

The Growing Strategic Importance of the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities for Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines how the Indo-Pacific architecture is perceived by India and China and how these visions shape economic and diplomatic relations in the region. The study asks how India's and China's competing visions of the Indo-Pacific shape their economic and diplomatic engagement with regional actors, particularly ASEAN. The paper argues that Chinese and Indian strategic principles and diplomatic approaches regarding regional dynamics are necessary contexts for understanding the economic and political policies pursued through regional institutional frameworks. It demonstrates that China primarily frames the Indo-Pacific through economic connectivity and regional multipolarity, while India increasingly approaches the region through strategic balancing, maritime security and diversified economic partnerships. Previous research papers in the field mostly examined these dynamics from a one-country perspective, treating economic and political dimensions mostly separately; however, this paper aims to provide a comparative understanding of two visions represented by Indo-Pacific dominant players based on their official statements and bilateral and multilateral initiatives. This methodological approach facilitates the understanding of recent institutional crises in renewed India-China dialogues and possible diplomatic resolutions based on analysis of key state principles pursued by both sides to achieve stable maritime security and economic cooperation.

KEYWORDS: Indo-Pacific, maritime security, economic cooperation, India, China, ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the most strategically important regions in the twenty-first century. It connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans through major maritime trade routes and plays an important role in global trade, energy transportation, and economic activity (UNCTAD, 2024).

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ itself is not used consistently across policy and scholarly discourse, and at least three distinct conceptions can be identified (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). Geographically, it denotes the maritime space linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, generally understood to extend from the eastern coast of Africa through South and Southeast Asia to the western Pacific littoral. Strategically, it functions as a framework for balancing China’s rising influence, emphasising freedom of navigation, maritime security, and coalition-building among like-minded states, most visibly through the Quad (Liu, 2020; Medcalf, 2020). Institutionally, it denotes a normative and diplomatic architecture built around ASEAN centrality, exemplified by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019), which frames the region through dialogue, inclusivity, and cooperative governance rather than balancing or containment. For its analytical purposes, this paper adopts the strategic and institutional conceptions of the Indo-Pacific primarily, treating the region as a contested space in which China’s and India’s competing strategic visions interact with ASEAN’s institutional framework, rather than using the term in a purely geographical sense.

Its geographical and economic importance has also made it a major area of geopolitical competition. As the strategic interests of major powers in the region progressively overlap, issues of economic connectivity, maritime security and overall regional stability have gained profound significance. China and India are among the principal actors shaping this regional order, with different visions of how the Indo-Pacific should develop. China seeks to strengthen its strategic and economic influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015), while India promotes a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific through its Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific

Oceans Initiative (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015, 2020). These different approaches have contributed to wider debates about regional security, cooperation, and governance.

Although a growing body of research examines the Indo-Pacific, much of the existing literature focuses separately on China's maritime strategy, India's Indo-Pacific policy, or broader regional security issues. Comparatively limited attention has been given to how the different perspectives of China and India shape both maritime security and economic cooperation. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) also provides a broader framework for defining these developments, particularly through its emphasis on dialogue, inclusivity, cooperation, and central role of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2019).

This study is significant because comparing China's and India's approaches can provide a clearer understanding of the changing strategic and economic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. By examining their competing visions, the study seeks to understand their implications for regional maritime security and economic cooperation. Accordingly, the research asks: How do China's and India's competing visions of the Indo-Pacific shape regional maritime security and economic cooperation? The changing economic and strategic realities of the Indo-Pacific are increasingly driven by how China and India operate within it. Understanding where the region is heading requires looking at these two powers side-by-side. This study asks: *How do China's and India's competing visions of the Indo-Pacific shape regional maritime security and economic cooperation?*

To answer this, the research focuses on China, India, and the ten ASEAN member states. ASEAN effectively serves as the main arena where Chinese and Indian policies actually play out on the ground. This specific focus makes sense for three reasons.

