

India's Strategic Role In Indo-Pacific And South China Sea

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper delves into India's growing role in the Indo-Pacific region, with a special focus on its role in the South China Sea. The concept of Indo-Pacific is an evolving concept that has taken a central stage in every major country's foreign policy, which is a reflection of this region's growing prominence, as it contains the world's most dynamic economies, shipping lanes, maritime biodiversity, and resources. This new concept sees the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single strategic theater. India, an ancient civilisational state realizes the importance this region will play in fulfilling its future aspirations.

This paper acknowledges the historical transition from the concept of Asia-Pacific to the concept of Indo-Pacific and the various visions of different countries for the Indo-Pacific. At the heart of the Indo-Pacific lies the South China Sea. This sea is particularly characterized by huge maritime resources, oil and natural gas reserves, fisheries, etc. This is also a significant global shipping route, with a vital bulk of global trade passing through here. All this has made this region a flashpoint for various territorial disputes, particularly with China. This region is also a flashpoint for strategic rivalry between the USA and China. India's approach toward this region is examined including its various agreements and engagements with key countries in the region to ensure Indian interests are taken care of and militarisation of the region is avoided. This paper underscores various strategic and economic opportunities that India should focus on while addressing various challenges it faces like China's increasing assertiveness, lack of implementation of international law and treaties like UNCLOS, and poor regional connectivity, etc.

The role of QUAD is central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. India's support in debt restructuring and climate change mitigation for developing nations is appreciated in this paper. Furthermore, Indian initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Information Fusion Center (IFC-IOR) are examined for their contribution towards promoting regional cooperation and inclusivity. The paper concludes with various recommendations for India's future role in the Indo-Pacific, including enhancing its capability as a net security provider in the region, taking the lead in climate action and disaster relief, supporting the debt-ridden economies of

the region, securing sea lanes of communication and to collaborate with the private sector to remain engaged in the geoeconomics of the region as well.

2. Introduction

Any leading nation that aspires to be a superpower has to play a central role in the international arena. India is a civilisational state, with cultural and historical linkages throughout the world. Nowhere these linkages will be more important in the future than Indo-Pacific. Indo-Pacific is a relatively new concept in itself, becoming more significant for every major country's foreign policy every passing day due to the changing realities of the world order. It is based on the idea that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are part of just one single strategic theater and are linked. Though the term Indo-Pacific has been in use for quite some time, the credit for popularizing the concept should be given to former late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who used this term in his 2007 address to the Indian parliament.

Before this, the concept of Asia-Pacific was in common use, not surprisingly countries like China, which opposed the idea of Indo-Pacific still prefer to use this old term only.¹

As stated by Dr. S Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, "So far, we think about the Indian Ocean whenever we think about oceans. This is the limitation of our thinking that we talk about the Indian Ocean whenever we talk about maritime interests. But more than 50 percent of our trade goes towards the East, towards the Pacific Ocean. The line between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean is only on the map, exists on an atlas, but there is no such thing in reality...We should go beyond the historical lines in our thinking, because our interest has increased. Indo-Pacific is a new strategic concept going on in the world."²

3. CONCEPT OF INDO-PACIFIC

¹ [The Hindu: China against the term Indo-Pacific](#)

² [LiveMint](#)

3.1 Meaning

To better understand the idea and concept of Indo-Pacific as it exists today, it is important to understand the idea of Asia-Pacific, which the new concept seeks to replace. The word Asia Pacific has been used to refer to a geographical area, encompassing both Asia and the Pacific Ocean. However, unlike Indo-Pacific which is used for strategic and security-oriented theaters, Asia-Pacific has been mostly used for geo-economics of the day as this was the region of highest growth and rapidly developing economies. The emergence of China, and the growing differences between the Western world and China, along with the great power rivalry between the United States and China, has led to the popularization of the term Indo-Pacific. Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that powers like Russia and China are against the concept of Indo-Pacific and see it through the lens of the US trying to control and interfere in the Chinese periphery to contain China.



SOURCE: RESEARCHGATE

3.2 Divergences and convergence in different visions of the Indo-Pacific

Every major player in the Indo-Pacific, be it the United States, China, India, Japan, ASEAN, and Australia, have some divergences and convergences in their version and vision of the Indo-Pacific. The country that has a major issue with the concepts of the Indo-Pacific itself, is China. China sees the concept of Indo-Pacific as an US idea to control China's rise and contain it in a region in which it has been historically dominant, i.e. the South China sea and the larger Asia and parts of the Indian ocean as well. Countries like India, welcome the idea of Indopacific, for it allows them to play a central role in the latest and most prominent strategic region in the world. Every western country's Indo-Pacific strategy puts India at the center stage, this is in line with India's aspiration to be a *Vishwa guru* in the emerging new world order.

