

International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652
ISSN Online: 2664-8660
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.31
IJAHS 2025; 7(2): 622-628
www.socialstudiesjournal.com
Received: 22-10-2025
Accepted: 25-11-2025

Dr. Binoda Kumar Kar
Head of the Department,
Department of Political
Science, Braja Bandhu
Mahavidyalaya,
Harichandanpur, Keonjhar,
Odisha, India

Ashok Kumar Swain
Post Graduate Teacher in
Political Science, Saheed
Bhagat Singh Higher
Secondary School,
Khandadeuli, Ganjam, Odisha,
India

Dragon at the Doorstep: How China is Redefining India's Foreign Policy choices?

Binoda Kumar Kar and Ashok Kumar Swain

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i2h.360>

Abstract

China's contemporary posture toward India constitutes a multidimensional challenge that extends far beyond traditional border disputes. While Beijing continues to assert claims over territories such as Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and parts of Uttarakhand, its core strategy focuses on gradually altering the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) through calibrated, incremental encroachments often described as "salami-slicing." This approach is reinforced by extensive investments in dual-use infrastructure—including roads, airfields, logistics hubs, and forward bases—that enhance China's ability to mobilize rapidly and sustain military pressure. Frequent incursions and prolonged standoffs have exposed the fragility of existing confidence-building measures and cast doubt on China's commitment to bilateral border agreements. China's assertiveness is also embedded in a broader strategy of strategic containment. Economically, its trade practices and expanding regional influence have constrained India's leadership in South Asia. Strategically, deepening ties with India's neighbours—particularly Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as well as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—have heightened perceptions of encirclement. Cyber operations, information warfare, growing missile and nuclear asymmetries, and repeated violations of the 1993 and 1996 agreements further indicate coercive diplomacy rather than cooperation. Dialogue mechanisms such as the Special Representatives' talks and the WMCC have delivered limited outcomes, highlighting institutional inadequacies. India's response reflects a shift from past restraint, combining military deployments, infrastructure upgrades, and diplomatic activism. However, structural constraints and China's superior material capabilities limit India's options, forcing a careful balance between deterrence and escalation avoidance.

Keywords: Border, counter, LAC, standoff, strategy

Introduction

Strategic Overview of China's Challenges

India and China are among the world's oldest continuous civilizations, sharing a long history of cultural, economic, and civilizational interaction spanning over five millennia. Geographically, the two Asian powers are separated by the Himalayan mountain range, traditionally regarded as India's natural frontier. Despite this historical and geographical context, bilateral relations have been persistently strained due to unresolved boundary disputes and growing strategic rivalry. India maintains that Aksai Chin forms an integral part of its territory and has been illegally occupied by China, while China disputes India's sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh by rejecting the legitimacy of the McMahon Line and asserting its claims based on Tibet. These competing territorial narratives have periodically intensified tensions between the two countries.

The border dispute assumed a decisive and destabilizing character following China's military offensive against India in 1962, which resulted in China gaining control over large portions of eastern Ladakh, including Aksai Chin. Since that conflict, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has repeatedly sought to alter the existing status quo along all three sectors of the India-China border by transgressing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and, in the eastern sector, the McMahon Line. Such actions have rendered the shared frontier highly volatile and prone to escalation. Over the years, reported instances of Chinese incursions into Indian territory have demonstrated a troubling pattern of persistence and increase, reflecting a sustained effort to apply pressure along the border. The situation deteriorated sharply after 2020, culminating in a violent clash in eastern Ladakh on 15 June 2020, when thousands of The civilizational Indian presence in the Gulf has grown into a solid partnership, Chinese

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Binoda Kumar Kar
Head of the Department,
Department of Political
Science, Braja Bandhu
Mahavidyalaya,
Harichandanpur, Keonjhar,
Odisha, India

troops confronted Indian forces. This incident resulted in the death of twenty Indian soldiers and injuries to several others, marking the most serious border violence between the two countries in decades. Concurrently, China has significantly enhanced its military posture along the LAC by deploying advanced weapon systems, including hypersonic and ballistic missiles, fifth-generation fighter aircraft, and modern surveillance capabilities. Another alarming development has been the establishment of hundreds of civilian settlements near the border areas, which appear to serve strategic purposes by strengthening China's territorial claims and facilitating logistical support for military operations. Indian officials have repeatedly acknowledged that the border situation remains unsettled, underscoring the fragility of peace along the frontier. The rapid expansion of infrastructure—particularly road networks and military installations—has further enabled China to mobilize troops swiftly in sensitive areas such as the Tawang sector. The construction of sealed roads and forward encampments in close proximity to the LAC has played a critical role in supporting Chinese troop movements during recent standoffs.

