

INDO-PACIFIC REALIGNMENT: U.S. STRATEGY UNDER CHANGING LEADERSHIP AND ITS EFFECTS ON INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central focus of global geopolitics, with the United States playing a pivotal role in shaping its strategic landscape. This article examines the evolution of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy across different administrations, highlighting the elements of continuity and change. From the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" to Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" framework and Biden's enhanced emphasis on alliances, each administration has adapted its approach to address shifting regional dynamics. The article delves into the implications of these strategies for India, a key player in the region, analysing opportunities for collaboration in defence, trade, and regional stability, as well as challenges posed by strategic divergences and India's commitment to strategic autonomy. By evaluating the broader regional and global impacts, the article underscores the significance of India's role in navigating the evolving Indo-Pacific narrative and its potential to shape a multipolar order.

KEYWORDS

Indo-Pacific Strategy, Pivot to Asia, Geopolitics, India-U.S. relations, Multipolarity

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of global geopolitics, shaping strategic priorities for significant powers, including the United States. This region spans from the west coast of the United States to the eastern coastlines of Africa, encompassing vital trade routes, important waterways, and emerging economic powerhouses. Given its significance, the U.S. has steadily formulated and refined its Indo-Pacific strategy to maintain regional stability, counterbalance China's growing influence, and strengthen partnerships with like-minded nations.

Over the years, successive U.S. administrations have pursued distinct approaches to engagement in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting continuity and change in their strategic outlook. The Obama administration laid the "Pivot to Asia" foundation, emphasising diplomatic, economic, and military rebalancing towards the region. The Trump administration built on this framework but rebranded it as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), placing greater emphasis on countering China and forging stronger bilateral partnerships, particularly with India. Under the Biden administration, the U.S. has sought to deepen multilateral engagements, focusing on strengthening alliances like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and AUKUS (Australia-UK-U.S. security pact), while also integrating economic initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

For India, the evolving U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy presents both opportunities and challenges. As a key regional power, India has increasingly aligned itself with the U.S. vision for a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific while maintaining its strategic autonomy. India's participation in various U.S.-led regional initiatives, its expanding defence and economic cooperation with Washington, and its growing role in countering China's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean all underscore its strategic significance in this framework.

The term "Indo-Pacific" emerged in 2010 as a regional framework for US strategic communication during the Obama administration and gained prominence in official US discourse by 2017 under the Trump administration. This recent shift in strategic terminology is attributable to two factors: one geo-economic and the other geopolitical. The geo-economic shift pertains to the commerce volume, encompassing substantial energy flows between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The geopolitical transition pertains to the ascendance of China and India in the region. The United States has been the preeminent force in the Pacific since 1945 and significant in the Indian Ocean since the 1980s. The United States, Japan, and Australia are confronting Chinese assertiveness in the Western Pacific. Conversely, in the Indian Ocean, the United States and another significant emerging power, India, confront a growing Chinese influence. In response to this Chinese challenge, the US has formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy (Scott, 2018).

This review is important because it provides a comprehensive understanding of how the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved across administrations, highlighting both continuity in core strategic objectives, such as balancing China's rise and promoting a rules-based order, and changes in diplomatic style, multilateral engagement, and regional priorities. For India, which plays an increasingly central role in this region, analysing these shifts is essential to formulating a coherent foreign policy that balances strategic partnerships with autonomy. Moreover, in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, such a review offers valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and strategic thinkers seeking to anticipate future developments and align national interests with emerging regional dynamics.

While numerous studies have examined individual U.S. administrations' approaches to the Indo-Pacific such as Obama's "Pivot to Asia," Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," and Biden's focus on multilateralism most existing literature tends to analyse these phases in isolation or from a U.S.-centric perspective (Madan, 2020; Smith, 2022). In contrast, this review offers a comparative, cross-administration analysis with a specific focus on the implications for India, addressing a critical gap in Indo-Pacific strategic scholarship. By integrating policy continuity, shifts in geopolitical drivers, and India's evolving role within U.S. strategic thinking, this work contributes a holistic and regionally grounded perspective that complements but expands beyond existing U.S.-focused strategic narratives.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific region has been central to U.S. strategic calculations for decades, evolving from Cold War-era security arrangements to a comprehensive geopolitical and economic framework in the 21st century. The United States' engagement in the region has been shaped by military alliances, economic partnerships, and strategic competition, particularly with China. While the term "Indo-Pacific" gained prominence in recent years, the region has long been critical to U.S. foreign policy, evolving through different phases under successive administrations.

2.1. Cold War Period: Containment Strategy And Security Alliances

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific was chiefly motivated by its containment strategy against the Soviet Union and Communist China (Gaddis, 2005). The United States built a network of bilateral security alliances, referred to as the "hub-and-spokes" system, with principal allies including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia (Cha, 2016). The signing of security treaties, including the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (1951) and the ANZUS Treaty (1951), solidified America's military presence in the region.

The Vietnam War (1955–1975) marked a significant period of direct U.S. military involvement in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting its commitment to preventing the spread of communism (McMahon, 1999). However, the war's outcome led to a recalibration of U.S. strategy, resulting in the Nixon Doctrine (1969), which emphasised burden-sharing with regional allies and reduced direct U.S. military interventions (Sutter, 2018).

