

India's Response to China's Expanding Strategic Footprint in South and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region is becoming volatile. China's growing economic and military expansion in South and Southeast Asia poses strategic challenges to India's position in the region and its maritime interests. Through the BRI, Beijing has enhanced infrastructure connectivity and naval access in key locations such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, engendering regional debates over debt sustainability, maritime security, and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean. Because Beijing has expanded its power through the BRI by developing infrastructure projects and naval presence by building new port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and island nations posed structural challenges to India's regional position and maritime interests. This paper examines how India has responded to this evolving strategic environment and asks whether its approach reflects classical balancing behaviour under Realist assumptions or a broader regional order-building strategy within the Indo-Pacific security architecture. The study applies Realist theory to interpret India's power-balancing behaviour in an anarchic international system and employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to situate Sino-Indian rivalry within an interconnected regional security structure.

Geo-economics is treated not as a theoretical framework but as an instrument of statecraft shaping strategic competition in the region. While India's response is analysed through naval modernisation, expanding maritime deployments, strengthened mini-lateral partnerships, including Quad, and the evolving scope of the Act East Policy. Rather than viewing Act East solely as a counter-China mechanism, the paper interprets it as part of India's broader ambition to emerge as a leading regional and global power through comprehensive engagement with ASEAN and the wider Indo-Pacific. Hence, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on analysis of primary policy documents, strategic assessments, and secondary academic literature to reflect a calibrated multi-alignment approach aimed at preserving strategic autonomy and shaping a rules-based regional order.

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena of contemporary geopolitical transformation, characterised by shifting power distributions, intensifying maritime competition, and expanding economic interdependence (Brewster, 2012) (Pant & Rej, 2018). The growing strategic salience of the region reflects its critical sea lines of communication, energy transit routes, and expanding connectivity networks linking South and Southeast Asia. Within this evolving landscape, China's expanding economic, military, and diplomatic footprint has significantly altered regional strategic dynamics. At the same time, the sustained strategic presence of the United States, particularly through its "pivot to Asia" and broader Indo-Pacific strategy, has reinforced its role as a central security actor in the region (Yigit, 2024). This dual dynamic has contributed to an ongoing transformation of the international system from a unipolar order towards an increasingly contested and fluid multipolar configuration, characterised by intensifying great power competition. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has increased infrastructure investments and maritime engagement across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other Indian Ocean littoral states.

The United States role in the Indo-Pacific is central to understanding the evolving regional balance of power. Through its extensive military presence, including forward-deployed forces and strategic bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, the United States maintains a robust capacity for power projection and rapid response across the region (Raj, 2025). This military posture is reinforced by a longstanding alliance system with countries such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, which collectively underpin a networked security architecture aimed at deterring aggression and maintaining regional stability (Heiduk, 2022). In addition to formal alliances, the United States actively supports flexible strategic platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, contributing to a more adaptive and issue-based security framework. From a realist perspective, the United States serves as a key external balancer, shaping the Indo-Pacific order by countering the expanding influence of China (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). At the same time, its emphasis on freedom of navigation, secure

sea lines of communication, and adherence to international law reflects an effort to sustain a rules-based order alongside material balancing. This dual role reinforces the United States as both a security provider and a central actor in the ongoing transformation of the international system. These developments have generated debates concerning debt sustainability, maritime access, and long-term strategic influence. Simultaneously, China's expanding naval deployments and growing overseas interests reflect a broader outward maritime orientation aimed at securing sea lines of communication and protecting external economic assets (AlZarooni, 2024).

For India, current structural shifts present both strategic challenges and policy recalibrations. As a major regional actor with longstanding maritime and continental security interests, India must navigate an increasingly complex environment marked by maritime competition in the IOR, persistent continental tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and institutional realignments within South and Southeast Asia (Tellis, 2020). Rather than interpreting these dynamics solely as bilateral rivalry, can be understood as part of a broader transformation within the Indo-Pacific security architecture. This study seeks to examine how India has responded to China's expanding strategic footprint in South and Southeast Asia and addresses the central research question: Is India primarily engaging in classical balancing behaviour, as predicted by Realist theory, or is it pursuing a broader regional order-building strategy within the Indo-Pacific security complex? This paper adopts a dual theoretical framework. First, realism provides insight into balancing behaviour, security dilemmas, and relative power calculations in an anarchic international system. Second, the RSCT situates Sino-Indian strategic interaction within interconnected regional security structures, where geographic proximity and interdependence shape threat perceptions and policy responses. Geo-economics is treated as an instrument of statecraft that influences strategic competition but is not conceptualised as a standalone theoretical framework.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative research design based on the analysis of primary policy documents, strategic assessments, and secondary academic literature. It examines India's naval modernisation, expanding maritime deployments, minilateral partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and the evolving scope of the Act East Policy. These developments are analysed within the broader context of the United States' strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly its "pivot to Asia" and broader Indo-Pacific strategy, alongside the ongoing transformation of the international system from

