

# SOFT-BALANCING AND COALITION-BUILDING: INDIA'S RESPONSE TO CHINA'S RISE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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## Abstract

India's strategic approach to managing China's ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific region represents a complex and multifaceted framework that combines soft-balancing tactics across multilateral forums with active coalition-building through minilateral partnerships and strategic bilateral relationships. Unlike traditional hard balancing strategies that rely on military build-up and formal alliances, India has developed a nuanced approach termed "zone balancing" by strategist Arzan Tarapore (2023), which seeks to shape the regional environment by strengthening the capacity and resilience of third-party states to resist coercion while maintaining strategic autonomy and avoiding direct military confrontation with Beijing. This approach has become increasingly sophisticated following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, marking a watershed moment in India's China strategy that catalyzed a shift from tentative engagement toward more assertive countermeasures across multiple strategic domains.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, soft balancing, coalition-building, Quad, strategic autonomy, zone balancing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India's strategic response to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region demonstrates a sophisticated evolution from what scholars termed "evasive balancing" to systematic soft balancing across multiple institutional contexts. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in casualties and direct military confrontation along the Line of Actual Control, catalyzed a fundamental reorientation of Indian strategic thinking (Hall, 2025). Rather than pursuing traditional hard balancing through military build-up alone or formal military alliances explicitly organized for China containment, India has developed a multidimensional approach combining soft-balancing tactics within multilateral forums like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Russia-India-China trilateral with active coalition-building through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, strategic partnerships with democratic powers, and maritime initiatives designed to enhance regional resilience (Tarapore, 2023).

The strategic context shaping India's approach reflects fundamental power asymmetry. China's defense budget in 2024 reached \$314 billion compared to India's \$86.1 billion, representing a threefold gap that continues to widen. China's navy comprises 730 ships and submarines compared to India's 294, with China possessing 61 submarines versus India's 18 (Stockholm International Peace Soft-Balancing and Coalition-Building: India's Response to China's Rise in the Indo-Pacific Abstract 1. Introduction Research Institute, 2024). Yet this asymmetry coexists with geographic advantages for India in the Indian Ocean, shared concerns among US, Japanese, and Australian leaders regarding Chinese assertiveness, and the possibility of leveraging third-party states' capacities to resist coercive pressure.

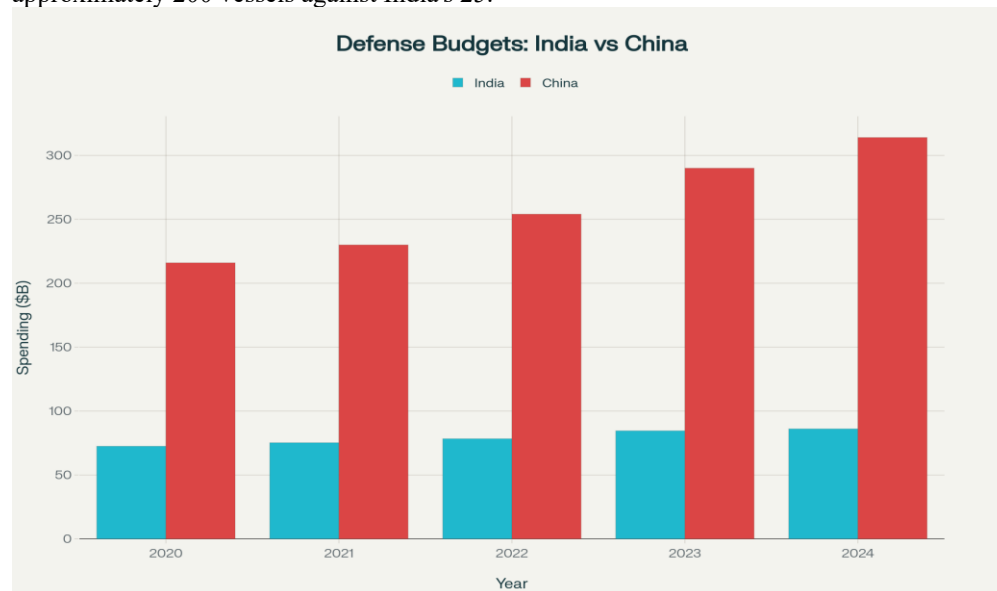
This paper systematically examines India's soft-balancing and coalition-building strategies through three analytical lenses: first, the mechanisms and tactics deployed within multilateral forums to constrain Chinese influence; second, the coalition-building architecture constructed through minilateral partnerships and strategic bilateral relationships; and third, the constraints, limitations, and strategic challenges confronting India's approach as Indo-Pacific competition intensifies. The analysis draws on recent scholarly work by strategic analysts including Ian Hall, Arzan Tarapore, and Rajesh Rajagopalan, as well as official statements and policy documents from Indian government sources and Quad partnership frameworks.

