



# India's Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific

PROF. SUDHANSHU TRIPATHI



## Abstract

Notwithstanding long odds posing grave challenges to the national security of the country, India's competent leadership has successfully managed to retain the core essentials of its foreign policy while addressing mammoth internal as well as external challenges in an effective way to ward off the threats posed by the emerging Beijing–Islamabad–Kathmandu axis against the country. Though countries such as China and Pakistan being unable to manage their respective internal challenges targeted India with the aim to divert popular attention from their own failures, India consistently upheld all the stated goals of its foreign policy in accordance with the underlying principles detailed therein and in the true spirit of peace, prosperity, welfare, and security of not only itself but that of all humanity—for example, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (Sanskrit: वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्)—while emphasizing the significance of peace and development with an aim to make the current century an Asian one,

which can only be accomplished through China's honest support and cooperation with India.

\*\*\*

China's mounting aggressions and rising militarist assertions in the entire Asia-Pacific, or to be more specific in the Indo-Pacific, have become a cause of grave concern not only for the states in the region but also for the whole world. China has considerably challenged the foundation of the security cover first erected after the close of World War II and later consolidated after the termination of the Cold War. In fact, the term Asia-Pacific is gradually losing its sheen due to the rising significance of a broader spectrum of international interactions, consisting of the entire Asia-Pacific together with Indian Ocean. Today the region is characterized more or less as the Indo-Pacific. Despite today's widespread use of this term, there is no agreement among scholars regarding the exact geographic contours of the Indo-Pacific. In the so-evolving scenario, the coming up of the Indo-Pacific as a new area of convergence among most international powers—while including in its fold both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean—manifests a new element in the prevailing strategic reality of the twenty-first century. Many powerful countries in the region such as Australia, Japan, and the United States consider India's role to be crucial in the Indo-Pacific, but despite India's significant presence in the Indian Ocean region, New Delhi had typically ignored the strategic interests and security concerns of maritime security prior to the current regime under Prime Minister Narendra Modi due to the colossal threats inherent to involving India in great-power competition. Hence, today the Indo-Pacific occupies a new, significant area in India's foreign policy interactions, representing a major shift in New Delhi's strategic thinking—expanding its threat perception from solely its continental borders to its maritime space.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Indo-Pacific may be conveniently defined as the sum of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. In more simple terms, the Indo-Pacific may be considered as the Asia-Pacific plus India.<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, while the mounting global spread of COVID-19 has put the whole of humanity under the gravest threat of this century with its disastrous impact on health, life, livelihoods, and the economies of countries around the globe, it has also offered wide-ranging cooperative opportunities to fight the epidemic and restore the world economy and sociopolitical order. Of course, this is a challenging task for all nations, whether big or small; it is therefore very necessary for all of them to come forward in earnest cooperation with each other,

as no country alone can fight the menace and address the consequent challenges going forward in this present era of sweeping globalization and liberalization. These challenges are mitigated by powerful and intensive information technology, which provides for satellite-based, amazingly fast international financial transactions at the click of a mouse, subsequently leading to the shedding of national barriers and increasing proximities of different nationalities and cultures toward amalgamation—paving the way for an upcoming global village. Countries such as China and Pakistan—being unable to manage their respective internal challenges due to the pandemic, including a mounting number of COVID-19 patients, economic recession, and rising unemployment, among other social and economic crises—have targeted India to divert their people's attention from their own failures to handle the crises prevailing inside their own borders. Despite this ill attention, India has consistently upheld all the stated goals of its foreign policy and continues to work with the real motivation to protect its national interests in accordance with the true spirit of peace, prosperity, welfare, and security of not only itself but all of humanity—to attain the long-cherished ideal of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (i.e., the entire world is a family).<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to political analysts, China is confronted with mounting internal threats and popular uprisings, including difficulties presented by new COVID-19 variants, prevailing economic slump, and its government's inability to address people's aspirations—instead suppressing the masses including minority Uyghur Muslims—to name only a few such issues. All these together pose serious threats to the regime of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping who has been “earnestly trying to divert the popular attention from his own follies to focus on the thorny border issue with India.”<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses on India's current foreign policy making all-out efforts to remain consistent to its proclaimed principles and goals, and to effectively counterbalance the threats posed by the emerging Beijing–Islamabad–Kathmandu axis and the challenges posed by China's mounting imperialist aggressions in the Indo-Pacific. In its introduction section the article discusses the highly tense, volatile, and insecure scenario that has emerged in the Indo-Pacific due to China's mounting transgressions, particularly around the South China Sea and against India, Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and virtually all other regional powers. In its second section, the paper analyzes India's efforts to protect its national security and territorial integrity against China's multiple intrusions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) through military options as well as diplomatic means, during perhaps the most troubled times of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic both in India and abroad. These are detailed in the next section, elaborating the recently concluded India-Australia security deal along with passing reference to the just-concluded India-Vietnam meeting, underscoring the immediate ne-