2.2. Post-Cold War Era: Economic Engagement and Strategic Realignment

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. shifted its focus in the Indo-Pacific from military containment to economic engagement. The Clinton administration (1993–2001) advocated for globalization and regional economic integration via institutions like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and reinforced bilateral relations with China through trade. (Ikenberry, 2008). However, concerns over China's growing assertiveness emerged with incidents like the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, prompting Washington to reaffirm its security commitments to Taiwan and regional allies (Ross, 2000).

During the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009), the Indo-Pacific strategy was largely overshadowed by the War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks. However, the U.S. maintained a strong security presence in the region, strengthening ties with India through the 2005 U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement (Tellis, 2006). This marked the beginning of a more profound strategic convergence between Washington and New Delhi.

The Obama administration (2009–2017) acknowledged the Indo-Pacific as the new centre of global power and implemented the "Pivot to Asia" plan, subsequently redefined as the "Rebalance to Asia" (Clinton, 2011). This program sought to reallocate U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic resources to the region. For India, the Pivot to Asia increased U.S.-India defence cooperation, culminating in the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signing in 2016, facilitating closer military coordination.

The Trump administration (2017–2021) introduced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, marking a significant shift from Obama's multilateral approach to a more confrontational stance against China (White House, 2017). Under Trump, U.S.-India ties deepened, particularly in the defence sector, with India being designated a Major Defence Partner and signing key agreements like COMCASA (2018) and BECA (2020) to enhance military interoperability.

The Biden administration (2021–present) has retained the FOIP framework but has placed greater emphasis on multilateralism, alliances, and economic frameworks (White House, 2022). For India, Biden's approach has reaffirmed the strategic partnership, with increased defence and technology cooperation, though concerns remain over trade barriers and U.S. policies toward Pakistan and China.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has undergone significant transformations across different administrations, reflecting both continuity and change in Washington's geopolitical calculus. While the overarching goal of maintaining regional stability and countering China's influence remains consistent, the methods and priorities have evolved from Obama's diplomatic engagement to Trump's strategic competition and Biden's multilateral cooperation. For India, these shifts have provided new opportunities for security collaboration and economic engagement, reinforcing its role as a key player in shaping the Indo-Pacific's future.

3. OBAMA'S 'PIVOT TO ASIA': STRATEGIC REBALANCING AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA

The Pivot to Asia (later reframed as the Rebalance to Asia) was a major strategic shift in U.S. foreign policy under President Barack Obama (2009–2017). This policy aimed to reposition U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic resources toward the Indo-Pacific, recognising the region's growing economic and strategic importance. The strategy was driven by the need to balance China's increasing assertiveness, reaffirm U.S. alliances, and enhance regional economic engagement (Clinton, 2011).

For India, the Pivot to Asia allowed it to deepen strategic ties with the U.S. while navigating its geopolitical challenges. India's Look East Policy (rebranded as the Act East Policy in 2014) aligned well with the U.S. objective of maintaining regional stability and fostering economic cooperation. The period saw significant advancements in U.S.-India defence relations, maritime security cooperation, and economic engagement, laying the foundation for India's role in the evolving Indo-Pacific order.

3.1. Origins and Objectives of the Pivot to Asia

The Pivot to Asia was formally introduced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a 2011 article titled *America's Pacific Century*, published in *Foreign Policy*. She outlined the key pillars of the strategy:

- **Strengthening U.S. Alliances:** Enhancing security ties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines.
- **Deepening Engagement with Emerging Powers:** Increasing diplomatic and economic relations with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam.
- **Expanding Trade and Investment:** Promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to counter China's economic dominance.
- **Advancing Military Presence:** Expanding U.S. military deployments in Asia, including the stationing of Marines in Darwin, Australia.
- **Supporting Democratic Institutions and Human Rights:** Promoting governance reforms across the Indo-Pacific (Clinton, 2011; Green, 2017).

The policy was motivated by several factors:

- The economic rise of Asia, with China's GDP skyrocketing and increasing its global influence (Ikenberry, 2014).
- There is a need to reassure regional allies amid China's territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea (Sutter, 2018).
- A strategic rebalancing from the Middle East after years of U.S. military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan (Obama, 2016).

3.2. The Security Dimension: Indo-Pacific Stability and India's Role

3.2.1 U.S. Military Rebalancing and Strategic Partnerships

As part of the Pivot, the U.S. expanded its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, including:

- Deploying 2,500 U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia, to enhance rapid response capabilities.
- Increasing freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea to challenge China's maritime claims.
- Enhancing defence cooperation with allies through joint military exercises such as RIMPAC and Malabar.

3.2.2. Strengthening U.S.-India Defence Ties

For India, the Pivot to Asia marked a transformational phase in its defence relationship with the U.S. Key agreements and collaborations included:

- 2012 U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region – A landmark statement recognizing India's role in maintaining regional security (Tellis, 2014).
- 2015 U.S.-India Defense Framework Agreement – Renewed for 10 years, enhancing military cooperation and technology sharing.
- 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) – Allowed both countries to use each other's military facilities for refueling and logistics, a crucial step in interoperability.

The U.S. also supported India's defense modernization, approving key arms sales, including Apache and Chinook helicopters and P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft, strengthening India's naval capabilities in the Indo-Pacific (Brewster, 2018).

