

Convergence of the Indo-Pacific with the Indian Ocean—Is a Maritime-Centric Approach Enough?

An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines China's strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region through the lens of its “Zhōngguó” or “Middle Kingdom” dream of regaining its perceived historical dominance. It traces the deep roots of this aspiration in Chinese nationalism and the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of reclaiming lost territories. The article analyzes China's coercive actions to expand its influence in the East and South China Seas, the Indian Ocean region, and along its land borders with India. It highlights China's growing military capabilities, particularly its increasing use of land-based airpower to complement its maritime forces. The article argues that countering China's aggressive strategies requires a collective, multi-domain approach integrating the strengths of regional powers like India, the United States, and others who believe in a rules-based international order. It calls for cooperation across land, maritime, air, space, and cyber domains to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Amid the seemingly endless Russo-Ukraine conflict in Europe, the uncertain outcomes of the Gaza dispute, and the instability plaguing Red Sea commerce, the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean dynamics emerge as enduring constants in our geopolitically turbulent world. China's ascent, veiled within Hu Jintao's 和平崛起 (Héping juéqǐ) or “peaceful rise” strategy, initially quelled international apprehensions about its growing power. However, a contradictory reality surfaced with Zheng's quasi-official declaration in 2005, signaling China's ambition to transcend traditional great-power norms and establish a new geopolitical and economic order.¹ While nations striving to enhance their global standing is nothing novel, China's disruptive approach, aimed at asserting its “justified” civilizational dominance as the 中國 (Zhōngguó), or

¹ Zheng Bijian, “China's ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September–October 2005): 18–24, <https://doi.org/>.

Middle Kingdom, has not only sparked global anxieties but also underpins Beijing's strategies in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

The Name Game

The name resonating with China's imperial legacy is more than a reflection of its geographical and cultural heritage, its ancient connotations fundamentally pointed to political life as the overall frame of reference.² The formal adoption of the name Zhōngguó followed the revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty in 1912, ushering in the era of 中华民国 (*Zhōnghuá Mínguó*), or Republic of China. More than three decades later, the triumph of Communist forces and aspirations for national rejuvenation led to the present designation 中华人民共和国 (*Zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó*), or People's Republic of China (PRC). Ancient Chinese history embraced contemporary republican models to firmly establish the notion of "one Zhōngguó" (One China) as the paramount principle of national unity. The much-debated Middle Kingdom mind-set serves as the foundational concept linking modern China to its perception of an illustrious ancient civilization.

The historical interaction between the West and China witnessed significant shifts marked by two key events. Firstly, following the Treaty of Versailles, China sought full sovereignty over its territories. However, despite its wartime contributions, the European powers conceded Shandong province to Japan, inciting widespread protests and sowing the seeds of communism.³ Secondly, after World War II, a diplomatic failure occurred when former US Chief of Staff of the US Army General George C. Marshall's mediation efforts between the Communist and Nationalist governments faltered, ultimately leading to civil war conditions.⁴ This failure ignited the Communist conflagration that engulfed China.⁵

Since the establishment of the PRC, a cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narrative has been the Century of Humiliation, spanning from the First Opium War in 1839 to the CCP's victory in 1949 in the Chinese Civil War, culminating in the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists. This historical narrative has been meticulously ingrained through a comprehensive "patriotic education process" by the CCP, serving as a source of inspiration and rallying cry for its citizens to reclaim China's former glory and rightful position in the

² Luke S. K. Kwong, "What's in a Name: Zhongguo (or 'Middle Kingdom') Reconsidered," *Historical Journal* 58, no. 3 (September 2015), 787, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³ K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: Gregory Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953), 275–91.

⁴ Raymond J. De Jaegher and Irene Corbally Kuhn, *The Enemy Within: An Eyewitness Account of the Communist Conquest of China* (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1969), 145–47.

⁵ De Jaegher and Kuhn, *The Enemy Within*, 286–301.

world. This “carefully curated curriculum begins in elementary school and is omnipresent in not only party education but also in the CCP-controlled media. It is designed to instill a love of country and a sense of nationalistic pride.”⁶

More than a decade ago, upon assuming power in 2013, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese people.” He articulated that “the CCP advocates for a return to China’s glorious past, moving the Chinese people from humiliation to a resurgence. The CCP was forging the path for China to reclaim its former glory and return China to its rightful place in the world—a position of leadership.”⁷

The redefinition and reclamation of what is deemed historical Chinese territory have emerged as crucial elements of the China dream. According to Victoria Tin-bor Hui

in 1973, Mao famously lamented to Henry Kissinger the loss of “a half million square kilometers” of territory in Eastern Turkestan, Outer Mongolia, and Manchuria to the Soviet Union. But as we have seen, these peripheral regions were incorporated into China only in the 18th century. “The amazing fact of the 20th century,” noted William C. Kirby, “is that this space [the periphery] was not only redefined as ‘Chinese’ and as the sacred soil of China, but also defended diplomatically to such a degree that the borders of the People’s Republic of China today are essentially those of the Qing.”⁸

Claims also extend to maritime territories, including the contentious nine-dash line in the South China Sea (SCS) and borders with India.⁹ Thus, at the heart of China’s aspirations for regaining former glory lies the reclamation of perceived territorial and maritime spaces, serving as the guiding principle of its long-term national strategy, one it will undoubtedly pursue in the foreseeable future.

Zhōngguó is not merely a name but a symbol of a meticulously nurtured dream, deeply ingrained into the national psyche, underpinning all facets of its comprehensive national power and serving as the essence of its approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Ironically, in 1602, when Matteo Ricci presented his world

⁶ Mark Metcalf, “The National Humiliation Narrative: Dealing with the Present by Fixating on the Past,” *Education about Asia* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 43–50, <https://www.asianstudies.org/>.

⁷ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “The China Dream: Revival of What Historical Greatness?,” in *China Dreams: China’s New Leadership and Future Impacts*, ed. Chih-Shian Liou and Arthur S. Ding (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 3–32, <https://www.worldscientific.com/>.

