

A Case for Indo-Russia Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

The intensification of strategic competition between the United States and China and Russia—reminiscent of the Cold War era—is changing geopolitical equations across the globe. However, unlike the Cold War era, strategic competition is unfurling in a hitherto unknown multipolar, interconnected world where rising powers such as India will have an indelible say in shaping the future world order. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Indo-Pacific—which is emerging as a prominent theater of bipolar strategic competition—where India has made its deep presence felt. With the Indo-Pacific in flux, India’s approach to the region confers on it a degree of flexibility in action, without compromising its core values. Such a position allows India to engage with Russia, which despite its criticism of the Indo-Pacific, has important stakes in the region, opening the possibility of cooperation between these two traditional partners. This article outlines how India’s unique and independent position within the evolving and dynamic Indo-Pacific concept is well suited to alleviate Russian concerns about the Indo-Pacific, which are squarely directed toward only Washington’s conception of Indo-Pacific. It outlines how Russia is crucial for India to advance its inclusive vision for the region, and India for Russia, to achieve its ambitious “Greater Eurasia” vision, among other reasons. Despite the challenges, this article makes a case for Indo-Russia cooperation in the fluid and dynamic Indo-Pacific theater.

The Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic concept is rapidly replacing “Asia-Pacific” as a framework to define Asian regionalism. Like its predecessor, the Indo-Pacific is best understood as an imagined space, which emerged as a response to the changing reality where Asia is replacing Europe as the theater of world politics. Arif Dirlik’s work shows how terms such as “Asia-Pacific” and “Pacific Rim” are “ideational constructs” that “define the physical space they pretend to describe.”¹ He analyzed how the Pacific “as a region” was a “Euro-American invention” that emerged in “historical consciousness as an extension of the conquest and consciousness of the Americas.”² As it was the commercial and political activity of Euro-American actors that defined the region, it came to be seen as a “periphery to a European core” but it had a “strong Asian orientation” represented

by the strong presence of the Chinese economy with Guangzhou (Canton) as the trade hub.³ Subsequently the emerging economic power of Asia-Pacific societies during the late 1960s, particularly Japan, impacted the discourse on the Pacific. Due to the rapid economic rise of these countries, they came to be seen at once a part of the industrialized and highly advanced Pacific economies and Asia. Thus “economism” emerged as the ideological foundation of the Asia-Pacific discourse, which was further strengthened by the emergence of the “Asian Tigers” in 1980s.⁴ However, the Euro-American conceptualizations continued to hold “hegemonic sway over consciousness”⁵ and United States’ military-strategic representations of the region were crucial in the overall representation of the region. Intertwined with the larger Cold War dynamics, the Asia-Pacific became a “site of struggle and contestation between US, China and their allies in the ‘region’ on one hand, and the Soviet Union and its ‘client states’ like Vietnam on the other.”⁶ In essence, the Asia-Pacific discourse at once reinforced Washington’s crucial security and economic role in the region while also accommodating the success of East Asian countries in the regional economy.⁷

Similarly, the Indo-Pacific is also a “political term” that is “neither purely descriptive nor value neutral.”⁸ The intellectual origins of the term can be traced back to Karl Haushofer who laid the “natural foundation of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ space” by tracing the “routes of fishes swimming from Madagascar to the Austroasiatic coasts.”⁹ Even before that, going back to the eighteenth century one can see how in European maps, Asia stretches from “the Indian Ocean rim, through Southeast Asia to China, Korea and Japan” corresponding with the contemporary Indo-Pacific arc.¹⁰ However it emerged in contemporary discourse from changes in balance of power equations, particularly due to the rise of India, which “reversed” the split of Asia into smaller units, largely as a result of Cold War geopolitics.¹¹ Contemporary geopolitical and strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific began with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2007 speech in the Indian Parliament where he spoke of the “confluence of the two seas” (the Pacific and the Indian Ocean) without directly using the term.¹² Despite some activity around the idea, resulting in the first iteration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) consisting of India, Japan, the United States, and Australia, which met in 2007, it dissolved quickly in 2008.¹³ Australia—which is generally blamed for the demise of Quad 1.0 as it was the first to step out of the arrangement¹⁴—was the first country to formally introduce and outline the country’s interest in a “stable Indo-Pacific region” with its 2013 Defence White Paper.¹⁵ The Indo-Pacific reemerged in Japan after Shinzo Abe unveiled the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy in 2016 at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development.¹⁶ The following year, the United States released its National Security Strategy,

which noted the emergence of “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order” in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷ In May 2018, the US Pacific Command changed its name to US Indo-Pacific Command, which officials stated was a “recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.”¹⁸ Subsequently, official documents, most recently the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States released in February 2022,¹⁹ broadly outline Washington’s approach to the region and policy initiatives, geared mostly to work with allies and partners to contain Chinese influence in the region. In June 2019, ASEAN leaders formally adopted “The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” indicating the importance Southeast Asians accord to the region.²⁰ Regional survey reports show that the concept is gaining more traction among Southeast Asians. In 2020, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute regional survey revealed that more than half (54 percent) of the respondents thought that the Indo-Pacific concept is “unclear and requires further elaboration,” whereas in 2021 only 11.8 percent of the respondents thought so.²¹ Prior to the EU releasing its “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” in 2021, countries such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands adopted their own Indo-Pacific strategies in 2018 and September 2020 and November 2020 respectively.²² The United Kingdom also announced its “Indo-Pacific tilt” on 11 October 2021 through its Integrated Review 2021.²³ This indicates that both regional and extraregional powers are actively participating in shaping the narrative surrounding the Indo-Pacific to ensure their interests are well represented. However, this has also led to the “concept” of the Indo-Pacific increasingly being conflated with “strategy,” which mistakenly leads to the assumption that the discourse on the Indo-Pacific is only shaped by the position countries take in the region.

Researchers have shown that the “prospects for multilateral partnership” are also an important variable in the definition of the Indo-Pacific, where some prioritize the security component, while others the economic.²⁴ In terms of geospatiality, it is broadly understood as the integrated theater that includes the Indian and Pacific Ocean, however, the countries that advocate the term Indo-Pacific have often geographically adjusted their conceptualization of the region to suit their national interests.²⁵ Due to the different priorities of each country, a unified adaption of the concept remains elusive thereby making a single vision for the region a distant reality. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Indo-Pacific concept is increasingly gaining traction, despite the differing perception among key actors in the region.

“Indo” in Indo-Pacific: Understanding India’s Definition of Indo-Pacific

In view of the Indo-Pacific’s increasing strategic importance as the fastest growing region in the world, it is not surprising to see policy makers in India reorient the country’s focus to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. This is a result of greater appreciation of India’s maritime identity and recognition of New Delhi’s growing stakes in ensuring a stable regional order. India has a rich maritime heritage and an acute awareness of incorporating maritime perspectives to further its own national interest—evident from the writings of Indian historian, diplomat, and strategic thinker K.M. Panikkar in the 1940s. Indeed, current narratives about the region advanced by New Delhi can be traced back to the works of Panikkar. His definition of “strategic arc” has been “realigned and reinvigorated” to suit India’s current definition of the region.²⁶ However, preoccupation with continental threats immediately after independence and former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s (hailed as the architect of India’s foreign policy) “formal rejection of geopolitics” as a foreign policy driver, resulted in a willful ignorance of maritime focus.²⁷ It was only in 2011 that the phrase “Indo-Pacific” appeared in India’s foreign policy discourse, but as early as the 1990s India had been exploring the notions of an “extended neighborhood” comprising “countries in the ASEAN-Pacific region, Central Asia, the Gulf, West Asia and North Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim” to exploit economic opportunities.²⁸ Domestically the idea of the Indo-Pacific emerged as an extension of the Look East Policy, due to imperatives of economic development owing to its incipient liberalization, which had led to increased trade in resources through maritime routes crossing the Indian and Western Pacific Ocean.²⁹ New Delhi’s “Indo-Pacific” narrative focused on cultivating trade and investment linkages with countries across its extended neighborhood and promoting free and open sea lanes of communication to ensure no disruption to its economic development.³⁰

Under the current government in power since 2014, New Delhi has complemented its economic focus with deeper political and diplomatic engagement with the region, especially through minilaterals such as the Quad. Prime Minister Narendra Modi provided the clearest exposition of India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific in his remarks at the 2018 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, where he defined the region as stretching “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas.”³¹ It is here that he also extended India’s SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision—which was introduced in 2015 in the context of the Indian Ocean³²—to the larger Indo-Pacific region. Inclusivity, ASEAN centrality, partnerships rather than alliances, rules-based order, free and open trade, and connectivity emerged as the core aspect of India’s approach to the region. This vision dictates New Delhi’s

policy priorities and initiatives in the region, which are mostly through issue-specific collaborations. Through this, India is positioning itself not as a passive recipient, but an active participant in the nascent regional order formation of Indo-Pacific. Such a position is an extension of the fundamental drivers of its foreign policy, such as maintaining strategic autonomy and independent decision making.³³ India's engagement in the region is best described as "involvement, rather than entanglement" as evident from the core aspects of its vision.³⁴