3.2.3. Countering China's Maritime Expansion

India and the U.S. found common ground in countering China's growing maritime assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

- The Malabar naval exercises involving the U.S., India, and Japan were expanded during this period, enhancing trilateral cooperation (Scott, 2018).
- The U.S. supported India's freedom of navigation interests in the Indian Ocean, helping counterbalance China's String of Pearls strategy, which involved building military and economic infrastructure in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

3.3. The Economic Dimension: The Trans-Pacific Partnership and India

The economic pillar of the Pivot to Asia was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement involving 12 nations, excluding China.

- The TPP aimed to establish high trade standards, reduce dependency on China, and create an economic counterweight to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (Petri & Plummer, 2016).
- India, however, did not join the TPP, citing concerns over stringent labour and environmental regulations and the impact on domestic industries.
- Despite this, U.S.-India bilateral trade grew from \$40 billion in 2008 to over \$114 billion in 2016, reflecting a deepening economic partnership (USTR, 2017).

3.4. Diplomatic and Multilateral Cooperation

3.4.1. India's Role in the Evolving Indo-Pacific Order

The Pivot to Asia coincided with India's Act East Policy, leading to greater diplomatic coordination between New Delhi and Washington.

- India strengthened ties with ASEAN, supporting regional connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.
- The U.S. encouraged India's leadership in regional forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).
- In 2015, President Obama became the first U.S. President to attend India's Republic Day celebrations, marking a symbolic deepening of ties.

3.5. Challenges and Criticism of the Pivot to Asia

While the Pivot to Asia was a significant shift, it faced several challenges:

- **Inconsistent U.S. Commitment** – Critics argued that the strategy lacked long-term institutional backing and that the U.S. remained preoccupied with conflicts in the Middle East (Green, 2017).
- **China's Response** – Beijing viewed the policy as an attempt to contain its rise, accelerating Chinese militarization in the South China Sea (Sutter, 2018).
- **India's Cautious Approach** – While India engaged with the U.S. strategy, it remained committed to strategic autonomy, balancing ties with the U.S. and China (Raja Mohan, 2017).

The Pivot to Asia represented a major strategic realignment in U.S. foreign policy, reinforcing America's long-term commitment to the Indo-Pacific. The policy provided new opportunities for India to expand defence, economic, and diplomatic cooperation with Washington. Key agreements like LEMOA, joint military exercises, and maritime collaboration strengthened India's role in the Indo-Pacific. However, India maintained a balanced approach, engaging with the U.S. while preserving strategic autonomy.

4. TRUMP'S 'FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC': A SHIFT IN PRIORITIES

The Trump administration (2017–2021) introduced a significant shift in U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pacific by launching the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. This approach departed from Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' by adopting a more confrontational stance toward China, emphasizing bilateral partnerships over multilateral agreements, and prioritizing regional military and economic competition (White House, 2017).

For India, FOIP presented both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it reinforced U.S.-India strategic ties, particularly in defence and maritime security. On the other hand, Trump's **protectionist trade policies** and **withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)** raised concerns about Washington's long-term economic commitment to the region (Madan, 2020).

4.1. Origins and Objectives of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy

The term "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) was first articulated by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, emphasizing the need for rule-based order, freedom of navigation,

and economic connectivity. The Trump administration formally adopted FOIP as its core regional strategy in 2017, outlining three key pillars (Department of Defense, 2019)

1. **Promoting Economic Prosperity:** Encouraging fair and reciprocal trade, rejecting multilateral trade deals favouring bilateral agreements.
2. **Enhancing Regional Security:** Strengthening military alliances and countering China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.
3. **Advancing Good Governance:** Promoting transparency, sovereignty, and rule of law in the Indo-Pacific.

The strategy aimed to contain China's rise by challenging its economic and military expansion while reinforcing partnerships with regional powers like India, Japan, and Australia (Campbell & Ratner, 2018).

4.2. Strategic Military Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

Under FOIP, the U.S. increased military operations and defence partnerships in the region, including:

- **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs)** in the South China Sea, directly challenging China's territorial claims (Sutter, 2019).
- Expanding military bases in **Guam, the Philippines, and Australia** to deter Chinese influence (Tellis, 2020).
- Establishing **AUKUS (Australia-UK-U.S. security pact, 2021)** to enhance naval capabilities, including providing nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

4.3. Deepening U.S.-India Defence Cooperation

Trump's FOIP significantly strengthened U.S.-India defense ties, aligning with India's **Act East Policy** and broader Indo-Pacific ambitions.

Key developments included:

- **Major Defence Partner Status (2018):** The U.S. designated India a Major Defence Partner (MDP), enhancing defence trade and technology sharing.
- **COMCASA (2018) & BECA (2020):** These agreements improved real-time intelligence sharing and interoperability between Indian and U.S. forces.
- **Expansion of the Quad:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, was revived and upgraded to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.

4.3.1. Naval Cooperation and the Indian Ocean Strategy

Recognizing India's strategic role in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, the U.S. supported:

- **Increased Malabar Naval Exercises** involving the U.S., India, Japan, and later Australia.
- **Enhanced maritime domain awareness**, strengthening India's surveillance and anti-submarine warfare capabilities (Brewster, 2019).
- **Joint operations in the Indo-Pacific**, reinforcing India's role in securing sea lanes from the Strait of Malacca to the Persian Gulf

4.4. The Economic Dimension: U.S.-India Trade and Trump's Protectionism

4.4.1. U.S. Withdrawal from the TPP and India's Concerns

Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, favouring bilateral trade agreements (Blustein, 2019). This decision weakened U.S. economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific, allowing China to fill the vacuum through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Kim, 2020). Disappointed partners like India, which had been considering joining a U.S.-led economic framework but hesitated due to China's growing influence (Sahgal & Anand, 2018).