## 2. The Strategic Context: Understanding India's Constraints and Opportunities

### 2.1 The Power Asymmetry Challenge

India confronts a profound power asymmetry with China that fundamentally shapes its strategic calculus. China's defense budget in 2024 reached \$314 billion compared to India's \$86.1 billion, representing a three-fold gap that continues to widen despite India's growing military expenditure. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China accounted for 12 percent of global military spending in 2024 while India accounted for only 3.2 percent, placing China second globally and India fifth. The naval imbalance is particularly stark: China's navy comprises 730 ships and submarines compared to India's 294, with China possessing 61 submarines versus India's

18. The disparity in major surface combatants destroyers and frigates is even more pronounced, with China maintaining approximately 200 vessels against India's 25.



**Figure 1:** India vs. China Defense Budget Comparison (2020-2024)

Additionally, India's defense budget allocation presents structural challenges for modernization. Nearly 75 percent of India's military expenditure is consumed by salary, pension, and operational costs, leaving only 25 percent for capital procurement and capability development. In contrast, China allocates approximately 30 percent of its defense budget to capital acquisitions, representing roughly \$72 billion annually approaching the entirety of India's total defense budget. Furthermore, India's defense research and development spending stands at only \$2.8 billion, approximately 3.35 percent of total military expenditure, compared to China's estimated \$44.4 billion allocation representing 15 percent of its defense budget. This disparity in R&D investment has profound implications for indigenous capability development and technological self-reliance.

## 2.2 Geographic and Strategic Imperatives

India's geographic position as the only Quad member sharing a direct land border with China creates unique vulnerabilities and strategic imperatives. The Line of Actual Control (LAC), stretching 3,488 kilometers across the Himalayas, remains a flashpoint for military confrontation, most dramatically illustrated by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash that resulted in significant casualties and fundamentally altered New Delhi's strategic posture toward Beijing. Simultaneously, India faces strategic encirclement through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has expanded Beijing's influence across South Asia through projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, potentially constraining India's traditional sphere of influence.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) represents another critical domain where India confronts Chinese assertiveness. With over 2 percent of global oil shipments and 90 percent of India's trade by volume transiting through the Indian Ocean, maritime security is fundamental to India's economic prosperity. China's naval modernization, expansion of maritime facilities including carrier bases, and increasing naval exercises in the region have prompted India to develop comprehensive maritime strategies. China's "String of Pearls" strategy establishing naval bases and logistical facilities across the Indian Ocean in countries like Sri Lanka, Djibouti, and elsewhere directly challenges India's traditional dominance of the region and represents what New Delhi views as unacceptable strategic compression.

## 2.3 Evolution of India's Strategic Thinking

India's strategic response to China's rise has undergone significant evolution. Scholar Rajesh Rajagopalan (2020) characterized India's pre-2020 approach as "evasive balancing," a contradictory strategy combining balancing efforts with reassurance measures that satisfied neither Beijing nor New Delhi's strategic partners. This approach included India's participation in organizations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) while simultaneously strengthening ties with the United States and Japan, creating perceptions of strategic inconsistency. The Galwan crisis, however, catalyzed a fundamental reorientation. As noted by Ian Hall (2025), India shifted from evasive balancing to systematic soft balancing within multilateral forums, deploying differentiated tactics tailored to each context to constrain Chinese influence.

## 3. Soft Balancing: India's Multifaceted Approach Within Multilateral Forums

### 3.1 Denial in the Russia-India-China (RIC) Trilateral

India has employed what Hall (2025) terms "denial" within the Russia-India-China trilateral mechanism, essentially preventing the forum from serving as a platform for advancing Chinese interests. Following the Galwan clash, India refused to convene regular RIC meetings, effectively freezing this institutional mechanism, that Beijing sought to leverage for coordinating positions on various regional and global issues. This tactic proves particularly effective because it does not require India to formally exit the grouping which would damage relations with Russia but rather withholds cooperation without explicit confrontation. The strategic calculation reflects India's assessment that the RIC format no longer serves Indian interests when China pursues coercive policies on the LAC and naval expansion in the Indian Ocean.