First, China and India are the largest Asian powers with active, competing frameworks for the region—namely, the Belt and Road Initiative (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015) and the Act East Policy/Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015, 2020). Second, ASEAN sits at the center of the region's diplomacy. As outlined

in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (ASEAN, 2019), it is the primary space where Chinese and Indian interests meet. Third, the South China Sea dispute provides a practical case study for this dynamic, as it directly involves Chinese claims, several ASEAN states, and India's growing strategic footprint. While countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia obviously shape the broader region, they are excluded here to keep the analysis strictly focused on the China-India-ASEAN triangle.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing papers on the Indo-Pacific have predominantly examined national strategies of China and India, particularly their visions of maritime security and regional order defining their Indo-Pacific related discourses. However, the literature predominantly follows a one-country perspective, analysing either China's or India's foreign policy rather than comparing how their competing visions shape the Indo-Pacific as major regional actors. Alternatively, papers focus on bilateral relations of India-ASEAN or India-China within the same context of national security and political or economic state priorities.

Studies examine the issue mostly using qualitative analyses of official policy documents and government statements or comparative analysis for foreign policies. Perspective-analysis is not a common methodology, but there are several works present. This way, an early and influential contribution by Hong (2006) explored China's evolving perception of India's growing engagement with ASEAN and regional security dynamics. Although the study provides valuable insights into the foundations of China's strategic thinking, its empirical scope is limited to data prior to 2004 and therefore does not reflect more recent changes in China's Indo-Pacific policy.

At the same time, research on India's Indo-Pacific strategy has expanded considerably in the recent decade. Academic studies of Kipgen (2020), Lee & Chan (2021), and Nachiappan, (2021) examine India's regional approach through qualitative analyses of policy documents, official statements, and strategic initiatives. A common methodological principle across these studies is the use of the South China Sea as the core case study for evaluating maritime security

dilemmas and developing strategic competition. In these studies maritime security is represented as the dominant analytical framework, while Nachiappan (2021) also incorporates the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), extending the discussion to the economic side of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. However, economic cooperation primarily examines the India-ASEAN alignment opposing China's economic ambitions, with limited consideration of its strategic perspective.

Across the reviewed literature, qualitative document analysis remains the dominant methodological approach focusing on security and maritime issues. Alternatively, academic works explain national approaches to the Indo-Pacific as a framing concept for cooperation in political, economic, social and cultural spheres (Kipgen, 2020). Despite differences in

analytical focus, the literature consistently portrays China as viewing the Indo-Pacific through the lens of strategic competition and containment, whereas India's vision is commonly associated with maritime cooperation, connectivity, and a rules-based regional order where it is playing a balancing role between China and the other regional players. Maritime security therefore constitutes the principal analytical framework across the field, while economic cooperation receives comparatively less systematic attention due to rising geopolitical concerns. Only a limited number of studies employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to analyse regional economic integration (Rahman et al., 2020), indicating a continued preference for qualitative policy analysis in Indo-Pacific scholarship.

This paper focuses on how China's expansionist strategy has influenced India's strategic approach to the South China Sea and its Indo-Pacific vision. Although many researchers have discussed China's growing military presence and increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, fewer studies have shaped India's foreign and security policies with regard to those developments. Moreover, this study also examines the role of multilateral initiatives such as the Quad (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020) and ASEAN-led mechanisms in promoting a rules-based regional order. Instead of looking at the Indo-Pacific only as an area of strategic competition, the study also considers the importance of economic cooperation, diplomacy, and regional partnerships. It highlights India's respect for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the

Sea (UNCLOS), which have become key parts of its Indo-Pacific policy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). In addition, the given research reviews existing academic debate. Some studies mainly focus on China's military and technological advancements leading to expansion in the region (Mukherjee, 2024), while others assess India's shift from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy to achieve stronger engagement with ASEAN countries (Mazumdar, 2021). By bringing together these different viewpoints, the paper provides a clearer understanding of the changing security environment in the Indo-Pacific. It concludes that the future of the region will depend not only on the strategic competition between China and India but also on the ability of regional organisations, international law, and cooperative security efforts to maintain stability.