4.4.2. Trade Disputes Between the U.S. and India

While FOIP strengthened security ties, economic relations between the U.S. and India faced challenges, including:

- **Termination of India's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) benefits (2019)**, affecting Indian exports (Singh, 2020).
- **Tariff disputes** as the U.S. imposed higher tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium, while India retaliated with duties on U.S. goods (Mukherjee, 2019).
- **Disagreements over digital trade and data localization policies**, impacting major U.S. tech firms operating in India (Pant, 2020).

Despite these tensions, bilateral trade between India and the U.S. increased from \$114 billion in 2016 to \$146 billion in 2019, demonstrating economic resilience (USTR, 2020).

4.5. Diplomatic and Strategic Implications for India

4.5.1. The Quad: Strengthening Regional Multilateralism

One of the most significant diplomatic shifts under FOIP was the revival and institutionalization of the Quad:

- **2017:** Quad meetings resumed after a decade-long hiatus, signaling a renewed commitment to regional security (Madan, 2020).
- **2019:** Quad countries expanded cooperation in **infrastructure, cybersecurity, and disaster relief** (Grossman, 2021).
- **2020:** The **first-ever Quad ministerial meeting** occurred, marking its evolution into a formalized grouping (Raja Mohan, 2020).

For India, the Quad provided an alternative to China-led regional architectures while maintaining its strategic autonomy. Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific marked a shift from Obama's Pivot to Asia, emphasising hard power, bilateralism, and economic competition. For India, the strategy brought:

- Stronger defence and security cooperation, particularly in naval and intelligence domains.
- Increased Quad engagement, reinforcing India's role in regional security.
- Economic tensions, as trade disputes complicated bilateral relations.
- Concerns over U.S. commitment, given Trump's withdrawal from multilateral agreements like the TPP.

5. BIDEN'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: MULTILATERALISM AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy, introduced in 2021, emphasised restoring multilateralism, revitalising alliances, and reinforcing the rules-based international order in the region. While building upon previous frameworks like Obama's Pivot to Asia and Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Biden's approach marked a return to institutional engagement and coalition-building, aligning more closely with traditional U.S. diplomatic norms (White House, 2022).

For India, Biden's Indo-Pacific policy offered renewed opportunities for strategic convergence with Washington, especially on shared interests like maritime security, regional connectivity, climate change, technological collaboration, and China's assertiveness. The Biden administration's framing of the Indo-Pacific placed India at the heart of its strategic calculus, reflected in deeper engagement through forums like the Quad, IPEF, and bilateral defence agreements.

Strategic Vision and Key Objectives: The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, released in February 2022, articulated five core objectives (White House, 2022):

- **Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific:** Upholding sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute resolution.
- **Building Connections Within and Beyond the Region:** Strengthening regional institutions and economic connectivity.
- **Driving Indo-Pacific Prosperity:** Promoting fair trade, innovation, and economic inclusiveness.
- **Bolstering Indo-Pacific Security:** Enhancing deterrence capabilities and building resilient defence partnerships.
- **Building Regional Resilience:** Addressing transnational challenges, including pandemics and climate change.

Unlike the Trump administration's more bilateral focus, Biden emphasized multilateral forums, institutional partnerships, and shared values with regional allies and partners, including India (Campbell & Doshi, 2021).

5.1. Reinvigorating the Quad: Strategic Convergence with India

One of the most prominent features of Biden's Indo-Pacific approach was the institutional revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia:

- **March 2021:** The first-ever **Quad Leaders' Summit** was held virtually, reaffirming shared interests in a "free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific" (Quad Joint Statement, 2021).
- **September 2021:** A **physical Quad summit** was hosted in Washington, D.C., with leaders pledging cooperation in vaccines, critical technologies, climate, and infrastructure
- India was pivotal in the Quad Vaccine Partnership, which focused on the production and distribution of vaccines throughout the Indo-Pacific, integrating India's manufacturing capabilities with financial support from the U.S. and Japan, alongside logistical assistance from Australia (Madan, 2022). India acquired influence by aligning its worries against Chinese aggressiveness, especially with the 2020 Galwan Valley conflicts, which solidified India's position and aligned its China policy more closely with that of the U.S.

5.2. Defence and Maritime Cooperation: Deepening U.S.-India Strategic Ties

5.2.1. Institutional Agreements and Joint Exercises

Biden's tenure witnessed the continuation and expansion of defence agreements initiated under previous administrations. India and the U.S. have all four foundational defence agreements, LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA, and GSOMIA, creating an institutional framework for deeper military interoperability (Tellis, 2022). Joint military exercises like Yudh Abhyas, Tiger Triumph, and Malabar Naval Exercises (now trilateral/quadrilateral with Japan and Australia) became more sophisticated, with a stronger focus on anti-submarine warfare, maritime domain awareness, and interoperability in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific (Brewster, 2022).