China looms large in any discussion on the Indo-Pacific, including in India, where several commentators linked India's rising activism in the Quad as a response to the Chinese challenge along their shared border.³⁵ Scholars have pointed out how focus on maritime security in India's Indo-Pacific discourse "directly links to China's increasing activity in the IOR"³⁶—despite strong denials from official quarters about China's role as a driver of India's Indo-Pacific policy.³⁷ Noted scholar Rajesh Rajagopalan has characterized India's Indo-Pacific strategy as a "subset of its China policy," identifying the "primary objective" of India's Indo-Pacific policy as "preventing China from dominating the region."³⁸ At the same time, he identifies reassuring China as a crucial component of its Indo-Pacific strategy and characterizes India's attempts at balancing China's rise through coalitions while reassuring it as "evasive balancing." Undoubtedly, Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean is a direct threat to India's interest, which Indian officials have openly expressed their concerns about. However, India's strong reliance on Chinese imports dictates that it cannot afford to alienate China, which also explains India's careful calibration of ties with partners in the region, most visibly through its advocacy of a limited security role for the Quad. Unlike the United States, Japan, and Australia, India shares a continental border with China and any activity on the maritime domain will undoubtedly affect the status quo on the border. New Delhi, while staying firm on national security questions with China, has also engaged with Beijing on questions of regional order, setting it apart from Washington's position in the region, which is primarily concerned with "losing strategic primacy to China in Asia."³⁹ Unlike the United States, India is reluctant about a "securitized role" in the region, which comes from India's traditional role as a "non-securitized actor" in Southeast Asia, where its post-Cold War engagement has been "gradual and non-threatening, emphasizing the importance of economic linkages and exchange."⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, such a stance does not come without its challenges. As argued by Rajagopalan, for New Delhi, evasive balancing is unviable due to its fundamentally unwieldy posture.⁴¹ As other scholars have also pointed out, although India espouses an inclusive vision for the region, the "premise of mini-literalism that the Quad presupposes" goes against it.⁴² Despite New Delhi's clarity on the Quad not

being directed against China or any third country, there remains a visible confusion on how India views Chinese participation in the region, especially in the light of worsening bilateral relations with Beijing since the fatal clashes in Galwan Valley in 2020.⁴³ Worsening relations between Russia and the United States on one hand and China and the United States on the other significantly reduces New Delhi's room for maneuver to justify its independent position. Convincing both the domestic and international audience that New Delhi remains committed to inclusivity while strengthening strategic ties with the United States is a challenge.

Russia in the Indo-Pacific: Rhetoric versus Reality

Despite the increasing prominence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic reality among many Asian countries, Russia—which has its own legacy of dispute over whether it belongs to Asia or Europe in the debate over its civilizational identity⁴⁴—has shown outright hostility toward the strategic construct. The strongest Russian criticism is directed against the Quad, which Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once described as a “devious policy” that was “divisive” and “exclusionist”—constructed by Western powers to engage India in “anti-China games.”⁴⁵ The Indo-Pacific, in the Russian psyche, is an effort to recreate a Cold War-era two-bloc system in Asia while simultaneously trying to “contain” China.⁴⁶ Russia has expressed this concern through multilateral forums, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, especially highlighting its exclusionary character.⁴⁷ Russia's position is that the Indo-Pacific strategy “undermines the core role played by ASEAN,” which becomes particularly important in light of President Putin's increased Southeast Asia outreach through increased engagement with ASEAN.⁴⁸ In January 2020, Lavrov condemned the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy in harshest terms describing it as “destructive” and aimed at dividing the region into “interest groups.”⁴⁹ Worsening relations with the United States, particularly since 2014, complemented by growing Sino-Russian ties has undoubtedly contributed to negative Russian perceptions of the region. However, despite this strong rhetoric opposing the Indo-Pacific, Russia has important stakes in the region especially in view of its increasing ties with important Indo-Pacific players, namely India, Japan, and ASEAN as a whole. A closer scrutiny of Russia's criticism of the Indo-Pacific reveals that it echoes its concerns about the perceived domination of the West, which misreads the complex reality of the Indo-Pacific. In fact, several Russian scholars have pointed out that viewing the Indo-Pacific “as a single (US-led) anti-Beijing front is simplistic and misleading, obscuring a variety of approaches by the region's state.”⁵⁰ Individually none of Russia's concerns, whether it is fears about the Quad developing as an Asian NATO or diminishing ASEAN centrality, do not hold up to careful scrutiny. On several accounts, New

Delhi has clarified that far from being an “Asian NATO,” the Quad is a “grouping of four countries” that have “common interests, common values” and who together address global challenges.⁵¹ As a flexible “group of likeminded democracies,”⁵² the Quad does not have any collective defense obligation comparable to Article 5 of the NATO charter. ASEAN support for the Indo-Pacific is also evident in its 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which specifies that ASEAN “may also seek to develop, where appropriate, cooperation with other regional and sub-regional mechanisms” in the region, undermining Russia’s claims of the Indo-Pacific concept diluting ASEAN centrality.⁵³ Seemingly to navigate these tensions and maintain its “privileged” partnership with India, top Russian diplomats have expressed support for “India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific” while continuing to express concerns about the Quad.⁵⁴ In fact, even China, which has staunchly opposed the Indo-Pacific construct, has acknowledged India’s Indo-Pacific initiative, an indicator of India’s unique, independent vision of the region.⁵⁵

Moscow also has a notable military presence in the region. Russia’s presence in the Indian Ocean and Pacific predates its modern existence and can be traced back to the Soviet era. The Pacific Fleet, one of the largest and strongest single fleets in the Soviet Navy, emerged as a “symbol of Soviet military strength and an indication of the seriousness of its commitment and its stake in the region.”⁵⁶ The Soviet Union deployed naval forces in the Indian Ocean in 1968 and had a permanent presence by 1969. Some records shows that Washington’s permanent naval force presence in Indian Ocean was small when compared with the Soviets,⁵⁷ yet others point out that the Soviet Indian Ocean squadron’s role was primarily “political” indicated by “its limited offensive capability and power projection.”⁵⁸ Despite the debatable strength of the Soviet Navy in the Indian Ocean, it is undeniable that the Soviets did have a naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Pacific Fleet was officially declared as an asset of the Commonwealth of Independent States but in 1992 it became the Russian Pacific Fleet. Among the four Russian fleets, the Pacific Fleet covers the largest area of responsibility, spanning across both the Pacific and Indian Ocean and extending to the Persian Gulf.⁵⁹ Maritime concerns did not figure prominently in Russia’s strategic calculations immediately after the end of the Cold War, resulting in the reduced funding and activity of the Russian Navy. For example, by mid-2000, the Pacific Fleet’s overall strength had been reduced by 40 percent from 1991, and the number of ships and personnel had also been reduced by more than half.⁶⁰ After a prolonged period of decline, the Russian Navy received a significant boost as a part of its overall “pivot to Asia” in 2014, which experts then assessed would transform the fleet “from its smallest to its biggest naval asset.”⁶¹ Since 2019, the frequency of antisubmarine warfare exercised by the Russian Pacific fleet has been increasing,

indicating the modernization of the fleet.⁶² Over the past few years, the Pacific fleet has received nearly 20 new and upgraded warships and supply vessels, and reports suggest that it will receive more new warships and submarines in 2022.⁶³ Beyond the Pacific, Russia has revived its interest in the Indian Ocean, most evident in its 2015 Maritime Doctrine, which clearly identifies the Indian Ocean as one of the regional priorities along with the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, Caspian, and Antarctic.⁶⁴ Slowly, but steadily, Russia is making its presence felt in the Indian Ocean⁶⁵— sometimes in conjunction with China, evident from the increasing number of joint naval exercises.⁶⁶ Russia's inclusion in the Indian Ocean Rim Association on 17 November 2021 is both an indicator of Russian interest in the region, and a recognition of Russia's growing presence.⁶⁷

Prospects for India–Russia Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific

New Delhi's deepening security ties with Washington in the face of Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control has caused notable unease in Russia. As highlighted above, Moscow's primary concern is with India's participation in the Indo-Pacific through forums such as the Quad.⁶⁸ Lavrov's statement describing India as an "object of the Western countries persistent, aggressive and devious policy"⁶⁹ did not sit well with members of India's strategic community, who called for a reevaluation of traditional ties with Russia in light of changed global balance of power equations.⁷⁰ The cancellation of the India–Russia annual summit in 2020 for the first time in over two decades raised speculations about a downturn in relations,⁷¹ despite the official clarification by the Ministry of External Affairs that it was called off due to "epidemiological reasons."⁷² The latest visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin on 6 December 2021 to New Delhi seems to have temporarily assuaged concerns about a downturn in bilateral relations, and the inception of the 2+2 Dialogue of Foreign and Defence Ministers was hailed as a notable boost to strategic relations.⁷³ India's subtle pro-Russia position on the Ukraine crisis has made it further clear that both India and Russia continue to value their partnership, despite the more complicated international geopolitical environment.⁷⁴

New Delhi has been vocal about its desire for "more active Russian partnership" in the Indo-Pacific, reiterated by high level officials across several multilateral forums.⁷⁵ However, such participation may invite the ire of Washington, which considers India a crucial Indo-Pacific partner. Nevertheless, for New Delhi, Russia's participation strengthens its inclusive Indo-Pacific narrative, ergo serving its own national interests. At the same time, India has sternly objected to Russian foreign ministers' comments that criticized the Indo-Pacific as a "Western ploy" to draw India into "anti-China games"⁷⁶—further indicating India's independent position. India's active preference of operating through minilaterals in the Indo-

Pacific to maximize its interests is in tune with the current administration's preference for issue-based coalition. The Indo-Pacific is undoubtedly in flux, with rapidly changing balance of power equations, which necessarily entails grouping and regrouping without compromising on core values. India's position on the Indo-Pacific has to be seen against this backdrop, as one which ensures "congruence with many, convergence with none."⁷⁷ Moreover, India's notion of the Indo-Pacific is "based on a 'continental connect' proposition" which, rather than being defined in strictly geographical terms, adopts a "'positive' continental" approach that effectively opens the space for cooperating with countries such as Russia.⁷⁸

Since 2016, when President Putin announced the idea of "Greater Eurasia"—which envisages linking Europe and Asia—it has emerged as Moscow's dominant strategic framework. Although Russia's geopolitical thinking has historically been focused on land, it cannot afford to ignore the maritime dimensions of Eurasia, surrounded by the Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean. India is a crucial partner for Russia to actualize its Greater Eurasia vision. Indian foreign secretary Harsh Shringla identified Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Russian Far East as the geopolitical theaters where the two countries can cooperate.⁷⁹ The congruence between Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific was identified by Prime Minister Modi in his virtual address at Eastern Economic Forum where he described Vladivostok as a "*Sangam*" (a confluence of rivers) of Eurasia and Indo-Pacific.⁸⁰ The Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor connectivity project links the Northern Sea Route and the Pacific creating a "connectivity continuum" that binds the two countries. For New Delhi, this project is an extension of its Indo-Pacific policy with Jaishankar confirming that "there is an Indo-Pacific message in Vladivostok."⁸¹ The Russian vision of free trade areas and interregional trade in Eurasia complements India's economic vision for the Indo-Pacific. As pointed out by Dmitri Trenin, "in-depth strategic dialogue with New Delhi" on the Indo-Pacific will not only serve to alleviate Russian concerns, but also open strategic dialogue with New Delhi on Greater Eurasia.⁸²

In many ways, Soviet naval assistance to India during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War laid the foundation for maritime cooperation between the two countries. At the height of the war, when the United States sent a carrier task group to the Indian Ocean in support of Pakistan, the Soviet Union came to India's support by dispatching a nuclear-armed flotilla from its Pacific Fleet to support India.⁸³ Some commentators see this as the "beginning of Indo-Pacific concept between India and Russia."⁸⁴ Now as Russia seeks to revive its engagement in the Indian Ocean, India is well positioned to facilitate Russian access to the region. Reports suggest that the maiden 2+2 ministerial meet between India and Russia held in December 2021 resulted in both sides agreeing to expand partnership in the Indian Ocean Region through "additional port calls by Russian Navy ships to Indian

ports, increasing joint exercises in the Indian Ocean Region and even trilateral naval exercises with friendly countries . . .” in the region.⁸⁵ Russia is also increasing its maritime engagement with Southeast Asia, having recently concluded its first ever joint naval exercise with ASEAN members in December 2021.⁸⁶ Historically both India and Russia have experienced a degree of “weariness vis-à-vis independent engagements” in Southeast Asia.⁸⁷ Given the importance both countries place on ASEAN centrality, Indo-Russian maritime collaboration in Southeast Asia may further serve to convince Moscow of India’s vision of Indo-Pacific while proving to be mutually beneficial.⁸⁸ 🌐

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