cessity of forging close strategic relations with all like-minded countries in the region—including Far Eastern states, the United States, NATO powers, and Russia—as they are all suffering from the trauma of China’s mounting imperialist aggressions in the region and also elsewhere. Further, the article discusses India’s Look East policy, reactivated as the Act East and Look West Policy, against this backdrop as well as a few other options to collectively ward off China’s imperialist aggressions and assertions in the region. Lastly, it concludes in favor of peace and development for all humanity as these have no other alternatives, underlying Indian prime minister Modi’s vision toward this end, reflected in India’s so-groomed foreign policy to make the current century an Asian one—and that demands China’s unflinching positive attitude and cooperation with India, as global geopolitics is shifting “from the West to the East.”<sup>5</sup>

The foreign policies of different countries are struggling to remain coherent and logical in the pursuit of their defined national interests, because the “success and failure of a foreign policy is largely a function of its power and the way that power is wielded. Power and its pursuit lie at the heart of inter-state relations.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the odds posing grave challenges, India’s competent leadership has successfully managed to retain the core principles of the country’s foreign policy while addressing mammoth internal as well as external challenges in an effective way, so as to project the country’s capacity to handle all challenges in a genuine and responsible manner, thereby substantiating India’s long-cherished aspiration “to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power” in the world.<sup>7 8</sup> As Prime Minister Modi holds, a leading power is a great power not only economically and militarily but also culturally, having ideational and philosophical power to contribute something new for the welfare of all humanity. Prime Minister Modi’s invocation for the country consequently offers transformative possibilities toward acquiring great power capabilities with a view to make “their procurement a formal objective of Indian national policy.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, with this view in hand, while India has successfully managed to refresh and forge close relations with all major and other regional powers including the lone super power, the United States, by revitalizing and reinvigorating its diversified relations under leadership of Prime Minister Modi, his sincere efforts to restore normal bilateral relations with China, Pakistan, and Nepal have not resulted in the desired outcomes and, instead, have gone from bad to worse. This is particularly the case as Beijing and Islamabad continue to maintain highly bitter and hostile relations with New Delhi both individually and acting in collusion, most likely with the involvement of Kathmandu and possibly Colombo in this evolving anti-India conglomeration.

## **Evolving Beijing–Islamabad–Kathmandu Axis**

There is a nascent Beijing–Islamabad–Kathmandu axis aiming to encircle and deter India with an ultimate goal to force New Delhi to submit to the emerging, hypothetical China-centric world order. Both China and Pakistan continue to be the two most urgent security concerns for India and will further complicate its security concerns with the involvement of Nepal.<sup>10</sup> China has already encircled India through its earlier String of Pearls strategy with the active support of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and other littoral states around the Indian Ocean. “Further, Beijing has also captured an area in Indian Ocean and has also established its air-strip in the Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). . . . Again India’s endeavour to claim the PoK after Pakistani Supreme Court directed to conduct elections in Gilgit-Baltistan has obviously unnerved both Pakistan and China, because New Delhi’s weather reports included PoK as part of Jammu and Kashmir.” Also, Beijing is “apprehensive because its OBOR [One Belt, One Road] grand strategy includes the whopping \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through PoK.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, China’s Strings of Pearls strategy and the OBOR grand strategy are almost like the well-crafted ploy of the East India Companies of the United Kingdom and other European powers such as France, Portugal, and the Netherlands, which traveled to India and elsewhere, targeting the weak, underdeveloped, or developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America for trade and commerce. These developing countries were blessed with abundant natural resources and large markets, but when these European trading companies established their own sovereign rule over these hapless states by force, it led to their complete subjugation and social, economic, and political enslavement. Further supported and sustained by meticulous schemes of the White Man’s Burden and divide and rule, accompanied by brutal tactics of loot, plunder, and other, worse kinds of exploitation (vividly described in famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by H. B. Stowe), this de-facto foreign rule resulted in a dark era of colonialism, apartheid, racism, interventionism, and numerous other forms of discrimination against and exploitation of these developing states by their powerful colonial masters. Thus, considering these facts, Beijing appears to have thrown its gauntlet not only upon India but upon almost all states in the region with the abovementioned narrow and selfish interests hidden in its neo-imperialist policy. India, alongside Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet, is today the worst sufferer of ongoing Chinese imperialist and expansionist designs in the region. In fact, the continuation of the almost eight month long, bloody standoff along the LAC against India obviously aims to pressure New Delhi to accede to the evolving Sino-centric international system.