5.2.2. Maritime Security and Indian Ocean Strategy

The Biden administration recognised India's pivotal role in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**. Key developments include:

- Enhanced **bilateral naval cooperation**, including information sharing via **BECA** and real-time maritime tracking.
- Increased U.S. support for India's leadership in regional organizations like **IORA** and mechanisms such as the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**
- Promotion of **Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)** security and opposition to Chinese attempts to dominate critical maritime chokepoints.

5.3. Economic Engagement: The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

In May 2022, the U.S. launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a significant economic initiative aiming to set new rules for trade, supply chains, digital economy, clean energy, and anti-corruption (USTR, 2022). India joined IPEF as a founding member despite opting out of the trade pillar due to concerns over market access and digital governance norms. The IPEF signifies a shift from traditional trade deals to issue-specific, modular cooperation, a model more compatible with India's cautious trade posture. It reflects Washington's attempt to reassert economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific without returning to significant multilateral trade pacts like TPP.

5.4. Technology, Climate, and Global Governance

Beyond traditional security issues, the Biden administration sought to align with India on emerging technology, climate change, and global governance. Launched the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET) in 2023, focusing on AI, semiconductors, space, and quantum tech. Strengthened the U.S.-India Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership, supporting India's renewable energy goals (White House, 2021). Collaborated with India in multilateral forums like the G20 and the UN, reflecting shared democratic values and global interests.

A renewed emphasis on multilateralism, strategic partnerships, and normative leadership marks the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. By embedding India into frameworks like the Quad, IPEF, and ICET, the U.S. has elevated the India-U.S. partnership to a global level. For India, this phase signifies a maturing strategic partnership with opportunities in defence, technology, and global governance, while also requiring careful calibration of its ties with China and Russia. Biden's strategy has thus positioned India as not just a regional power but a key pillar in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific order.

6. KEY AREAS OF CONTINUITY ACROSS U.S. ADMINISTRATIONS

Despite differences in tone, emphasis, and tactics, the Indo-Pacific strategies under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden have demonstrated remarkable continuity in several core areas. These areas reflect the strategic consensus in Washington on the centrality of the Indo-Pacific to U.S. national interests and the enduring importance of partners like India in balancing China's rise. The continuity is visible across four key domains: (1) **Strategic Convergence with India**, (2) **Maritime Security**, (3) **The Centrality of the Indo-Pacific Region**, and (4) **Support for a Rules-Based Order**.

6.1. Strategic Convergence with India

Across all three administrations, there has been a growing convergence between U.S. and Indian strategic interests. The U.S. has consistently recognised India as a key pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy, beginning with the Obama administration's support for India's rise, continuing through Trump's security-driven engagement, and deepening under Biden's multilateral diplomacy (Madan, 2020; Tellis, 2022). During the Obama administration, the U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (2015) clearly delineated mutual interests in maritime security and freedom of passage (White House, 2015). The Trump administration classified India as a "Major Defence Partner," implemented significant defence deals, and promoted enhanced cooperation with China (Pant, 2020). The Biden administration, leveraging this foundation, enhanced the connection through platforms such as the Quad and the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET). This strategic coherence has been propelled by a bipartisan agreement in Washington over India's democratic qualifications, expanding military capabilities, and regional clout.

6.2. Emphasis on Maritime Security and Naval Presence

A key pillar of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has been maritime security, particularly in countering Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Across administrations, the U.S. has prioritized Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), capacity-building with regional navies, and forward military presence (Sutter, 2019). Obama emphasised a "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific, strengthening U.S. naval deployments and participating in multilateral maritime exercises (Clinton, 2011). Trump accelerated FONOPs and encouraged naval interoperability with India and the Quad members, including expanded Malabar exercises (Brewster, 2019). Under Biden, maritime cooperation has deepened, with increased focus on shared domain awareness, joint naval patrols, and support for regional forums like ASEAN and IORA (White House, 2022). The U.S. policymakers across administrations have consistently supported India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean.

6.3. Centrality of the Indo-Pacific in U.S. Grand Strategy

Another area of continuity is the consistent geostrategic elevation of the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre of great power competition. This regional framing has largely replaced the older "Asia-Pacific" term to reflect the inclusion of India as a strategic partner and the broader geopolitical realities of the 21st-century power shift toward Asia (Campbell & Ratner, 2018). The Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" first declared that the U.S. would focus more resources on the Asia-Pacific to manage China's rise and maintain regional stability (Clinton, 2011). The Trump administration's FOIP strategy institutionalized the Indo-Pacific as the central regional framework, integrating economic, military, and diplomatic initiatives. The Biden administration retained the FOIP framework while restoring multilateralism, deepening alliances, and

introducing IPEF as an economic counterpart (White House, 2022). This continuity reflects the U.S. strategic imperative to prevent any single power, namely China, from dominating the Indo-Pacific.

6.4. Support for a Free, Open, and Rules-Based Order

All administrations have consistently endorsed a rules-based international order, democratic principles, and international law, particularly concerning maritime governance and territorial integrity. Obama frequently associated security and economic development with democratic administration and principles, especially in Southeast Asia (Obama, 2014). Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy positioned the United States as a proponent of sovereignty, transparency, and the rule of law, especially in response to Chinese expansionism. Biden expanded the narrative to include climate action, digital governance, and resilient supply chains but continued to emphasise the same foundational principles, including in the Quad joint statements and IPEF announcements (White House, 2022; USTR, 2022). While cautious about direct alignment with Western ideological frameworks, India has broadly supported a rules-based maritime order and multilateral cooperation, aligning with these themes (Madan, 2022).

