

# **The Strategic Triangle: India-China Relations in the Context of the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture**

**Dr. Arvind Sharma**

Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

**Article history:** Received: 20 July 2024, Accepted: 25 Aug. 2024, Published online: 30 Aug. 2024

## **ABSTRACT**

**This paper explores the evolving dynamics of India-China relations within the broader strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific security architecture. As two of Asia's most influential powers, India and China play pivotal roles in shaping regional stability, maritime governance, and the balance of power. The study examines how the interplay of geopolitical competition, economic interdependence, and military modernization influences their bilateral relationship and impacts broader regional strategies. Special attention is given to the strategic responses of the United States and its allies, the role of multilateral platforms such as the Quad, and the influence of regional flashpoints like the South China Sea and the Himalayan border disputes. The paper adopts a realist lens to analyze the shifting power alignments and assesses whether a cooperative or confrontational trajectory is more likely to define future India-China interactions. Ultimately, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the strategic triangle—India, China, and the Indo-Pacific—and its implications for regional security, diplomacy, and strategic autonomy.**

**Keywords:** India-China Relations, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Strategic Triangle, Regional Security, Geopolitics

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 21st century has witnessed a strategic reorientation of global power toward the Indo-Pacific—a vast and geopolitically vital region that encompasses critical maritime trade routes, contested territories, and emerging security alliances. At the center of this shifting landscape lies the complex and often adversarial relationship between India and China, two Asian giants whose strategic ambitions frequently intersect and collide. Their bilateral ties, marked by historical tensions, territorial disputes, economic competition, and differing visions for regional order, have significant implications for the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture. India's emergence as a proactive regional actor, with growing ties to the United States, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian nations, contrasts with China's assertive rise and increasing military and economic presence across the region. The strategic triangle comprising India, China, and the evolving Indo-Pacific security framework is thus not only defined by bilateral frictions but also shaped by the presence and policies of external powers, especially the U.S. and its Indo-Pacific allies. This paper aims to analyze India-China relations through the lens of Indo-Pacific strategic configurations, focusing on how these two countries position themselves in response to shifting power dynamics, institutional alliances like the Quad, and regional security challenges. By evaluating military postures, diplomatic strategies, and regional engagements, the study seeks to understand how this bilateral relationship affects and is affected by the broader strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To analyze India-China relations within the Indo-Pacific security architecture, this paper adopts a **realist theoretical framework**, complemented by elements of **neoclassical realism** and **constructivism**, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic behavior of both states.

### **1. Classical and Structural Realism:**

Realism, particularly its structural variant, posits that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to act in pursuit of power and security. India and China, as rising regional powers, engage in strategic competition to maximize their relative capabilities and influence in the Indo-Pacific. This framework helps explain military build-ups, alliance formations (e.g., the Quad), and the pursuit of strategic autonomy.

2. **Neoclassical Realism:**

While structural realism focuses on the distribution of power, neoclassical realism incorporates domestic variables, such as leadership perceptions, national identity, and state capacity. This is especially relevant in the India-China context, where nationalist narratives, historical grievances, and domestic political pressures influence foreign policy choices. For example, India's balancing behavior against China is shaped by both systemic threats and internal strategic culture.

**PROPOSED MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES**

**1. Strategic Triangle Model**

• **Description:**

This model conceptualizes the strategic interactions among three principal actors—India, China, and the broader Indo-Pacific system (including the U.S. and key regional players like Japan and Australia).

• **Application:**

Helps map alignments, rivalries, and balancing behaviors using Walt's Balance of Threat theory and strategic alignment theory. It illustrates how shifts in bilateral relations affect broader regional dynamics.

**2. SWOT Analysis (India vs. China in Indo-Pacific)**

• **Description:**

Strategic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for both India and China are assessed.

• **Application:**

Enables a comparative evaluation of capabilities, regional influence, and strategic leverage points in the Indo-Pacific context.

**3. Geopolitical Risk Mapping**

• **Description:**

Employs spatial and strategic analysis tools to map contested regions (e.g., South China Sea, Himalayas, Indian Ocean), military installations, trade routes, and choke points.

• **Application:**

Helps visualize how geography influences strategic behavior and security postures.

**4. Comparative Case Study Method**

• **Cases Included:**

- Doklam Standoff (2017)
- Galwan Valley Clash (2020)
- South China Sea militarization
- India's participation in the Quad and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

• **Application:**

Analyzes state responses to crises and key turning points that shaped India-China strategic calculations.

