navy brings together 29 nations to influence regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. It fosters cooperation between nations from HADR operations to naval warfare capability building. In 2024 India sent its frigate INS Shivalik to participate in the exercise while emphasizing our capability “INS Shivalik's participation in RIMPAC-24, 9000 Nautical Miles away from Indian coast Stands testimony to the Indian Navy's capability to operate in any part of the world.”¹⁰ Moreover the notable exclusion of China highlights the belief of the participating nations of China not being a responsible power in the region.

Additionally, India also undertakes bilateral exercises with important powers across the region. Exercise JIMEX was held with Japan in 2024 to foster shared commitments to the region. Exercise VINBAX was held between the Indian and Vietnamese armies and air force to build interoperability and confidence. The Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX) was held with the Philippines in light of growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. The Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX) focused on manoeuvre drills along the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Exercise MILAN, started by India, has seen the participation of aircraft carriers,

⁹ India, U. M. (2024, October 10). India hosts Australia, Japan and U.S. forces in Exercise Malabar 2024 - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India. *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India*. <https://in.usembassy.gov/india-hosts-australia-japan-and-u-s-forces-in-exercise-malabar-2024/>.

¹⁰ Press Information Bureau (2024, June 29). NS SHIVALIK REACHES PEARL HARBOUR TO PARTICIPATE IN RIM OF THE PACIFIC EXERCISE (RIMPAC) – 24. *Government of India*. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2029512>.

which are vital for operations in the Indo-Pacific. These exercises act as a deterrent for China as well as a means for India to construct a favourable regional environment in line with its values.

India also has agreements to facilitate port calls with various nations. They play an important role in promoting the Indian Navy as a blue-water navy and a diplomatic force. While India has made port calls to Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines in the past, it now seeks to expand its presence in the Pacific through port calls to New Zealand and Papua New Guinea¹¹. This is a step towards gaining some level of strategic parity with China, which has made substantial gains in the Pacific Island region via developmental aid and security pacts such as one with Solomon Islands¹².

High-Level Meetings

In 2023, the Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference (IPACC) and Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar (IPAMS) were held in New Delhi, with 18 countries sending their Chiefs of Armies for participation¹³. The seminar focused on stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region and the role of defence forces of participating nations in maintaining this dynamic in the region. Notably, at the conference, Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh used the terms “circle of concern” and “circle of influence”¹⁴ to describe the region. Theorised by Stephen Covey¹⁵ (1989), a circle of concern are broad areas that include things we require but may or may not have control over; the circle of influence includes a smaller area where your power can enable you to exert control. In the Indo-Pacific, the defence minister stated that the areas of concern of many

¹¹ Joseph, B. S. (2024, October 26). How the Indian Navy Is Expanding Its Presence in the Indo-Pacific Through ‘Goodwill Visits.’ *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/how-the-indian-navy-is-expanding-its-presence-in-the-indo-pacific-through-goodwill-visits/>.

¹² Sullivan, H. (2023, March 8). China’s rising power and influence in the Pacific explained in 30 seconds. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/09/chinas-rising-power-and-influence-in-the-pacific-explained-in-30-seconds>.

¹³ Ministry of Defense (2023, September 27). Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference (IPACC). *PIB Government of India*. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1961331>.

¹⁴ Press Information Bureau (Defense Wing). Complexities & untapped potential of Indo-Pacific region demand concerted efforts for a prosperous, secure & inclusive future, says Raksha Mantri at 13th Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs’ Conference in New Delhi. <https://mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/PR260923.pdf>

¹⁵ Covey, S. R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people: restoring the character ethic*. New York, Simon and Schuster.

nations, like maritime resources, trade, and territorial integrity, intersect. Thus, it is up to nations with their circle of influence in the region to identify common concerns and use their power to promote shared interests. The IPACC can thus be cited as an outcome of using India's circle of influence to promote shared circles of concerns of partners in the region. This not only illustrates India's diplomatic outlook on the region but also showcases how our defence partnerships in the region can help us promote it.

The Indian defence forces have been termed as a “preferred security partner”¹⁶ to the region, showcasing inclusivity and equity in our partnerships in the region. To this end, India has deepened its defence diplomacy channels with countries in the region. Concerning QUAD members, in 2024, India held the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial meeting with Japan, where the two nations reiterated their commitment to upholding the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to create an inclusive, rule-based order¹⁷. Similarly, this year, the 21st US Military Cooperation Group (MCG) meeting¹⁸ was held in India. The meeting, chaired by India's Chief of Integrated Defence Staff Lieutenant General JP Mathew and US's Lieutenant General Joshua M Rudd, saw an emphasis on the two's shared democratic values and how they can be used to shape the Indo-Pacific. Notably, this comes after India and the USA signed two key defence agreements- The Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA), which facilitates a reciprocal provision of key defence materials- both raw and finished on request. The second is the MoU on Liaison officers from India to strategic commands in the USA. Australia, which has been a Comprehensive Strategic Partner to India since 2020, has converged on maritime issues. The Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement was signed in 2020, which seeks to increase inter-operability in the domain of maritime domain awareness and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In November 2024, the Prime Ministers of both India and Australia. Herein, the two reiterated their vision for the Indo-Pacific, citing adherence to

¹⁶ Initially India was termed as a “net security provider”, however due to relative defense budget and capacity vis-à-vis China, the term was changed. However, it is also a term that denotes more equality in partnerships. Roy-Chaudhury, R. (2022). From ‘net security provider’ to ‘preferred security partnerships’: the rhetoric, reality and result of India's maritime security cooperation. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 18(2), 87–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2022.2118191>.

¹⁷ Joint statement Third Japan-India 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial meeting. (2024, August 20). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/pageite_000001_00002.html.

¹⁸ 21st Edition of India – US Military Cooperation Group meeting held in New Delhi. *Press Information Bureau*. (2024, November 6.). <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2071242>.

the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).¹⁹

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as an important strategic region for India. Defence diplomacy, through exercises, training, and port calls, has become a crucial tool for India to fulfil its strategic imperatives. Joint exercises like Malabar and RIMPAC showcase India's military prowess and build partnerships. Port calls allow India to project itself as a blue-water navy and a regional security provider. These efforts aim to counter China's influence, promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, and establish India as a leading player in the region. Unlike China, which has a restrictive maritime geography, India is ideally positioned in the Indian Ocean with an unhampered coastline of 7,500 kilometres²⁰. It is high time India takes on a more militarily assertive role in the region and focuses on the development of an indigenous defence industrial base to assume our historic sphere of influence in the region.

¹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs. Joint Statement: 2nd India-Australia Annual Summit. (2024, November 19). https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral_documents.htm?dtl/38547/Joint+Statement+2nd+IndiaAustralia+Annual+Summit

²⁰ Profile. *National Portal of India*. (n.d.). <https://www.india.gov.in/india-glance/profile>.