⁸ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “How China Was Ruled,” *American Interest* 3, no. 4 (March–April 2008), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/>.

⁹ Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, “The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications,” *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 98–124. <https://doi.org/>.

map to the Chinese emperor, placing China at the center of the vast Pacific Ocean, little did he foresee the significance this region would hold more than four hundred years later.¹⁰

The Sino-India Game

The territorial dispute between India and China, Asia's two largest nations and neighbors, has been a persistent source of tension for over seven decades. Dubbed as the "world's largest boundary dispute, involving over 120000 square miles of territory," it ignited into a full-scale war between the two nations in 1962 and continues to fuel sporadic conflicts.¹¹ At the crux of the issue lies China's fixation on Tibet, stemming from its historical claims based on the alleged submission of the region during the ancient Yuan Empire and Qing dynasty.¹² This obsession culminated in China's invasion of Tibet in 1950. Beijing's obstinacy regarding the validity of the McMahon Line and its rejection of the outcomes of the Shimla Conference further exacerbate tensions.¹³ Driving China's actions is a geostrategic imperative to establish connectivity between Yunnan, Xinjiang, and Sichuan provinces with Lhasa in Tibet.¹⁴

The Chinese-occupied Aksai Chin region of India holds crucial geographic significance, serving as a vital link between Tibet and the resource-rich Xinjiang province, which shares borders with multiple countries. This region acts as China's gateway to the politically, security, and economically strategic Central Asian Region, pivotal for initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁵

Beijing's strategic engagement with South Asian nations follows country-specific approaches but shares a common agenda of expanding strategic influence to counterbalance India. Its deepening strategic partnership with Pakistan, in particular,

¹⁰ Kwong, "What's in a Name," 804.

¹¹ Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices – Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2016), 15.

¹² Michael van Walt van Praag and Miek Boltjes, *Tibet Brief 20/20* (Parker, CO: Outskirts Press, 2020), 7.

¹³ Lezlee Brown Halper and Stefan Halper, *Tibet: An Unfinished Story* (Delhi: Hachette India, 2016), 154.

¹⁴ J. J. Singh, *McMahon Line: A Century of Discord* (Haryana: HarperCollins India, 2019), xi. The McMahon Line is a demarcation line that serves as the effective boundary between China and India. It was proposed by Sir Henry McMahon, a British colonial administrator, during the 1914 Simla Convention negotiations between British India, Tibet, and China. The line was intended to delineate the frontier between British India and Tibet, and it generally follows the crest of the Himalayas. However, China never officially accepted the McMahon Line, leading to ongoing disputes and tensions between India and China over the border in the eastern Himalayan region. The McMahon Line remains a significant point of contention in the Sino-Indian border dispute.

¹⁵ Diptendu Choudhury, "Salience of Airpower in Asian Waters," *Naval War College Journal* 32 (2020): 17–29.

has diminished Pakistan's reliance on past extensive US engagement. Nepal's strategic significance lies in its geographical proximity to Tibet and historical and ideological ties with the Communist Party of Nepal.¹⁶

Bhutan, a small yet strategically important nation, has long maintained a close and enduring bilateral relationship with India. This bond has been nurtured through collaborative efforts across various sectors, notably in education and culture. India not only stands as Bhutan's largest trading partner but also plays a pivotal role in its infrastructural development. However, recent territorial claims by China have disrupted the tranquility of this relationship. These claims, spanning an estimated 12 percent of Bhutan's territory, have injected a new dimension into the geopolitical dynamics of the region.¹⁷ The Chinese assertions are viewed as attempts to alter the existing status quo, placing significant strain on Bhutan's friendship with India. These developments carry profound implications for India's national security and territorial integrity.

Bangladesh emerges as the world's second-largest purchaser of military equipment from China, constituting nearly one-fifth of China's total arms exports between 2016 and 2020.¹⁸ Chinese weaponry comprises over 70 percent of Bangladesh's major arms acquisitions. Additionally, China's involvement extends beyond arms sales, encompassing investment in two ports in Bangladesh.¹⁹ Beijing aims to elevate bilateral strategic cooperation, a move particularly noteworthy amid Dhaka's recent differences with Washington.²⁰

As part of its BRI, China has finalized two major port projects in Sri Lanka: the Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City. These projects, secured through extensive lease agreements, have not only generated substantial economic gains for China but also strategically positioned it in the Indian Ocean. The Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka's largest Chinese-backed project, was acquired by China on a

¹⁶ Deep Pal, *China's Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

¹⁷ John Pollock and Damien Symon, "China's High-Stake Incursion in the Heights of Bhutan," *World Today* (blog), 29 September 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

¹⁸ Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers" (fact sheet, SIPRI, Mar 2021), <https://sipri.org/>.

¹⁹ Saeeduddin Faridi, "China's Ports in the Indian Ocean," *Gateway House*, 19 August 2021 <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/>.

²⁰ Ananth Kishan and K Bhattacharjee, "China says will back Bangladesh against 'external interference'," *The Hindu*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

99-year lease due to Sri Lanka's inability to repay its significant debt.²¹ Positioned strategically in the Indian Ocean, the port is part of China's broader geopolitical strategy to develop a "string of pearls" network of ports encircling India. Conversely, the Colombo Port City project is being transformed into a high-tech urban center, including an offshore international financial center, residential areas, and a marina, with ambitions to rival global financial hubs like Dubai and Singapore. However, the lease agreement for this project has sparked controversy, with China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) investing USD 1.4 billion in exchange for 43 percent of the land on a 99-year lease.²² These investments have not only extended China's influence in the Indian Ocean region and secured crucial maritime routes for energy supplies but also heightened concerns about Sri Lanka's mounting debt and the long-term implications of these projects.