Other major powers, like ASEAN, Australia, and Japan have also been welcoming to the concept of Indo-Pacific for it provides them with a greater sense of safety with an increased US role against China's aggressive territorial claims and assertive behavior in the region.



SOURCE: ASIA TODAY

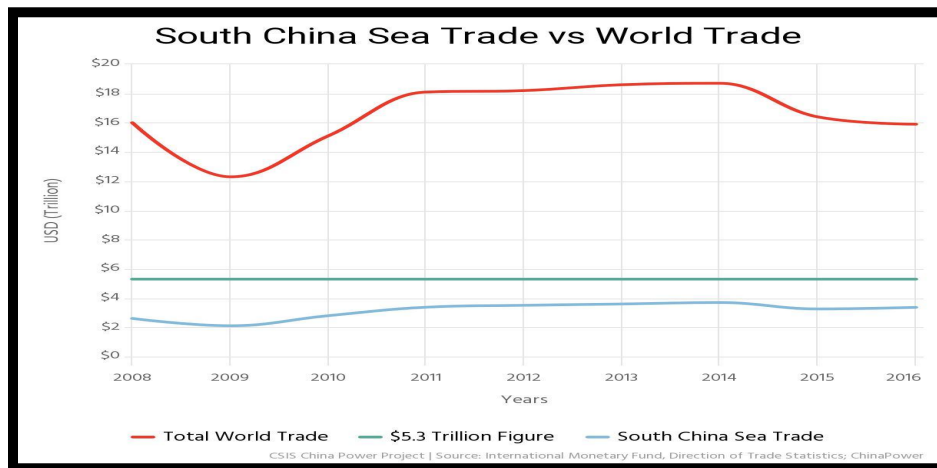
4. ABOUT THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

At the heart of the Indo-Pacific lies the South China sea. The South China sea is also the center of many regional disputes, the region of China's assertive behavior and challenges to the US dominance in the Indo-Pacific theater. It is a region that has many littoral countries from the ASEAN bloc and other smaller oceanic countries, it is in the periphery of China, and it comes between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It's the arm of the western pacific ocean, its area is south of China, east and south of Vietnam, west of Philippines, and north of the island of Borneo.

4.1 Importance

The importance of the South China Sea is evident from the fact that every major power has started to mark this region's disputes as a key challenge to their Indo-Pacific strategy. The strategic importance of the South China sea is underlined by its geographical location; it acts as the connecting link between the two of the biggest oceans of the world, i.e, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean through the Strait of Malacca.

According to many estimates, roughly 60 percent of global trade passes through the sea, and approximately 1/3rd of all global maritime trade passes through the South China Sea.



SOURCE: SHIP DIARY

Any naval blockade or war-type scenario can greatly affect the economies of major countries reliant on this critical trade route.

This sea contains many shoals, islands, reefs and corals, etc. This region is also the sea body where huge levels of fishing activities support the food security of maritime nations in Southeast Asia. One estimate suggests that 1/3rd of the entire world's marine biodiversity is in this region only. It is not just marine biodiversity, fisheries are also abundant in the region. The region is also rich in hydrocarbons. After the 1960s when huge reserves of oil and natural gas were found in the region, not surprisingly enough, the territorial claims of various nations in the region also started to grow, primarily among them China's claims, which claims almost the entirety of south china sea through its so-called 9 dash line. Due to rising tensions and increasing geo-political rivalry between the Western world led by the US with China, this region has become a playground for great power rivalry.

4.2 Conflicts and disputes

The great geographical significance and abundance of resources are leading to high levels of geopolitical disputes in the South China Sea. Out of various islands, reefs, atolls, shoals in the South China Sea, the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal are the most important.