## **Sino-Indian Standoff along the LAC**

“Indeed, the geopolitical dynamics of today tends to accord priority to security over development. Scholars are agreed that the pandemic, which was first detected in Wuhan, has accelerated the Sino-US tensions and created new disturbing trends in Asian geopolitics.”<sup>12</sup> Among these, the Sino-Indian standoff continues to be perhaps the most serious one. In fact, “China continues to stage a precariously tense situation against India by hugely amassing its soldiers and weapons over Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, thereby compelling New Delhi to follow suit in its own defence.” In this tense scenario one obviously gets “reminded of the turbulent days in 1962, when China had successfully stabbed into India’s back. Although such incursions by the Chinese army in the unsettled boundary zone with India are not unusual events but this time Beijing has intruded at multiple points into the Indian side, even in such areas like Galwan where, there has never been a dispute regarding” actual alignment of the LAC between the two sides. The present standoff between the two is also different from the earlier Doklam dispute in 2017 because that was confined there. Doklam is an area near the triple (please see if tri-junction is appropriate) junction of China, Bhutan, and India and stands as a disputed area between China and Bhutan. Although the ongoing face-off between India and China appears to have emerged due to differences in perceptions between them upon “the LAC, but the real Chinese intention goes far beyond that to include larger geo-political landscape,” thereby influencing the onward political course of Asia and impacting the Indo-Pacific region beyond having an intercontinental or global character involving extraterritorial powers and extraterritorial regions, thus “characterized by the mounting Sino-US tensions. In fact, by staging a long standoff over the LAC, China can use India as a perfect bait to extract tactical gains over it.”<sup>1314</sup>

Thus, China aims to threaten India away from joining the emerging anti-China global alliance comprised of the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Canada, Norway, and others. Apart from India, China continues to cast its ambitions over Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet as well, with mala fide intentions to annex them. China is also staking claim over major Russian port city Vladivostok and continues to remain at loggerheads with the United States over the South China Sea, thereby adversely affecting the peace and security of the entire Indo-Pacific. In such a precarious situation India has no option but to encircle China from all sides wherein all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, particularly Vietnam (as both India and Vietnam continue to deepen their close relationship while sharing common security concerns against China)<sup>15</sup> and Indonesia, as well as other Indo-Pacific powers such as Australia,

Japan, Russia, and the United States will prove to be very helpful as perhaps all of them are highly threatened by Beijing's militarist aggressions and assertions. The ASEAN powers are particularly concerned because China has territorial disputes with nearly all of them.

### **China's Imperialism vis-a-vis Middle Kingdom Complex**

Indeed, China's rising political and military ambitions have given reasons to the member nations of ASEAN and other littoral states in Indo-Pacific to be wary of Beijing's mounting imperialist aggressions in sea waters. Because Beijing's military power ascendance over the collective powers of all littoral states, most being smaller states—Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, or the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam—is a cause of grave concern for them and others states in the region. In this respect, there is a consensus among scholars in connection to security concerns of the smaller states that consider themselves as soft targets to arbitrary external pressures with respect to their interactions with foreign powers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, these regional states have categorically refuted China's blatant claim of the South China Sea as its exclusive sphere of influence—an imperialistic assertion—as reflected in the strong rebuttal by all nations of ASEAN from the Philippines to Taiwan, while India too has opposed this assertion. China's unresolved dispute with Taiwan is another major irritant between the two. While the earlier Kuomintang government in Taipei was friendlier to Beijing than the present one in Taiwan, the island nation continues to be a potential cause of dispute between China and the United States. Hence, ASEAN and the East Asia Summit had sought participation of the US and other powerful countries to counter China's rising influence.<sup>17</sup> With this view in hand, the United States and Russia have already joined the East Asia forum. There is no doubt that the China of today has emerged as a major contender for global influence as a result of having a deep-rooted passion for asserting itself as a responsible global player, ensuring peace and security in the world—wherein it has mostly failed due to its imperialist and expansionist policies. Also, Beijing always fails to grasp the fact that an elevation in power status is necessarily followed by sharing in global responsibility to contribute to peace and development, which must be reflected in Beijing's external behavior and intentions. But on the contrary, its deployment of forces along the LAC and around the South China Sea, as well as its regular military exercises in contested sea waters and land frontiers, are in total opposition to the established conventions, customs, and traditions of peaceful international relations—and are instead aimed at advancing Chinese interests abroad and enhancing its powerful image as a respectable member of the world. Perhaps China is still suffering from the anguish of the middle kingdom complex, despite accomplishing amazing all-round

progress. Notwithstanding these Chinese presumptions, Beijing's increasingly aggressive and reckless behavior has aroused considerable restlessness and insecurity among all peace-loving nations, including the United States and all other major and small powers around the world. To counter the Chinese expansionist policies, British prime minister Boris Johnson has called for instituting a group of ten powerful democratic nations as D-10.