From India's continental security perspective, according to Debendra Sanyal, "China's play in South Asia involves encircling India in the region, a strategy similar to that employed in the Chinese game *weiqi*, where the goal is to surround more territory than the opponent, thereby restricting the opponent's moving space."²³ As China continues to expand its coercive foreign policy, India finds itself compelled to navigate its engagement with China. Beijing's strategic deployments form distinct "outward arcs of expansion," extending over the waters of the East China Sea (ECS) and SCS, as well as across land in Indian territories such as Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Given these dynamics, India faces no alternative but to manage and confront China's growing influence in the region.²⁴

India's maritime domain presents distinct security dynamics. China has strategically established land routes, notably the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) terminating at Gwadar port, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor linking to ports at Yangon and Kyaukpyu. These investments strategically position China to access both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, effectively encircling India's eastern and western coasts. Despite India's 15,000 km of land borders, which include 6,798 km of hostile borders with Pakistan and China, the

²¹ Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, 'China, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Hambantota Port Project,' *St Antony's International Review* 15, no. 1 (2019): 153–64, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan, "The Advent of China's Indian Ocean Strategy," in *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 15–41, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Anbarasan Ethirajan, "Colombo Port City: A New Dubai or a Chinese Enclave?," *BBC*, 16 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

²³ Debendra Sanyal, "China-Sri-Lanka Relations: A Game of Weiqi in the Subcontinent," Organisation for Research on China and Asia—ORCA, 7 August 2023, <https://orcasia.org/>.

²⁴ Diptendu Choudhury, *Security Vision 2047: A Hundred Years Since Independence* (New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, November 2022), <https://www.vifindia.org/>.

remaining 8,202 km shared with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar facilitate limited trade, highlighting the pivotal role of the Indian Ocean region (IOR) in India's future growth. India boasts a coastline stretching 7,516 kilometers, with its peninsula extending 1,980 kilometers into the Indian Ocean. This positioning grants India exclusive rights over an expansive area of 2.02 million square kilometers, with half of the basin lying within a 1,500 kilometer radius of the mainland and its island territories. The strategic significance of the IOR to India cannot be overstated, given factors such as geography, energy resources, trade routes, natural resources, sea lines of communication, security considerations, and regional geopolitics. Recognizing these imperatives, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has designated the IOR as a "policy priority," as reflected in India's maritime initiative Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).²⁵

Conversely, China views the IOR as vital to its economic growth, trade, and broader regional interests. At the core of China's maritime strategy lies its Malacca dilemma—the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait, a vulnerable chokepoint through which 80% of its oil imports pass.²⁶ Any threat to access through this strait raises significant concerns for China's energy and trade security. From India's security perspective, the Malacca Strait serves as a crucial link connecting the IOR to the SCS, highlighting the interdependence of the Indian Ocean and SCS in the region's strategic calculus.²⁷ Moreover, the SCS acts as a vital maritime connector between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, impacting both regions. China's expanding maritime reach is evident in the increased presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and activities such as antipiracy missions off the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden. China's extensive developmental investments in strategic ports and maritime bases, including Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota, and others totaling 13 in the region, bolster its shipping and submarine capabilities.²⁸ According to the Indian Navy Chief, the PLAN maintains a sustained presence in the IOR, with six to eight ships deployed at any given time.²⁹ Despite challenges in the ECS and SCS, the PLAN's increased presence in the IOR remains

²⁵ G. Padmaja, "Revisiting 'SAGAR'—India's Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean," National Maritim Foundation, 25 April 2018, <https://maritimeindia.org/>.

²⁶ Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma'," *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 143–61, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁷ Choudhury, "Salience of Airpower in Asian Waters."

²⁸ Faridi, "China's Ports in the Indian Ocean."

²⁹ Rajat Pandit, "Navy: India closely watching China-Pak collusion in IOR," *Times of India*, 2 December 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

apparent, emphasizing the enduring relevance of Alfred Thayer Mahan's insights on the Indian Ocean.³⁰

The New Great Game

In his August 2007 address to the Indian parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe foresaw the convergence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as catalysts for freedom and prosperity, envisioning a vast network spanning the Pacific and encompassing the United States and Australia. This strategic alignment between Japan and India marked a revival of their relationship based on shared values and interests, motivated in part by China's escalating belligerence and coercive foreign policy.³¹ Recognizing India's pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific, Abe elevated the country's importance in Japan's foreign policy.³²

In the early 2000s, the Indo-Pacific concept struggled to gain traction as global attention fixated on the scourge of international terrorism. During this time, China's actions regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea raised significant regional concerns.³³ Despite these actions, Beijing, cognizant of its military limitations, exercised strategic restraint. By positioning itself as an opportunity rather than a threat, China successfully assuaged fears among numerous Asian nations. During this period, Beijing's bold commitment to services liberalization upon joining the World Trade Organization sparked a notable shift in foreign direct investment toward service industries. By 2009, this shift had tripled investment in services and increased manufacturing by 81 percent, resulting in a surge of multinational corporations flocking to invest in China.³⁴

³⁰ Alfred Thayer Mahan, a renowned American naval strategist, emphasized the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, famously stating, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters." Mahan viewed the sea as a "great common," facilitating the flow of commerce and military force, with control of the sea intertwined with commercial, geographic, and military considerations. He advocated for peace as the paramount interest of great seafaring nations, as commerce thrives in times of peace and suffers during war. Today, Mahan's insights remain relevant, with control over strategic waterways essential for national security, economic prosperity, and geopolitical influence, shaping the maritime strategies of numerous nations. See Sibapada Rath, "Maritime Strategy of India and China: Influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan," *Naval War College Journal* 26 (2014): 71–79, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/>.

³¹ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas" (speech, Parliament of the Republic of India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 22 August 2007), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>.

³² Sanjaya Baru, "Shinzo Abe and India: A Confluence of Minds," *The Wire*, 8 July 2022, <https://thewire.in/>.

³³ Manoj Joshi, "China is the potential threat No. 1, says George Fernandes," *India Today*, 18 May 1998, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

³⁴ "Foreign Direct Investment—The China Story," World Bank, 16 July 2010, <https://www.worldbank.org/>.

