

# India and the Indo-Pacific Challenges and Opportunities

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“Light gains make heavy purses” is a quote from *Eastward Ho*, an early Jacobean-era stage play written by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston. Though E Sridharan’s edited volume *Eastward Ho? India’s Relations with the Indo-Pacific* has nothing to do with the 17th century satirical play of Chapman et al, the implication of the quote is clear enough: small steps fetch big gains. Plausibly, Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical expanse with both economic opportunities and strategic challenges, and how an emerging power like India can gain a foothold in this terrain is a critical question.

Indo-Pacific is a newly reconceptualised entity in international relations—encompassing the vast maritime space

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covering the Indian Ocean, the littorals of East Asia and the Western Pacific Ocean. Sridharan presents the volume in the context of varied geopolitical and geoeconomic realities in the Indo-Pacific. A running theme of the essays in the volume is China’s rise as a major power and the United States (US) rebalance towards the Indo-Pacific. Sridharan places two major questions for in-depth analysis and the essays in subsequent sections deal with different aspects of these questions. In his introductory chapter, Sridharan seeks to analyse the strategic

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fallout of the Asian economic integration and the economic consequences of the lack of a security consensus for Asia. This obviously has implications for India’s relations with a range of actors in the Indo-Pacific. Sridharan says that over the years, the Indo-Russian arms deals did not bother the US. There was a decline in the US’s closeness to Pakistan also, even as India was becoming a strategic partner of the US. The validity of this argument seems to be debatable today with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. According to him, while India’s quest for security against the Sino-Pak strategic ties continues, it also aspires to become a major power in the world, besides seeking to ensure its strategic autonomy.

## China’s Rise

In the context of China’s emergence as a major power in the Asia-Pacific region, the US is determined to offset the strategic tilt with Russia drawing closer to China. The scenario assumes a geopolitically sensitive dimension today after

the outbreak of the Ukraine war. India may consider status quo maintenance in global affairs. Sridharan's view holds relevance here when he says that "India would make independent decisions" in global fora "depending on how national interest is defined from situation to situation, that is, retain its autonomy on such issues." Curiously, he also foresees a scenario when Russia–China relations grow stronger "given Russia's frozen relations with the West, following the Crimea/Ukraine crises of 2014." This obviously has far-reaching implications today with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Discussing the various dimensions of the evolving Asian security architecture, Swaran Singh says that China's rise is the "strongest single catalyst for most new initiatives and visions of various stakeholders." Singh also suggests that India must "build bridges with its immediate neighbours to make sure that under ideal circumstances, the smaller neighbours are willing to be 'the first line of defence for India.'" However, he admits that this would be a long-term challenge for India.

Though China figures prominently in all sections, the chapter on Chinese perceptions is important. While India's bilateral trade with China was growing apace, security concerns also began to persist between the two countries. After the Doklam episode in 2017, a change in perceptions was underway that culminated in the Galwan conflict. Since then, a downward trend has been visible in Sino–Indian relations. Srikanth Kondapalli explains the Chinese perception of India, putting in place the interdependence/conflict scenario. Even as interdependence has grown apace, territorial dispute has also emerged afresh with Galwan conflict posing new challenge to the conflict management options.

H S Prabhakar sees the maritime domain as a potential area of India–Japan collaboration. This is quite significant at a time when Japan is exploring an Asian architecture independent of Washington. Prabhakar also outlines the contours of economic cooperation with India's human resource assets and Japan's technological capability. Similarly, in East Asia, India's relations with South Korea cannot be understood without considering the

potential and limits of each in the spheres of technology, market, and labour. South Korea sees India as a huge market, source of raw materials and cheap labour, as well as a major connecting link between Southeast Asia and West Asia. Hence, it is eager to get sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean through maritime collaboration with India. According to Vyjayanti Raghavan, a strategic cooperation between India and South Korea has also become important with the emergence of the Pakistan–China–North Korea nexus. While charting out the areas of collaboration, she also pointed out the growing trade deficit between India and South Korea and the imperatives of sorting out issues.

It may appear strange that the Himalayan region also figures in the Indo-Pacific entity. This is primarily due to the geopolitical proximity of two Asian giants whose sensitive territorial boundary (LAC) intersects in the Himalayan region, where Nepal and Bhutan are bound by India and China. Sangeeta Thapliyal focuses on the trajectory of India's relations with Nepal and Bhutan. She has shed sufficient light on important issues in India's handling of the two small states in South Asia, particularly against the backdrop of China's growing interest in the region as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

### South and South-east Asia

Similarly, P Sahadevan underlines the fact that India cannot ignore its interests in Sri Lanka nor can it sidestep issues between India and Sri Lanka. He argues that furthering Indian interests is part of its larger Asian strategy. Insofar as perception and image are crucial factors, Sahadevan broadly discusses how Colombo and New Delhi perceive each other in the context of domestic and bilateral issues. Some of the major observations made by Sahadevan carry considerable weight today even as Sri Lanka is undergoing a terrible economic crisis. The Chinese factor in the crisis was also foretold when he discussed issues related to Chinese investment and aid policies in Sri Lanka.