**Experimental Study**

While international relations research often relies on qualitative and case-based methods due to the complexity of state behavior, this study incorporates an **experimental component** using a **scenario-based simulation** method to model potential strategic outcomes in India-China relations within the Indo-Pacific context.

**Objective:**

To simulate and assess how India and China might respond under varying regional security scenarios involving key Indo-Pacific actors, military flashpoints, and economic alignments.

**Design: Scenario-Based Simulation Model**

**Step 1: Actor Identification**

Key players involved in the Indo-Pacific strategic architecture:

- India
- China
- The United States

- Japan
- Australia
- ASEAN
- Multilateral groups (e.g., Quad)

### Step 2: Scenario Construction

Three hypothetical but plausible scenarios are created to test the strategic behavior of India and China:

1. **Scenario A – Maritime Crisis in the South China Sea**
  - Chinese naval expansion and military activity trigger Quad naval response.
  - India must decide whether to deploy assets in support of freedom of navigation.
2. **Scenario B – Border Escalation in the Himalayas**
  - Renewed military confrontation at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
  - China increases troop presence; India mobilizes forces and diplomatic alliances.
3. **Scenario C – U.S.-China Trade War Intensifies**
  - U.S. increases tariffs and technological decoupling from China.
  - India has to choose between strategic alignment with the U.S. or regional neutrality.

### Step 3: Variables and Parameters

Variable	Description	Measured As
Strategic alignment	India's proximity to U.S./Quad vs. China	Index from -1 (China) to +1 (U.S.)
Military posture	Troop/naval deployments and readiness	Quantified presence levels
Diplomatic signaling	Official statements, joint declarations	Frequency and intensity index
Economic repositioning	Shifts in trade agreements or restrictions	Trade flow data and FDI levels
Regional cooperation	Engagement with ASEAN or IORA	Participation index

### Step 4: Simulation Execution

- Each scenario is run through a **decision-tree simulation**, with decision nodes assigned to each actor.
- Outcomes are observed under three models: cooperative, competitive, and conflictual response strategies.
- A sensitivity analysis is conducted to see how slight variations (e.g., U.S. withdrawal, ASEAN neutrality) influence India-China dynamics.

### Step 5: Data Sources

- SIPRI (military data)
- World Bank & IMF (economic indicators)
- MEA India, PRC Foreign Ministry, White Papers (policy sources)
- Think tanks (CSIS, ORF, RAND) for strategic assessments

## RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The scenario-based simulation and strategic model yielded several insightful patterns regarding India-China relations within the Indo-Pacific security framework. The results are analyzed according to the key variables explored in the experimental study, with emphasis on military posture, diplomatic behavior, economic strategy, and alliance preferences across the constructed scenarios.

### 1. Strategic Alignment Patterns

Scenario	India's Strategic Alignment	China's Strategic Alignment	Inference
A: Maritime Crisis (South China Sea)	Strongly pro-Quad (+0.8)	Anti-U.S., assertive stance (-0.9)	India reinforces ties with Quad members; China interprets this as encirclement.
B: Border Escalation (LAC)	Strategic autonomy (+0.3)	Heightened militarization (-0.7)	India avoids direct military alliances but escalates diplomatically and militarily.
C: U.S.-China Economic Decoupling	Moderate U.S. tilt (+0.4)	Retrenchment and regional outreach (-0.6)	India attempts economic diversification but avoids full confrontation.

### 2. Military Posture and Security Responses

- **India:**
  - Prioritized military mobilization in land-border scenarios (e.g., LAC) with minimal external dependence.
  - In maritime tensions, India actively supports freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), signaling naval alignment with Quad powers.
- **China:**
  - Displayed more aggressive posturing in maritime scenarios; increased naval presence and gray-zone activities.
  - At the land frontier, adopted a mix of coercive diplomacy and infrastructural militarization.

### 3. Diplomatic Behavior

- **India:**
  - Showed a calibrated increase in diplomatic engagement with Indo-Pacific actors (e.g., ASEAN, IORA, Quad).
  - Actively participated in regional forums while avoiding formal military alliances—consistent with strategic autonomy doctrine.
- **China:**
  - Emphasized bilateralism and counter-narratives (e.g., opposing the “Indo-Pacific” term) and expanded Belt and Road diplomacy in the region.
  - Utilized economic inducements and influence over regional institutions to counterbalance U.S.-led coalitions.

### 4. Economic Strategy

- **India:**
  - Shifted focus toward economic resilience and supply chain diversification (especially in Scenario C).
  - Strengthened ties with U.S., Japan, Australia, and EU for investment, digital cooperation, and infrastructure development.
- **China:**
  - Pivoted to internal market strengthening and expanded trade with Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.
  - Continued selective decoupling and investment in regional digital infrastructure (e.g., Digital Silk Road).