Amid accelerated military modernization and an 18 percent increase in defense budget in 2007, US Vice President Dick Cheney bluntly remarked that China’s “military buildup is not consistent with the country’s stated goal of a peaceful rise.”³⁵ The subsequent global financial crisis and ensuing US recession provided China with a strategic opening to assert its regional presence and influence. Adopting a more assertive stance, China began to assert its maritime territorial claims in the SCS, ECS, and along its borders with India.

From 2013 onward, Xi’s “Asia for Asians” security concept challenged US alliances, which Beijing viewed as the Achilles’ heel and a major impediment to a peaceful Asia, ushering in heightened strategic competition.³⁶ Beijing’s long-term strategy of steadily growing military capability and capacity is evident in its defense white papers spanning the past two decades.³⁷ Through aggressive leveraging of comprehensive national power, China aims to reclaim perceived territories and maritime spaces, promoting an alternative world order aligned with its Zhōngguó dream. Undoubtedly, China’s aspiration for great-power status is directed toward the United States, viewing dominance in Asia as a precursor.

Historically, China viewed India solely through the prism of its relationships with the Soviet Union and the United States, failing to recognize India’s inherent qualities or acknowledge its agency. Instead, Beijing regarded India as inferior and untrustworthy, particularly in light of ongoing territorial disputes.³⁸ Seeking to assert influence and control over South Asia, China was confident that it could resolve issues on its terms as it pursued its revanchist Zhōngguó dream of national rejuvenation.

However, India’s resolute response to Chinese aggression in the Doklam and Galwan border crises of 2017 and 2020–2021 underscores New Delhi’s stance that any disturbance of peace and tranquility along the border will significantly impact bilateral relations.³⁹ As US Indo-Pacific (INDOPACOM) commander ADM John Aquilino observes, China’s adoption of a 2021 land borders law allowing greater involvement of the PLA in border security represents a continu-

³⁵ “Cheney concerned about China and North Korea - Asia - Pacific—International Herald Tribune,” *New York Times*, 23 February 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

³⁶ Thomas F. Lynch III, James Przystup, and Phillip C. Saunders, “The Indo-Pacific Competitive Space: China’s Vision and the Post-World War II American Order,” in *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into an Era of Great Power Competition*, ed. Thomas F. Lynch III (Washington: NDU Press, 2020): 185–218, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

³⁷ Andrew S. Ericson, “China Defence White Papers—1995–2019,” blog, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/>.

³⁸ Vijay Gokhale, “A Historical Evaluation of China’s India Policy: Lessons for India-China Relations” (working paper, Carnegie India, 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

³⁹ “India-China relations can’t be normal unless border situation is: S Jaishankar,” *Mint*, 13 August 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/>.

ation of its lawfare strategy aimed at justifying military actions in territorial disputes. Moreover, China has significantly expanded its military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control, intensifying pressure on India and enhancing its readiness for potential future conflicts. These actions, intended to expand borders and consolidate gains, contribute to regional instability and heighten the risk of unintended incidents.⁴⁰

The Indo-Pacific concept, stemming from the US Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, has evolved into the comprehensive US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, aiming to bolster American presence and influence in the region. This strategy encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions, striving to cultivate a free and open Indo-Pacific, strengthen alliances, and counterbalance China's growing influence. Through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS trilateral with Australia and the United Kingdom, Washington seeks to manage strategic challenges posed by China's rise, promoting a rules-based international order, human rights, and regional cooperation.⁴¹

In May 2018, the rebranding of US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command underscored the pivotal role of the region and the burgeoning significance of India in the escalating US rivalry with China. India's consistent economic expansion, burgeoning geopolitical influence, and unwavering adherence to foundational principles, aligning with those of normative global powers, position it as a disruptor to China's dominance in Asia and a swiftly escalating strategic priority.

Vijay Gokhale asserts that China may need to come to terms with the existence of an alternate great-power triangle in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific, excluding Russia. The United States and its allies in the region stand as the primary pillars of this triangle, with China as the secondary pillar and India as the third. Soon, no other nation or coalition, be it Russia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or the Gulf Cooperation Council, will possess the capacity to replace any of these key players, given their blend of economic strength and military prowess.⁴²

Chinese scholars' analysis since 2019 perceives the Indo-Pacific framework as a strategic maneuver by the United States aimed at imposing limitations on China's growth. According to this view, Washington seeks to constrain China's current development model, thereby maintaining and furthering its own asym-

⁴⁰ Statement of Admiral John C. Aquilino, US Navy, Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture," 18 April 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/>.

⁴¹ Li Li and Tianjiao Jiang, "From Conceptual Idea to Strategic Reality: 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' from the Perspective of Chinese Scholars," *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2023), 101–19, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴² Gokhale, *A Historical Evaluation of China's India Policy*.

metric advantages with the ultimate goal of prevailing over China.⁴³ In parallel, the US *National Security Strategy* identifies Beijing’s “ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power. . . . [and that] . . . Competition with the PRC is most pronounced in the Indo-Pacific.”⁴⁴

China’s aggressive exploitation of the abundant hydrocarbons, minerals, and fish resources in the SCS, encroaching upon the exclusive economic zones of neighboring nations, has fueled instability in the region. Recognizing its role as an Indo-Pacific power, the United States perceives the preservation of freedom of navigation and the cultivation of regional consensus for open access to the SCS as imperative. This strategic stance directly challenges China’s interests.⁴⁵

India’s strategic interests in the IOR and the United States’ interests in the broader Indo-Pacific, when viewed through the lens of a shared apprehension regarding China, naturally align them as partners. Their convergence is rooted in common democratic principles and a commitment to a rules-based international order, among other shared values.