unipolarity to a more contested and fluid multipolar order (Yigit, 2024). The study also situates India's strategy alongside developments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), border security dynamics, and regional institutional engagement. The paper argues that India's response cannot be reduced to a singular strategic logic. While elements of internal and external balancing are evident in its military modernisation and strategic partnerships, India simultaneously pursues institutional engagement and geo-economic diversification to shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order (Ikenberry, 2018), including participation in regional trade agreements and collaboration with international organisations to enhance its influence. In this context, India's strategy is best characterised as calibrated multi-alignment, which seeks to preserve strategic autonomy while pragmatically adapting to shifts in global polarity and great power competition (Yigit, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Understanding India's response to China's expanding strategic footprint requires a conceptual framework that captures both competitive power dynamics and regionally embedded security interactions. This study integrates RSCT as a complementary analytical lens. Additionally, geo-economics is treated as an instrument of statecraft shaping strategic behaviour, rather than as an independent theoretical paradigm.

Realist Perspectives: Balancing Behaviour and Security Dilemma

Realism remains one of the most influential theories in international relations, grounded in the assumption that the international system is anarchic, that is, lacking a central authority capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing security. In such an environment, states are the primary actors and must rely on self-help mechanisms to ensure survival (Waltz, 1979). Power, particularly military capability, becomes the principal currency of security. Under conditions of anarchy, uncertainty regarding other states' intentions compels actors to prioritise relative gains over absolute gains. The distribution of capabilities shapes strategic interaction, and rising powers may generate insecurity among established or regional actors (Garzon, 2022). Consequently, shifts in power distribution often prompt balancing responses intended to prevent any single state from dominating.

Internal balancing involves the development of domestic military and economic capabilities. Whereas external balancing entails forming alliances or strategic partnerships to offset perceived threats. Hence, balancing behaviour does not necessarily imply hostility; rather, it reflects structural adjustment to changes in relative power. States may adopt flexible

alignments rather than formal alliances to preserve autonomy while enhancing deterrence capacity (Walt, 1987). Within the central concept of realism, the security dilemma plays a critical role. Measures taken by one state to increase its security, such as military modernisation or strategic deployments, may be interpreted by others as threatening, prompting reciprocal actions. This dynamic can generate spirals of competition even in the absence of aggressive intent (Jervis, 1978). The security dilemma is particularly acute in regions characterised by contested territories, strategic chokepoints, or rapid capability expansion.

Hence, within the Realist framework, strategic interaction between major regional powers can be interpreted as responses to shifting distributions of material capabilities. Balancing behaviour, whether internal or external, reflects rational adaptation to perceived structural pressures. This lens allows analysis of how states recalibrate their military posture and strategic partnerships under conditions of uncertainty and power transition. In the Indo-Pacific context, the continued presence of the United States as a dominant military and strategic actor, alongside the rise of China, reflects an ongoing transition in the structure of the international system. Rather than a stable unipolar order, the region increasingly exhibits characteristics of an emerging multipolar or partially bipolar configuration. Within this evolving structural environment, regional powers such as India are compelled to recalibrate their strategies in response to both systemic pressures and shifting distributions of power (Yigit, 2024).

While Realism explains balancing behaviour at the systemic level, RSCT shifts the analytical focus to geographically proximate clusters of states whose security concerns are deeply interconnected (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Developed within the broader Copenhagen School tradition, RSCT argues that security interactions are most intense among neighbouring states due to proximity, historical interaction, and overlapping threat perceptions. RSCT posits that security is regionally clustered. Threats travel more easily over short distances, making geographically contiguous states particularly sensitive to one another's actions. As a result, security dynamics in one part of a region are rarely isolated from developments in various places. In a regional security complex, political, economic, and military developments in one state affect the calculations of others. These interlinkages produce patterns of amity and enmity that structure regional interaction. Regional powers play a central role in shaping the internal balance of the complex, while extra-regional actors may influence but do not fully determine its dynamics. Whereas maritime-continental interaction and institutional embeddedness

significantly help RSCT to recognise that regional complexes may encompass both land and maritime dimensions. Security interactions across maritime spaces, contested borders, and trade routes are interconnected rather than compartmentalised. Continental disputes, naval expansion, and economic connectivity may therefore be analytically linked within a single regional framework (Alabi & Isiksal, 2025). Regional organisations and multilateral institutions form part of the security complex. They reflect and mediate patterns of rivalry, cooperation, and norm formation. Institutional engagement can either stabilise regional dynamics or become an arena through which competition is managed (Alabi & Isiksal, 2025). Thus, regional security cannot be understood purely in material terms but must also account for institutional and normative structures.