Shibashis Chatterjee argues that "power asymmetry" causes difficulties in India–Bangladesh relations and that geopolitics is vital insofar as Bangladesh is

"India-locked." However, according to him, the "ultimate challenge for India–Bangladesh relations is to move away from geopolitical determinism towards human security and economic prosperity." Chatterjee also says that the relations "involve the complex dynamics of China and several southeast Asian states." He further argues that "at least in the short run, economic cooperation needs to be the dominant driver of policy as strategic depth requires sufficient material and symbolic power." Shankari Sundararaman analyses the changing dynamics of India–Myanmar relations in the context of domestic, bilateral and regional developments. Discussing the growing role of China in Myanmar, Sundararaman says that it is "critical to India's security concerns," particularly when Beijing is seeking "access to the Indian Ocean through an overland transit route via Myanmar." The essay also underlines the significance of the plight of the Indian community in Myanmar, which includes as many as four lakh stateless people of Indian origin, besides the critical issues of the Rohingyas. Sundararaman also offers an essay in the next section dealing with India–Indonesia relations. Indonesia is India's one of the largest trading partners in the region, but relations remain at a low-key level. The spirit of Bandung no longer exists except in a rhetorical fashion.

Part IV of the volume offers six essays dealing with India's relations with countries in South-east Asia—Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. According to Lawrence Prabhakar, Singapore is a major player in the transformative process of economic and security policy restructuring in the Asia-Pacific. Since India's passage to the Asia-Pacific transits Singapore (through the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea), and its economic pathways are routed through Singapore, the two countries must strive for economic and strategic consensus which is important for peace and stability in the region. Reena Marwah also makes a similar argument in respect of Thailand and the Philippines, other key players in the ASEAN. However, Marwah pointed out that despite the vast areas of shared interests, relations with the Philippines remain more or less

“unexplored and reflect a lack of informed knowledge about one another.” India’s total trade with the Philippines is one of the lowest in the ASEAN.

Baladas Ghoshal provides a broader canvass in understanding India–Vietnam relations, and he underlines how the two countries with profound strategic and political linkages remain cautious of the role of China. Ghoshal says that from the point of view of energy security, Vietnam is so crucial as it has offshore oil deposits that “offer opportunities for exploration and eventual supply to India.” However, Beijing’s perception of India’s Act East Policy appears to be antagonistic insofar as “New Delhi asserted its rights in the international waters of the South China Sea and deepened its engagement with Hanoi.” However, he admits that neither India nor Vietnam “can afford to have an open conflict with China and would like to avoid provoking Beijing.” Ghoshal also discusses India’s relations with Malaysia in another essay and says that there are several areas of agreement and disagreement. The disagreements have largely emerged in the context of the recent overtures with regard to Kashmir and the emerging ties with

Pakistan. Some bilateral issues have also developed lately as a consequence of Malaysia’s unwillingness to comply with New Delhi’s request for the formal extradition of Zakir Naik, whose preaching in India amounted to urging Indians to join terror outfits.

### **Geopolitical Coordinates**

Indeed, the Indo-Pacific as a trans-regional entity has wider geopolitical significance in the context of the Eastward containment strategy set in motion by the us and its allies. Countries like Japan, Australia, and the us are the prominent players in this strategic theatre and they are set to offer strategies to contain China, both economically and militarily. India has already joined this new containment project by becoming a major partner in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and one of the primary objectives of the QUAD is to work for a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. Though Sridharan’s volume does not have very specific essays dealing with these larger geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives of the Indo-Pacific project, almost all chapters make references to these aspects in one way or

the other. The volume is comprehensive, insightful and thought-provoking from the point of view of India’s foreign policy challenges and opportunities. However, insofar as the geopolitical entity of Indo-Pacific is a vast stretch of countries and regional and sub-regional organisations, India’s expanding ties with them require patience and perseverance.

Today, several assumptions in respect of the rise of China are revisited against the backdrop of the Ukraine war. Though China’s ascendancy has not been disputed yet, the rise of Russia with a military prowess has become a factor to be reckoned with in global negotiations. The us and its allies are now in a frantic mood to isolate Russia, but they are equally apprehensive about a new power configuration emerging with Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey pulling their strategic games into an antagonistic mode vis-à-vis the West. Evidently, India is cautious in its diplomatic responses and careful in its political positions across the world fora.

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