RESEARCH GAP

The Indo-Pacific region has gained attention in recent years for its critical maritime trade routes, geopolitical competition and increasing military presence. A considerable amount of literature has assessed China's increasing maritime assertiveness, strategies of major powers, ASEAN centrality, the Quad, and regional security interplay. Existing research examines India's and China's Indo-Pacific strategies independently or from the perspective of a single actor. Studies that compare how these competing strategic perspectives interact and influence ASEAN's regional security and economic cooperation remain relatively limited. Moreover, there is insufficient integration of security and economic facets within a single framework, wherein most studies address these issues separately rather than examine their interconnected nature. Studies have focused on qualitative aspects like bilateral relationships, foreign policy initiatives or official policy statements and documents. While they are crucial, they lack comparative unification across multiple actors. Further, quantitative studies, especially CGE trade-simulation models, are rarely incorporated alongside strategic and security analyses (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020).

The present study addresses these contextual and methodological gaps through a comparative qualitative research design that integrates multiple analytical approaches covering both China's

and India's visions of the Indo-Pacific and examining how these competing perspectives influence regional security and economic cooperation.

METHODOLOGY

This study is mostly qualitative, structured as a comparative case-study that treats the South China Sea dispute as the key linking China's maritime assertiveness to India-ASEAN security and economic cooperation. This is expanded by a comparative discourse analysis, contrasting China's and India's respective visions of the Indo-Pacific defined by their official documents and bilateral or multilateral initiatives, to explain the division of their ASEAN-related approaches. Doctrinal analysis of the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Award adds to international relations literature (McDorman, 2016), ensuring that the paper's legal claims are based on binding decisions, not just policy interpretations. A quantitative dimension is represented by existing Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) trade-simulation models from recent economic-cooperation literature (Rahman et al., 2020), providing evidence to complement existing research and showing the economic importance of deeper Indo-Pacific integration.

The paper also draws predominantly on secondary data: peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank working papers, and policy commentary published between 2006 and 2026, a period spanning India's "Look East Policy" through its 2014 rebranding as "Act East Policy." (Bajpae, 2017). However, primary sources are incorporated for the analysis to define policy development strategies: state strategy papers, official statements, treaties, and public speeches - among them the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019) and the Arbitration Award itself. This way, the paper's claims about institutional positions rest on primary text rather than secondary paraphrases.

ANALYSIS

China's approach to the Indo-Pacific has evolved alongside its growing economic, maritime, and strategic capabilities (Prof. Mukherjee, 2024). A major policy shift was in 2012, when the Chinese government began placing greater emphasis on developing China as a maritime power (海洋强国). This approach linked maritime development with economic growth, the protection of maritime rights and interests, marine resources, and national security (Mallory, 2015; Lee & Chan, 2021). The 2015 Government Work Report further stated the objective of moving towards building China into a maritime power, while emphasizing maritime economic development, maritime governance, and the protection of China's maritime rights and interests (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015; Lee & Chan, 2021).

The next major stage was shaped by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 and formally developed through the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road in 2015 (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015). The policy placed particular importance on maritime connectivity with Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Europe. The 2015 document specifically anticipated maritime routes extending from China through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean towards Europe, while also establishing routes to the South Pacific (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015).

China further developed this maritime approach in 2017 through the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. The document proposed strengthening maritime cooperation through defining the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage, which demonstrated the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean for a broader maritime network (NDRC & State Oceanic Administration, 2017).

These policies have implications for India because the Indian Ocean is an important space for China's trade, energy supplies, and global maritime strategy. China's expanding economic and maritime engagement in the region therefore invades India's own interests and its growing

emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. Despite this, the relationship cannot be understood only through strategic competition. China and India remain economically connected, while recent diplomatic efforts have sought to stabilize bilateral relations. In 2026, both countries continued border-related dialogue through the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination, indicating an effort to maintain communication despite continuing strategic differences (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026). Thus, China's Indo-Pacific approach represents the interaction of economic connectivity, maritime development, and strategic interests. The "Dragon at Sea" (海中之龙) therefore refers not simply to China's growing naval presence, but to the broader evolution of state policy linking maritime power, trade routes, infrastructure, and regional influence. For India, this creates a complex environment in which cooperation and competition continue to coexist, making the management of China's expanding regional role an important factor in the future of the Indo-Pacific.