Beyond the immediate border challenge, China's broader strategic behavior has deepened India's security concerns. Beijing's close strategic partnership with Pakistan, particularly its extensive investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—a territory claimed by India—directly impinges on India's sovereignty claims. Moreover, China's growing military, economic, and political engagement with India's neighboring countries, coupled with its expanding presence in the Indian Ocean Region, reinforces New Delhi's perception of strategic encirclement. Collectively, these developments suggest that China has limited inclination to pursue meaningful de-escalation in the near future.

In response to China's assertive posture, India—albeit belatedly—has undertaken a series of corrective measures. These include accelerated development of border infrastructure, establishment of forward military bases and check posts, modernization of armed forces, and a recalibration of foreign policy priorities. India's participation in strategic groupings such as the Quad, closer engagement with Western democracies, and its growing visibility in global diplomacy have contributed to reshaping regional power perceptions. Externally, India has sought to counterbalance China through strengthened partnerships and diplomatic outreach, while internally it has focused on infrastructure expansion, military preparedness, and greater strategic self-reliance. This article examines how India's evolving domestic and foreign policy responses represent an effort to manage and counter China's growing assertiveness across multiple domains.

India's Foreign Policy Shift

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has adopted a more assertive and flexible approach toward its immediate neighbourhood, placing regional diplomacy at the Centre of its foreign policy. From the outset, the Modi government signalled a renewed emphasis on South Asia by inviting the leaders of all SAARC member states to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014, followed by the invitation to BIMSTEC leaders during his second oath-taking in 2019. These symbolic gestures underscored India's intention to strengthen political connectivity and regional engagement through dialogue. Shortly after assuming office, Prime Minister Modi formally articulated the “Neighbourhood

First” policy, reinforcing India's commitment to building cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with its neighbouring countries. His decision to make Bhutan his first official foreign destination further demonstrated the priority accorded to smaller neighbouring states, a trend continued through high-level engagements with Bangladesh, Nepal, and other South Asian countries.

A notable shift in India's neighbourhood strategy under the Modi government has been its pragmatic willingness to engage with governments that may be politically unfriendly, aligned with China, or even opposed to Indian interests. Rather than relying on ideological affinity, New Delhi has adopted a more accommodative posture aimed at safeguarding long-term strategic interests. This approach has been evident in India's engagement with governments such as those led by Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, K.P. Sharma Oli in Nepal, Mohamed Muizzu in the Maldives, and even the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan. By maintaining channels of communication and cooperation, India has sought to prevent strategic vacuums that could otherwise be exploited by China. This pragmatic diplomacy is increasingly complemented by development assistance, economic cooperation, and enhanced connectivity, which have become critical tools for retaining influence in South Asia and counterbalancing Beijing's expanding footprint.

Infrastructure and connectivity have emerged as key pillars of India's regional strategy. The Modi government has significantly expanded cross-border projects in neighbouring countries, particularly in sectors such as transport, energy, telecommunications, and logistics. At present, India is involved in more than one hundred connectivity projects across Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, collectively valued at approximately US\$7 billion. These initiatives include railways, highways, ports, power transmission lines, and digital infrastructure, all aimed at facilitating trade, improving market access, and fostering economic interdependence within South Asia. Such projects not only enhance regional integration but also provide neighbouring states with credible alternatives to China-led infrastructure initiatives.

Several high-profile projects illustrate this growing emphasis on regional connectivity. In 2022, India and Nepal operationalised the Jaynagar-Kurta section of the Jayanagar-Bardibas railway line, strengthening people-to-people and commercial links. The following year witnessed the inauguration of the Akhaura-Agartala rail link between India and Bangladesh, constructed with Indian support. India also launched a direct shipping service between Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu and the Maldives in 2023, expanding maritime connectivity. In the energy sector, the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline has delivered tangible economic benefits to Nepal, while India and Bangladesh inaugurated their first cross-border energy pipeline for diesel transport in 2023. Discussions are also underway with Sri Lanka on energy cooperation, including an oil pipeline and an undersea electricity transmission line linking India with Colombo's power grid. Additionally, India has supported Nepal's hydropower generation and facilitated its export potential.