Geo-Economics as an Instrument of Statecraft

Geo-economics refers to the strategic use of economic instruments, such as trade, investment, infrastructure financing, and connectivity initiatives, to advance geopolitical objectives (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Unlike traditional military balancing, geo-economic strategies leverage economic interdependence to shape influence and alter strategic environments through infrastructure and connectivity. Infrastructure developments like port construction and connectivity corridors can generate long-term patterns of economic dependence and strategic access. Such initiatives expand influence not necessarily through coercion but through structural integration and financial engagement. Similarly, economic interdependence can produce asymmetries that translate into political leverage. States may use trade access, investment flows, supply chain positioning, or financial instruments to shape the policy choices of partners. Geo-economic competition thus operates alongside military competition in shaping regional order.

In this study, geo-economics is treated as an instrument of strategy rather than as a standalone theoretical paradigm. It complements Realist and regional security perspectives by explaining how economic tools interact with power politics and institutional dynamics. Geo-economic behaviour is analysed within the broader structural context provided by Realism and RSCT. Together, Realism and RSCT provide a layered analytical framework. Realism explains balancing behaviour and security dilemmas arising from shifts in power distribution, while RSCT situates these interactions within geographically interconnected regional dynamics. Geo-economics, as an instrument of statecraft, operates within this framework by shaping patterns of influence through economic integration (Reddy & Ran, 2026). This theoretical

foundation enables a systematic examination of strategic interaction in the Indo-Pacific without reducing it to either purely military rivalry or purely institutional cooperation.

China's Expanding Strategic Footprint in South and Southeast Asia

China's expanding presence across South and Southeast Asia constitutes a significant structural development within the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment. This expansion is not merely incremental or fragmented; rather, it reflects a coherent and multidimensional strategy that integrates infrastructure development, maritime capability enhancement, and sustained diplomatic engagement. These dimensions operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, enabling China to secure critical economic interests, extend its regional influence, and project strategic power beyond its immediate periphery.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has emerged as the central pillar of its overseas economic engagement and a key instrument shaping the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Through large-scale infrastructure financing and connectivity projects, the BRI seeks to deepen trade integration, enhance logistical efficiency, and foster economic interdependence across Asia and beyond. In South and Southeast Asia, however, these initiatives assume significance that extends beyond their developmental objectives, owing to their geographic positioning and long-term strategic implications. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects western China to the Arabian Sea through an extensive network of transport and energy infrastructure. The development of Gwadar Port, in particular, provides China with a direct outlet to the Indian Ocean, thereby reducing its reliance on the congested and strategically vulnerable Malacca Strait. While CPEC is officially framed as an economic development initiative, its spatial configuration and infrastructural depth enhance China's logistical flexibility and expand its strategic reach into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Spies, 2021). A similar pattern is observable in Sri Lanka, where Chinese investment in Hambantota Port reflects a broader model of infrastructure-led engagement. The port's long-term lease arrangement has generated sustained debate regarding issues of debt sustainability and potential strategic access (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Although Hambantota remains primarily commercial in function, its location along major maritime shipping routes elevates its importance within the regional security architecture.

In Myanmar, China's development of the Kyaukpyu deep-sea port, alongside oil and gas pipelines linking the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan Province, provides an alternative overland

corridor for energy transportation (Poling, 2018). This reduces China's exposure to maritime chokepoints while strengthening its access to the Indian Ocean. At the same time, these projects deepen economic interdependence and embed Myanmar more closely within China's regional economic network. China's engagement in Bangladesh further reinforces this pattern, as infrastructure and port development projects expand its commercial footprint in the Bay of Bengal sub-region (Jacob, 2025). These initiatives not only facilitate trade connectivity but also contribute to the gradual consolidation of China's economic presence across South Asia. Similarly, increased involvement with smaller island states in the Indian Ocean through infrastructure financing, construction, and port development highlights the geographic breadth of China's outreach (Baruah, 2025). While such projects are developmental in nature, their spatial distribution contributes to an emerging network of maritime connectivity that may offer long-term logistical advantages.