### **Disturbing Geopolitical Trends**

As leading defense expert Vinod Saighal comments, it is generally "taken for granted in ASEAN and East Asia that Australia, being equally apprehensive of China's growing power," apportions their concerns and would follow the same political course.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Australia is a leading military power carrying out joint naval exercises with India, Japan, and the United States with the intent to improve interoperability among them. However, some Australian leaders believe that bilateral cooperation with Beijing should be placed upon a much stronger foundation and all eggs should not be put in the American basket. This trend cannot be dismissed out of hand. Earlier, the Australian government decided to invest five percent of its foreign exchange reserves in Chinese bonds and that, apart from strengthening the renminbi, indicated Australia's closer association with Beijing, who consequently became Canberra's top business partner ahead of Tokyo, Washington, and Seoul. In addition, strategic experts hold the view that a policy to check China's military ascendance may not be successful and Canberra must balance its defense ties with Washington by supporting Beijing's rising military might. Perhaps there may not come any sharp and sudden shift from the existing alliances or agreements, either overt or covert, but nonetheless, it would be a wise step for ASEAN and its powerful supporters to take cognizance of the prevailing realities in the region. The United States may find it difficult in coming times to carry on with the current massive military deployment, including its naval carriers on sea waters around the South China Sea, or may be obliged to reach an accommodation with China. Therefore, India must actively interact with ASEAN and all other states in East Asia apart from Japan, South Korea, and Russia and must help build up a potential defense network that may ensure free passage to commercial cargoes over maritime channels through and around the South China Sea.

### **Indian Counterefforts and China's Isolation**

In fact, the structure or framework of any country's foreign policy lies in its "regional approaches," a key element in policy that carries considerable influence



in the policy-making exercise, accompanied by the same “trait.”<sup>19</sup> This principle explains the regional ambitions and goals of India’s foreign policy against the backdrop of China’s mounting imperialist aggressions and assertions in the entire Indo-Pacific region, especially over the South China Sea, thereby exploring geopolitical factors in the context of current bilateral business cooperation and competition.<sup>20</sup> India has been making all-out efforts to reactivate its Look East Policy since the early 1990s by particularly focusing its attention over Southeast Asia and ASEAN states and the Far East as well, including the Indian Ocean region, with an intent to counter these disturbing and hostile activities continuing in its vicinity in the east and north. Ongoing Chinese armed misadventures against India, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet, alongside most of the Indo-Pacific powers such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and almost all ASEAN states have indeed prompted the United States to counter the Chinese militarist edge in the region. Ostensibly so, as Washington has its own economic and commercial interests in ensuring free and unrestrained passage through maritime channels around South China Sea, besides protecting its naval bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and elsewhere in the region. It is due to these reasons that the United States has resorted to massive deployment of its forces and hectic military exercises on the sea waters in the region for the past few months with an aim to re-establish its presence and hegemony in the entire Indo-Pacific as directly opposing China’s mammoth force deployment therein, apart from instilling a sense of security and confidence-building among other lesser states in the region.

Since the United States appeared firm to retaliate against “China’s misadventures through both diplomatic means as well as muscle-flexing tricks,” reflected in case of Tibet (as well as Hong Kong) and the South China Sea respectively, Beijing had reacted by asserting its full preparedness to meet even “worst case scenarios,” in the words of Chinese president Xi Jinping. In fact, China has selectively hit those countries that have “either raised question regarding origin of the Corona virus, as did Australia and New Zealand by supporting World Health Organization’s inspection into China’s Wuhan Lab of Virology,” or may possibly be forthcoming adversaries—especially New Delhi, Hanoi, and Manila—prepared to align with the impending US-sponsored “post-Corona global alliance against Beijing. Among these, India is obviously the most” potential warning to Beijing in the Indo-Pacific “due to its inherent moral-cultural power and significant scientific, technological and economic advancements,” achieved in the recent past thereby shaping its China policy, as Beijing perceives a threat from New Delhi and has done so historically.<sup>2122</sup> Thus the “increasing isolation of China on all global fronts due to its supposedly shady role in leaking Corona virus” has begot it “to send across a message of dominance in the larger context: South China Sea,”

Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and India, including global trade. It is against this highly tense and volatile scenario marked by the mounting Sino-US row and consequent tensions in the region that has led scholars to comment that Eastward shifting global geopolitics may ultimately converge at the South China Sea.