To further limit China's strategic penetration in South Asia, the Modi government has increasingly coordinated with like-minded extra-regional partners. India has shown greater openness toward trilateral and multilateral cooperation that aligns with its regional interests. In Nepal, for instance, the United States has committed substantial financial assistance toward electricity transmission infrastructure, complementing India's connectivity initiatives. Similarly,

U.S. support for the development of Sri Lanka's West Container Terminal aligns with India's objective of maintaining strategic balance in the Indian Ocean Region. New Delhi has also explored collaborative ventures involving other major powers, including discussions on joint operations at the Hambantota International Airport, reflecting a flexible approach to regional partnerships.

Over the past decade, the Modi government has fundamentally recalibrated India's engagement with South Asia by placing the neighbourhood at the core of its strategic thinking. Through the Neighbourhood First policy, India has become more proactive in responding to China's expanding regional influence while simultaneously adopting a more inclusive and adaptable diplomatic posture. By leveraging connectivity, development cooperation, strategic partnerships, and people-centric initiatives, New Delhi has sought to rebuild trust and generate new sources of influence among its neighbours. Taken together, these efforts represent a significant attempt to consolidate India's regional leadership and counterbalance China's growing presence in South Asia.

Relations with Taliban lead Afghanistan

Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, India promptly suspended the operations of its embassy in Kabul and ensured the safe evacuation of Indian nationals. At the time, there were significant concerns in New Delhi that the return of the Taliban to power could adversely affect India's security interests, particularly given the Taliban's historical association with Pakistan and the possibility of renewed interference in the Kashmir issue. Traditionally, India had viewed the Taliban as hostile and had refrained from engaging with the regime during its earlier rule between 1996 and 2001. However, developments since 2021 have marked a noticeable shift in India's approach toward Afghanistan.

In the post-2021 period, India has demonstrated a clear intent to contribute to regional stability while safeguarding its strategic interests. Recognizing that instability in Afghanistan has wider regional implications, New Delhi adopted a cooperative regional strategy rather than isolation. In November 2021, India convened a regional dialogue on Afghanistan, bringing together key stakeholders to address the emerging security and humanitarian challenges following the Taliban takeover. This initiative reflected India's effort to position itself as a responsible regional actor. Further reinforcing this approach, India's National Security Advisor hosted a special meeting with his Central Asian counterparts in December 2022, where the deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan featured prominently on the agenda.

At the bilateral level, India made a pragmatic decision to cautiously re-engage with Kabul, signaling a departure from its earlier policy of non-engagement with the Taliban. Instead of extending formal diplomatic recognition, India adopted a calibrated approach centered on humanitarian assistance and people-centric engagement. New Delhi has focused on providing food aid, medical supplies, and support for basic human needs. This included the commitment of 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat, the supply of life-saving medicines, and assistance through international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to address issues like drug addiction. Education has also remained a key pillar of India's engagement, reflecting continuity with its earlier development-oriented policies. In 2023, India launched an online scholarship programme offering one thousand educational scholarships

to Afghan students, with a significant proportion allocated to women and girls residing within Afghanistan.

This limited yet meaningful engagement has yielded diplomatic dividends. The Taliban leadership has largely avoided overtly anti-India rhetoric and has repeatedly assured New Delhi that Afghan territory will not be allowed to be used against Indian interests. Moreover, the Taliban have expressed a strong interest in expanding India's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, viewing India as a credible and non-coercive partner.

India's recalibrated Afghanistan policy must also be understood within the broader context of its strategic competition with China and the deepening China-Pakistan nexus. China's growing presence in the region, particularly through large-scale infrastructure investments and the Belt and Road Initiative—of which India is not a participant—poses significant strategic challenges. A complete withdrawal of Indian economic and developmental engagement from Afghanistan would risk creating a vacuum that China could readily fill, thereby enhancing Beijing's influence and strategic depth in South and Central Asia. If combined with Pakistan's close alignment with China, such a scenario could have serious implications for India's security.

Against this backdrop, India's continued presence and cautious engagement with the regime in power in Kabul acquire strategic significance. By maintaining humanitarian assistance, limited diplomatic outreach, and regional cooperation, India seeks to prevent strategic marginalization, counter the expansion of rival influence, and protect its long-term interests in Afghanistan. This pragmatic approach reflects New Delhi's broader effort to balance security concerns with geopolitical realities in an increasingly contested regional environment.

Act East policy

Soon after assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded India's long-standing Look East Policy into the more proactive Act East Policy, signalling a substantive shift in New Delhi's engagement with East and Southeast Asia. This policy transformation expanded India's strategic outlook beyond a primarily geographic and economic orientation to include continental and maritime dimensions, thereby strengthening India's role in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Rather than limiting engagement to trade and investment alone, the Act East Policy adopted a comprehensive and strategic framework that integrated economic, political, security, and cultural objectives.

The Act East Policy seeks to deepen India's partnerships with key regional actors such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its core goals include promoting economic cooperation, enhancing physical and digital connectivity, strengthening strategic and defence partnerships, and expanding people-to-people exchanges. Through this approach, India has widened its engagement across multiple sectors, including commerce, infrastructure development, defence collaboration, and cultural diplomacy with East Asian countries. A distinctive feature of the policy has been its emphasis on maritime cooperation and security, reflecting the growing strategic importance of sea lanes and the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

During both terms of the Modi government, sustained efforts have been made to enhance India's presence within the regional security architecture of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives are closely linked to concerns

in New Delhi regarding China's expanding economic, military, and strategic influence in the region. As part of its Act East framework, India has actively promoted connectivity projects aimed at integrating its northeastern states with Southeast Asia. Notable initiatives include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar, and the development of port infrastructure at Sittwe. Collectively, these projects are intended to improve regional integration, facilitate trade, and offer alternative connectivity options to China-led infrastructure initiatives.

India's expanding security cooperation and strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries thus reflect a broader effort to safeguard its interests and maintain strategic balance in the region. By strengthening diplomatic engagement, enhancing connectivity, and deepening defence cooperation, the Act East Policy represents a key instrument through which India seeks to counter China's growing presence and assert its role as a responsible and influential Indo-Pacific power.

Defence Diplomacy with Southeast Asian States: Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines

India's defence diplomacy under the Modi government has played a pivotal role in deepening strategic engagement with key Southeast Asian countries, particularly those seeking to diversify their security partnerships amid China's expanding regional influence. States such as Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines have increasingly viewed India as a credible and reliable strategic partner, enabling them to broaden their defence options and pursue hedging strategies in response to China's assertive behaviour.

Singapore has emerged as one of India's most important defence partners in Southeast Asia. In November 2015, the two countries concluded a Defence Cooperation Agreement, which laid the foundation for expanded military interaction. This was followed in November 2017 by a bilateral naval cooperation arrangement aimed at enhancing maritime security through joint exercises, logistics support, and operational coordination. These agreements have significantly strengthened naval interoperability and reinforced India's presence in the regional maritime security framework.

India's defence relationship with Vietnam has also witnessed substantial advancement. In 2016, the two countries upgraded their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signalling a higher level of political and military trust. This was institutionalized through the launch of their first formal security dialogue in 2018. Subsequently, the Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and People was articulated in 2020 and reaffirmed through a follow-up agreement in 2022. Notably, the 2022 arrangement on mutual logistics support marked a significant milestone, as it was the first such agreement Vietnam had entered into with any foreign country, reflecting the depth of bilateral defence cooperation.

The Philippines has similarly emerged as a key defence partner for India since 2016, both in terms of military collaboration and defence exports. A major breakthrough occurred when India agreed, for the first time, to export three batteries of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile system to the Philippine Marine Corps. This development not only underscored India's growing defence manufacturing capabilities but also strengthened strategic trust between the two countries. Further institutional progress was made at the fourth meeting of the Philippines-India Joint Defence Cooperation Committee in March 2023,

where New Delhi decided to appoint a defence attaché in Manila to coordinate defence and security cooperation. In addition, both sides have expanded engagement in areas such as military training, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, maritime domain awareness, and the exchange of white shipping information.

Collectively, these evolving defence partnerships reflect India's growing role as a security provider in Southeast Asia. The deepening military cooperation with Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines indicates a convergence of strategic interests, particularly in addressing shared concerns over China's regional assertiveness, and positions India as an increasingly influential actor in the regional security landscape.

Asian Land Partners (Vietnam, Mongolia and South Korea)

India has increasingly pursued strategic partnerships with countries located in China's immediate neighbourhood as part of its broader effort to counterbalance Beijing's regional influence. In addition to strengthening ties with Vietnam, Japan, and South Korea, New Delhi has developed a strategic partnership with Mongolia—a landlocked country sharing a border with China and historically sensitive to the risk of excessive dependence on, or domination by, its powerful neighbour. Defence cooperation between India and Mongolia was institutionalized in 2019, a development that reportedly generated unease in Beijing. From New Delhi's strategic perspective, engagement with Mongolia carries clear geopolitical significance, as it demonstrates India's ability to operate diplomatically and strategically within China's immediate strategic environment. India has also expanded its partnership with South Korea, with initial emphasis placed on economic cooperation. South Korea's efforts to diversify its economic relationships under its New Southern Policy, aimed at reducing over-reliance on China, have created new opportunities for closer collaboration with India. At the same time, Seoul has expressed growing concern over China's assertive activities in the East China Sea, bringing its strategic outlook closer to that of New Delhi. South Korea's advanced shipbuilding and maritime technology sectors offer potential benefits for India's naval modernization and internal balancing efforts. Since 2018, defence and security cooperation between India and South Korea has gradually intensified, including naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and shared commitments to freedom of navigation and adherence to international maritime norms. This expanding defence engagement has not gone unnoticed by China, which has reportedly expressed reservations regarding the deepening strategic ties between New Delhi and Seoul. Together, India's outreach to Mongolia and South Korea reflects a calculated effort to broaden its strategic partnerships in China's periphery, thereby reinforcing India's position within the evolving regional balance of power.

Indian Ocean Diplomacy

Until the late 2010s, the strategic centrality of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) did not occupy a clearly articulated position in India's foreign and security policy discourse. This changed decisively at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered a coherent vision and conceptual clarity to the emerging idea of the "Indo-Pacific." In his articulation, the Indo-Pacific was defined not merely as a strategic construct but as an expansive geographical and political space stretching from

the eastern shores of Africa to the western coast of the Americas along the Pacific Ocean. This interpretation marked a significant departure from narrower regional frameworks and underscored India's intent to assume a more consequential role across both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In the contemporary period, India has positioned itself as an active and responsible stakeholder in the Indian Ocean Region by promoting regional cooperation, strengthening economic linkages, enhancing maritime security, upholding freedom of navigation, and supporting the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law. To advance this multifaceted agenda, India has intensified its engagement with a range of regional and multilateral institutions, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation framework. Beyond the immediate region, India's Indo-Pacific vision also emphasizes collaboration with extra-regional partners to ensure the security and openness of critical global sea lanes.

India has further reinforced its Indo-Pacific posture by aligning selectively with complementary strategic initiatives such as the United States' "Pivot to Asia" and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," while simultaneously deepening engagement with Pacific Island countries through platforms like the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). Operationally, this approach has been reflected in an expanding network of joint military and naval exercises aimed at improving interoperability and maritime coordination. Notable examples include Samudra Shakti with Indonesia, AUSINDEX with Australia, IMBAX with Myanmar, and successive editions of the Malabar naval exercise involving India, the United States, and Japan, with the potential for broader regional participation in the future. Under Prime Minister Modi, India's growing naval activism has been explicitly framed around the aspiration to act as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. This ambition is closely linked to the doctrine of SAGAR—Security and Growth for All in the Region—announced in 2015. SAGAR serves as the conceptual foundation of India's maritime strategy, recognising the interconnected nature of economic activity, maritime security, and regional stability. The doctrine acknowledges that non-traditional threats—such as piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, and humanitarian crises—pose serious challenges to the IOR and that collective responses are essential to address them effectively. Importantly, SAGAR represents a departure from narrowly defined national interests by emphasizing cooperative security, capacity-building, and economic partnership with neighbouring maritime states.

As China continues to expand its naval presence and strategic footprint across the Indian Ocean, India's emphasis on maritime diplomacy, regional cooperation, and naval capacity-building has acquired heightened urgency. In this context, countering China's growing power projection has become a central driver of India's Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean strategies, increasingly shaping New Delhi's broader security and foreign policy priorities.

India's lean towards US and attention Indo-Pacific region

During its second term, the NDA government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to position India as a globally acknowledged major power by deepening strategic

engagement with the United States. Unlike earlier approaches, Modi placed greater emphasis on U.S. support across economic, strategic, and military domains, with particular focus on defence cooperation, counterterrorism, and regional security. While economic ties with Washington remained important, security and defence emerged as central pillars of the partnership, largely driven by the shared objective of responding to China's growing power. The United States emerged as a key partner for India due to its global influence, strategic interests, capacity for external balancing, and willingness to collaborate with New Delhi.