### 3.2 Delay in BRICS Forum Activities

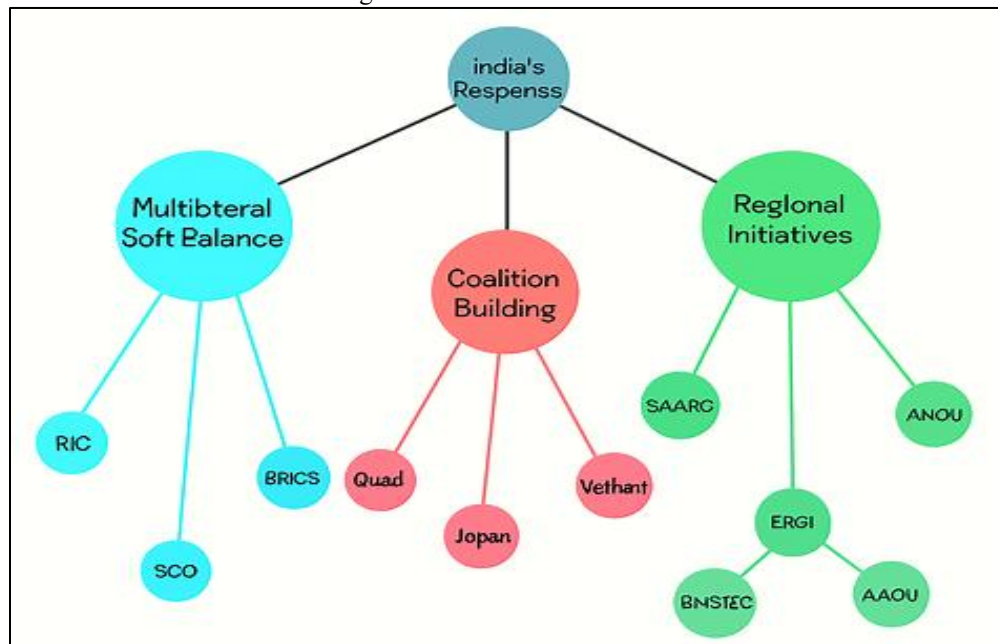
Within BRICS, India adopted a different soft balancing approach: delay. When China held the BRICS presidency in 2022, Beijing sought to expand the organization rapidly, particularly its membership base, aiming to transform BRICS into a more overtly anti-Western coalition and platform for advancing Global South positions aligned with Beijing's preferences. India, however, systematically pushed back against rapid expansion, insisting on further consultation and deliberation, slowing the entire expansion process. The final agreement on admitting new member states Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE only materialized after China had relinquished the presidency to India in 2023, demonstrating India's effective use of procedural mechanisms to control the pace and character of the forum. Simultaneously, Indian officials, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, used BRICS meetings to insert public remarks emphasizing principles of respect for sovereignty and opposition to politicizing counterterrorism oblique references to Chinese conduct at the LAC and in Xinjiang.

### 3.3 Trivialization of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Agenda

India's approach to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization represents what Hall (2025) characterizes as "trivialization," whereby India deliberately circumscribes the SCO's agenda and operational scope. Beginning with India's admission in mid-2017 at the Qingdao summit, New Delhi refused to endorse the SCO's embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative, instead articulating a distinct vision emphasizing respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs a deliberate counternarrative to China's developmental model. During India's SCO presidency in 2023, New Delhi deliberately limited the organization's agenda, avoiding substantive decisions on expansion or new initiatives that might expand Beijing's influence. Notably, India bypassed the SCO entirely when it convened a new India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022, creating an alternative mechanism for pursuing trade and connectivity objectives in Central Asia without Chinese participation.

### 3.4 Exclusion Through IBSA Revival

India employed a fourth soft balancing tactic exclusion by reviving the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) dialogue on the sidelines of the G20, creating a mini-platform comprising three democracies without Chinese participation. This move allowed India to coordinate positions on global governance and development issues while reinforcing India's credentials as a Global South representative without Beijing's presence. The strategic value lies in fragmenting Global South cohesion on issues where unified positions might previously have benefited China and in creating alternative forums where India can exercise greater influence.