We can understand the various disputes in this sea through the map below:



SOURCE: FORBES

Through various bilateral agreements between these countries and China, as well as a Declaration on a code of conduct between ASEAN nations and China to settle these disputes, China has repeatedly called for only bilateral negotiation and no involvement of a third party, but these nations often complain that China, due to its relative size and strength is making it difficult for a fair negotiation.³

Significantly enough, the Philippines challenged China's claims through Arbitration under Law of Seas convention (UNCLOS) with the tribunal rejecting Chinese claims and favoring Philippines', but China refused to comply with such a ruling.⁴

5. INDIA'S ROLE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA

5.1 International engagements

³ [The diplomat: Chinese insistence on only bilateral negotiations](#)

⁴ [Global challenges : China-Philippines dispute](#)

Indian engagements in the South China sea have been governed by India's foreign policy initiatives, earlier it was the Look East policy, now Prime Minister Modi has guided India's initiatives in South China sea through his renewed Act East policy. Indian engagement in the South China sea has mostly been at bilateral levels with country-level engagements with Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with countries in the region like CSPs with Indonesia and Vietnam, and also Comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) with the likes of Malaysia and Japan. However, India has now started to engage with ASEAN nations as a whole as well, with a recent agreement to deepen the ASEAN-INDIA Comprehensive strategic partnership.⁵

5.2 Reluctance for militarisation and military-based alliances

One of the key things that differentiates security and military structure in Asia and European-North American-styled NATO, is the lack of a formal multilateral military alliance. The Indian security and defense ecosystem has always been averse to using hard power and military based alliances to settle disputes. Similarly, the littoral states of the South China Sea are also reluctant to militarisation of the region. Major economies and states like Japan or the Philippines are already bilateral treaty allies of the United States, which is the main guarantor of security in NATO, thus making a multilateral alliance redundant by logic, and an unnecessary provocation towards Beijing. By relying on separate alliances, rather than forming a grouping of countries through a military alliance, the risk of provoking Beijing is lower.

It can be rightly said that having been the playground for ideological battles and Cold War-era proxy wars between the USA and the erstwhile USSR is something that made these countries averse to such alliances. India may look favorably towards any such alliance which would contain China in the region, but will still most certainly remain away from such an alliance to maintain its 'strategic independence.'

6. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA IN INDO-PACIFIC

6.1 Strategic opportunities

India's historical and cultural ties provide it with a great advantage over any other country trying to increase its influence in the region through people-to-people exchanges, and historical and cultural cooperation. India has a great

⁵ [ASEAN-INDIA CSP Agreement](#)

opportunity in this region to showcase its soft power. Engagement with like-minded countries like the US, Australia, and Japan through initiatives like QUAD can help India enhance its role as the leading global power through collaboration with these nations in many multilateral institutions where they have a significantly greater heft than India has at present.

As an aspiring global power, it is necessary, as history has shown, to become an active player in maritime space. India has been a net security provider in the Indian ocean region. However, with India's growing resources and ambitions, it is only logical for India to expand its diplomatic outreach to the extent of the Pacific Ocean and Pacific countries, as well as to its neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

6.2 Economic opportunities

Be it intelligence sharing, or military exercises with partner nations, it is imperative for India to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific for its national security interests. Almost 55% of India's trade goes through this region, making it necessary to ensure open navigation rights, and overflight access in the region.

Now, when every major multinational company is focusing on strengthening their supply chains and also diversifying it from complete dependence on China, India has a once-in-a generation opportunity to leverage and exploit its credentials of a huge market, and skilled young workforce. This requires a deeper integration with the economies in the region through Free trade agreements and joining initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which we have delayed participating in due to the Indian government's age-old fears and trust issues in India Inc's ability to compete with other countries. The vast natural resources of the Indo Pacific region, be it the untapped oil and natural gas resources of the South China Sea, or the abundance of fisheries, make it imperative for India to become a leading player in the region to further strengthen food and energy security. Indian state companies like ONGC are already exploring the waters near Vietnam, such activities and exploration should be supported by the Indian government, not just for its economic benefits but also for the strategic benefits and deeper linkages it provides with other growing economies. ⁶

⁶ [TheHinduBusinessLine : ONGC gets extension to explore the South China sea](#)

India has always been averse to Free trade agreements, but this policy has changed a lot under the Modi government with India signing back-to-back trade agreements within months with UAE as well as Australia. This should be further followed with the dynamic and rapidly growing economies of the Indo pacific, like Vietnam, Indonesia, etc. ⁷

7. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

7.1 Increasing and enhancing defense partnerships and engagements

In the areas of defense & maritime security engagement as well, India has moved beyond bilateral exercises like JIMEX with Japan, Samudra Shakti with Indonesia, Simbex with Singapore, etc. ⁸

Recently, India's first-ever maritime exercise with the ASEAN block as a whole, at the South China Sea made headlines around the world. ⁹

Apart from this, India also conducts annual maritime exercises with its QUAD partners, including the famous MALABAR exercise.