### **India–Australia Security Deal**

While taking cognizance of mounting threats to its national security from China and Pakistan, with whom Nepal is also colluding with a shared purpose, India has recently concluded a security treaty with Australia whereby each party can use the military, naval, and air bases of the other when required, in addition to making efforts to address the core security concerns of ASEAN and that of the Far Eastern states. Obviously, the agreement has added to India's overall strategic power in the Asia-Pacific as well as enhancing India-Australia security cooperation to counter China's increasingly aggressive and imperialist assertions in the region. This deal will obviously pave the way for more military exchanges and exercises in the Indo-Pacific between the two and can help revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) initiative (consisting of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India) that has been stalled in the air for the past few months, by including Japan as well as the United States. This initiative can be further consolidated by including Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other like-minded states in Southeast Asia, as almost all countries in the region are having border disputes with China and always remain threatened and victimized by China's reckless aggression. In fact, this endeavor can well serve to strengthen much-needed regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, which can appropriately balance the Chinese expansionist agenda in the Indo-Pacific including the Indian Ocean, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and over the LAC.

### **Options before India**

Hence India must immediately make efforts to further activate its diplomacy to forge strategic relations with all states in the Indo-Pacific, including the member states in Southeast Asia, and must also endeavor to help enlarge the scope of the recent security pact with Australia with an aim to bring the spirit of the Quad initiative into reality. Fortunately, Australia has a preexisting security arrangement with the United States since 2011 to the same end. Similarly, Japan is also upgrading its techno-economic and military profile with an aim to assert its role in the region and to counterbalance China's expansionist aggressions.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, such a strong regional security bulwark (i.e., a powerful regional security architecture cum alliance) similar to NATO is the need of the hour, which can indeed

effectively counter mounting Chinese imperialist assertions in the region. India for its part must further enhance its Look East diplomacy by forging closer economic and defense partnerships with all like-minded ASEAN and Far Eastern states, as the recently concluded India-Vietnam comprehensive relations on 25 August 2020 and prior India-Australia security deal do reflect. Further, India must not become unduly “confrontational with either China or Pakistan but consistently endeavor to become strong” to protect its “national interests defined in terms of power” and that can be considered as “the function of the material capabilities that a state possesses.”<sup>242526</sup> In the so-evolving scenario, the Indo-Pacific region “will continue to provide New Delhi an opportunity to raise its profile and secure its strategic interests, but the government must be open to new ideas and frameworks such as a burden-sharing model centered on issue-based partnerships. Such an approach will allow India to maximize its limited resources and capacities to better prepare for a new security environment. Going forward, India’s actions and deliverables in the Indo-Pacific will lay the foundation for its role in a new global security architecture.”<sup>27</sup>

### **India’s Look East to Act East and Look West Policy**

Against this backdrop, while India holds strong plans to focus on its economic ties with ASEAN and other Far Eastern regional partners, New Delhi under Prime Minister Modi has already reactivated its earlier Look East Policy into an Act East Policy to ensure better and comprehensive relations with all the members of the East Asian region, particularly in terms of strategic partnership in trade and security areas. Apart from this India has also launched its Look West Policy with an aim to forge close relations with West Asian and Gulf countries, because the region is basically an extended part of the Asian continent. Indeed, both India and the ASEAN states will benefit considerably from their emerging economic cooperation and that will be a landmark accomplishment for both in sustaining an ever-increasing multifarious cooperation, resulting in overall progress and prosperity for both sides. Again, this cooperation between the two sides will significantly strengthen their collective power and that will help them to fight the mounting terror menace, apart from various other political, social, and economic problems and challenges. Also, their collective power will restrain the external great powers from interfering in their regional or internal matters and will also emerge as a powerful regional bulwark to discourage any unwanted territorial claims, such as those by China over the South China Sea and over territories of many ASEAN nations, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, and the same holds true in the case of Japan regarding territories in the East China Sea. India’s aim to expand its Look East Policy can also be achieved through a closer relation-

ship with Vietnam and that New Delhi has accomplished, as witnessed by the recent developments in their consolidating bilateral relations.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately, a historical friendship exists between them as both nations were strong allies and coordinated their activities within the framework of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. India supported Vietnam in the latter's war against United States and Vietnam backed India in its military conflict with Pakistan in 1971.

As for Asia, Hence or Thus Indian diplomacy must focus here on the region to play a significant role as it shares the centuries-old commercial, religious, cultural, and civilizational ties through Buddhism with East Asia and it needs to be properly addressed and regularly renovated. But with the changing global order since the 1990s, India's widening trade links had led to its increasing engagement in this region known as the "Look East Policy."<sup>29</sup> The Look East Policy, which gained traction in the 1990s, in fact, constitutes India's own strategic pirouette toward East Asia after long neglect. While the great Himalayas have restricted India's geopolitical vision, it is now required to go beyond them to become a part of a larger entity consisting of not only South Asia but also East Asia as well with a view to protect its national interests through economic and security linkages in the region. Thus, New Delhi started focusing more on Southeast Asia and the Far East and has reinvigorated its Look East Policy.<sup>30</sup> Before, India had not taken interest in this region due to fierce Cold War power politics and as a result trade and economic interactions with the area were minimal. The flourishing alliance between India and Southeast Asian states becomes clearly visible through India's progressive persuasion of this policy and from the reciprocity of Southeast Asia as well. India must also engage itself with Southeast Asia for its economic prosperity as cultural and religious ties have, already, existed with this region since ancient times.