**Figure 2:** India's Multi-Dimensional Strategy Framework: Soft Balancing and Coalition Building

#### **4. Coalition Building: The Quad and Strategic Partnerships**

##### **4.1 The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad): Strategic Balancing Without Military Alliance**

The Quad comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India represents the centerpiece of India's coalition-building strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Originally established in 2007 following the tsunami relief coordination, the Quad was revived in 2017 following the Doklam standoff, formalized in 2019, and elevated to summit level in 2021. For India, the Quad represents what Tarapore (2023) terms "zone balancing": strengthening the capacity and resilience of regional states to resist coercion without requiring India to formally commit to an anti-China military alliance, thus preserving strategic autonomy.

India's engagement with the Quad reflects calibrated sophistication. Rather than naming China as an explicit adversary which would raise unnecessary tensions and potentially damage opportunities for negotiation Quad statements emphasize commitment to a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" based on rules-based order, international law, and freedom of navigation. This linguistic restraint reflects what researchers term India's "hedging strategy," designed to preserve diplomatic space for bilateral engagement with Beijing while supporting collective resistance to coercive behavior. The Quad's strategic scope extends beyond traditional military security to encompass pandemic response, vaccine manufacturing, supply chain resilience, critical and emerging technologies, climate action, maritime security, and infrastructure development.

The Malabar Exercise, conducted annually by Quad navies (and occasionally plus-France), exemplifies the operational manifestation of zone balancing. The 2024 edition, held off Visakhapatnam in October, involved complex surface, sub-surface, and air operations including anti-submarine warfare, live weapon firing drills, and synchronized maneuvers. Significantly, these exercises focus on interoperability and capability development rather than explicit operational planning against China, though the strategic implications remain clear. Australia's renewed participation beginning in 2020 after a 13-year hiatus marked a significant recalibration, signaling comprehensive Quad security cooperation.

##### **4.2 India-United States Strategic Partnership and Foundational Agreements**

The India-US relationship constitutes the cornerstone of India's coalition-building strategy, particularly following formalization of foundational defense agreements that transformed the relationship into what some observers characterize as approaching formal alliance status without legal treaty obligations. India signed LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) in 2016, COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) in 2018, and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) in 2020 the "holy trinity" of US military agreements. These accords enable unprecedented logistical support, secure military communications, and real-time sharing of geospatial intelligence critical for naval operations in the Indian Ocean.

The strategic significance of these agreements extends beyond bilateral defense cooperation. LEMOA permits Indian and US forces to access each other's military bases for fueling, provisioning, repair, and maintenance on a reimbursable basis, providing India with unprecedented access to America's global military infrastructure. This proves particularly valuable for Indian naval operations in the Indian Ocean and beyond. COMCASA enables India to acquire specialized encryption technology for US military platforms including the C-17 transport aircraft and P-8 maritime reconnaissance aircraft, essential for secure interoperability with US forces. BECA, the most recent agreement, facilitates sharing of highly classified geospatial information critical for coordinated military operations.

##### **4.3 India-Japan Strategic Partnership and Regional Cooperation**

The India-Japan relationship has evolved from modest engagement to what analysts characterize as a comprehensive strategic partnership fundamental to Indo-Pacific stability. The trajectory commenced with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 2007 "Confluence of Two Seas" speech in the Indian Parliament, formally acknowledging Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean strategic integration. This conceptual framework evolved into concrete cooperation, with the 2014 elevation of bilateral relations to "Special Strategic and Global Partnership," further upgraded in 2018 to emphasize maritime security and infrastructure development.

Japan's permanent inclusion in the Malabar exercise beginning in 2015 represented a watershed moment, transforming the exercise from bilateral US-India coordination to genuine multilateral Quad naval integration. Joint military exercises expanded to include signed agreements on defense technology transfer, mutual access to military information, and classified information sharing. The India-Japan partnership specifically emphasizes infrastructure development, with Japan gaining access to strategic projects in India's northeast region and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands geographically critical locations for monitoring Chinese naval movements in the Indian Ocean.

More recently, the partnership expanded into economic security cooperation. In August 2024, PM Modi's visit to Japan established eight priority pillars for the next decade, with a 10-trillion yen (\$75 billion) investment target over ten years, encompassing semiconductor manufacturing, critical minerals, clean energy, and defense manufacturing. The Japan-India Indo-Pacific Forum, which held its eighth iteration in 2024, reflects both nations' commitment to institutionalizing cooperation on the region's future trajectory.

