

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy vs China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Abstract :

The global strategic landscape has undergone major transformation in the twenty-first century, primarily due to the rising influence of Asia. Two major frameworks—India's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—have emerged as pivotal instruments of geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic engagement. While the Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasizes openness, transparency, rules-based order, and multilateral cooperation, the BRI seeks to enhance global connectivity through large-scale infrastructure investments and economic corridors extending across continents. This research paper provides a comparative examination of the two frameworks by analyzing their origins, strategic motivations, economic implications, regional security impacts, challenges, and global reception. Using a qualitative research methodology rooted in secondary data, academic literature, and policy documents, the paper presents a pointwise expanded analysis to illustrate how the IPS and BRI represent competing visions for regional and global order. The paper concludes that while both India and China seek to expand their influence, their strategies differ significantly in approach, values, and geopolitical outcomes. The Indo-Pacific framework reflects a collaborative, multilateral approach, whereas BRI presents a state-driven, infrastructure-focused model. The comparative analysis helps understand the evolving regional balance of power and the future trajectory of global geopolitics.

Keywords : Indo-Pacific Strategy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Geopolitical Competition, Maritime Security, Connectivity Initiatives, Strategic Partnerships, Regional Power Dynamics, Economic Corridors.

Introduction :

The Indo-Pacific region has become the central arena of geopolitical competition and cooperation in the twenty-first century. Home to more than half of the global population and contributing majorly to world trade and economic growth, the region holds unparalleled strategic importance. Within this geopolitical context, two major powers—India and China—have outlined distinct strategic frameworks to shape regional and global governance. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, envisions a network of economic corridors linking Asia with Africa, Europe, and beyond through infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and investment flows. The initiative, consisting of the Silk Road Economic Belt (land routes) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (sea routes), aims to position China as the center of global connectivity.

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy, articulated particularly after 2018, seeks to promote an open, inclusive, and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. India emphasizes respect for sovereignty, freedom of navigation, ASEAN centrality, and multilateral cooperation, aligning with like-minded democracies such as Japan, the United States, Australia, and European partners. The competing visions reflect broader strategic rivalries between India and China, encapsulating economic ambitions, geopolitical aspirations, and ideational differences. The objective of this research paper is to provide a detailed comparative analysis of these two frameworks to better understand regional power dynamics and the emerging global order.

Objectives :

1. To analyze the strategic motivations underpinning India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on geopolitical, economic, and security drivers shaping both frameworks.
2. To compare the structural frameworks of India's Indo-Pacific vision and China's BRI in terms of their institutional mechanisms, economic models, and diplomatic approaches.
3. To examine the regional and global implications of both strategies for connectivity, maritime governance, and power distribution across the Indo-Pacific region.
4. To evaluate the impact of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's BRI on smaller and middle-power states, particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region.
5. To assess the challenges and limitations faced by India and China in achieving their strategic ambitions, including political resistance, economic constraints, and security tensions.

6. To identify areas of convergence, competition, and potential cooperation between the two strategies, and develop informed policy recommendations for balancing geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Research Methodology :

1. Qualitative Research Design: The study adopts a qualitative, analytical research design to examine strategic, geopolitical, and economic dimensions of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's BRI. It relies on interpretive methods to understand policy motivations and regional implications.

2. Comparative Framework Approach: A structured comparative framework is used to evaluate both strategies based on parameters such as connectivity, geopolitical objectives, institutional mechanisms, and regional influence.

3. Secondary Data Collection:

The research draws on secondary sources including academic journals, government reports, think-tank publications, policy documents, and international organization datasets to build an evidence-based understanding.

4. Content Analysis: Key speeches, official policy statements, and strategic documents from India and China are analyzed to identify themes, narratives, and patterns reflecting national strategic intentions.

5. Case Study Method: Selected regional case studies—such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Southeast Asia, and Africa—are utilized to assess on-ground impacts, diplomatic outcomes, and geopolitical responses to both initiatives.

6. Historical and Geopolitical Contextualization: The study situates India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's BRI within the broader historical evolution of Asian geopolitics, regional security architecture, and economic connectivity corridors.