As well sustained by the historical evolution of the increasingly close interaction between India and ASEAN, there was considerable progress in the pace of interactions between both, particularly regarding infrastructure development of northeastern states in India, because India's relations with ASEAN were upgraded to a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in March 1993 in three areas—trade, investment, and tourism—and that still continues.<sup>31</sup> Due to sustained efforts by both sides, their mutual partnerships were advanced to a Full Dialogue Partnership at the fifth ASEAN summit in Bangkok in December 1995. This rejuvenated interaction between India and ASEAN, from the senior official to the ministerial level, facilitated New Delhi's admission to the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference held at Jakarta in July 1996. In this Post Ministerial Conference, ASEAN and Indian ministers designed a framework of areas for extensive cooperation, such as infrastructure, human resource development, science and technology, and tour-

ism. The former prime minister of India, I. K. Gujral commented that India's Full Dialogue Partnership status was, in fact, a veritable gateway to India's enterprising participation in other regional groupings such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and Asia-Europe meetings.<sup>32</sup> The deepening cooperation between India and ASEAN paved the way toward the consolidation of not only their economic relations but also their security relations as well, which ensured India's entry into the ASEAN regional forum (ARF) in 1996. The ARF is an important platform for security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region where global and regional security issues along with disarmament and nonproliferation matters are being nurtured.

The increasing involvement of India in the strategic deliberations of the Asia-Pacific region underscores its rising inclination toward the goal of stable regional peace and security, which requires all-around strategic cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. At the same time, India has maintained good relations with Japan and Australia for consistently upgrading its techno-economic progress in the age of increasing digitalization and evolving artificial intelligence against the backdrop of sweeping globalization and liberalization. Both nations are parliamentary democracies, which makes Australia India's natural ally, which is not far from truth as both Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and Australian prime minister Scott Morrison are close friends indeed. In the Indian Ocean, including the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere, India can enjoy good cooperation with Australia as well as Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States. Further, Indian diplomacy must continue focusing on the East to play an important role in Southeast Asia as it shares a centuries-old commercial, religious, cultural, and civilizational tie with the region's countries through Buddhism. That tie needs to be properly addressed and regularly reinvigorated. Fortunately, India's earnest and hectic endeavors toward this end, including its own military muscle-flexing against the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the LAC, have indeed resulted in exerting enough pressure on China to mend its fences with India.

As a result, China has also come to understand the inherent message of the India-Australia security deal and is finding itself increasingly isolated, with an impending international probe regarding its complicity regarding COVID-19. Given all these external and internal pressures on China, compounded with India's bold and tough stand asking for immediate status-quo-ante at all points in the eastern Ladakh and elsewhere over the LAC, Beijing has been left with no option but to crumble. Recently, Indian forces have moved ahead from many forward positions along the LAC to repel the PLA and to secure the ridgeline in the Chushul subsector that allows India to capitalize on the tremendous strategic and tactical importance of the Chushul bowl, including Thatung's Helmet Top

and Black Top, Gurung Hill, Magger Hill on the Indian side, and Moldo sector on the Chinese side hitherto under Chinese control since 1962.<sup>33</sup> All these recent tactical gains have put the Indian army in a strong position and that has embarrassed China to a significant extent, as reflected in Beijing's conciliatory tone and gestures as it harps over peace and bilateralism.