While the United States’ regional concerns in the Indo-Pacific predominantly revolve around maritime issues, India faces a more immediate threat due to the simultaneous presence of two nuclear-armed adversaries, both of which enjoy a strategic partnership. India’s historical experience of enduring continental threats, including multiple conflicts with Pakistan and one with China, has now extended into the maritime realm. This shift is underscored by significant efforts to bolster the Pakistan Navy with Chinese support, along with increased bilateral maritime exercises between Pakistan and China.⁴⁶

The existence of a clear and present danger of conflict with these two neighbours is a harsh reality in the continental domain for India, a conflict it will have to “go it alone.” The reality of this tenuous peace, which can escalate to a conflict as it has in the past, often gets missed in the larger US-centric Indo-Pacific narrative.

Consequently, India seeks to maintain a distinction between its military engagements and exercises with Western and regional powers and its involvement in broader regional groupings and security frameworks. A robust and capable India

⁴³ Gokhale, *A Historical Evaluation of China’s India Policy*.

⁴⁴ *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, October 2022), 7 and 24, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁴⁵ *National Security Strategy*.

⁴⁶ Abhijit Singh, “Deciphering China-Pakistan naval exercises in the Indian Ocean,” *ORF*, 20 November 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

is essential for fostering stability and balance in Asia and beyond, as it offers a counterweight to the current geopolitical dynamics.

As Robert Kaplan contends regarding India, “Its great power status in the new century will be enhanced by its very political and military competition with China, even as it is pinned down by frontiers with weak and semi-dysfunctional states inside the subcontinent.”⁴⁷

China’s conduct in South Asia is influenced by its apprehension of inadvertently driving India closer to the United States’ sphere of influence. The prospect of an adversarial alliance along its extensive southwestern continental border presents a significant concern for China, as it would expose it to a two-front threat scenario. Conversely, the emergence of India and US allies as two formidable pillars in the region, with China occupying the third position, contributes to a broader normative framework.

Despite Beijing’s assertive rhetoric, the Quad’s unconventional structure, devoid of typical alliance formalities and characterized by its “informal, club-like nature,” elucidates its current operational dynamics and longevity. India’s deepening engagement with Quad partners, as highlighted by the Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar’s intriguing references to the “rediscovery of America,” “rising with the sun,” and “building a new mateship,” has significantly broadened. This expanded engagement spans across various domains, facilitating a comprehensive spectrum of interactions aimed at garnering mutual traction, learning, and shared experiences.⁴⁸

Considering the increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific, maintaining the Quad as a crucible for ongoing reinforcement by its members emerges as a prudent long-term strategy. This approach not only keeps China uncertain about its future implications but also ensures the flexibility for the group to adapt to any potential future contingencies.

Just a Maritime Game?

Up to this point, the discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific has predominantly revolved around maritime affairs. This emphasis is unsurprising considering that seas have historically served as crucial conduits for transportation, trade, and diplomacy, acting as both a military asset and a diplomatic tool for colonial powers to assert political influence. Mahan famously likened the seas to a great highway or a vast common space, highlighting their pivotal role in facilitating easier and

⁴⁷ Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013), 252.

⁴⁸ S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2024), 115–26.

more cost-effective transport compared to overland routes. He argued that control of maritime routes was indispensable for any nation aspiring to great-power status, with Britain serving as the quintessential example.⁴⁹

In addition to its significance for commerce and geopolitical influence, the maritime domain continues to be valued for its abundance of resources, territorial waters, rights of passage, and the vital principle of freedom of navigation. However, while maritime security remains a primary focus, encompassing the protection of commerce during peacetime and the safeguarding of sea lines of communication during wartime, the question arises: Can traditional surface-centric maritime power projection be effectively pursued in isolation?⁵⁰

During World War II, major naval powers came to the realization that air power was indispensable for achieving sea control and projecting maritime strength inland, leading to the emergence of carrier-based aviation.⁵¹ The limited speed, range, and operational capabilities of land-based aircraft in the past necessitated the integration of aircraft carriers into naval battle groups for effective sea control or denial.

The increasing recognition of the importance of the vertical dimension above the maritime domain, particularly evident in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context, is exemplified by developments in the SCS. This acknowledgment underscores the evolving nature of maritime power projection, where considerations of airpower and aerial dominance play an increasingly pivotal role alongside traditional surface-based capabilities.

Securing its coastal waters, the linchpin of China's economic prosperity, has remained a top national priority, leading Beijing to focus its strategies on safeguarding its vital maritime arteries—the two seas. The PLA Navy's assertive deployment to protect and expand China's maritime interests and influence in the region has been evident. However, Beijing has long recognized that achieving dominance in distant maritime domains necessitates airpower, particularly considering the threat posed by US carrier strike groups (CSG).

While China is aggressively bolstering its own carrier battle group capabilities, it still faces challenges in controlling the airspace over the SCS. The asymmetric airpower advantage enjoyed by US CSGs has historically disadvantaged the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). Nonetheless, the PLAAF's rapid modernization in recent

⁴⁹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1890* (1890, repr., London: Methuen, 1990), Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ Hedley Bull, "The New Environment: Sea Power and Political Influence," in *Sea Power and Influence*, ed. Jonathan Alford (Osman, UK: Gower and Allanheld, 1980), 4.

⁵¹ Huber Fiegl, "The Impact of Maritime Technologies," in *Sea Power and Influence*, ed. Jonathan Alford (Osman, UK: Gower and Allanheld, 1980), 28.

years has positioned it as a critical component of China's anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) strategy, furnishing both offensive and defensive capabilities. This strategy primarily aims to impede the effective deployment of US CSGs in the region.