India's response to China's growing maritime assertiveness has taken the form of cooperative balancing rather than confrontation (Baruah, 2020). Shifting from the Look East Policy (1991) to the Act East Policy (2014) expands India-ASEAN engagement towards maritime security, defence and connectivity (Baruah, 2020; Ngaibiakching & Pande, 2020). This approach was reinforced by the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) in 2019, which promotes cooperation in maritime security, disaster management, capacity development, and connectivity (Baruah, 2020).

India's perception of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific emphasizes freedom of navigation, sovereignty, and peaceful dispute settlement. For this political direction UNCLOS provides a rule-based framework for cooperation with ASEAN. This is particularly relevant in the case of the South China Sea, where China's assertive maritime expansion accelerated ASEAN security concerns (Baruah, 2020; Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). India has consequently organized naval exercises, contributing to defensive maritime relations with Southeast Asian states.

The Quad further supports India's security strategy and its vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, India avoids measures that could unnecessarily escalate economic tensions with China. At the same time, it emphasises ASEAN centrality, connectivity, trade and cooperation (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). CGE simulations highlight the potential economic gains from deeper Indo-Pacific cooperation, reinforcing the importance of combining maritime security with economic integration (Rahman et al., 2020). Overall, India seeks to expand ASEAN's strategic options without forming a formal anti-China alliance.

Most scholarships treat Beijing's and New Delhi's regional strategies separately. Even though both countries desire a stable Indo-Pacific, they fundamentally clash on the structure of that stability. China's vision, defined by "Maritime Power" ambition and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, treats ASEAN primarily as a connectivity space: a network of ports, trade corridors, and infrastructure investment, rather than a rule-bound system to integrate (Lee & Chan, 2021; Mukherjee, 2024). At the same time, India's vision, shaped by Act East and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, relies on ASEAN as a central strategic partner, where naval defence expansion is grounded in UNCLOS (Manhas, 2024; Nachiappan, 2021). The result is two distinct structures of legitimacy: Beijing's rests on economic demands, while Delhi's relies on rule of law.

However, conflicting visions were not properly institutionalized. The renewed India-China dialogue since 2020, alongside CGE projections underscoring India's own position in regional trade (Rahman et al., 2020), suggests both powers treat economic entanglement as too costly to sacrifice for strategic competition. The same clash emerges in treatment of multilateral institutions: China engages selectively with ASEAN-led forums to avoid being bound by legal outcomes (Lee & Chan, 2021), whereas India pushes minilateral networks like the Quad into that same ASEAN-centred architecture instead of building stronger institution (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). India's confidence in security multilateralism does not expand to trade. Its 2019 withdrawal from RCEP reflected such structural misalignment between India's strength in services and ASEAN's advantage in goods trade, where India decided to prioritise protection of domestic industry over multilateral economic integration (Nachiappan, 2021). ASEAN's own posture is therefore best understood as a calibrated hedge (Goh, 2008): it sustains

economic dependence on Chinese-led connectivity infrastructure while distributing its security partnerships more broadly, particularly toward India (Joshi, 2023).

Drawing these threads together, the comparison across common analytical dimensions can be summarised concisely. In maritime security, China's approach centres on naval modernisation and assertive presence in contested waters (Singh, 2020), while India favours coalition-based deterrence anchored in UNCLOS and naval exercises with ASEAN partners (Raja Mohan, 2023). In trade, China relies on infrastructure-linked connectivity financing, whereas India's more cautious posture, reflected in its RCEP withdrawal, prioritises protecting domestic industry over deeper regional integration (Nachiappan, 2021; Rahman et al., 2020). On connectivity, China's Belt and Road and Maritime Silk Road initiatives position ASEAN chiefly as an infrastructure and logistics space (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015), while India's Act East and IPOI frameworks treat ASEAN as a strategic partner in its own right. In terms of great-power competition, China pursues consolidation of regional influence, whereas India pursues diversification and balancing without formal alliance formation (Narvenkar, 2025). Regarding institutional participation, China engages ASEAN-led forums selectively to avoid binding legal outcomes, while India layers minilateral arrangements such as the Quad onto ASEAN-centred structures (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Lee & Chan, 2021). Finally, on strategic autonomy, China's model preserves its own freedom of manoeuvre through bilateral leverage over smaller states, whereas India, like ASEAN itself, seeks to preserve strategic autonomy through multi-alignment rather than bloc formation (Joshi, 2023). Read together, these six dimensions confirm that China's and India's competing visions are not reducible to a single axis of maritime rivalry, but extend across the full range of economic, institutional and strategic engagement with the region.