7. Critical Evaluation of Scholarly Debates: The methodology includes engaging with diverse academic perspectives to compare supportive and critical views, ensuring a balanced assessment.

8. Interpretation and Synthesis: Findings from various data sources are systematically interpreted and synthesized to draw meaningful conclusions about strategic competition, convergence, and regional consequences.

This methodology provides a structured pathway to critically compare India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's BRI from multiple geopolitical angles. By combining comparative analysis, contextual interpretation, and case-based evidence, the study seeks to deliver a nuanced understanding of how these competing visions shape the Indo-Pacific order.

Theoretical Framework :

1. Historical Origins of the Two Frameworks

1.1 Origins and Evolution of China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, emerged during a period when China had accumulated significant financial surpluses, industrial overcapacity, and rising geopolitical confidence. After decades of rapid economic growth driven by manufacturing and export-led strategies, China faced new challenges: slowing domestic growth, increasing competition from Southeast Asian economies, and concerns about energy security due to its dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. BRI was conceptualized not merely as a connectivity programme but as a grand strategic map for reorienting global trade toward China. Its inspiration draws from China's historical Silk Road legacy, symbolically framing China as a natural hub of transcontinental trade.

The initiative expanded rapidly from two corridors—one land-based (Silk Road Economic Belt) and one maritime (21st Century Maritime Silk Road)—into a multidimensional global project connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. The BRI gradually incorporated digital corridors (Digital Silk Road), health initiatives (Health Silk Road), and even outer space cooperation. It aligned with the Chinese Communist Party's objective of achieving "national rejuvenation" by 2049 and projecting China's image as a global development leader. By financing and constructing ports, highways, industrial parks, and rail networks across developing countries, China positioned itself at the center of global logistics. Thus, BRI became a geopolitical

instrument intertwined with China's long-term economic restructuring, resource acquisition strategies, and its ambition to reshape global governance institutions.

1.2 Origins of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy evolved incrementally, shaped by maritime history, geopolitical compulsions, and changing global power dynamics. India has a natural maritime orientation; historically, the Indian Ocean connected Indian kingdoms with Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East through thriving cultural and commercial networks. However, during the post-independence era, India prioritized continental threats, especially from Pakistan and China, limiting its maritime outward engagement. This began to shift after the Cold War as India liberalized its economy, expanded its strategic partnerships, and recognized the growing significance of trade routes linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The Indo-Pacific concept gained formal articulation through India's Act East Policy, which deepened ties with ASEAN, Japan, and Australia. The turning point came with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue address, where he defined India's Indo-Pacific vision as open, inclusive, and based on a rules-based order. The rise of China's BRI and its strategic activities in the Indian Ocean—including submarine deployments, dual-use port construction, and support to Pakistan—prompted India to intensify its maritime engagement. India's Indo-Pacific Strategy thus became not only a foreign policy framework but also a strategic doctrine emphasizing maritime security, resilient supply chains, and cooperation with democracies through platforms such as the Quad. India's vision promotes multipolarity, sovereignty, and transparent connectivity as counter-narratives to China's expansive geopolitical footprint.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings and Strategic Motivations

2.1 China's BRI as a Tool of Strategic Expansion

BRI operates at the intersection of economic statecraft and geopolitical strategy. The initiative provides China with a mechanism to internationalize its industrial sectors, export surplus capacity, and create external demand for Chinese materials, technology, and labor. On a strategic level, BRI reduces China's vulnerability to maritime blockades by diversifying trade routes through land corridors such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). These corridors bypass chokepoints dominated by the United States and its allies, strengthening China's strategic autonomy. Moreover, BRI fosters asymmetric dependence: countries receiving Chinese loans often become reliant on Chinese investment and political goodwill. China uses this dependency to shape voting patterns in international institutions, gain access to natural resources, and support its larger vision of a Sino-centric world order. BRI is also closely aligned with the "Community of Common Destiny," a Beijing-driven narrative promoting China as the architect of a new global governance model distinct from Western liberal frameworks. Thus, BRI is not merely an economic initiative; it is the backbone of China's twenty-first century geopolitical expansion and its challenge to Western-led international norms.