##### **4.4 India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership**

Australia's elevation from strategic partner to comprehensive strategic partner in June 2020 marked a significant milestone in India's coalition-building architecture. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) reflects both



nations' shared vision of a "free, open, rules-based Indo-Pacific region supported by inclusive global and regional institutions". The CSP encompasses multiple dimensions: defense cooperation through military exercises and logistics support agreements, maritime security cooperation through AUSINDEX naval exercises, technology and critical minerals sourcing, supply chain resilience initiatives, cybersecurity cooperation, and science and research collaboration. Australia serves several strategic functions in India's coalition-building. Geographically positioned in the southwestern Pacific, Australia provides important presence in the maritime domains critical to Indo-Pacific security. The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) signed between India and Australia enables reciprocal access to military facilities, critical for sustaining naval operations across the Indian Ocean and Pacific. The shared commitment to combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and protecting marine resources reflects India's emphasis on comprehensive maritime governance as an alternative to Beijing's coercive maritime practices.

#### **4.5 India-Vietnam Strategic Alignment**

Vietnam occupies a unique position in India's coalition-building strategy as a critical partner for projecting influence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. The India-Vietnam relationship, characterized as a "trusted and warm" partnership by Vietnamese leaders, reflects mutual recognition of shared concerns regarding Chinese maritime assertiveness. India has strategically positioned itself as a "benign power" in the South China Sea through coordinated diplomatic positioning with Vietnam, emphasizing freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The bilateral partnership encompasses diplomatic, economic, and defense dimensions. Diplomatically, India and Vietnam have coordinated positions at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and regional forums, with Vietnam supporting India's increased visibility and security role in the region despite warnings from Beijing. Economically, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has engaged in joint oil and gas exploration on Vietnam's continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone, activities that implicitly challenge China's expansive South China Sea claims. Defensively, India and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Agreement on Mutual Submarine Search and Rescue Support in November 2025, improving interoperability between the Indian Navy and Vietnam People's Navy and enhancing joint underwater capabilities.

### **5. Regional Maritime and Economic Initiatives**

#### **5.1 SAGAR and MAHASAGAR: Maritime Doctrine Evolution**

India's "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) doctrine, launched by PM Modi in March 2015, represents the foundational maritime policy articulating India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region. SAGAR emphasizes five pillars: security cooperation against terrorism and piracy, trade and economic integration through blue economy development, capacity building and disaster management assistance, sustainable development through marine resource management, and connectivity and infrastructure development. Through SAGAR, India has branded itself as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean, offering naval assistance, intelligence sharing, and humanitarian support to smaller littoral states like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius.

In March 2025, India evolved this framework to "MAHASAGAR" (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), expanding the geographic and thematic scope beyond maritime security to encompass broader economic, development, and geopolitical concerns. MAHASAGAR represents India's attempt to provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, emphasizing sustainability, respect for sovereignty, and transparent governance rather than predatory lending practices often associated with BRI projects. The initiative targets Global South countries across the Indian Ocean and beyond, positioning India as a development partner that respects recipient countries' autonomy.

#### **5.2 Act East Policy: Regional Engagement and ASEAN Centrality**

India's evolution from the "Look East Policy" (initiated in 1992 focusing on trade and economic engagement with Southeast Asia) to the "Act East Policy" (formalized in 2014 with emphasis on proactive strategic engagement) reflects India's recognition that the Indo-Pacific region requires active participation beyond passive economic relations. The Act East Policy prioritizes three components: Commerce expanding trade and economic ties; Culture strengthening historical and cultural linkages; and Connectivity building infrastructure and digital networks facilitating seamless integration with Southeast Asia.

The Act East Policy's significance extends beyond bilateral engagement to encompass India's strategic positioning vis-à-vis China. Southeast Asia, particularly through ASEAN, represents a critical domain where Chinese influence has expanded substantially through BRI projects, diplomatic engagement, and military modernization. India's emphasis on infrastructure development (the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with Japan, port development, and digital connectivity), cultural exchanges, and inclusive regionalism provides an alternative model to China's approach. India and Japan jointly launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) in May 2017, explicitly designed as a counter-narrative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, emphasizing quality infrastructure, sustainability, and respect for recipient country ownership.

### 5.3 BIMSTEC: Bridge Between South and Southeast Asia

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) comprise seven member states: five from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and two from Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand). Critically, India elevated BIMSTEC over the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) by inviting BIMSTEC leaders to PM Modi's 2019 swearing-in, signaling a strategic pivot away from SAARC which has been paralyzed by India-Pakistan tensions toward more productive regional engagement.

BIMSTEC provides India with strategic leverage over Myanmar and Thailand, two Southeast Asian countries critical to India's connectivity ambitions. The proposed India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway forms the centerpiece of India's northeast connectivity strategy, positioning India to access Southeast Asian markets and participate in regional supply chains while reducing dependence on routes through southern India or longer maritime routes. For India, BIMSTEC serves multiple purposes: bypassing Pakistan in South Asian cooperation, positioning as a development partner to smaller economies, and establishing institutional mechanisms for addressing shared non-traditional security challenges including terrorism, piracy, climate change, and disaster management.

### 5.4 Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC): Extended Regional Reach

India established FIPIC in 2014 to engage 14 Pacific Island nations: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. While FIPIC might appear geographically distant, it serves India's strategic Indo-Pacific interests by establishing relationships with nations whose votes in international forums carry weight and whose allegiance China actively cultivates through infrastructure projects and maritime engagement. India's FIPIC initiatives emphasize climate adaptation, maritime capacity building, digital connectivity, disaster management, and development assistance areas where Pacific Island nations face acute vulnerabilities.

The third FIPIC Summit held in Port Moresby in May 2023 witnessed India pledging support for small and medium enterprise development, desalination units to address water scarcity, and submarine cable infrastructure for digital connectivity. These initiatives represent India's effort to compete with China's quiet diplomacy in the Pacific, where Beijing has expanded influence through recognition of various territorial claims, economic assistance, and military cooperation with Solomon Islands and other nations. India's emphasis on inclusive governance, respect for sovereignty, and sustainable development provides a sharply contrasting model to China's approach.

## 6. Strategic Autonomy and India's Hedging Approach

### 6.1 Balancing Strategic Alignment with Autonomy

A defining characteristic of India's strategy toward China's rise is its commitment to "strategic autonomy" the determination to manage its foreign policy independent of superpower alignments despite increasing pressure to choose between the United States and China. This principle, rooted in India's Non-Aligned Movement heritage, constrains India's willingness to enter formal military alliances or be perceived as part of an anti-China coalition explicitly designed for containment. The linguistic formulations in Quad statements emphasizing a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" rather than explicitly naming China as an adversary reflect India's deliberate ambiguity.

This hedging approach carries trade-offs. India maintains economic relations with China despite border tensions, participates in forums like BRICS and SCO that include Beijing, and avoids public confrontation where possible. Simultaneously, India strengthens ties with the US, Japan, and Australia, conducts sophisticated military exercises simulating Indo-Pacific scenarios, and has fundamentally recalibrated its maritime presence. For some analysts, this represents sophisticated statecraft; for others, it reflects inherent contradictions that may ultimately satisfy neither Beijing nor New Delhi's strategic partners.

### 6.2 India's Position Within the Quad: Zone Balancing vs. Containment

India's distinctive position within the Quad reflects unique geographic vulnerabilities. As the only Quad member sharing a direct land border with China, India confronts asymmetrical threat exposure that the US, Japan, and Australia do not face. Consequently, India's participation in the Quad emphasizes maritime security, capacity building, infrastructure development, and economic cooperation rather than explicit military alliance posturing against China. This approach reflects what Arzan Tarapore (2023) calls "zone balancing" strengthening regional capacity for resilience rather than engaging in direct military confrontation.

The strategic implications prove significant. India has explicitly stated that the Quad is not directed against any particular country, maintaining diplomatic space for bilateral negotiations with Beijing on border disputes, economic cooperation, and other bilateral issues. However, the objective effect of Quad activities naval exercises, technological cooperation, supply chain resilience initiatives clearly constrain Chinese freedom of action in the Indo-Pacific. This represents a subtle but profound distinction from Western perceptions of the Quad as an embryonic military alliance explicitly organized for China containment.

### 6.3 Economic Interdependence and Strategic Leverage

Despite geopolitical rivalry, India and China maintain significant economic relationships. India imports critical components, raw materials, and manufactured goods from China valued at approximately \$90 billion annually, while