DISCUSSION

Our findings generally support the existing literature while adding a comparative perspective to debates on China and India's Indo-Pacific visions. In line with previous research, China emerges as a core strategic and maritime challenger making India to respond through closer engagement with ASEAN, aiming at a broader rules-based regional order. However, the

comparison suggests that their relationship cannot be understood solely through strategic competition. A key finding is that both China and India share an interest in regional economic prosperity and multilateral institutional engagement to prevent excessive external pressure on the region. Chinese strategy combines economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement with efforts to preserve its national interest and manage emerging distrust among neighbouring states. India, by contrast, uses ASEAN partnerships, economic diversification, and international legal norms to reduce strategic dependence on China and strengthen its regional position by following international norms.

By comparison, both states approach multilateralism, but for different purposes: China primarily seeks to consolidate regional influence, whereas India uses institutional partnerships to diversify its strategic options and constrain unilateral dominance. This finding contributes to the identified research gap by demonstrating that competition and cooperation coexist within the Indo-Pacific. Rather than being mutually exclusive, economic interdependence and strategic balancing constitute parallel dimensions through which China and India seek to shape the regional order.

The given findings have several practical implications for the Indo-Pacific. Regional stability would benefit from greater maritime dialogue, confidence-building measures, and adherence to international maritime law, particularly UNCLOS. Economic cooperation could be strengthened through transparent connectivity initiatives, mutually beneficial trade arrangements, and regional mechanisms that reduce the risks of strategic competition. ASEAN-led frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific can provide an inclusive platform for dialogue without requiring alignment with either power. Academically, this study contributes to existing Indo-Pacific scholarship by bringing China's and India's perspectives together through a comparative, perspective-based analysis, considering both maritime security and economic cooperation.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature, official documents, and English-language sources, which may not fully capture the nuances of Chinese strategic perspectives. Moreover, the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific environment may also affect the continuing relevance of current findings. Future research could incorporate Chinese-language primary

sources, interviews with policymakers and regional experts, and empirical economic data. Nevertheless, by bringing together the Chinese and Indian perspectives across both security and economic dimensions, this study provides a useful comparative foundation for understanding the evolving Indo-Pacific order and for future research on regional cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this study shows China engages the region primarily through economic leverage, while India relies on cooperative balancing via its Act East policy and the Quad. Competition and interdependence coexist here. Both powers use multilateralism differently, leaving ASEAN to walk a middle path; balancing Chinese economic ties with Indian security partnerships.

Read together, these findings point to a differentiated rather than uniform balance of opportunities and challenges across the region. The principal opportunity is the coexistence, documented above, of competing strategic visions with continued economic interdependence: ASEAN states can draw on Chinese-led infrastructure financing while diversifying security partnerships toward India, without being forced into exclusive alignment. This opportunity is not shared equally, however; it is most available to ASEAN members with the diplomatic and economic capacity to engage both powers at once, while smaller or more externally dependent states face a narrower set of choices. The principal challenge is that the institutional hedging identified above, China's selective engagement with ASEAN-led forums alongside India's layering of minilateral arrangements onto ASEAN structures, leaves regional governance without a single accepted framework for resolving disputes. This challenge, too, falls unevenly: it is most acute for the South China Sea claimant states directly exposed to China's maritime assertiveness (McDorman, 2016), and considerably less pressing for ASEAN states without competing maritime claims. The Indo-Pacific, in short, is neither uniformly an opportunity nor uniformly a threat for the states examined in this study; its practical meaning depends on each state's maritime exposure, economic dependence, and capacity for strategic diversification.

More broadly, these Indo-Pacific perspectives are key to understanding the region's economic and diplomatic future. On a practical level, this paper shows that managing strategic

competition requires open maritime dialogue, respect for international law, and inclusive frameworks like the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*..

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature, official documents, and mainly English-language sources, while the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific environment may affect the relevance of the findings over time. Still, comparative perspective was able to identify close interrelation of economic cooperation and security concerns, going beyond strategic balancing in the region.

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