These developments show how infrastructure financing under the BRI functions as a form of geo-economic statecraft, shaping patterns of economic dependence and influencing strategic alignments across the region (Rolland, 2017) (Ferdinand, 2016). This expanding economic footprint is paralleled by a gradual enhancement of China's maritime capabilities and operational presence in the IOR. Activities such as anti-piracy missions, naval escort operations, and participation in maritime security initiatives reflect an increasing capacity to operate beyond China's immediate maritime periphery to safeguard overseas interests. The development of port infrastructure assumes additional significance due to its potential characteristics of dual-use. Although these facilities are primarily constructed for commercial purposes, they may, under certain conditions, provide logistical support such as refuelling, replenishment, or maintenance for naval vessels. Even in the absence of formally established overseas military bases, access to such infrastructure enhances China's operational flexibility and contributes to its evolving maritime posture in the Indo-Pacific (Bose, 2025).

Strategic and Structural Implications of China's Expanding Footprint

The Indian Ocean carries a substantial proportion of global energy shipments and trade flows. Ensuring secure access to SLOCs is therefore central to China's economic security. Maritime expansion is interpreted as an effort to mitigate vulnerability to chokepoints and safeguard energy imports. However, the cumulative effect of enhanced naval presence and infrastructure access contributes to evolving perceptions of strategic competition among regional actors. China's expanding footprint is not limited to economic and maritime domains.

Diplomatic engagement and institutional initiatives form an integral component of its regional strategy. China's activities in the SCS, including infrastructure development on disputed features and expanded maritime patrols, have intensified regional debates over maritime jurisdiction and international law. The SCS serves as a critical pathway for global trade and energy flows, making developments in this area central to regional stability (Hmouda, Orzes, & Sauer, 2024). Similarly, China articulated an alternative regional security concept that emphasises regional resolutions to regional problems. Such proposals aim to redefine security governance frameworks and influence the normative architecture of the Indo-Pacific. Hence, under economic partnerships, diplomatic outreach and development assistance, China has deepened political engagement with states across South and Southeast Asia. These relationships increase interdependence and expand China's ability to shape regional discourse and institutional processes.

The interplay of infrastructure expansion, diplomatic engagement, and maritime capability enhancement contributes to a gradual yet discernible redistribution of influence across South and Southeast Asia. Rather than representing discrete policy initiatives, these developments collectively signal an evolving structural shift within the Indo-Pacific security environment. From a Realist perspective, the expansion of material capabilities and strategic access reconfigures the regional balance of power, compelling other states to reassess and recalibrate their strategic postures. Simultaneously, from the standpoint of RSCT, these dynamics reshape patterns of security interdependence by linking maritime and continental theatres in increasingly complex ways. China's expanding strategic footprint thus operates not only at the level of state capability but also at the systemic level, transforming the nature of regional security interactions. The ongoing changes reflect a broader structural transformation of the Indo-Pacific security complex, within which regional actors are both constrained and enabled in their strategic choices. It is within this evolving structural context that India's strategic responses must be situated, as they reflect an adaptive effort to navigate shifting power distributions and emerging patterns of regional order.

India's Strategic Response: Internal Balancing through Military Modernisation and Maritime Posture

China's expanding strategic footprint has compelled India to recalibrate its security, diplomatic, and economic posture within South and Southeast Asia. India's response reflects a layered strategy combining military capability enhancement, strategic partnerships, regional

institutional engagement, and geo-economic recalibration. When interpreted through realism and RSCT, India's actions demonstrate both balancing behaviour and broader regional order-building ambitions. India's military modernisation and evolving maritime posture can be effectively understood through a realist framework of internal balancing, wherein states seek to enhance their domestic capabilities in response to shifts in the distribution of power. Within the Indo-Pacific context, India's maritime strategy reflects a deliberate structural adjustment aimed at preserving strategic equilibrium amid intensifying regional competition (Sisodia & Seth, 2025). India has prioritised the modernisation of its naval forces through the acquisition and development of aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, and maritime patrol assets. This emphasis underscores a growing recognition of the centrality of maritime power in safeguarding SLOCs, securing trade routes, and protecting offshore resources. By strengthening its naval capabilities, India enhances both its deterrence posture and its capacity for sustained operational presence across the IOR, thereby reinforcing its influence within its immediate maritime neighbourhood (Brewster, 2016).

Complementing surface fleet expansion is the development of subsurface capabilities, which constitute a critical dimension of maritime deterrence. India's investment in both conventional and nuclear-powered submarines enhances its sea-denial and anti-access capabilities, enabling it to counter potential adversaries more effectively in contested maritime environments (Abbasi & Masood, 2024). In the context of increasing undersea competition in the IOR, such advancements are particularly significant, as technological asymmetries in submarine warfare can alter strategic calculations. From a realist perspective, the strengthening of sub-surface capabilities represents a classic form of internal balancing aimed at maintaining a stable balance of power. Geostrategic investments in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands further illustrate India's effort to translate geographic advantage into strategic capability. Situated in proximity to the Malacca Strait, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, these islands provide India with a unique vantage point over key shipping lanes. Recent infrastructure upgrades, including runway extensions, enhanced surveillance systems, and improved logistical facilities, have transformed the region into a forward-operating hub. This enables India to expand its monitoring capacity and project power into the eastern Indian Ocean, thereby augmenting its strategic depth and reinforcing its deterrent posture.