7. POINTS OF CHANGE: POLICY SHIFTS AND THEIR DRIVERS

While the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has demonstrated significant continuity over the past three administrations, it has also undergone important shifts in tone, emphasis, and implementation, reflecting each administration's foreign policy ideology, strategic priorities, and global context. These changes can be analysed across several key dimensions: **(1) Ideological framing, (2) Approach to multilateralism, (3) Economic engagement, and (4) Response to China.**

7.1. Ideological Framing

Each administration has brought a distinct strategic narrative to the Indo-Pacific, shaped by its political values and worldview. Obama's "Pivot to Asia" (later rebranded "Rebalance to Asia") was framed around engagement, diplomacy, and liberal internationalism. It sought to integrate China into the existing global order while simultaneously hedging against its rise through regional alliances (Clinton, 2011; Obama, 2014). Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" marked a sharp ideological shift. The strategy was explicitly competitive, aiming to counterbalance China, strengthen sovereignty, and project American power. Trump's FOIP focused on bilateralism, national interest, and strategic realism (DoD, 2019; White House, 2017). Biden's strategy retained FOIP's core principles but re-emphasised democracy, multilateralism, and shared values. It introduced themes like resilience, inclusivity, and climate action, reflecting Biden's broader internationalist approach (White House, 2022; Smith, 2022).

7.2. Multilateralism vs. Bilateralism

A prominent point of distinction is the approach to multilateral organizations and alliances. Obama emphasized multilateral diplomacy, actively participating in ASEAN-led conferences, the East Asia Summit, and APEC. The United States also negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) for economic unity and standardization (Green, 2017). Trump abandoned many multilateral mechanisms, most notably withdrawing from the TPP in 2017. His administration preferred bilateral deals and "America First" rhetoric, viewing multilateral institutions as constraints on U.S. sovereignty (Kaplan, 2020). In contrast, Biden restored U.S. credibility in multilateral fora, reinvigorated the Quad, launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

(IPEF), and reaffirmed commitment to ASEAN centrality. The Biden administration has sought to build coalitions of like-minded democracies rather than go it alone (Campbell & Doshi, 2021).

7.3. Economic Strategy: From TPP to IPEF

U.S. economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific has also evolved in response to domestic political pressures and changing global trade dynamics. Under Obama, the TPP was the centrepiece of economic strategy in Asia, designed to set high-standard trade rules and counterbalance China's influence (Petri & Plummer, 2016). However, the agreement faced bipartisan opposition in Congress and was abandoned under Trump. Trump's approach lacked a regional trade framework, and economic tools were often used punitively, including tariffs and trade wars. His Indo-Pacific vision lacked a coherent economic pillar, creating strategic gaps. Biden attempted to fill this vacuum by launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022. Though not a traditional free trade agreement, IPEF aims to shape regional economic rules on supply chains, digital trade, and decarbonization without facing congressional approval hurdles (USTR, 2022; Mukherjee, 2022).

7.4. Approaches to China: From Engagement to Strategic Competition

The most significant transformation has occurred in the U.S. stance toward China, evolving from cautious engagement to explicit strategic rivalry. Under Obama's administration, the U.S. aimed to balance competition and cooperation, especially regarding global challenges such as climate change and nuclear non-proliferation, despite escalating tensions in the South China Sea (Clinton, 2011; Sutter, 2019). The Trump administration identified China as a "strategic competitor" in the 2017 National Security Strategy, signifying a paradigm shift toward great power competition. The Indo-Pacific became a key theatre containing Chinese military and economic influence (DoD, 2019; Tellis, 2020). Biden's policy has continued this competitive stance but emphasises building alliances and setting rules rather than unilateral pressure. His administration frames the contest as one between democracy and autocracy, with China viewed as the principal challenge to the rules-based order (White House, 2022; Doshi, 2021). This transformation reflects a growing bipartisan consensus in Washington that China represents a long-term strategic threat to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific.

8. INDIA'S ROLE IN THE U.S. INDO-PACIFIC VISION

India occupies a central and expanding position in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, emerging as a crucial strategic partner in maintaining a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based order. Over the past decade, successive U.S. administrations have deepened defence ties, promoted economic partnerships, and enhanced strategic alignment with India. India's geopolitical location, democratic credentials, and growing military capabilities have made it a natural partner for the U.S. to balance China's assertiveness.

8.1. India as a Strategic Counterweight to China

India's geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean and its growing security capabilities position it as a critical balancer to China's expanding regional footprint. For the U.S., India represents a non-ally partner that shares concerns about Chinese aggression, particularly in the Himalayas, South China Sea, and across maritime trade routes (Tellis, 2020; Brewster, 2021). The U.S. has consistently described India as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), endorsing its role in regional maritime stability. The 2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy names India a key partner and commits to "building a strategic partnership rooted in shared responsibility and

mutual trust” (White House, 2022). Following the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, defence and intelligence coordination between the U.S. and India accelerated, including enhanced real-time intelligence sharing under BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement). India’s strategic posture is not entirely aligned with U.S. containment goals, but its independent positioning increases its value as a credible and sovereign partner in the Indo-Pacific.

