



# India's Role in Asia-Pacific Security and Trade, 2001–2025: From Strategic Periphery to Engaged Regional Stakeholder

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## ABSTRACT

Over the quarter-century spanning 2001 to 2025, India's engagement with the Asia-Pacific region underwent a fundamental transformation—from cautious peripheral involvement to active, institutionally anchored participation in the region's security architecture and trade networks. Driven by the imperatives of economic liberalisation, the strategic challenge posed by China's ascending regional influence, and the United States' deliberate cultivation of India as a balancing partner, New Delhi progressively deepened its bilateral and multilateral commitments across maritime Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific. This article traces the evolution of India's role across four interlocking domains: maritime security and freedom of navigation; defence diplomacy and multilateral institutional engagement; bilateral and regional trade integration; and the articulation of a distinctively Indian Indo-Pacific vision. Drawing on established scholarship, policy documents, and official treaty frameworks, the article argues that India's Asia-Pacific engagement, while substantively expanded, remains constrained by strategic ambivalence, domestic institutional limitations, and the structural tension between its non-alignment tradition and the requirements of effective security partnership.

**Keywords:** India, Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, maritime security, Act East Policy, QUAD, trade, China, ASEAN, strategic autonomy



## 1. Introduction

India's relationship with the Asia-Pacific region prior to the turn of the millennium was characterised by episodic engagement, residual non-alignment caution, and a strategic gaze that remained predominantly continental in its orientation. The 2001 watershed—marked not only by the September 11 attacks but by the accelerating pace of China's economic and military rise—furnished the structural incentives for a recalibration of Indian foreign policy eastward and seaward. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's consolidation of the Look East Policy during this period signalled a growing recognition that India's economic future and strategic interests were inseparable from developments across maritime Asia (Mohan, 2004).

The subsequent two and a half decades witnessed a sustained deepening of this engagement, punctuated by landmark policy innovations. The rebranding of Look East as the Act East Policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 elevated the framework from a largely economic orientation to one explicitly incorporating security, connectivity, and strategic partnership dimensions (Hall, 2016). Simultaneously, India's growing alignment with the United States—formalised through a series of foundational defence agreements—and its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) signalled a willingness to assume a more assertive role in the region's evolving security architecture. This article traces, analyses, and evaluates these developments across the period under review.

## 2. Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation

India's maritime strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific are rooted in material geography and economic necessity. Approximately ninety-five percent of India's international trade by volume transits through sea lanes that traverse the Indian Ocean and connect to the South China Sea and the Western Pacific (Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, 2020). The progressive militarisation of the South China Sea, China's construction of artificial island installations, and Beijing's expansive maritime territorial claims articulated through the 'nine-dash line' have, collectively, generated conditions that India perceives as threatening to open sea lanes and the established rules-based maritime order (Pant, 2017).

India's response has been pursued along several complementary tracks. The Indian Navy has expanded its operational reach through port access agreements, notably with Singapore at Changi Naval Base and with Vietnam, which has received Indian assistance in submarine crew training and maritime domain awareness (Brewster, 2014). India's consistent diplomatic position—that maritime disputes in the South China Sea must be resolved through international law, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—has been articulated across ASEAN summits, bilateral engagements, and multilateral forums. The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling against China's claims, which India acknowledged as legally significant, reinforced New Delhi's normative positioning (Jaishankar, 2020).

India's naval diplomacy with Southeast Asian states accelerated substantially during the 2010s. Coordinated naval patrols with Indonesia in the Malacca Strait, bilateral maritime exercises with the Philippines, and the annual MILAN multilateral naval exercise hosted by India brought together over fifty navies by its 2022 edition, demonstrating India's aspiration to function as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific littoral (Singh, 2023). The QUAD's maritime cooperation dimension—encompassing information sharing, interoperability exercises, and maritime domain awareness partnerships—further institutionalised India's security role in the region from 2017 onwards, when the dialogue was revived after a decade-long hiatus.

## 3. Defence Diplomacy and Multilateral Institutional Engagement

India's multilateral engagement in the Asia-Pacific has been conducted through overlapping institutional frameworks. As a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a participant in the East Asia Summit since 2005, India has embedded itself within the region's principal diplomatic architecture. The India-ASEAN Summit framework, elevating the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022, marked a qualitative deepening of engagement that encompassed cybersecurity cooperation, digital connectivity, and counter-terrorism coordination alongside trade and investment facilitation (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2022).

The bilateral defence relationship with the United States, which underwent transformative expansion following the 2005 Defence Framework Agreement and the 2016 designation of India as a Major Defence Partner, provided the structural



underpinning for India's growing Asia-Pacific security commitments. The conclusion of the foundational defence agreements—LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020)—enabled logistics cooperation, communications interoperability, and geospatial intelligence sharing that qualitatively enhanced India's capacity for power projection and coalition operations across the Indo-Pacific (Ladwig & Mukherjee, 2021). Japan's emergence as a close strategic partner, formalised through the Special Strategic and Global Partnership of 2014 and deepened through the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue initiated in 2019, further anchored India's institutional connectivity to the region's security framework.