Development of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has emerged as a foundational pillar of India's maritime security architecture. Through the integration of satellite surveillance,

coastal radar networks, information-sharing mechanisms, and data fusion centres, India has significantly enhanced its ability to monitor activities across the IOR. Improved situational awareness reduces strategic uncertainty, an inherent feature of the anarchic international system, and mitigates the risks of miscalculation or covert manoeuvres by adversaries (Affairs, 2025). As such, MDA represents a form of capability enhancement that strengthens internal balancing while avoiding overt escalation. Hence, these developments demonstrate that India's maritime modernisation is not merely a process of capability accumulation but a strategically calibrated response to evolving regional dynamics. By enhancing naval power, sub-surface deterrence, geostrategic positioning, and informational awareness, India seeks to preserve its strategic autonomy and maintain a favourable balance of power within the Indo-Pacific.

Diplomatic and Multilateral Engagement (External Balancing-Realism)

India's diplomatic outreach and participation in multilateral frameworks can be understood through the realist concept of external balancing, wherein states cooperate with others to offset systemic pressures arising from shifts in the distribution of power. Unlike formal alliance systems, however, India's approach reflects a calibrated and flexible strategy that prioritises strategic autonomy while simultaneously enhancing its ability to respond to an evolving regional security environment. A key manifestation of this approach is India's engagement with the Quad, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The inclusion of the United States, given its extensive military presence, alliance network, and forward deployments across the Indo-Pacific, significantly enhances the platform's strategic weight and deterrent signalling capacity (Yiğit, 2023).

Rather than functioning as a formal military alliance, the Quad operates as a flexible strategic platform addressing a wide range of issues, including maritime security, supply chain resilience, technological cooperation, and regional stability. Within a Realist framework, the Quad contributes to collective deterrence by signalling strategic convergence among major Indo-Pacific powers. At the same time, its informal and non-binding nature allows India to avoid the constraints typically associated with alliance commitments, thereby preserving its long-standing emphasis on strategic autonomy. Beyond mini-lateral arrangements, India has also expanded its network of bilateral defence partnerships with both regional and extra-regional actors. These partnerships encompass logistics-sharing agreements, intelligence exchanges, and collaboration in defence technology and capacity-building. Such engagements enhance operational interoperability and extend India's strategic reach without locking it into

exclusive or hierarchical alignments. In this sense, India's external balancing strategy remains inherently flexible, issue-based, and responsive to shifting geopolitical conditions.

Complementing these institutional and bilateral efforts is India's active participation in joint maritime exercises, which serve both operational and signalling functions. Regular involvement in multilateral naval exercises enhances military readiness, improves coordination with partner navies, and reinforces shared commitments to maintaining maritime stability. From a realist perspective, these exercises contribute to cooperative deterrence by demonstrating capability and resolve while avoiding the formalisation of alliance structures (Menjón, 2025). India's diplomatic engagements, mini-lateral initiatives, and defence partnerships illustrate a nuanced form of external balancing that departs from traditional alliance politics. By combining strategic cooperation with institutional flexibility, India is able to mitigate emerging security challenges while maintaining decision-making autonomy. This approach aligns with its broader strategy of calibrated multi-alignment, enabling it to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive Indo-Pacific order.

RSCT Dimension-Regional Order-Building

Beyond the dynamics of internal and external balancing, India's regional strategy can also be understood through the lens of RSCT, which emphasises the interconnected nature of security interactions within geographically proximate regions. In this context, India's engagement with Southeast Asia reflects not merely a response to shifting power distributions but a broader effort to participate in shaping the regional order. India's Act East Policy, initially conceived as an economic outreach initiative, has evolved into a multidimensional strategic framework encompassing connectivity, institutional engagement, and security cooperation. This transformation underscores a growing recognition that the security dynamics of South and Southeast Asia are deeply interlinked. Consequently, India's approach extends beyond narrow balancing considerations to include active participation in the institutional and normative architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) exemplifies participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms, and India embeds itself within the institutional fabric of the regional security complex, thereby reinforcing patterns of cooperation and dialogue (Prakash, 2024). Rather than functioning solely as a counterweight to any particular power, such engagement contributes to the maintenance of normative stability and the management of regional security

interdependence. At the same time, India's economic diplomacy plays a complementary role in this process. Through trade agreements, development partnerships, and connectivity initiatives, particularly those linking Northeast India with Southeast Asia, India seeks to deepen economic interdependence and reduce structural asymmetries within the regional order (Ghosh & Prabhu, 2024). These efforts highlight the interplay between economic and security considerations, as greater integration within regional networks enhances both influence and resilience.

From an RSCT perspective, regional institutions serve as mechanisms for mediating competition and mitigating conflict. India's emphasis on a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" reflects a commitment to a rules-based order that privileges inclusivity over exclusive bloc formation (He & Li, 2020). Institutional participation, therefore, becomes an instrument of order-building, enabling India to shape regional norms and practices without resorting to overt confrontation. In this sense, the Act East Policy should be understood not merely as a counter-balancing strategy but as part of India's broader aspiration to function as a responsible stakeholder within the Indo-Pacific security complex (Baliyan & Kumar, 2025). Complementing these diplomatic and institutional efforts is a growing emphasis on geo-economic statecraft, through which India seeks to address structural vulnerabilities and enhance long-term resilience. In an era marked by supply chain disruptions and intensifying strategic competition, India has prioritised the diversification of trade partnerships and the promotion of domestic manufacturing capabilities (PIB Delhi, 2026). Such measures designed to reduce dependence on external actors and limit exposure to asymmetric economic leverage, thereby reinforcing strategic autonomy. India has supported regional connectivity initiatives that either complement or provide alternatives to existing infrastructure networks (PIB Delhi, 2026). These initiatives emphasise transparency, sustainability, and local capacity-building, reflecting an effort to embed economic engagement within a rules-based framework. By advancing such alternatives, India participates in shaping the geo-economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific in ways that align with its broader strategic objectives.

The pursuit of economic resilience through technological advancement, industrial development, and financial stability forms a critical underpinning of India's overall strategy. Strengthening domestic economic foundations enhances India's capacity to sustain strategic competition without overextension, ensuring that its external engagements remain viable over the long term. Geo-economics, therefore, is not an isolated domain but an integral component

of India's wider strategic approach. Hence, India's response to evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics operates across multiple, interconnected dimensions. Military modernisation and maritime capability enhancement reflect internal balancing, while diplomatic outreach and strategic partnerships illustrate flexible external balancing (Chaudhry, 2026). Simultaneously, institutional engagement under the Act East framework contributes to regional order-building, and geo-economic initiatives reinforce resilience and strategic autonomy. Rather than representing a reactive or containment-oriented posture, this multidimensional approach is best understood as a strategy of calibrated multi-alignment, through which India seeks to preserve autonomy while actively shaping a stable and inclusive Indo-Pacific order (Ikenberry, 2018).

Evaluating India's Strategy Across Strategic Domains

India's strategic response reflects classical balancing behaviour, regional order-building, or a broader strategy of calibrated multi-alignment by examining its conduct across three interconnected domains: maritime competition in the IOR, continental security along the LAC, and institutional and mini-lateral engagement within the Indo-Pacific. Analysed through the complementary lenses of Realism and RSCT, these domains together provide a comprehensive understanding of India's evolving strategic posture. The maritime domain constitutes the principal theatre of strategic interaction between India and China. China's development of port infrastructure across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and key island states in the IOR has significantly reshaped patterns of regional connectivity. While these facilities are officially commercial, their potential dual-use characteristics enhance China's logistical access and operational flexibility. From a Realist perspective, such developments contribute to a redistribution of material capabilities and strategic access, thereby altering the regional balance of power. Even in the absence of overt militarisation, the geographic positioning of these ports generates perceptions of encirclement and latent power projection. India's response, through naval modernisation, enhanced surveillance systems, and the strengthening of strategic partnerships, reflects a balancing strategy aimed at offsetting these shifts in maritime influence.

At the same time, RSCT offers additional insight by highlighting the growing interdependence of maritime security dynamics across the region. Developments in the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, and eastern Indian Ocean are increasingly interconnected, with security concerns transcending national boundaries and reinforcing a shared regional security complex. China's expanding naval deployments in the IOR, including anti-piracy missions and extended

patrols, further underscore its growing operational reach (Brewster, 2016). India has responded by maintaining a sustained maritime presence, expanding joint exercises, and strengthening its forward posture, particularly in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Rana, 2026). Within a Realist framework, these measures reflect both internal and external balancing aimed at preserving maritime equilibrium, even as competition remains below the threshold of confrontation.

A comparative perspective further clarifies the distinct yet interconnected roles of India, the United States, and China in shaping Indo-Pacific dynamics. China's strategy is primarily expansionary in geo-economic and maritime terms, driven by infrastructure development, connectivity initiatives, and the gradual extension of naval capabilities (Kumar, Gapa, & Chand, 2025). In contrast, the United States operates as a systemic stabiliser, leveraging its military presence and alliance network to preserve a favourable balance of power and uphold a rules-based order. India, however, occupies a more nuanced position. Rather than pursuing overt containment or dominance, it adopts a strategy of calibrated multi-alignment that combines internal balancing, selective external partnerships, and active institutional engagement (George, 2025). While the United States emphasises alliance-led deterrence and China focuses on structural expansion of influence, India seeks to navigate between these poles by maintaining strategic autonomy and enhancing its regional role without entering rigid bloc politics. This triangular interaction highlights the complexity of the Indo-Pacific security environment, where competition, cooperation, and coexistence operate simultaneously within an evolving multipolar framework.

Moreover, the evolving maritime competition also illustrates the dynamics of the security dilemma. Measures undertaken by both states to secure sea lines of communication and protect economic interests, such as surveillance enhancement, submarine acquisition, and infrastructure development, are interpreted by the other as potential threats (Bose, 2025). This generates a cycle of reciprocal adjustments that intensifies strategic competition. In this context, Realism explains the logic of balancing and deterrence signalling, while RSCT captures the deepening interdependence that amplifies regional tensions. India's approach, however, also reflects elements of multi-alignment, as it seeks to enhance cooperation with multiple partners without entering into rigid alliance structures. Consequently, its maritime strategy can be understood as calibrated balancing embedded within a broader regional framework.

While maritime competition dominates the Indo-Pacific discourse, continental tensions along the LAC remain a central and enduring dimension of Sino-Indian rivalry. Periodic standoffs and military build-ups underscore the persistent territorial nature of the dispute, exacerbated by the absence of a clearly demarcated border. This ambiguity sustains operational friction and reinforces mutual mistrust. From a Realist perspective, such unresolved disputes in an anarchic international system heighten the likelihood of conflict and incentivise continuous adjustments in force posture (Tellis, 2020). A critical factor shaping this domain is the asymmetry in border infrastructure development. China's rapid expansion of roads, airfields, and logistical networks in its border regions has significantly enhanced its operational mobility and capacity (Garver, 2016). In response, India has accelerated its own infrastructure projects to reduce these disparities and improve deployment readiness. This dynamic reflects a classic pattern of internal balancing, wherein states seek to augment domestic capabilities in response to shifts in relative power.

India's strategic calculus is further complicated by the possibility of dual-front pressure, arising from the intersection of continental and maritime challenges. The prospect of strategic coordination between China and Pakistan intensifies threat perceptions and necessitates a more comprehensive and integrated security approach. In contrast to the maritime domain, however, the continental sphere reveals the limits of RSCT-mediated institutional mechanisms (James, 2026). Regional institutions have minimal capacity to address hard territorial disputes, leaving military preparedness and deterrence as the primary instruments of stability. Hence, the continental dimension represents the most rigid and structurally constrained aspect of Sino-Indian rivalry, where the scope for institutional mitigation remains limited. In this context, India's strategy is characterised by internal balancing and deterrence management, operating within a persistent security dilemma that constrains opportunities for cooperative engagement (Nath, 2025).

Institutional and Mini-Lateral Arenas

Beyond the domains of maritime and continental security, India's engagement in regional organisations and mini-lateral platforms represents an additional and distinct arena of strategic interaction. This institutional dimension reflects an approach that goes beyond conventional power balancing, incorporating elements of regional order-building and normative engagement within the Indo-Pacific (Prakash, 2024). India's involvement in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

illustrates its emphasis on sub-regional connectivity and cooperation. By promoting economic integration and infrastructural linkages across the Bay of Bengal, India seeks to strengthen regional cohesion while reducing structural fragmentation between South and Southeast Asia. From the perspective of RSCT, such initiatives contribute to embedding states within structured patterns of cooperation, thereby moderating the intensity of strategic rivalry and fostering interdependence within the regional security complex.

India's engagement with ASEAN occupies a central position in the Indo-Pacific's institutional architecture. By affirming ASEAN centrality, India aligns itself with an inclusive and rules-based regional order, rather than pursuing exclusive or bloc-based arrangements (Prakash, 2024). This approach reflects a deliberate strategy of institutional embeddedness, wherein India participates in established multilateral frameworks to reinforce norms of dialogue, cooperation, and restraint (Acharya, 2015). In doing so, India not only enhances its regional legitimacy but also contributes to the stabilisation of the broader security environment. India's participation in the Quad highlights the growing importance of mini-lateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike formal alliances, the Quad operates as a flexible and issue-based platform addressing areas such as maritime security, technological governance, and supply chain resilience (Pant & Saha, 2021). From a realist perspective, it represents a form of external balancing, enabling coordinated responses to shared strategic concerns without binding commitments. From an RSCT standpoint, the Quad can be understood as a substructure within the wider Indo-Pacific security complex, reflecting the layered and networked nature of regional interactions (Amin & Krishnan, 2021). Crucially, India's engagement with the Quad coexists with continued cooperation with other major powers, underscoring its broader strategy of multi-alignment and its commitment to preserving strategic autonomy.