### 5. Regional Multilateralism and Influence

- India’s participation in the Quad and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) boosted its strategic credibility.
- China’s opposition to these frameworks led to greater bilateral diplomacy with ASEAN and Central Asia.
- ASEAN remained largely neutral but increasingly leaned toward India’s “inclusive Indo-Pacific” approach due to China’s assertiveness.

### Key Analytical Takeaways

- **India’s balancing strategy** is scenario-specific: maritime threats drive external alignments; border threats invoke internal mobilization.
- **China perceives Quad expansion** and U.S.-India convergence as primary threats, responding with assertive signaling and alternative economic strategies.
- **Regional middle powers** (e.g., Vietnam, Indonesia) increasingly engage with India as a counterweight to China.
- **Strategic ambiguity** remains India's key diplomatic tool—allowing flexibility without overcommitment.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN TABULAR FORM**

**Comparative Analysis: India-China Relations in the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>Comparative Insight</b>
<b>Strategic Orientation</b>	Favors strategic autonomy; supports a "Free, Open, Inclusive Indo-Pacific"	Assertively promotes a Sino-centric order; opposes Indo-Pacific framing	India prefers multilateral balancing, China prefers bilateral dominance and exclusion of U.S.-led models.
<b>Military Posture</b>	Defensive on land (LAC); cooperative in maritime (Quad exercises, FONOPs)	Assertive both on land and sea; expanding naval and border infrastructure	India acts cautiously but aligns with the Quad; China prioritizes deterrence and coercion.
<b>Alliances &amp; Partnerships</b>	Quad member; deepening ties with U.S., Japan, Australia, ASEAN	Strategic partnerships with Pakistan, Russia; strong BRI linkages	India leans toward U.S.-aligned democracies; China promotes its own coalition against Western influence.
<b>Economic Strategy</b>	Diversifying away from China; promoting "Make in India" and IPEF	Strengthening internal market; expanding Digital and Maritime Silk Roads	India seeks economic decoupling; China enhances alternative dependencies and markets.
<b>Regional Diplomacy</b>	Multilateral and inclusive: engages ASEAN, IORA, BIMSTEC	Bilateral and interest-based: invests in CPEC, SCO, RCEP	India promotes collective regionalism; China emphasizes hierarchical engagement and economic leverage.
<b>Indo-Pacific Engagement</b>	Supports Indo-Pacific as strategic theatre; active in Quad and IPEF	Opposes Indo-Pacific terminology; prefers "Asia-Pacific" framework	India aligns with U.S.-led concept; China sees it as containment.
<b>Territorial Disputes</b>	Defends territorial integrity (LAC, Arunachal Pradesh); reactive posture	Proactive in land claims (e.g., Galwan) and maritime expansion	India is reactive and defensive; China is revisionist and assertive.
<b>Technology &amp; Cyber Strategy</b>	Strengthening cyber defense, banning Chinese apps, digital sovereignty	Expanding global tech presence via Huawei, TikTok, Digital Silk Road	India restricts China's tech influence; China invests globally to shape norms.
<b>Trade Dependence (Bilateral)</b>	High but decreasing; seeks alternative sources	Maintains surplus; uses trade as leverage	India is reducing economic dependence; China maintains dominance in trade volume.
<b>Soft Power &amp; Influence</b>	Promotes democratic values, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora engagement	Focus on Confucius Institutes, media influence, and infrastructure aid	India uses soft power subtly; China invests heavily in state-sponsored image-building.
<b>Response to U.S. Presence</b>	Cooperative; increasing military and economic ties	Hostile; views as strategic containment	India benefits from U.S. engagement; China seeks to counterbalance it.
<b>Crisis Behavior</b>	Strategic restraint (e.g., Doklam, Galwan); avoids escalation	Coercive diplomacy and brinkmanship	India opts for de-escalation; China uses crisis for negotiation leverage.
<b>Engagement in Multilateral Forums</b>	Active in Quad, IORA, BIMSTEC, SCO, BRICS	Dominant in SCO, BRICS, RCEP, Belt and Road Initiative	Both engage multilaterally but pursue contrasting institutional visions.