At the same time, Modi's foreign policy involved managing relations with China through a combination of assertive diplomacy and selective engagement. Recognising that India's global standing is shaped by its interaction with China, New Delhi adopted a firmer posture on border issues while maintaining limited cooperation to preserve regional stability. India also strengthened strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian countries to counterbalance Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. This approach included revitalising the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and supporting initiatives such as the Indo-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) as alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Maritime cooperation has been a key component of this strategy. The Malabar naval exercise, initiated in 1992 as a bilateral India-U.S. drill, has evolved into a major multilateral exercise focused on maritime interoperability, submarine warfare, and naval coordination. Japan's permanent inclusion in 2017 and Australia's participation from 2020 transformed Malabar into a full Quad exercise. Given China's increasing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Malabar has become a significant platform for signalling collective resolve and enhancing maritime deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Necklace of Diamonds

India's Sagarmala initiative is widely viewed as a strategic response to China's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its broader "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean. Originally announced in 2003 and revitalized under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sagarmala seeks to integrate port-led development with national economic growth. The project focuses on modernizing major and non-major ports, creating coastal economic regions, and improving multimodal connectivity through rail, road, and inland waterways. By promoting port-based industries, logistics hubs, shipbuilding, and maritime services, Sagarmala prioritizes maritime connectivity over traditional land routes. With an estimated investment of about USD 54 billion across roughly 150 projects, the initiative aims to strengthen India's maritime infrastructure, enhance global trade links, and reinforce India's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region, thereby offering a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Chabahar Port

The development of Iran's Chabahar port has regained strategic importance as both a trade gateway and a site of geopolitical competition. For India, the port offers a critical route to Central Asia and Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan, thereby reducing strategic dependence on hostile land corridors. Chabahar also strengthens India-Iran relations and serves as a counterweight to China's influence in the Indian Ocean, particularly in response to Pakistan's Gwadar port and the deepening China-Pakistan partnership. Located in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, Chabahar is

the country's only deep-water port with direct ocean access and occupies a key position along the International North-South Transport Corridor, enhancing its potential as a major commercial and strategic hub in the region.

Abrogation of Article 370

In an effort to counter the deepening China-Pakistan strategic alignment and address internal security challenges, the Modi government revoked Article 370 in August 2019, thereby ending the special status of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir and reorganizing it into two Union Territories—Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. The revised territorial delineation formally incorporated areas such as the Shaksgam Valley, which Pakistan ceded to China under a 1963 boundary agreement, as well as Aksai Chin, which has remained under Chinese control since the 1962 conflict. These changes, including updated official maps, were approved by the Indian Parliament. Alongside administrative reorganization, India has accelerated infrastructure development to strengthen defence preparedness. This includes the construction of a three-kilometre airstrip along the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway to enable rapid air operations. The government has also prioritized all-weather connectivity through the construction of multiple tunnels across Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, aimed at improving logistics, troop mobility, and resilience in the event of external security threats.

Act Far East Policy

India has proposed the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor (VCMC) as a strategic initiative to connect India with Russia's Far Eastern region, including Siberia's resource-rich energy zones, thereby facilitating trade, investment, and energy flows to the Indian economy. This initiative effectively represents an extension of Prime Minister Modi's Act East Policy into what may be described as an "Act Far East" approach. The significance of this vision was highlighted by Prime Minister Modi at the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum, often referred to as the "Vladivostok moment," where he emphasized Vladivostok's potential role as a gateway for India into Northeast Asian markets and as a point of strategic linkage between the Eurasian Economic Union and the broader Indo-Pacific framework.

The proposed corridor is also envisaged as a multilateral platform, with countries such as Japan and South Korea identified as potential partners. Strategically, the VCMC could contribute to diversifying Russia's economic partnerships and reducing its excessive reliance on China. At the same time, it offers India an alternative maritime route that indirectly counters China's westward-oriented overland connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. By extending connectivity toward Russia's Arctic maritime routes, the concept has also given rise to the notion of an "Indo-Arctic" strategic outlook for India, enabling New Delhi to limit China's expanding influence along emerging Arctic shipping corridors.