The forward positioning of sensors and weaponry on China's artificial island bases reinforces the A2AD perimeter in the SCS, extending the range and coverage of its defensive umbrella. The PLAAF's operational patterns underscore the enduring principle of air power articulated by Giulio Douhet a century ago—the imperative of achieving air superiority.⁵² The PLAAF's swift advancements prompted Gen Mark Welsh, the US Chief of Staff of the Air Force, to caution the House Appropriations Committee in 2016 that China's aircraft inventory could rival, if not surpass, that of the United States by 2030.⁵³

Asserting irredentist sovereignty claims over island territories in the region under the pretext of reclaiming its “historical” spaces is a cornerstone of China's strategic approach. This stance led China to establish an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the waters of the ECS, encompassing areas disputed with Japan and Taiwan, in 2013, triggering international outcry.⁵⁴ While the PLAAF was unable to enforce the ADIZ at the time, the political declaration had significant ramifications. It emboldened the PLAAF to extend its air operations beyond mainland boundaries into maritime domains, marking a strategic shift from its previous focus on defense to a more assertive and offensive posture.⁵⁵

Subsequently, the PLAAF conducted multiple combat exercises over the Western Pacific Ocean and the SCS, signaling its heightened capabilities and intentions. The prospect of future ADIZ enforcement in the ECS and/or the SCS could have profound disruptive effects, particularly given the significant volume of civilian air traffic in Southeast Asia's aviation sector.

Contested sovereignty over regional airspaces would impact various facets of the aviation industry, including airlines, airports, and tourism supply chains. Civil aviation plays a vital role in the GDPs of Southeast Asian countries, with passenger traffic reaching 510 million in 2019, representing 11 percent of global air traffic, and attracting 144 million visitors, including 98 million arriving by air. This

⁵² Diptendu Choudhury “Expanding Role of PLAAF in China's National Security Strategy,” *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 6 (2020): 521–41, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵³ Jeremy Bender, “US general: China's airpower will overtake the US Air Force by 2030,” *Business Insider*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.in/>.

⁵⁴ Alex Calvo, “China's Air Defense Identification Zone: Concept, Issues at Stake and Regional Impact” (working paper, Naval War College, 23 December 2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

⁵⁵ Arjun Subramanian, “PLAAF: Increasing Presence beyond the First Island Chain,” *CAPS in Focus*, 29 November 2016, <https://capsindia.org/>.

generates passenger traffic of approximately 196 million and accounts for about 17 percent of global international air cargo traffic.⁵⁶

The extensive presence of more than 300 regional airports offering scheduled commercial services, along with 60 Southeast Asian airlines operating scheduled passenger services utilizing 1,696 aircraft, and 21 Low-Cost Carriers managing a combined fleet of nearly 800 aircraft, underscores the potential for substantial disruption in the region. This abundance of infrastructure and air transportation resources presents a significant strategic leverage opportunity.⁵⁷ Utilizing its three artificial island air bases and its growing capability to enforce ADIZs, the PLAAF's land-based airpower will empower the PRC to intimidate, coerce, and exert heightened political pressure.

The impact of the PLAAF's expanded role as a coercive military tool is reflected in the significant increase in air violations of Taiwan's ADIZ, soaring by 79 percent in 2022 compared to 2021. In 2023, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported detecting a total of 4,679 Chinese aircraft in proximity to its airspace, with 1,674 intruding into its ADIZ.⁵⁸

Presently, routine violations typically involve one to five aircraft, while assertive violations typically entail six to nine aircraft. Reactionary violations, involving 10 or more aircraft and often linked to geopolitical developments, political signaling, or displays of force, accounted for 20.5 percent of violations in 2022.

Recent missions in the region have witnessed a surge in numbers, duration, and complexity, often featuring J-10, J-16, and J-20 fighters, H-6 strategic bombers, KJ-500 airborne early warning and command aircraft, and Y-20U tanker aircraft. The proliferation of routine violations and assertive air operations by the PLAAF has effectively nullified the unofficial Taiwan Strait centerline, a previously respected boundary intended to mitigate unintended tensions and apply pressure on the island's inhabitants.⁵⁹ This strategy by Beijing aims to establish "new normals," wherein routine violations over land, sea, and in the air are escalated to a level where they are perceived as commonplace, deliberately reshaping the status quo in boundary matters.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Hiroaki Yamaguchi et al., *Landscape Study on Southeast Asia's Aviation Industry: COVID-19 Impact and Post-Pandemic Strategy* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, May 2023), <https://www.adb.org/>.

⁵⁷ *Landscape Study on Southeast Asia's Aviation Industry Covid-19 Impact and Post-Pandemic Strategy* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, May 2023), <https://www.adb.org/>.

⁵⁸ Greg Waldon, "Fighters, ASW Aircraft Dominate China's 2023 Aerial Incursions against Taiwan," *Flight Global*, 3 January 2024, <https://www.flightglobal.com/>.

⁵⁹ Aquilino, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture."

⁶⁰ Ben Lewis, "2022 in ADIZ Violations, China Dials Up Pressure on Taiwan," *China Power*, 23 March 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

The US pullback in 2020 of its continuous bomber presence, a significant deterrent presence in the region for 16 years, aligns with the 2018 *National Defense Strategy's* emphasis on operational unpredictability. According to the US Strategic Command, "The US has transitioned to an approach that enables strategic bombers to operate forward in the Indo-Pacific region from a broader array of overseas locations, when required, with greater operational resilience."⁶¹

Despite the explanations provided, the expansion of the PLAAF's air operations, such as deploying long-range H-6 bombers armed with air-launched cruise missiles to Guam in the second island chain, has fostered the perception of a US withdrawal from the region, not solely aimed at reducing its vulnerable footprint. Over time, the increasing capabilities of Chinese weapons, systems, and platforms have heightened the vulnerability of US CSGs in the region, posing a more formidable threat than Japan did in mid-1944.⁶²

The existing medium-range access denial weapon systems are integrated with China's continuous surveillance intelligence, reconnaissance capability utilizing geosynchronous equatorial orbit (GEO) optical and synthetic-aperture radar (SAR) satellites to identify and track threats, a combination tailored to China's security priorities. The Yaogan-41 satellite notably enhances China's capability to detect and track not only naval vessels but also aircraft.⁶³

This suggests that while the US may currently employ its CSGs for power projection and signaling within the Second Island Chain region, doing so in a conflict scenario may not be operationally feasible.⁶⁴ In its annual report on Chinese military power last year, the Pentagon acknowledged the threat posed by DF-21s, cautioning that these missiles provide China with "the capability to conduct long-range precision strikes against ships, including aircraft carriers, out to the Western Pacific from mainland China."⁶⁵

Currently, the longest-ranged land-based combined anti-ship missile firepower of DF-26 ballistic missiles and bombers, capable of posing a threat to naval targets,

⁶¹ "The USAF Relocates B 52 and B 2 Stealth Bombers from Guam to USA," *Global Defense Corp*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/>.