## Conclusion

The maritime space continues to be a critical aspect regarding influencing regional dynamics and contributing to the evolution of a powerful security bulwark. Great-power competition is no different.<sup>34</sup> Evidently both New Delhi and Canberra emphasized this fact that “many of the future challenges are likely to occur in, and emanate from, the maritime domain underlining the reemergence of the maritime space as the theater for geopolitical competition.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, India has now decided to play a crucial role in the Indo-Pacific despite continuing to face tremendous challenges from China and Pakistan along the LAC and Line of Control (LOC) respectively, with the possible involvement of Nepal as well. And that demands a two-pronged strategy: first, greater arms buildup by earmarking massive investment in the defense sector accompanied by ever-continuing modernization combined with dynamic and vibrant research and development and second, rejuvenating the national economy to attain a two-digit annual growth rate of the gross domestic product, with consistent efforts to reduce the consistently hiking fiscal deficit through curtailing nonplan expenditure. In the so-emerged grim scenario, the mounting insecurity across the entire Indo-Pacific due to China's transgressions demands India's sincere efforts to contain Beijing's rising imperialism in the region through evolving a megaregional security architecture by expanding the scope of the Quad to include South Korea, Russia, ASEAN states, and all littoral states around the Indian Ocean as well as other major and smaller nations in the region. Further, India must come forward to play the role of net security provider in the region as desired by the ASEAN powers. To this end, New Delhi must discontinue its long couched stand occasionally labeled as “strategic restraint,” as reflected in its hesitation or aversion to use military “hard power” to pursue its foreign policy goals—which superpowers such as the United States, Russia, Israel, and China openly use—thereby allowing India to assume powerful status in the prevailing world order.<sup>36,37</sup> Such a hesitant attitude will obviously belittle India's foreign and security policy.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately, Prime Minister Modi's call for *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, aimed at enhancing resilience through self-reliance and human-centric globalization, is to become the basis for India's economic revival and sociopolitical stability and consolidation, and his continuing emphasis on *Swadeshi*—production and usage—by all countrymen, including

stress on “think global, act local,” alongside speedy modernization of India’s military power, are indeed the defining goals that will definitely boost the morale of the country to attain his further goals—India First, India Shining and Digital India—on the global stage.<sup>39</sup> To this end, India must initiate a meaningful agenda of forging close strategic relations with all like-minded powers in the Indo-Pacific region, with express aim to encircle China from all directions, in addition to procuring state-of-the-art weapons and military gadgets for rapidly upgrading and consolidating its military power. Purchasing of five Rafael advanced fighter planes from France, an advanced radar system from Israel, and an S-400 missile attack defense system from Russia, in addition to other military hardware being procured from different sources are the commendable efforts toward this end—combined with continuously striving for indigenous production of all these military necessities. Also New Delhi must procure bigger warships cum supercarriers like the USS *Nimitz*, *Carl Vinson*, or *George Washington* to strengthen its naval presence in the region. Relations with Israel, France, America, and Russia remain very pertinent in this context and that must be further strengthened and diversified.

China must be convinced that peace and development have no substitutes; these twin goals must not be compromised for sake of false pride and the self-gratifying chimera of defeating India in a war, should such a conflict break out. Also, China must not forget that today’s India is totally different from that of 1962 in terms of military power and socioeconomic potential. Further, India’s massive deployment of the armed forces along the LAC with a rising number of heavy artillery, tanks, and other advanced gadgets, including fighter planes that regularly patrol over the frontier, have significantly challenged the Chinese forces and caused them to withdraw from their forward posts along the LAC, while Indian forces continue to repel or kill terrorists on the LOC against Pakistan for the past several decades. Indeed, India’s force presence has evidently led Beijing to moderate its aggressive tone against India, as reflected in the Chinese official newspaper *Global Times* wherein it has expressed the necessity of bilateral discussion to resolve the ongoing standoff, as well as asking for delineation of the LAC between the two neighbors. At the same time, India must not forget that Beijing is a highly unreliable and dishonest military power; and as several rounds of earlier military and diplomatic talks with it have not yielded any positive result, New Delhi must therefore maintain all precautions and the utmost military preparedness over the LAC to protect its frontiers in all circumstances. Further, while China shows its intention to have talks with India to resolve the border issue it, at the same time, sends its army to intrude into the Indian side of the LAC and is also not retreating from the much-disputed point Pangong-Tso. Hence, in the evolving new world order marred by the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic and

China's militarist expansions, the Sino-US partnership will become as pivotal as the Anglo-US had been throughout most of the twentieth century. In fact, both India and China can contribute immensely to the peace and security of this region, and to the overall progress and prosperity of East Asia, including peace and security of the entire Indo-Pacific and beyond, as they share the same vision toward the region as a whole. But what is very much needed is honest intentions and sincere efforts by China to collaborate with India to this end. Evidently, the present century will certainly be Asia's, if China honestly cooperates with India alongside Japan and all other ASEAN and East Asian powers with an aim to carefully manage the essential imperatives of global geopolitics in their favor, just as Europe did during the years after the Second World War. As clearly visible, India's foreign policy stands well-groomed for this goal under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership to achieve economic growth and all-around social and political development not only of India alone but also that of the whole world, thereby truly reflecting the spirit of *vasudhaiiva kutubakam*. Now it is for China to decide as to which side it prefers: that of peace or hegemonic expansionism. But goodness always prevails. This is possible as *nothing is beyond human endeavor*. ❧

**Prof. Sudhanshu Tripathi**

Dr. Tripathi is a former professor of political science with the Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagaraj (Allahabad), India.