Across the maritime, continental, and institutional domains, India's strategic behaviour reveals a differentiated yet interconnected pattern of responses. In the maritime domain, balancing behaviour is tempered by high levels of regional interdependence and the need to secure shared economic interests. In contrast, the continental domain is characterised by persistent territorial disputes, where internal balancing and deterrence dominate strategic calculations. The institutional domain, meanwhile, reflects a hybrid approach in which external balancing coexists with active efforts to build regional order and engage normatively. This domain-based evaluation suggests that India's strategy cannot be adequately explained through

a narrow lens of containment. Rather, it reflects a calibrated and adaptive approach that integrates Realist balancing with the institutional and normative dynamics highlighted by RSCT. The implications of this evolving strategic interaction extend beyond bilateral relations and bear directly on the stability of the wider Indo-Pacific region. Although the India-China relationship has not escalated into open confrontation, it generates structural pressures that shape the behaviour of other regional actors and influence the broader security environment.

The intensification of the security dilemma causes both states to enhance their capabilities in maritime and continental domains through infrastructure development, force modernisation, and forward deployments intended for defensive purposes. These are often interpreted as offensive signals by the other side. This reciprocal suspicion increases the risk of miscalculation, particularly in contested maritime spaces and along unresolved land borders. While large-scale conflict remains unlikely, the accumulation of tactical frictions contributes to a persistent condition of structural instability. At the same time, competition is increasingly manifested in the grey zone, below the threshold of conventional warfare. Infrastructure financing, strategic port access, information operations, and calibrated military signalling enable both states to expand influence without triggering overt hostilities. Such activities complicate traditional deterrence frameworks, as they remain legally ambiguous and politically deniable, yet cumulatively reshape the regional balance of influence.

Regional institutions also face growing pressure under conditions of intensified strategic rivalry. Although ASEAN-led mechanisms and sub-regional forums such as BIMSTEC provide platforms for dialogue and confidence-building, their capacity to manage hard security competition remains limited. Nevertheless, institutional engagement continues to play a moderating role by sustaining communication channels and reinforcing norms of restraint. The resilience of Indo-Pacific institutions will depend on their ability to adapt to evolving geopolitical realities without fragmenting under the weight of great-power competition. Maritime chokepoints represent another critical dimension of regional stability. The Indian Ocean and its adjoining sea lanes carry a substantial proportion of global trade and energy flows, making them extremely sensitive to strategic competition. Increased naval deployments, submarine activity, and surveillance operations in proximity to key chokepoints heighten the risk of disruption. Even in the absence of deliberate blockade, the intensification of strategic presence amplifies uncertainty and vulnerability along vital sea lines of communication, particularly in areas such as the Malacca Strait. The Indo-Pacific is

increasingly characterised by a diffusion of power rather than a rigid bipolar structure. Middle powers, regional institutions, and mini-lateral groupings play an active role in shaping strategic outcomes alongside major powers. While this diffusion reduces the likelihood of outright dominance by any single actor, it also introduces greater systemic complexity. In such an environment, regional stability is less likely to depend on decisive superiority and more on the ability of states to pursue calibrated balancing, sustain institutional engagement, and exercise strategic restraint.

Conclusion

This study examined India's response to the expanding strategic footprint of China, which reflects classical Realist balancing or a broader process of regional order-building in the Indo-Pacific. The findings demonstrate that India's strategy cannot be reduced to a singular logic; rather, it constitutes a multidimensional approach integrating internal balancing, external partnerships, and institutional engagement within an evolving regional security environment. At the substantial level, India's military modernisation, maritime expansion, and geostrategic positioning reflect sustained internal balancing aimed at preserving equilibrium in the IOR. This is complemented by calibrated external balancing through mechanisms such as the Quad and broader defence partnerships, which enhance coordination without constraining strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, India's engagement with ASEAN-led institutions and sub-regional platforms such as BIMSTEC underscores its commitment to normative order-building and regional stability. In parallel, geo-economic initiatives, including connectivity and supply chain diversification, strengthen resilience and reduce structural vulnerabilities. These strategies unfold within a shifting global order shaped by the continued presence of the United States and the transition towards multipolarity. While India's calibrated multi-alignment enhances flexibility, its effectiveness will depend on managing resource constraints and persistent security challenges.

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