⁶² Alistair Gale, "Aboard a U.S. Aircraft Carrier, a Front-Row Seat to China Tensions," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

⁶³ Clayton Swope, "No Place to Hide, A Look into China's Geo-Synchronous Surveillance Capabilities," CSIS, 19 January 2024 <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁶⁴ Kelley Saylor, *Red Alert, The Growing Threat to US Aircraft Carriers* (Washington: CNAS, 22 February 2016), <https://www.cnas.org/>.

⁶⁵ Ryo Nakamura, "U.S. 'Confident' Carrier Can Operate under China Missile Threat: Admiral," *Nikkei Asia*, 5 February 2024 <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

is estimated to extend up to 1,800 miles from the mainland.⁶⁶ This capability is one that China is likely to enhance in the future as it persists in prioritizing its goal of acquiring six aircraft carriers by 2035.

The traditional views and principles regarding the significance of maritime power require careful reconsideration for the future of the broader Indo-Pacific and IOR. While maritime power remains crucial, it is essential to accord equal importance to other emerging domains, particularly air, space, and cyber, given their increasing interconnectedness and interdependencies. Technologies such as hypersonic weapons, space glide vehicles, fractional orbital bombardment systems, early warning systems, antisatellite capabilities (including co-orbital systems), directed energy weapons, high-powered lasers, and space-enabled electronic jamming and cyber warfare have become integral components of the future threat landscape. As vulnerabilities in the maritime domain escalate, the once-dominant focus on maritime operations is no longer sufficient.

The historically undervalued vertical dimension has been rapidly overshadowed by technological advancements in the air and space domains over the past few decades. Therefore, it is imperative to reassess and broaden our perspective of the Indo-Pacific and IOR beyond a purely maritime lens. As future developments and advancements in land, air, sea, space, and cyber capabilities unfold, adopting a comprehensive multi-domain security approach becomes increasingly vital.

During the transitional phase until space and cyber security capabilities mature for collective regional implementation, the underutilized potential of land-based airpower in the Indo-Pacific and IOR represents a near and medium-term capability that warrants greater investment.

More Players in the Game

The scale of the PLAN's East and South fleets is significantly greater than the capabilities of regional navies. Beijing's aggressive utilization of its blue hull Maritime Militia and the China Coast Guard as part of a gray-zone strategy to advance its sovereignty interests amplifies the risk of maritime incidents, accidents, and conflicts that could disrupt the global supply chain and induce economic instability, adding to the complexity of the situation.

China's efforts to enhance its regional dominance extend beyond the maritime domain to encompass air, cyber, space, electromagnetic, subsurface, and emerging security domains such as the deep sea, quantum computing, artificial intelligence,

⁶⁶ Dimitri Filipoff, "Fighting DMO, Pt. 8: China's Anti-ship Firepower and Mass Firing Schemes," CIMSEC, 1 May 2023, <https://cimsec.org/>.

and biological security.⁶⁷ While developments in these new security domains are ongoing, the expansion of the PLA's land-based air power capability complements the PLAN's growing carrier capabilities.

China has expanded its presence and infrastructure across at least seven reefs and artificial islands in the Spratly Islands, including Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Johnson Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Cuarteron Reef. Notably, Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief Reefs now feature airfields capable of supporting fighter operations, enabling the deployment of a variety of aircraft such as fighters, bombers, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, airborne early warning and control (AEWC) aircraft, tanker aircraft, and advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. This enhances the PLA's ability to project power over both air and maritime spaces in the SCS and beyond, facilitating broader control of the airspace.

From a perspective of cooperative defense and regional security among Southeast Asian countries, nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam possess relatively small air forces characterized by a mix of aging and limited modern combat assets. In contrast, Singapore and Taiwan boast modern air force inventories. Individually, none of these nations can rival the capabilities of the PLA. However, all are undertaking efforts to modernize their air forces, recognizing them as perhaps the sole viable conventional hard-power option to bolster their limited maritime capabilities.

Collectively, these air forces represent an asymmetric instrument for asserting sovereignty against a dominant China in the nine-dash-line region, expanding the range of response options to counter its increasing capabilities.⁶⁸ India, the United States, and Australia are already engaged in various bilateral and multilateral air exercises with many of these nations, offering opportunities for further collaboration. It raises questions as to why this aerial dimension has been overlooked in maritime strategy.

The oversight of incorporating land-based airpower into the maritime security discourse has, to a degree, been a casualty of various factors. Firstly, domain-centric exclusivity has led services to vie for exclusive ownership of domains, overshadowing the potential integration of airpower. Additionally, navies historically maintain closer governmental engagement in executing foreign policies and addressing regional geopolitics linked with maritime nations. Moreover, the historical limitations

⁶⁷ Derek Solen, "Chinese Views of All-Domain Operations," China Aerospace Studies Institute, August 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁶⁸ Diptendu Choudhury, "The Absence of Air Power in India's Security Narratives," Vivekananda International Foundation, 16 June 2021, <https://www.vifindia.org/>.

of airpower, including deficiencies in aerial refueling and long-range capabilities of combat platforms, hindered its prominence. The last significant exclusively maritime warfare involving airpower occurred during World War II. These factors collectively contributed to the oversight of recognizing the crucial role of land-based airpower in maritime security.