**Notes**

1. Darshana M. Baruah, "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Executive Summary, 30 June 2020.
2. Rajiv Bhatia, "India and ASEAN in a VUCA (Vulnerability, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) World," Indian Council on Global Relations, Gateway House, Weekly Briefing, vol. 9, Issue 36, 10 Sept. 2020.
3. Shekhar S. Chandra, "Sino-India Relations," *Antioch Review* 20, no.3 (1960): 296.
4. Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Analysing Sino-Indian Standoff," *Daily Excelsior*, 8 June 2020.
5. James F. Hoge Jr., "A Global Power Shift in the Making," *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2004.
6. Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Foreign Policy and China," *Strategic Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2006): 760–80.
7. Sudhanshu Tripathi, *India's Foreign Policy: Dilemma Over Non-Alignment 2.0* (New Delhi: Sage, 2020), p. 26.
8. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, "IISS Fullerton Lecture," speech presented at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore, 20 July 2015.
9. Ashley Tellis, "India as a Leading Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/>.
10. Jagannath P. Panda, *China's Path to Power: Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition* (New Delhi: Pentagon Security International, 2010).
11. Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Analysing Sino-Indian Standoff," *Daily Excelsior*, 8 June 2020.



12. Rajiv Bhatia, "India and ASEAN in a VUCA (Vulnerability, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) World," Indian Council on Global Relations, Gateway House, Weekly Briefing, vol. 9, Issue 36, 10 Sept. 2020.
13. Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Analysing Sino-Indian Standoff," *Daily Excelsior*, 8 June 2020.
14. Jagannath P. Panda, *India and China in Asia: Between Equilibrium and Equations* (London: Routledge, 2019).
15. Pillai Rajeswari Rajgopalan, "India-Vietnam Relations: Strong and Getting Stronger," *The Diplomat*, 28 Aug. 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
16. M. F. Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science* 25 (1995): 171–271; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001): 57–60; Mughanda Muhindo and Gaetano Calenzo, "Neorealism and International Subsystems of Small States: Insights from Sub-Saharan African Countries' Interactions," *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 1, no. 2 (Nov 2011): 148–160; Sten Rynning and Jens Ringsmose, "Why Are Revisionist States Revisionist? Reviving Classical Realism as an Approach to Understanding International Change," *International Politics* 45, no. 1 (2008): 19–39; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965); Nikolaos Zahariadis, "Nationalism and Small-State Foreign Policy: The Greek Response to the Macedonian Issue," *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 647–68.
17. Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Military Threat from China: Is the World Fearful," *Election Review*, 29 Nov. 2011, <http://theelectionreview.com/>.
18. Vinod Saigal, "Multipolarity in East and Southeast Asia: Can India Provide a Balance," *World Affairs* 17, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 2013).
19. Anant Mishra, "Assessing the Paradigm Shift in India's Foreign Policy: Abandoning the Traditional Approach?," *South Asia Journal* 23 (Winter): 95–97.
20. Young-Chan Kim, *China-India Relations: Geo-political Competition, Economic Cooperation, Cultural Exchange and Business Ties* (New York: Springer, 2020).
21. Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Analysing Sino-Indian Standoff," *Daily Excelsior*, 8 June 2020.
22. Krishan Anant, *India's China Challenge: A Journey through China's Rise and What It Means for India* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2020).
23. Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Foreign Policy and China," *Strategic Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2006): 760–80.
24. J. S. Bajwa, "India's Foreign Policy Dilemma," *Indian Defence Review* 29, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 2014).
25. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
26. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001): 57–60.
27. Darshana M. Baruah, "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Executive Summary, 30 June 2020.

28. Pillai Rajeswari Rajgopalan, "India-Vietnam Relations: Strong and Getting Stronger," *The Diplomat*, 28 Aug. 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
29. Sanjaya Baru, "Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 26 (June 2002).
30. Rajiv Sikri, "India's 'Look East' Policy," *Asia-Pacific Review* 16, no. 1 (2009): 131–45.
31. Sameer K. Das, "India's Look East Policy: Imagining a New Geography of India's North-east," *India Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Dec. 2010): 343–57.
32. I. K. Gujral, "A Foreign Policy for India," Ministry of External Affairs, 1998, 74–75.
33. M. G. Sharma, "In India-China Border Standoff in Ladakh, Why Chushul Sector is Critical," *Indian Express*, 13 Sept. 2020.
34. Darshana M. Baruah, "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Executive Summary, June 30 June 2020.
35. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia," 4 June 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/>.
36. Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 2–16.
37. Ashley J. Tellis, "India as a Leading Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April 2016 <http://carnegieendowment.org/>.
38. Harsh V. Pant, "Indian Foreign Policy and China," *Strategic Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2006): 760–80.
39. Shubhajit Roy, "With Eye on Indo-Pacific, India, Vietnam to Enhance Cooperation," *Indian Express*, 26 Aug. 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in this article are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers.