

Autonomy Under Pressure: India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Strategic Interests in a Changing Global Order

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Abstract

India's Indo-Pacific policy reflects a careful balance between cooperation and independence. India continues to emphasise strategic autonomy, meaning the ability to make foreign policy decisions without being bound by formal alliances. At the same time, it has expanded security cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia. This situation raises a central question: how can India maintain policy independence in a region increasingly shaped by U.S.–China rivalry? This paper argues that India has adopted a strategy best described as calibrated alignment. It deepens cooperation in areas of shared interest, particularly maritime security, while avoiding formal treaty commitments. This approach allows India to respond to changes in the regional balance of power while preserving flexibility. Its long-term viability, however, depends on India's material capabilities and the trajectory of greatpower competition.

Introduction

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific reveals an important tension in its foreign policy. On one side stands the principle of strategic autonomy. On the other stands growing cooperation with major maritime democracies. India criticises rigid bloc politics, yet it participates in the Quad. It speaks in favour of a multipolar international order but operates in a region where the United States and China increasingly shape strategic outcomes.

This is not a contradiction in policy. It reflects the structural pressures of the contemporary international system. The Indo-Pacific has become central to global trade, energy flows, and naval competition. For India, it is critical to economic growth and long-term security. At the same time, intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing defines the regional environment.

The central question, therefore, is how India can safeguard strategic autonomy while engaging in a region marked by competitive power politics. This paper argues that India's strategy represents calibrated alignment: selective cooperation without binding alliance commitments. This approach has enabled India to strengthen its maritime position while preserving decision-making independence. Whether it remains sustainable depends on India's economic strength, defence capabilities, and the future direction of U.S.–China relations.

Key Terms

- 1.Strategic autonomy refers to the ability of a state to make foreign policy decisions independently, without external alliance obligations.
- 2.Calibrated alignment refers to selective strategic cooperation that stops short of formal alliance commitments.
- 3.Multipolarity describes an international system in which power is distributed among several major states.
- 4.Maritime security refers to the protection of sea lanes and naval stability essential for trade and energy flows.

Objectives

This study examines the strategic meaning of the Indo-Pacific for India, analyses India's security and economic interests in the region, evaluates calibrated alignment as a framework for understanding India's policy, and considers the sustainability of this approach under conditions of intensifying rivalry.

Hypotheses

India's Indo-Pacific policy does not represent a move toward formal alliance politics but an effort to preserve autonomy through selective alignment. Its durability depends on domestic capability and the degree of systemic polarization in the region.

Main Discussion

The Indo-Pacific represents more than a geographical category. It signals a shift in strategic thinking toward maritime Asia. By linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the concept highlights the importance of naval presence, trade routes, and economic interdependence. For India, this shift requires moving beyond a primarily continental security outlook. A substantial share of India's trade and energy imports moves by sea. Disruption of maritime routes would have direct economic consequences. Maritime stability is therefore closely tied to national security. China's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean has intensified these concerns. Investments in port infrastructure and submarine deployments indicate a growing strategic footprint. These developments alter the regional balance of power and generate uncertainty for India.

India's response has been gradual but deliberate. Naval modernization, expanded maritime awareness, and joint exercises with partners have strengthened deterrence. Cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia has enhanced operational capacity. Yet India has avoided treaty commitments that would restrict its freedom of action. The Quad remains consultative rather than alliance-based. Economic realities also shape India's policy. China remains a significant trading partner. Complete economic disengagement would impose substantial costs. India therefore pursues diversification without full decoupling. Strategic autonomy, in practice, depends on economic resilience and technological development. Domestic political tradition reinforces caution toward alliances. Autonomy has long been associated with sovereign decision-making in Indian foreign policy. Policymakers must therefore balance external cooperation with domestic expectations of independence.

The sustainability of India's Indo-Pacific strategy depends on systemic conditions. If rivalry between the United States and China escalates sharply, pressure to adopt clearer alignment may increase. If competition remains limited, India may continue to benefit from selective cooperation without formal commitments. Strategic autonomy, in this context, is conditional. It rests on material capacity and the structure of regional power politics.

Conclusion

India's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a deliberate attempt to reconcile cooperation with independence. Rather than choosing strict neutrality or formal alliance, India has pursued selective alignment while retaining policy flexibility. This approach strengthens maritime security without surrendering sovereign decision-making. Its future depends on India's economic growth, naval modernization, and the broader trajectory of great-power rivalry. The Indo-Pacific will remain the principal arena in which India's autonomy is tested. Whether calibrated alignment can endure under increasing polarization remains an open question.

Recommendations

India should continue strengthening naval capabilities and maritime infrastructure to enhance deterrence. It should deepen functional cooperation within the Quad while maintaining institutional flexibility. Sustained economic growth and technological development must remain priorities, as material strength underpins strategic autonomy. Diplomatic engagement with ASEAN and Indian Ocean states should be expanded to preserve inclusive regional stability.

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