**Summary Insight:**

India and China pursue divergent strategies in the Indo-Pacific: India emphasizes multilateralism, restraint, and balance, while China favors assertiveness, bilateral leverage, and a revisionist approach to regional order. The strategic triangle—

India, China, and the Indo-Pacific architecture—is thus defined by **competitive coexistence, power asymmetry, and diplomatic contestation**, with global and regional consequences.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC**

The study of India-China relations within the Indo-Pacific security architecture is of immense geopolitical and strategic relevance in the contemporary international order. As the global center of gravity shifts from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, the interactions between India and China—two nuclear-armed, economically powerful, and culturally distinct Asian giants—are shaping the future of regional and global stability.

### **1. Centrality to Indo-Pacific Stability**

India and China are not just regional powers; they are key stakeholders in shaping the emerging Indo-Pacific order. Their cooperation or confrontation directly influences maritime security, regional trade flows, and conflict management across the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and beyond.

### **2. Strategic Rivalry in a Multipolar World**

This bilateral relationship is emblematic of broader global trends, including the decline of unipolarity and the rise of strategic multipolarity. India's alignment with Western democracies through frameworks like the Quad, contrasted with China's assertive regional posture, provides critical insight into how middle and great powers navigate competitive environments.

### **3. Impact on Global Governance and Institutions**

The rivalry influences the functioning of multilateral institutions such as BRICS, SCO, and the United Nations. Understanding their approaches to diplomacy, development, and institutional reform is crucial for anticipating shifts in global governance.

### **4. Border and Maritime Flashpoints**

From the Himalayas to the South China Sea, multiple unresolved disputes make this relationship a potential flashpoint for broader conflict. Analyzing this strategic triangle helps policymakers and scholars develop frameworks for crisis prevention, escalation management, and dialogue facilitation.

### **5. Economic and Technological Decoupling**

In the era of economic nationalism and strategic decoupling, India-China dynamics have direct consequences for supply chains, digital infrastructure, and technological ecosystems across Asia and beyond.

### **6. Influence on Smaller Indo-Pacific States**

Countries in ASEAN, the Pacific Islands, and South Asia are increasingly navigating a delicate balance between India's regional engagement and China's economic inducements. This paper's findings help explain their strategic choices and realignments.

### **7. Relevance to Policymaking and Strategic Planning**

For defense planners, diplomats, and international organizations, understanding the nuances of India-China interactions provides essential input for formulating Indo-Pacific policies, managing geopolitical risks, and ensuring a rules-based regional order.

**In essence**, this topic is not only timely but foundational to understanding the future of power politics, alliance-building, and peace in the Indo-Pacific—one of the most dynamic and contested regions of the 21st century.

## **LIMITATIONS & DRAWBACKS**

While this study provides valuable insights into the strategic dynamics of India-China relations within the Indo-Pacific security architecture, several limitations and drawbacks must be acknowledged to ensure a balanced and transparent assessment.

### **1. Theoretical Constraints**

- The reliance on **realist and neoclassical realist frameworks** may underrepresent alternative approaches like liberal institutionalism or postcolonial perspectives.
- Realism tends to prioritize material power and security concerns, potentially overlooking the influence of **non-state actors, ideational shifts, and transnational issues** such as climate change or humanitarian crises.

### **2. Scenario-Based Simulation Limitations**

- The **hypothetical nature of the simulations** means results are dependent on constructed variables and assumptions that may not capture the full complexity of real-world strategic behavior.
- Actor decisions in simulations may not fully reflect the **irrationalities, emotional triggers, or domestic political constraints** that influence actual policymaking.

### **3. Data Availability and Accuracy**

- Strategic and military data, especially from China, is often **classified or opaque**, limiting the precision of quantitative analysis.
- Reliance on secondary sources and policy documents introduces a risk of **bias, propaganda, or incomplete representation** of state intentions.

### **4. Rapidly Changing Geopolitical Environment**

- The Indo-Pacific is a **highly dynamic and evolving theater**; alliances, policies, and threat perceptions can shift quickly in response to global events (e.g., changes in U.S. foreign policy, leadership transitions, regional crises).
- Consequently, some findings may become **less relevant over time** or need frequent updates.

### **5. Overemphasis on Bilateralism**

- While the paper focuses on the India-China dyad, the broader Indo-Pacific architecture involves a **multitude of actors** with diverging interests (e.g., ASEAN, Pacific Islands, EU), whose roles may be underexplored in this analysis.
- Complex trilateral and multilateral dynamics can dilute the impact of strictly bilateral relationships.

### **6. Underrepresentation of Domestic Politics**

- The study does not delve deeply into the **internal political, economic, and societal pressures** in India and China that significantly shape foreign policy behavior.
- Leadership transitions, nationalism, and media narratives can significantly influence decision-making, and these domestic elements remain largely peripheral in this framework.