The recent consolidation of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aviation assets, encompassing fighters, bombers, air defense, and air surveillance radars, under the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) signifies a strategic shift to streamline defensive operations and synchronize all air-based maritime strike capabilities.⁶⁹ This move underscores the pivotal role of land-based air power in China's present and future regional strategies. Furthermore, it acknowledges the critical importance of airpower in controlling the aerial domain within a joint multi-domain approach, emphasizing the need to strengthen service-specific core competencies without redundancy. The expanding influence of the PLAAF, reinforced by the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), across the Indo-Pacific and IOR, will soon be complemented operationally by the growing carrier capabilities of the PLAN.

Integrating land-based air power into the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific and IOR holds significant promise for enhancing regional security dynamics, particularly in light of China's comprehensive multi-domain strategy. Neglecting this aspect would be a strategic oversight.

Addressing the challenge posed by the long-range capabilities of land-based air power can be effectively managed through enhanced cooperative interoperability and shared use of assets and bases among partners, leveraging the operational locations organized by INDOPACOM. These locations, both permanent and rotational, form clusters that enhance regional defense capabilities.⁷⁰

In the past, most regional maritime exercises in the IOR were bilateral and essentially between Navies, with the inclusion of carrier-based air assets and integral ship-borne air power elements, while regional Air Forces carried out their air exercises independently.

Traditionally, regional maritime exercises in the IOR primarily involved bilateral engagements between navies, with limited involvement of carrier-based air assets and integral ship-borne airpower elements. Transitioning toward a more integrated

⁶⁹ Asian News International, "Major Restructure Sees PLA Air Force Take Over Naval Aircraft," *Economic Times*, 16 August 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>; and Rod Lee, "PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023," China Aerospace Studies Institute, July 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁷⁰ Aquilino, "U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture."

approach that combines the strengths of land-based airpower with aerial refueling and forward-staging capabilities is essential for enhancing regional security.

Likewise, the collaborative efforts of regional stakeholders to counteract potential threats in the domains of space and cyber present significant opportunities. Adopting an inclusive, all-domain approach involving the Quad and other multilateral engagements is essential for promoting stability and security. This approach aligns with the principles of equal access enshrined in international law, emphasizing the importance of freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful dispute resolution in common spaces across sea and air domains.⁷¹ Expanding beyond existing bilateral and multilateral maritime and air exercises, joint multinational exercises that capitalize on the diverse military capabilities of all participants are crucial for enhancing security in the Indo-Pacific and IOR.

In 2018, Prime Minister Modi expressed a firm stance: “We will work with others to keep our seas, space, and airways free and open; our nations secure from terrorism; and our cyber space free from disruption and conflict.”⁷² This belief creates an opportunity to develop a novel cooperative regional security framework involving all regional stakeholders and those with vested interests. This shared vision aims to foster an Indo-Pacific that is open, stable, secure, and prosperous for all.⁷³

End Thoughts

As the world’s most populous democracy and the second-largest nation in Asia, India’s economic and rising power trajectory inevitably positions it to either compete or contend with China’s Zhōngguó dream. The legacy of unresolved border issues and past wars with China and Pakistan, who share a strategic friendship and pose threats to India’s rise, create an uncertain geopolitical future. Beijing’s ambitions and Islamabad’s economic and political instability leave India caught between continental security threats and maritime strategic interests. In the past, these two realms were mutually exclusive, but with China’s expanding territorial and maritime reach, India must now balance the sovereignty of its land borders with the freedom of seas simultaneously.

The strategic nexus between the Indian and Pacific oceans, bolstered by shared ideals with like-minded nations, lays the foundation for collective action to counter Chinese assertiveness and dominance in Asia. Unless challenged and contained, China’s ambitions will not only shape an alternative geopolitical order on its terms

⁷¹ Narendra Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue June 01, 2018” (speech, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1 June 2018), <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.

⁷² Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.”

⁷³ Modi, “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue.”

but also seek to exert influence across all domains, including space. A collaborative approach among nations committed to the security and stability of the broader Indo-Pacific region offers the most promising path forward. India's future strategic interests position it as a crucial partner in this collective and cooperative endeavor, while its unique security challenges require it to maintain readiness and flexibility.

Despite this dual challenge, the alignment of overarching ideals provides ample opportunity for India to actively engage with others in the future. Given the increasing blurring of boundaries between land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains, as well as their growing interconnectivity and interdependence, the domain-centric approach of the past will limit future outlooks and options. Effectively countering China's comprehensive security and strategic approach requires all stakeholders to leverage their respective domain strengths and adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach across multiple domains and contested spaces. 🌐

Air Marshal (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury, Indian Air Force, Retired

Retired Air Marshal Choudhury boasts over 38 years of distinguished service in the Indian Air Force (IAF), attaining the rank of three-star officer. With extensive experience exceeding 5,000 sorties on various fighter aircraft, including MiG-21 in all variants, MiG-27, MiG-29, and Sukhoi-30s, he held pivotal roles throughout his career.

Choudhury's leadership includes serving as the commandant of the Tactics and Air Combat Development Establishment (TACDE), recognized as the IAF's TOPGUN School, and fulfilling the role of air defence commander for two operational air commands. He commanded the IAF's Composite Battle Response and Analysis (COBRA) Group, assuming the responsibilities of Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Insp) at Air HQ, and serving as the senior air staff officer of the IAF's largest operational air command.

Internationally, Choudhury led the IAF in three significant exercises: Red Flag (USA), Desert Eagle (UAE), and Garuda (France). Academically, he is an alumnus of the Royal College of Defence Studies in the United Kingdom, holds a postgraduate degree in strategy and international security from King's College London, a Master of Philosophy in defence and strategic studies from Madras University, and obtained his PhD in political science from Osmania University, focusing on "Air Power as an Instrument of National Power: The Indian Context."

Choudhury contributes to education as an adjunct professor and academic mentor at the College of Air Warfare, having led the IAF's 2022 doctrine team. Additionally, he holds the esteemed title of distinguished fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, United Services Institute, and the Vivekananda International Foundation. He writes and speaks regularly on matters of strategy, security and air power. He has recently authored the book 'Indian Air Power: Contemporary and Future Challenges'. He retired from his final post as the commandant of India's National Defence College, New Delhi.