These nations can also serve as a huge market for India's growing defense export ambitions, thus the government must work to improve the interoperability with different navies in the region to showcase our weapons and our growing resources.

7.2 Maintaining supply chain resilience

⁷ [TheHindu: UAE & Australia sign trade agreements with India](#)

⁸ [Indian maritime exercises](#)

⁹ [AIME](#)

India is a huge country with 1/5 th of the world's population. Our energy and food security demands are growing rapidly. Recently, be it due to covid 19 supply chain shocks or the trade war between the US and China, India has realized and started working on ensuring the resilience of its supply chain of essential goods and energy.

The COVID-19-led supply chain disruptions which were exacerbated by the rising tensions and trade war between the US and China have forced many multinational companies to decouple or follow the practice of 'friendshoring'. The closer-than-ever ties India currently has with the Western world should help it in leveraging such a paradigm change in the globalization of trade and economies of the world.

7.3 Investments in tackling and mitigating climate change

India has always been a leader in making the first moves in providing innovative ideas and solutions to solving climate and environment-related problems. Various initiatives by India like Lifestyle for Environment (LIFE) or Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), launched in partnership with the United Nations have displayed our position on the global stage.¹⁰

The Indo-Pacific region is predicted to be among the worst affected regions due to climate change. India should further engage the Indo-Pacific countries in such initiatives to help them collectively develop ideas for tackling and mitigating climate change.

8. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

8.1 China's rise and aggressiveness

China has become the second-largest economy, lagging just behind the USA. It has been the second largest spender on defense, which now some estimates and reports claim to be much higher than its official figures, and may almost be 3 times the official figures at around \$700bn in reality. In comparison, India's defense budget of approx \$85 bn is a dwarf. Moreover, China has become very aggressive recently, be it through its wolf warrior diplomacy or assertive territorial claims in the South China sea claiming almost the entirety of the South China sea through its so called

¹⁰ [SDG Knowledge Hub: CDRI](#)

nine-dash line, or in its confrontation with India as well as the USA, Japan, or Australia which are India's partners in the Indo-Pacific through the QUAD partnership.¹¹

Moreover, Indian security framework and policymakers should also be concerned over elevating China-Russia partnership. India's reliance on Russia is multi prong be it in multilateral organizations like UNSC or our defense hardware related dependence. Though the Indian government has started taking many steps to reduce such a reliance, it is not going to disappear overnight, counter measures to reduce our dependence, diversify our options and to ensure that Indian interests and partnership vis-a-vis Russia are taken care of should be taken proactively. Russia has been an old friend of India, but policymakers have started to realize that on the matter of any Indian dispute with China, Russia's support cannot be pre-imagined.

Another potential major flashpoint of challenge for Indian diplomacy and interests can be a war between western countries led by the USA and China over Taiwan, which China asserts as a non-negotiable issue of its sovereignty. Interestingly, recently retired Indian chiefs from all three forces visited Taiwan for a security conference, which invited sharp comments from Chinese diplomats. India should prepare for its potential response in case of a war over the Taiwan island.

8.2 Limited economic resources

India is still a developing country, we have to provide food support to more than 800 million people, we have a huge population still living in poverty, and our energy and infrastructure needs are ever-growing. All this makes it very challenging to provide for the required economic resources to be deployed in our quest to become a leading power in the Indo-Pacific.

Asia's other giant, China in comparison has spent more than 300bn\$ just on its now infamous Belt and Road Initiative. In contrast, India cannot afford to spend this much to compete with China on such a scale due to its limited economic resources at its current growth stage and domestic economic needs.

It has always been a matter of debate among policymakers about how much of our limited economic resources should we spend on achieving foreign policy goals, given the need for our populace to grow and develop economically, rapidly. It is always debatable if we have completed the period of our catch-up phase of growth, and need to look outside for

¹¹ [Bloomberg: China's defense budget](#)

any further expansion of our economy. No matter what answer our policymakers arrive at, our foreign service personnel are among the smallest when compared to our size, heft and our diaspora needs, at least this should be something that should be taken care off with urgency.