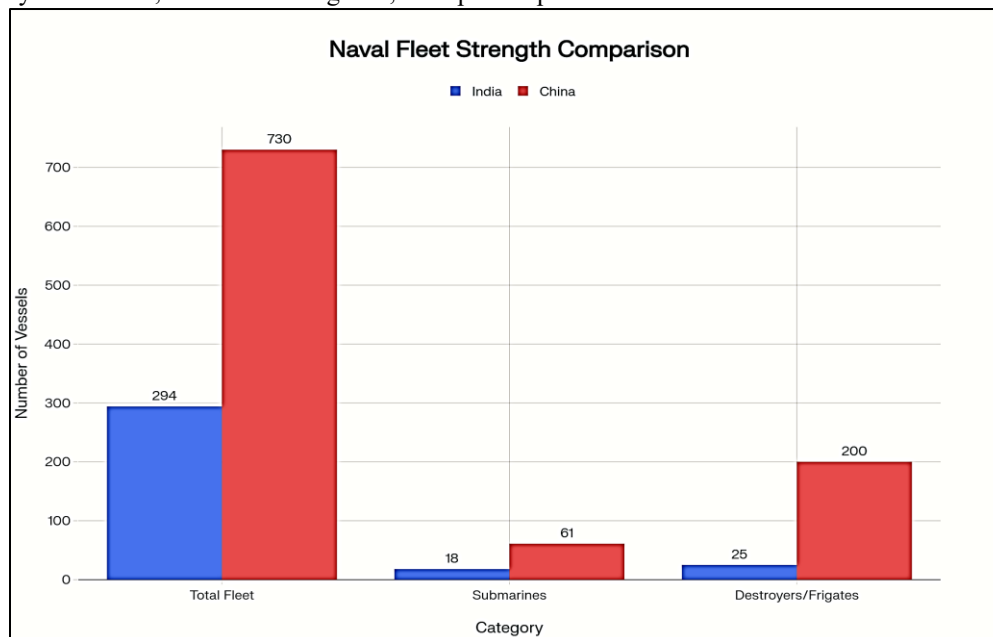
Indian exports to China total roughly \$20 billion. This asymmetrical economic relationship creates leverage for Beijing but also incentivizes both nations to avoid escalation into full-scale conflict. For India, managing this economic interdependence while pursuing strategic balancing requires sophistication to avoid over-dependence on Chinese imports while leveraging market opportunities.

India's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India) initiative, launched in 2020 in response to the Galwan clash, specifically aims to reduce reliance on Chinese imports of critical materials and components through domestic manufacturing promotion. The initiative includes policies to increase domestic procurement of defense equipment and technologies, incentives for domestic manufacturing of semiconductors and pharmaceuticals, and efforts to develop alternative supply chains through partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and others.

## 7. Limitations and Challenges to India's Strategy

### 7.1 Power Asymmetry and Military Capability Gaps

Despite sophisticated strategic approaches, India confronts fundamental constraints rooted in power asymmetry. China's military capacity continues to outstrip India's by substantial margins across multiple domains. China maintains a fleet strength of 730 ships compared to India's 294; 61 submarines compared to India's 18; and substantially more aircraft carriers, advanced fighter aircraft, and missile systems. Furthermore, China's military modernization trajectory shows no signs of deceleration, with 2024 defense budget increases of 7 percent and sustained R&D investment in hypersonics, cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and space capabilities.



**Figure 3:** Naval Fleet Strength: India vs. China Comparison

The geographic advantage that India enjoys in the Indian Ocean where China must project power across extended supply lines and faces logistical vulnerabilities remains significant but insufficient for comprehensive deterrence. A fully mobilized Chinese Navy could overwhelm Indian naval capacity in the Indian Ocean, though China could not sustain such commitments without leaving its homeland vulnerable to American power projection. This structural reality China's simultaneous competition with the United States globally creates India's strategic opportunities but does not eliminate the capability gap or military vulnerabilities facing New Delhi.

### 7.2 Quad Structural Limitations and Internal Divergences

The Quad itself faces limitations that constrain its effectiveness as an instrument of zone balancing. First, the Quad operates informally without binding legal commitments or formal decision-making procedures, meaning that coordinated action on significant issues remains subject to individual member state calculations. Second, Quad members possess divergent strategic priorities: the US and Japan emphasize the Western Pacific and Taiwan, while India emphasizes the Indian Ocean Region, Australia emphasizes the Indo-Pacific broadly, and all four members maintain distinct national interests that do not perfectly align.

Third, the Quad lacks what might be termed operational credibility while it conducts sophisticated exercises and coordinates on technology and infrastructure, it has not demonstrated capacity for rapid, decisive military action in response to aggression. Tarapore (2023) notes that zone balancing, while useful for capability development and deterrence signaling, remains incomplete without demonstrated commitment to swift political and military response to major aggression. This limitation proved evident during the Ukraine conflict, where Quad members divided on

responses, and remains a challenge for potential Taiwan contingencies where unified Quad action would prove essential for effective deterrence.

### **7.3 China's Persistent Assertiveness and Coercive Diplomacy**

Despite India's sophisticated balancing efforts, China has continued coercive behavior that constrains India's strategic flexibility. Chinese military provocations along the LAC, including the 2020 Galwan clash, subsequent clashes in 2022-2023, and most recently continuing skirmishes and incursions, demonstrate Beijing's willingness to use force to advance claims. Similarly, China's Belt and Road investments across India's neighbors Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal continue to expand Beijing's influence in what New Delhi considers its traditional sphere.

Furthermore, China's naval modernization and expansion in the Indian Ocean continue unabated. Chinese naval exercises in the Indian Ocean have increased in frequency and sophistication, and Chinese presence at ports like Djibouti, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan solidify Beijing's ability to sustain operations in the region. From India's perspective, these developments suggest that China is simultaneously adjusting to India's balancing efforts by investing in capabilities specifically designed to overcome Indian advantages in the Indian Ocean, including developing advanced anti-ship missiles, submarines, and carrier-based aviation.

### **7.4 Regional Skepticism and Balancing Act Complications**

India's soft balancing efforts, while strategically rational, generate complexity in managing relationships with other regional actors. Smaller Southeast Asian nations, while valuing Indian engagement and concerned about Chinese assertiveness, remain cautious about being perceived as part of an anti-China coalition that might invite Chinese retaliation. Vietnam's relationship with India reflects calculation that Indian presence can counterbalance China, but Vietnam simultaneously maintains significant economic ties with China and seeks to avoid confrontation. Similarly, BIMSTEC members like Bangladesh and Myanmar maintain complex relationships with both India and China, limiting India's ability to leverage BIMSTEC for explicit anti-China coordination.

## **8. CONCLUSION: ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC OUTLOOK**

India's response to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific represents a sophisticated but challenging strategic framework combining soft balancing within multilateral forums with coalition-building through minilateral partnerships and strategic bilateral relationships. Through systematic deployment of denial in the RIC trilateral, delay in BRICS expansion, trivialization of the SCO agenda, and exclusion tactics through IBSA revival, India has demonstrated capacity to constrain Chinese influence in forums where both nations participate without confronting Beijing directly. Simultaneously, India has invested heavily in coalition-building through the Quad, US strategic partnership, Japan coordination, Australia engagement, and Vietnam alignment, creating an institutional framework for regional cooperation that enhances Indian influence while distributing costs across multiple partners.

India's maritime and economic initiatives SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, Act East Policy, BIMSTEC, AAGC, and FIPIC provide comprehensive frameworks for engagement with multiple regions, offering alternatives to Chinese BRI models while positioning India as a development partner respecting sovereignty and sustainability. These initiatives collectively reflect India's determination to shape the Indo-Pacific environment by strengthening regional capacity for resilience, promoting inclusive governance, and establishing India as a stabilizing force in the region.

However, India's strategy confronts significant challenges rooted in power asymmetry, structural military capability gaps, and China's persistent assertiveness despite Indian balancing efforts. The power imbalance with China's defense spending exceeding India's by a factor of three-to-four, naval forces substantially larger, and modernization pace accelerating establishes constraints on India's ability to achieve decisive balancing outcomes through military means alone. The Quad, while increasingly operationally sophisticated and institutionalized, remains an informal grouping without binding commitments, facing internal divergences on regional priorities and demonstrating uncertain capacity for decisive collective action on major contingencies.

India's commitment to strategic autonomy, while reflecting important historical principles and contemporary preferences, creates inherent tensions with the demands of effective coalition-building, where alliance partners typically expect reciprocal commitment and burden-sharing. The attempt to simultaneously balance China while maintaining the possibility of negotiation, strengthen strategic partnerships while avoiding formal alliance status, and participate in Quad initiatives while privileging Indian interests reflects astute statecraft but may ultimately prove unsustainable as Indo-Pacific competition intensifies and Chinese assertiveness increases.

The most likely trajectory appears to involve further deepening of India's coalition-building efforts, accelerated military modernization despite budgetary constraints, and increasing sophistication in soft balancing tactics across multilateral forums. India will likely continue resisting pressure to make explicit anti-China commitments while demonstrating through actions military exercises, capability development, partnership expansion, and institutional coordination its determination to maintain a multipolar Indo-Pacific resistant to Beijing's dominance. Whether these efforts prove sufficient to sustain regional equilibrium as China's material capabilities continue expanding remains the fundamental strategic question confronting India, its Quad partners, and the broader Indo-Pacific region in coming years.



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