8.2. Defence and Security Cooperation

Defence ties have become the most robust pillar of U.S.-India engagement in the Indo-Pacific. This includes military dialogues, joint exercises, arms sales, and defence technology partnerships: All four foundational defence agreements (GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) have been signed, enabling interoperability and logistical support between the two militaries. The Malabar naval exercises, initially bilateral, now include all Quad members and symbolise growing maritime interoperability (Brewster, 2018). In 2016, India was designated a “Major Defence Partner”, allowing access to advanced U.S. military technology. The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET), launched in 2023, aims to expand collaboration in AI, quantum computing, and defence production (Carnegie India, 2023). These initiatives reflect the institutionalisation of the strategic partnership, particularly in the context of Indo-Pacific security.

8.3. India in the Quad Framework

India’s involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the U.S., Japan, and Australia exemplifies its expanding influence in regional coalition formation. Despite India’s initial reluctance, particularly following the dissolution of the first Quad in 2008, its re-engagement in 2017 signified a significant strategic transformation. The Quad has since expanded beyond military coordination to include infrastructure development, vaccine diplomacy, cybersecurity, and climate initiatives, increasing India’s profile as a multifaceted partner (White House, 2021). Shared concerns over China shape India’s commitment to the Quad, but it maintains strategic autonomy and refuses formal alliance structures.

8.4. Economic and Technological Engagement

India is also being increasingly woven into the economic and technological architecture of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, albeit with some caution and asymmetry: India did not join the TPP and has only partially engaged with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) joining three of the four pillars while opting out of the trade pillar (USTR, 2022). The ICET initiative represents a landmark step in bilateral high-tech cooperation, targeting semiconductors, space, 5G/6G, and critical minerals, crucial to the Indo-Pacific tech race (Mukherjee, 2023). The U.S. has supported India’s role in resilient supply chains, especially post-COVID, seeking to diversify away from China (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). India’s engagement in economic and tech initiatives reflects its selective multilateralism, focusing on strategic sectors where national interests and capacities align.

8.5. India’s Strategic Autonomy and Diplomatic Balancing

While India is a strong U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific, it remains committed to strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. India continues defence ties with Russia and pursues regional forums like BRICS and SCO, which do not align with the Western-led order. It has avoided taking sides in U.S.-China tensions, including over Taiwan or South China Sea disputes, preferring issue-specific cooperation. India’s position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, emphasising neutrality, underscores its non-aligned diplomatic tradition, even as its ties with the

U.S. deepen. For the U.S., India's independent foreign policy presents both a challenge and a strategic advantage it lends credibility to partnerships not seen as extensions of U.S. hegemony (Tellis, 2022).

9. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA

As India consolidates its role in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, it faces a complex set of strategic challenges and opportunities. Navigating these will shape India's regional influence, economic trajectory, and great-power status over the next decade. While the Indo-Pacific vision offers avenues for deepened cooperation, it also presents dilemmas concerning strategic autonomy, regional tensions, and economic constraints.

9.1. Opportunities

a) Enhanced Strategic Clout

India's participation in frameworks such as the Quad, iCET, and Malabar Exercises elevates its profile as a significant Indo-Pacific power. The U.S. endorsement of India's leadership role in regional security contributes to its geostrategic legitimacy (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). India's growing defence ties with the U.S. and alignment with like-minded democracies allow it to shape regional norms on freedom of navigation, maritime security, and supply chain resilience (Brewster, 2019). Quad initiatives in emerging technologies, vaccine diplomacy, and climate action enable India to project soft power alongside its hard power capabilities.

b) Access to Advanced Technologies

Through initiatives like iCET, India gains access to critical and emerging technologies such as AI, quantum computing, and semiconductors, essential for its strategic autonomy and economic modernization (Mukherjee, 2023). The U.S. commitment to defence co-production and co-development allows India to reduce reliance on Russian arms and build Indigenous capacity. Joint ventures and technology transfers can stimulate India's innovation ecosystem and attract FDI in high-tech sectors.

c) Strengthening Maritime Influence

The Indo-Pacific focus provides a strategic platform for India to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and to be seen as a regional maritime leader. Bilateral and multilateral naval exercises reinforce India's blue-water capabilities and its ability to protect sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). Partnerships with ASEAN and IOR nations under the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine align with U.S. interests, enhancing India's regional stature.

9.2. Challenges

a) Strategic Autonomy vs. Strategic Alignment

India's commitment to strategic autonomy often clashes with growing U.S. expectations for alignment, especially vis-à-vis China and Russia. India's refusal to join formal alliances and its neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine war have drawn criticism from Western partners. Balancing ties between Russia (for defence needs), the U.S. (for strategic partnerships), and China (for border stability and trade) requires nuanced diplomacy. This tightrope walk raises concerns about over-dependence on any bloc, especially when strategic interests diverge.

b) Asymmetry in U.S.-India Capabilities and Expectations

Despite deepening ties, India and the U.S. differ in their perception of threats and readiness for military cooperation. The U.S. prefers coalition-based containment of China, while India emphasizes multi-alignment and non-provocation (Tellis, 2022). India's defence spending and R&D remain limited compared to expectations for it to act as a "net security provider" (Brewster, 2021). Moreover, the asymmetry in economic and technological capacities constrains India's ability to match U.S. ambitions for the Indo-Pacific.

c) Internal and Regional Constraints

India's internal challenges, namely sluggish defence procurement, infrastructural deficiencies, and bureaucratic stagnation, constrain its strategic projection (Mukherjee, 2023). Regional challenges, such as deteriorating relations with neighbouring countries like China and Pakistan, together with internal turmoil in border areas, necessitate substantial resources and focus. The inadequacy of India's east-facing connectivity, especially with ASEAN and the Pacific Islands, obstructs its complete integration into Indo-Pacific frameworks.