8.3 Implementation of rule-based international laws and order

India and other developing nations have long benefitted from a rule-based world order established after World War II, its predictability made policy-making and trade practices feasible. Likewise, China has also benefited from the same but is now showing behavior and intentions to change this order to further benefit itself. This has become a challenge for countries in the Indo-Pacific, including India. It is one thing to create laws to govern the activities of nations in the high seas and international arena, but India should also advocate for the creation of a framework that ensures its proper implementation. Along with this, India should further invest in its SAGAR initiative, which envisions Indian policy for Indo-Pacific of providing ‘Security and Growth for all in the region (SAGAR)’ It is very likely that such an endeavor will not only help India in addressing its strategic challenges but will also help its strategic goals by showing itself as the leader in advocating the rights of the countries wary of China.

8.4 Ensuring open navigation routes like the Strait of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is the most important navigation route in the Indo Pacific near the Indian vicinity through India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Strait of Malacca connects the South China Sea with the Burma sea on its way to the Bay of Bengal. This strait sees almost 60% of the world’s maritime trade passing through it.



SOURCE: UNIVERSIDAD DE NAVARRA

India has a keen interest in ensuring its openness for a huge part of its trade passes through here, and it connects India to its South East Asian partners, as well as serves as a key route to the Pacific Ocean. For this, the archipelago of Andaman and Nicobar Islands provides India with a shorter response time to access this strait, which is why the Modi government has been aggressively spending on infrastructure at this long-forgotten and ignored strategic asset of India.

China sees this strait as a key to its strategic and military goals. Chinese exports, its energy requirements and quick military access to the Indian ocean all depend on its access to the Strait of Malacca. This makes this small passage all the way more important to the USA as well as India and other countries wary of China's aggressive behavior.

8.5 Debt restructuring for debt-ridden countries

Many countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have been suffering from increasing debt burdens. Such economic instability should be a cause of concern for India, as it breeds ground to terrorism, illegal migration into India, and increased foreign influence in these nations. India should take proactive steps to support the economic stability and growth of these nations. India was the first country to support Sri Lanka's efforts last year when a crisis hit the debt-ridden island nation. Indian involvement which has in the past been a very controversial aspect in the

island nation, was welcomed and gained huge public goodwill. India supported various debt restructuring measures, as well as facilitated the bailout through the IMF for Sri Lanka.¹²

Indian efforts to support debt-ridden nations in the developing world were also recognised when this was committed in the Delhi declaration during G20, to address the debt vulnerabilities of the developing world. It thus becomes important for India to keep supporting other countries in the Indo-Pacific as well, and keep building on this momentum.¹³

9. QUADRILATERAL DIALOGUE

There have been various bilateral as well as multilateral initiatives in which India participates, but none of them come closer in importance concerning the Indo-Pacific than the Quadrilateral dialogue between India, the USA, Japan, and Australia. These four are very diverse countries with a shared and common vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Each of them can bring forward different resources, and though many rightly point out that QUAD doesn't have a defined set of objectives, it can also be seen as its ability to be able to function more flexibly. As we have seen, QUAD has taken several diverse initiatives that serve Indian interests, from vaccine rollout during the Covid-19 pandemic, to people-to-people exchange through STEM scholarships for students, to maritime naval exercises with navies of different partner countries, etc. A likely way forward apart from increasing military interoperability and integration for QUAD should be a possible set up of a secretariat, with representatives from each of the four nations. It should also be food for thought in the defense ecosystem of these countries to address the fears of their other Indo-Pacific partners and ensure them that QUAD is not a military alliance and that it supports a free and open Indo-Pacific with free navigation and overflight rights and has an inclusive vision for all based on international law.

10. CENTRALITY OF OTHER INDIAN INITIATIVES

10.1 Renew the vitality and role of associations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association

The Indo-Pacific has become the center of global power play. India has been a major power in the region advocating for more regional connectivity and integration. The Indian Ocean Rim Association, founded by India and South Africa in

¹² [Economic Times: Sri Lanka gets support from India](#)

¹³ [India Today: G20 on debt vulnerabilities of developing nations](#)

1997, can play a key role in India's vision of the Indo-Pacific which ranges from the shores of eastern Africa to the western shores of North America. The Indian Ocean Rim Association promotes the same interests in the Indian Ocean region which are central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy like regional connectivity, trade and investment facilitation, information sharing in the region and finance sustainable projects, etc. However, the potential of IORA has not been fully realized, nor has it been as active as it could be in serving Indian interests in the Indian Ocean region of the broader Indo-Pacific.

10.2 Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region

Launched in December 2018, this has been one of the most successful initiatives by India. The center, hosted by the Indian Navy, aims to strengthen maritime security in the region by building a common coherent maritime situation picture and acting as a maritime security information sharing hub. Since its inception, the Centre has established 67 linkages in 25 countries. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), through which a very significant portion of the world's trade and energy flows, faces a plethora of challenges in the maritime domain viz., piracy and armed robbery, human and contraband trafficking, Irregular Human Migration (IHM), Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, gun running, poaching and maritime terrorism etc. To achieve a free and open Indo-Pacific, it becomes essential to solve these problems, for which IOR is playing a key role.¹⁴

11. WAY FORWARD

11.1 Be a net security provider in the region

India has long shed its traditional non-combative defensive approach towards displaying its hard power in the maritime security framework in the region. It has now become a net security provider in the Indian ocean through various measures like the Indian Navy's anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden and information sharing measures through initiatives like IOR. This policy should be further expanded in other parts of the Indo-Pacific theater like the South China Sea and the Pacific countries to reflect our growing resources as well as our growing security framework. Several initiatives like the integration and information exchange between coastal guards as well as anti piracy initiatives

¹⁴ [Indin Navy: IFC-IOR](#)

of the Indian Navy should be expanded in collaboration with the partners in the region, this will lead to showcasing India's leading role in providing net security to the entire Indo-Pacific region.

11.2 First responder in disasters

India has significantly increased its Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief (HADR) capabilities and deployed them multiple times whenever needed in friendly and neighboring countries. Recently, during the ongoing conflict in Palestine, India again proved its leading role as the first responder in the region by being among the first countries to send humanitarian aid.

Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, rightfully claimed during the 5th World Congress on Disaster Management, that India has time and again proved itself to be the first responder. There should be further investments in such HADR capabilities to reflect the country's growing capabilities and role as a leading power. India should take the initiative in building a framework for a coalition with other like-minded countries, which are also frequently affected by these increasing disasters, such a framework can help in setting standardized and integrated responses towards Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief capabilities in the region.

11.3 Ensuring & upholding international law like UNCLOS

The operational effectiveness of treaties and laws like UNCLOS are under increasing stress. Their effective implementation in ensuring freedom of navigation, and equitable use of maritime resources is becoming increasingly difficult, more so in India's backyard in the Indo-Pacific. It becomes imperative for India to engage and take a lead in working with the international community to update these laws to make them effective with respect to present geopolitical, economic, and technological realities.

11.4 Securing sea lanes of communication: (SLOC)

This can perhaps be the most important policy approach to secure Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific. Maritime shipping supported the growth of India as well as the global south's economy. India has long been advocating itself as the leader of the global south, for this can represent a different bloc of power in a multipolar world, which looks

crowded with the USA vs China narrative. It thus becomes important to deal with increasingly untraditional challenges to the free and open sea lanes of communication which acts as a highway for global trade. India's food and energy security depends critically on the openness of these SLOCs, also they can potentially serve as strategic choke points in case of any military disputes.

The critical chokepoints of SLOC where India should increase its capabilities are the

- Strait of Hormuz (key for oil trade)
- Horn of Africa (key for its geographic and geopolitical significance)
- Strait of Malacca (this is perhaps most important due to its connectivity to the South china sea and Southeast Asia for India, the bulk of global trade passes through here)

11.5 Work with the private sector

To remain a leader in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, India must necessarily engage in the geoeconomics of the region as well. In such a scenario, India's private sector can play a key role. In 2018, the USA, Japan, and India with great fanfare launched the Indo-Pacific Trilateral Infrastructure Forum, but sadly its projects have not been fully implemented, nor any significant investments have been made in comparison to its promised potential.

In today's time when many countries are suffering from unsustainable debt levels and stagflation, these three countries can provide alternative economic opportunities to the Indo-Pacific countries. Expansion of such trilateral forums with other countries should also be on the cards.

12. CONCLUSION

India's strategic role in the South China Sea, and the larger Indo-Pacific are pivotal to shaping the future of the region and will greatly affect the evolving global order. India must continue to seize opportunities and address the new and untraditional challenges it faces in its periphery and beyond. India should take historical cues from its ancient culture and people-to-people ties in the region, and leverage its strengths like its dynamic diaspora and rapidly growing

economy, to make our neighbors a partner in our growth story. India should further expand its various initiatives like IFC-IOR, engage with ASEAN, manage China, and build on the work of alliances like QUAD, to create an open and free Indo-Pacific.

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