Despite these advances, India's multilateral engagement has been marked by a persistent tension between institutional commitment and strategic autonomy. New Delhi's refusal to join formal alliance structures, its abstention on United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and its maintenance of defence procurement relationships with Russia—including the S-400 missile system—have created friction within QUAD partnerships and raised questions among regional partners about the reliability and scope of India's security commitments (Tellis, 2023). This tension remains unresolved and constitutes the central structural ambiguity in India's Asia-Pacific security posture.

#### 4. Trade Integration and Economic Connectivity

India's trade engagement with the Asia-Pacific expanded considerably between 2001 and 2025, though the trajectory was marked by missed opportunities alongside genuine gains. The India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement in Goods, concluded in 2009 and entered into force in 2010, created a combined market framework spanning approximately 1.9 billion people, and bilateral trade between India and ASEAN grew from roughly twelve billion dollars in 2001 to over one hundred and thirty billion dollars by 2023 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Sectoral agreements in services and investment subsequently widened the architecture of economic integration.

India's bilateral trade with Japan and South Korea similarly expanded under the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements concluded with both countries in 2011, covering goods, services, investment, and intellectual property. These agreements reflected India's broader recognition that economic integration with technologically advanced Asian economies offered pathways to industrial upgrading, foreign direct investment inflows, and supply chain participation that purely continental economic relationships could not replicate (Mattoo & Subramanian, 2012).

However, India's most consequential trade decision of the period was its withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations in November 2019, citing concerns about import surges from China, insufficient protection for the services sector, and inadequate investment safeguards (Goyal, 2020). This decision, while domestically defensible on political economy grounds, effectively excluded India from the world's largest trading bloc—encompassing fifteen Asia-Pacific economies accounting for roughly thirty percent of global GDP—at a moment when regional supply chain reconfiguration offered India significant potential gains. The decision underscored the continuing tension between India's trade liberalisation ambitions and its protectionist domestic political economy, a tension that subsequent industrial policy initiatives such as the Production-Linked Incentive scheme sought to address through supply-side measures rather than market-opening commitments.

#### 5. India's Indo-Pacific Vision: Convergence and Divergence

India's articulation of an Indo-Pacific vision, most comprehensively presented by Prime Minister Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, sought to distinguish New Delhi's conceptual framework from the more explicitly China-containment-oriented framings advanced by the United States and Australia. Modi's formulation emphasised an 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific that incorporated China rather than seeking to exclude it, and placed ASEAN centrality at the structural core of the regional order (Modi, 2018). This framing reflected the genuine complexity of India's regional position: simultaneously a QUAD partner with growing concerns about Chinese assertiveness and a country with substantial economic interdependence with China and a diplomatic interest in preserving functional bilateral relations.

The border standoff at Galwan Valley in June 2020, in which twenty Indian soldiers were killed in clashes with Chinese forces, materially altered New Delhi's calculus. The incident accelerated India's defence diversification, its Import Substitution in Defence programme, and its willingness to operationalise QUAD cooperation beyond declaratory diplomacy (Jaishankar, 2020). The QUAD Leaders' Summit elevated to head-of-government level in March 2021 represented a significant institutionalisation of the grouping, with substantive cooperation agendas spanning vaccine



delivery, climate resilience, critical and emerging technologies, and infrastructure financing emerging as concrete deliverables alongside the maritime security dimension.

## 6. Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2025, India traversed a considerable distance in its Asia-Pacific engagement—from a cautious peripheral actor to an increasingly visible and institutionally embedded regional stakeholder. The evolution was driven by intersecting strategic logics: the imperative of economic integration with the world's most dynamic regional economy, the challenge of managing China's growing regional footprint, the opportunities offered by American strategic investment in India as a balancing partner, and India's own aspirations for a security and diplomatic role commensurate with its size and capabilities. Across maritime security, defence diplomacy, trade integration, and Indo-Pacific conceptualisation, India's engagement deepened materially, even as it remained constrained by the structural tension between effective partnership and preserved autonomy.

The unresolved questions—whether India can reconcile its non-alignment tradition with the operational demands of security partnerships, whether domestic political economy constraints will continue to limit trade liberalisation, and whether the QUAD can develop the institutional density required to function as a meaningful security arrangement—will determine whether India's Asia-Pacific role continues to expand or reaches a ceiling imposed by these structural limits. What is clear is that the Asia-Pacific's security and economic futures are increasingly inseparable from the choices that Indian foreign policy makes, and that both regional and global actors have come to recognise this reality.

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