10. FUTURE OUTLOOK: THE INDO-PACIFIC IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The Indo-Pacific region is poised to remain the epicentre of 21st-century geopolitics, shaped by the evolving dynamics between great powers, the rise of middle powers, and the growing salience of non-traditional security threats. As the strategic focus of the U.S. pivots more firmly to this region, the contest for influence, the redefinition of global supply chains, and the institutionalisation of mini-lateral groupings are likely to intensify (Campbell & Doshi, 202). At the intersection of these shifts, India will play a pivotal role in shaping and responding to these transformations.

Despite domestic challenges and competing global crises, the U.S. is expected to sustain its Indo-Pacific engagement through military presence, economic frameworks like IPEF, and coalition-building mechanisms like the Quad and AUKUS (White House, 2022). China's rise will continue to be the defining geopolitical force in the Indo-Pacific. Its assertive actions in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Himalayan frontier will test regional stability and provoke counter-alignments. The PLA Navy's rapid expansion, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and efforts to reshape international norms will intensify U.S.-China rivalry and polarise regional politics (Brewster, 2021). However, regional fatigue over choosing sides may lead to the rise of hedging strategies, increasing the demand for flexible, non-ideological cooperation platforms where India's non-aligned leadership model could gain traction. The coming decade will see an increasing role for middle powers India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and ASEAN states in shaping the Indo-Pacific order. These nations will promote issue-based cooperation through mini-lateral groupings such as the Quad, I2U2, and AUKUS rather than traditional alliances. India is particularly well-positioned to anchor issue-specific coalitions around technology, climate action, cybersecurity, and connectivity (Mukherjee, 2023). This rise of functional multilateralism could diversify the regional order and prevent zero-sum bipolarity.

As strategic competition intensifies, the Indo-Pacific will become a key theatre for technological decoupling between the U.S. and China. The formation of tech alliances and secure supply chains will be critical. Initiatives like the iCET and CHIPS Act will expand to include like-minded countries like India, helping to de-risk dependencies on China (Carnegie India, 2023). With its demographic dividend and growing digital economy, India will emerge as a critical partner in

building resilient value chains and democratic technology ecosystems (Mukherjee, 2023). However, India must address infrastructure, R&D, and regulatory gaps to leverage this opportunity fully. The Indo-Pacific's future will also be shaped by non-traditional threats, such as climate change, illegal fishing, piracy, and pandemics, that require multilateral and humanitarian cooperation. The Quad's focus on climate action, vaccine delivery, and disaster relief indicates a broadening agenda beyond hard security (White House, 2021). India's leadership in platforms such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) establishes it as a norm entrepreneur within this broadened security framework. India's foreign policy will persist in being characterised by a strategic equilibrium, enhancing relations with the U.S. and Indo-Pacific allies while circumventing entanglement in great power conflicts. India is unlikely to enter any formal alliance but will persist in issue-based collaboration, preserving strategic flexibility (Tellis, 2022).

India's growing stature as a middle power, strategic geography, and multi-aligned diplomacy make it uniquely suited to mediate, stabilise, and shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order. The Indo-Pacific is entering a fluid and multipolar phase, marked by the contestation of norms, institutions, and influence. This scenario gives a historic opportunity for India to promote its strategic goals without surrendering its autonomy, forge deep technology and defence relationships, and Project itself as a responsible global force capable of altering the regional order. India must invest in institutional capacity, economic competitiveness, and strategic foresight while remaining agile in its diplomatic engagements to succeed.

11. CONCLUSION

The evolution of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy from Obama's Pivot to Asia, through Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific, to Biden's emphasis on multilateralism and strategic partnerships reveals a striking strategic continuity despite shifts in style, tone, and emphasis. The region has steadily risen to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy, underpinned by concerns over China's assertiveness, supply chain vulnerabilities, and the desire to uphold a rules-based international order.

For India, this presents both opportunities and strategic dilemmas. It benefits from being a central pillar in U.S.-led Indo-Pacific frameworks, such as the Quad, iCET, and maritime cooperation initiatives, while preserving its commitment to strategic autonomy. The U.S. sees India as a natural counterweight to China, a prominent democratic partner, and a key contributor to regional stability. However, India's reluctance to join formal alliances, its continued defence ties with Russia, and its complex China relationship shape a unique and cautious engagement strategy.

The Indo-Pacific will remain the geopolitical fulcrum of the 21st century. The intensification of U.S.-China competition, the rise of issue-based coalitions, and the emergence of new security and technological domains will continue to test India's foreign policy dexterity. In this dynamic environment, India's ability to lead without aligning, to partner without being constrained, and to influence without dominating will define its strategic relevance. The Indo-Pacific is a theatre of rivalry and a space for collaborative architecture, sustainable development, and shared prosperity. India's engagement, shaped by its civilizational ethos and strategic interests, will be pivotal in shaping a multipolar, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific order.

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