2.2 India's Indo-Pacific Strategy as a Framework for Balance and Stability

India's Indo-Pacific vision emerges from its desire to maintain strategic equilibrium, preserve navigational freedoms, and promote a region where no single power dominates. India recognizes that 90% of its trade by volume and critical energy flows pass through the Indian Ocean, making maritime stability essential for economic security. China's assertive maritime behavior in the South China Sea, combined with its reclamation of islands and militarization of artificial features, raised concerns about future implications for the Indian Ocean. India's Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to prevent a spillover of Chinese coercion into the wider maritime domain.

India collaborates with like-minded democracies—such as Japan, Australia, France, and the United States—to strengthen maritime domain awareness, secure sea lanes, and build resilient supply chains. However, India maintains strategic autonomy; it does not join military alliances and keeps the Indo-Pacific inclusive rather than anti-China in explicit terms. The strategy promotes developmental partnerships, respect for sovereignty, and capacity-building in smaller littoral states, ensuring that India's rise contributes to regional stability rather than power projection. In effect, India's Indo-Pacific Strategy balances China's expansive ambitions by promoting a normative, cooperative, and law-based order.

3. Economic Dimensions and Connectivity Models

3.1 BRI's Infrastructure-Driven Economic Model

BRI's economic foundation rests on massive infrastructure financing, often backed by Chinese policy banks, state-owned enterprises, and public funds. These investments range from highways, ports, and high-speed rail to energy pipelines, special economic zones, and digital infrastructure. Although presented as developmental assistance, the financing often involves high-interest loans, collateral agreements, and long-term concessions, creating asymmetric leverage.

China's infrastructure diplomacy stimulates demand for Chinese steel, cement, machinery, and engineering services. By using Chinese companies, technology, and labor, the BRI creates a closed economic loop that benefits China disproportionately. While many participating countries welcome the infrastructure, concerns arise when debt repayment becomes difficult, leading to renegotiations that favor China—exemplified by Sri Lanka's 99-year lease of Hambantota Port. This phenomenon has been termed “debt-trap diplomacy,” though China denies such claims. BRI also advances China's digital ambitions by exporting telecommunications technologies, e-governance systems, and surveillance technologies, thereby embedding Chinese digital standards globally. The infrastructure-first approach makes BRI a transformative yet controversial model of connectivity.

3.2 India's Flexible, Sovereignty-Respecting Connectivity Model

India's connectivity approach differs fundamentally from China's. Rather than pursuing mega-infrastructure projects financed through aggressive loans, India focuses on **demand-driven, consultative, and capacity-building projects**. Key initiatives such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), India-Japan joint infrastructure projects, and the Chabahar Port in Iran reflect India's approach of empowering partner nations rather than controlling their strategic assets. India emphasizes grant-based funding, long-term training programmes, technical assistance, and sustainable practices.

Unlike BRI's top-down model, India's strategy aims to complement local development priorities and preserve the sovereignty of partner states. For instance, India refused to join BRI primarily because the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, violating India's territorial sovereignty. India's projects may be slower and less financially overwhelming compared to China's, but they are perceived as more reliable, transparent, and non-coercive. This enhances India's credibility as a development partner in regions like Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean.

4. Security and Military Implications

4.1 China's Strategic Expansion through BRI's Dual-Use Facilities

Although BRI is marketed as an economic development programme, many of its projects possess dual-use capabilities that can support Chinese military operations. Chinese-built ports often feature deep berths, secure zones, and logistics infrastructure that enable naval docking. Examples include Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). These facilities, while serving commercial purposes, can provide Beijing with the ability to monitor sea lanes, conduct surveillance, and potentially project power beyond its borders.