Conclusion

As tensions between India and China continue to intensify, New Delhi must adopt a holistic strategy that simultaneously addresses the external pressures and internal vulnerabilities arising from China's growing assertiveness. Through sustained military modernization, accelerated infrastructure development, strengthened strategic partnerships, and assertive diplomacy, India has begun to respond more effectively to Chinese power projection.

Given the high strategic stakes, India's policy choices will be decisive in shaping the long-term direction of Sino-Indian relations. India's expanding engagement with ASEAN states and countries in China's immediate neighbourhood reflects its broader commitment to fostering a multipolar Asian order. These partnerships not only reinforce the objectives of the Act East Policy but also function as a strategic counterbalance to China's expanding regional influence. Moreover, India's proactive role in the Indian Ocean Region, alongside deepening ties with the United States, the European Union, and other like-minded partners, highlights its growing maritime ambitions and its dedication to maintaining regional stability.

Anchored in Prime Minister Modi's SAGAR vision, India is pursuing a multidimensional approach that integrates security cooperation, economic connectivity, and regional diplomacy to manage emerging challenges and constrain China's strategic advances. By expanding defence cooperation, promoting economic integration, and strengthening people-to-people and cultural linkages, India is consolidating its position as a pivotal actor in the Indo-Pacific and reaffirming its relevance in the evolving geopolitical landscape. These developments demonstrate that contemporary India is neither passive nor subordinate in the face of Chinese initiatives. At the same time, India may need to reconsider its strategic restraint on sensitive political issues. While China continues to leverage the Kashmir question and extend support to Pakistan over Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, New Delhi could adopt a more assertive diplomatic posture by highlighting concerns related to Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Such calibrated engagement could serve as an additional pressure point in India's broader strategy to manage and deter Chinese assertiveness.

References

1. Kumar S. The Indo-Pacific pivot: India-China rivalry and its geopolitical implications. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*. 2024;5(3):1-15. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.6502>
2. Lin HC. India's strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific strategy. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing; 2024.
3. Kulkarni NK. India's strategic response to China's influence in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 2025;60(1):1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2025.2457157>
4. Jaishankar S. Why Bharat matters. New Delhi: Rupa Publications; 2024.
5. Pant HV, Joshi Y. The Dragon's shadow over Arunachal: China's territorial assertions and India's response. London: Routledge; 2020. p. 1-112.
6. Seidel J. Chilling detail in China satellite photo reveals Beijing may be planning a military operation in a surprising location. *news.com.au*. 2024 Jun 8. <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/chilling-detail-in-china-satellite-photo-reveals-beijing-may-be-planning-a-military-operation-in-a-surprising-location/news-story/5dc3f05b059b3c700929c6e9b8eb97d2>
7. The Times of India. China has constructed a sealed road leading to within 150 m of LAC ridgeline. *The Times of India*. 2022 Dec 21. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-has-constructed-a-sealed-road-leading-to-within-150m-of-lac-ridge-line/articleshow/96380507.cms>
8. Le Monde. India challenged by China in its "sphere of influence". *Le Monde*. 2024 Sep 8.

- https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/09/08/india-challenged-by-china-in-its-sphere-of-influence_6725225_23.html
9. Ahmad Khan T. Limited hard balancing: explaining India's counter response to Chinese encirclement. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. 2023;Mar-Apr:1-22.
 10. Kumar A. India's defence diplomacy: a strategic response to China in the Modi years. *ORF Issue Brief No. 733*. New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation; 2024. p. 1-16.
 11. Rajagopalan R. India's strategic choices: China and the balance of power in Asia. New Delhi: Carnegie India; 2017.
 12. Scott D. India's China challenge: foreign policy dilemmas post-Galwan and post-COVID. *Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*. 2021;2(2):2140003-1-2140003-23.
<https://doi.org/10.1142/S2717541321400039>
 13. Sibal K. India: strategic challenges and responses. New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation; 2013. p. 5-26. <http://vifindia.org>
 14. Chandra S. India's relations with its SAARC neighbours. New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation; 2019. p. 1-120.
 15. Pant HV, Mankikar KA, editors. *Rising to the China challenge: Sino-Indian ties under Modi*. New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation and Global Policy Journal; 2024.
 16. Chakraborty S, Jha S. India's maritime strategy and the Sagarmala project: strengthening connectivity in the Indian Ocean Region. London: Routledge; 2021. p. 112-115.
 17. Rao PS, Mishra A. India's regional strategy: countering China's influence in South Asia. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2020. p. 1-179.