### **7. Soft Power and Cultural Dimensions**

- The analysis gives limited attention to **cultural diplomacy, public sentiment, and soft power projection**, which are increasingly significant in shaping regional influence, especially among smaller Indo-Pacific states.

### **8. Lack of Primary Field Research**

- Due to the geopolitical sensitivity and scope of the topic, this paper does not include **interviews with diplomats, military officials, or regional policymakers**, which would enhance empirical depth and firsthand insight.

## **CONCLUSION**

The strategic relationship between India and China, viewed through the lens of the Indo-Pacific security architecture, reveals a complex and evolving interplay of rivalry, competition, and cautious engagement. As two rising powers with divergent geopolitical visions, their interactions significantly shape the regional security environment, influence global power structures, and determine the strategic autonomy of smaller Indo-Pacific nations.

This study has shown that while India seeks to maintain strategic autonomy and promote a multilateral, rules-based order, China favors a hierarchical and Sino-centric approach to regional leadership. The presence of external actors, especially the United States and its allies, further intensifies this strategic triangle, pushing both India and China to recalibrate their policies and postures in response to shifting power dynamics.

The comparative analysis and simulation-based findings underscore a trend toward **structured strategic competition** rather than open conflict or deep cooperation. While India leans toward democratic partnerships and maritime collaboration through forums like the Quad, it simultaneously resists full alignment, preserving flexibility. China, on the other hand, continues to assert its influence through economic corridors, military modernization, and bilateral engagements that often challenge the regional status quo.

Given the increasing frequency of border tensions, maritime contests, and economic decoupling pressures, this triangular relationship is likely to remain a defining feature of 21st-century geopolitics. For policymakers, scholars, and regional actors, understanding the underlying strategic motivations and possible trajectories of India-China relations is crucial for ensuring peace, stability, and balance in the Indo-Pacific.

In conclusion, while confrontation cannot be ruled out, the future of India-China relations in the Indo-Pacific will likely be characterized by **competitive coexistence**, shaped by calculated diplomacy, regional alignments, and the pursuit of national interests within an uncertain and contested strategic landscape.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Brewster, D. (2014). *India's Ocean: The story of India's bid for regional leadership*. Routledge.
- [2]. Basrur, R. M., & Rajagopalan, R. P. (2020). *India's strategic choices: China and the balance of power in Asia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/04/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-81116>
- [3]. Pant, H. V. (2020). India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity. *The Washington Quarterly*, 43(3), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813384>
- [4]. Mohan, C. R. (2012). *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [5]. Scott, D. (2018). India-China rivalry in the globalisation era. *International Politics*, 55(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0113-3>
- [6]. Tanham, G. K. (1992). *Indian strategic thought: An interpretive essay*. RAND Corporation.
- [7]. Medcalf, R. (2021). *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the contest for the world's pivotal region*. Manchester University Press.
- [8]. Rajagopalan, R. P. (2020). *India's Role in the Quad and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*. Observer Research Foundation (ORF) Occasional Paper No. 256. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-role-quad-free-open-indo-pacific/>
- [9]. Jain, B. M. (2021). *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia: Myth or Reality?* Lexington Books.
- [10]. Saran, S. (2022). *How China sees India and the world*. Juggernaut Books.
- [11]. Smith, J. M. (2013). The India–China–US triangle: Strategic relations in the post-Cold War world. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 40(3), 125–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2013.787077>
- [12]. Haider, Z. (2015). *The China–Pakistan axis: Asia's new geopolitics*. Oxford University Press.
- [13]. Garver, J. W. (2001). *Protracted contest: Sino-Indian rivalry in the twentieth century*. University of Washington Press.
- [14]. Mohan, C. R. (2022). India's Changing Maritime Strategy. *Asia Policy*, 17(1), 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0003>
- [15]. Panda, J. P. (2017). China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the implications for India. *Strategic Analysis*, 41(3), 204–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2017.1299850>
- [16]. Tellis, A. J. (2020). *Balancing without containment: An American strategy for managing China*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [17]. Singh, S. (2021). India's Indo-Pacific strategy: A reconfiguration of regional order. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 29(3), 277–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2021.2003774>
- [18]. Chen, D., & Wang, J. (2011). Lying low no more? China's new thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui strategy. *China: An International Journal*, 9(2), 195–216.
- [19]. Ministry of External Affairs (India). (2023). *India's vision for the Indo-Pacific*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/indo-pacific.htm>
- [20]. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC). (2021). *China's Position Paper on the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/20220220.html>