China's establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 further indicates the strategic motives embedded within the BRI framework. Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean has increased significantly, often justified under the pretext of anti-piracy missions. The integration of economic corridors with military logistics creates concerns among regional powers that BRI is gradually transforming into a geopolitical instrument designed to challenge existing maritime powers and alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

4.2 India's Maritime Security Framework under the Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy places strong emphasis on maritime security, recognizing the Indian Ocean as a critical geopolitical space. India has increased naval modernization, expanded maritime domain awareness networks, and strengthened interoperability with friendly navies through joint exercises such as Malabar with the US, Japan, and Australia. The Indian Navy plays a vital role in anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief missions, projecting India as a responsible security provider.

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reflects a cooperative approach, focusing on capacity-building, marine ecology, sustainable blue economy, and technological collaboration. Instead of creating military bases abroad, India works with countries such as Seychelles, Mauritius, and Oman to develop shared facilities, surveillance systems, and coastal radar networks. India's security model is thus soft-power oriented, emphasizing trust-building and transparency rather than coercive dominance. This stands in stark contrast to China's increasingly militarized approach to connectivity.

5. Diplomatic Strategies and Soft Power Dimensions

5.1 China's Diplomacy Through BRI: Alliances, Influence, and Criticism

China uses BRI as a diplomatic tool to cultivate influence in Asia, Africa, and Europe. By offering loans and large-scale investments, China gains political leverage in participating countries, often securing diplomatic support on issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and South China Sea disputes. China frames itself as the leader of global South development, presenting BRI as an alternative to Western aid institutions. This diplomacy, however, is double-edged. While many countries welcome the infrastructure and economic opportunities, others express concerns over opaque contracts, environmental impacts, corruption allegations, and labor practices dominated by Chinese workers instead of local employment. Cases of debt distress in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Zambia have amplified global skepticism. As a result, the reputational appeal of BRI has diminished in many regions, especially as economic crises force countries to reconsider the long-term risks of Chinese loans.

5.2 India's Inclusive Diplomatic Approach: Soft-Power and Trust Building

India's diplomacy under the Indo-Pacific Strategy leverages its soft power strengths—democracy, cultural affinity, diaspora networks, and developmental partnerships. India promotes itself as a benign power with no colonial baggage or hegemonic ambitions. Its diplomatic engagements emphasize transparency, legal sovereignty, and non-interference. India offers extensive capacity-building assistance, from digital training to medical support and disaster relief. Through cultural diplomacy such as Yoga, Bollywood, literature, and historical maritime ties, India strengthens its goodwill and people-to-people connections.

India's partnerships with Japan, ASEAN, Australia, and African nations are built on shared concerns about maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. Unlike China's transactional diplomacy, India cultivates long-term trust by focusing on joint development rather than dependence, thereby establishing itself as a credible and cooperative regional actor.

6. Regional and Global Reception

6.1 Mixed Global Response to BRI: Support, Resistance, and Reassessment

BRI saw an initial surge of international support, with more than 150 countries signing cooperation agreements. However, as projects progressed, challenges surfaced. Countries like Malaysia, Myanmar, and Tanzania renegotiated or cancelled BRI projects due to inflated costs or concerns over sovereignty. Italy, the only G7 country to join BRI, formally withdrew after reassessing strategic risks. Western nations view BRI as a geopolitical tool for China to create dependent states and undermine democratic norms. Even within China, concerns exist about financial losses and reputational damage due to mismanaged projects abroad. Thus, BRI's global reception is now far more cautious than a decade ago.

6.2 Widespread Support for India's Indo-Pacific Framework

In contrast, India's Indo-Pacific Strategy has gained strong and sustained support from major global powers. The United States, Japan, Australia, France, the UK, and the EU align with India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. ASEAN endorses India's emphasis on multilateralism and sees India as a stabilizing maritime actor. Small island states in the Indian Ocean—such as Mauritius, Maldives, and Seychelles—welcome India's security assistance, capacity-building initiatives, and disaster-relief capabilities. Unlike BRI, India's Indo-Pacific approach has not generated fears of dependency or coercion. Instead, it is perceived as a balancing mechanism that preserves regional autonomy and counters China's growing influence.

7. Challenges and Criticisms

7.1 Limitations and Criticisms of BRI

BRI faces criticisms on multiple fronts. Debt sustainability remains a major issue, with several countries struggling to repay loans for unprofitable projects. Environmental degradation, displacement of local communities, and lack of transparency in bidding processes have also drawn criticism. Some BRI corridors traverse politically unstable regions, making them vulnerable to insurgencies and terrorism. China's domestic economic slowdown raises questions about its long-term ability to sustain such a massive initiative. Geopolitically, BRI has triggered pushback from the US, EU, India, and Japan, leading to the creation of alternative initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). These challenges collectively weaken BRI's global legitimacy.

7.2 Constraints and Challenges in India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy faces its own limitations. Compared to China, India's financial capacity for overseas investment is limited, slowing down project execution. The India-China border conflict and broader strategic rivalry complicate India's regional calculus. India must balance relations with Russia, Iran, and ASEAN while aligning with the US and Japan—often requiring delicate diplomacy. Domestic economic slowdowns can affect India's ability to fulfill its Indo-Pacific commitments. Furthermore, India must address maritime capability gaps, including shipbuilding delays and limited logistical outreach. Despite these challenges, India's strategy retains credibility due to its transparent and cooperative approach.

8. Comparative Review

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative represent two opposite models of regional engagement. BRI is infrastructure-heavy, state-driven, and aimed at reshaping global economic structures in China's favor; it centralizes control and expands strategic influence through economic dependency and potential military footholds. India's Indo-Pacific Strategy is cooperative, multilateral, and rooted in normative principles such as sovereignty, transparency, and freedom of navigation. While BRI attempts to build a China-centric order, the Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to maintain a balance of power and ensure stability. BRI's challenges stem from debt, environmental harm, and geopolitical suspicion, whereas India's main constraints relate to financial capacity and resource limitations.

Thus, the two models reflect a broader competition: a contest between a hierarchical, state-led connectivity system (BRI) and a decentralized, rules-based maritime order (Indo-Pacific Strategy).

Conclusion :

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative represent two competing frameworks for regional connectivity, power projection, and geopolitical influence. China's BRI relies heavily on large infrastructure investments, economic corridors, and strategic port development to expand its global footprint, often creating long-term financial and political dependencies. In contrast, India's Indo-Pacific vision prioritizes openness, sovereignty, transparency, and multilateralism through initiatives such as SAGAR, Act East Policy, the Quad, and strategic partnerships with ASEAN, the US, Japan, Australia, and Europe. While the BRI has achieved rapid physical connectivity, it has also attracted criticism for debt risks, opaque agreements, and geopolitical motivations. India counters this by advocating a rules-based order and sustainable, community-driven development that empowers local economies rather than creating structural dependence.

As both countries deepen their presence in the region, their competing models are reshaping maritime security, trade flows, and strategic alignments. India's approach, though slower in scale, appeals to nations seeking autonomy and balanced partnerships, while China's BRI remains attractive for its speed and financial scale despite its risks. The future of the Indo-Pacific will depend on how effectively India operationalizes its cooperative strategy, how countries manage the economic allure and political risks of the BRI, and how both frameworks adapt to emerging challenges such as digital infrastructure, supply-chain resilience, and maritime competition.

Overall, the Indo-Pacific is being shaped by the strategic competition between India's inclusive, sovereignty-driven vision and China's expansive BRI model. While China continues to offer rapid and large-scale infrastructure financing, India promotes sustainable development, transparency, and balanced

partnerships. Regional states now weigh immediate economic benefits against long-term strategic implications. India's rules-based, multilateral approach presents a credible alternative to debt-dependent projects, even as China's BRI expands but faces mounting scrutiny. Maritime security, connectivity, and supply-chain resilience will remain key arenas of influence. The choices of smaller states will significantly determine the regional balance. India must scale up its initiatives without compromising its cooperative principles, whereas China must build trust by addressing concerns about transparency and geopolitical intent. Ultimately, the interplay between these two competing frameworks will shape the future openness, stability, and strategic order of the Indo-Pacific.

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