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# India as an Asian Middle Power: Between Pragmatism and Regional Balance



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## 1. Introduction

Asia, the dynamic epicenter of contemporary economic power, has also become the primary stage for the consolidation of middle powers on the global scene. Countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, and Saudi Arabia stand out as prominent examples of states that embody this status.

India, the world's most populous country, is emerging as one of Asia's foremost powers, driven by sustained economic growth that today positions it as the fifth-largest economy globally<sup>1</sup>. The country is solidifying its role as a key player in international affairs, shaped by its socio-historical context, regional dynamics of competition and cooperation, and a fluctuating global order that directly impacts the projection and configuration of its foreign policy.

India occupies a distinctive position among the array of middle powers—distinguished by its exceptional attributes—while remaining short of achieving the status of a great power, a position that continues to elude New Delhi. According to Sridharan (2017, p. 56), “India is neither a great power nor a minor power; however, it is one that cannot be overlooked, and in this sense, fits the broader definition of a middle power.” Similarly, Kukreja (2020) argues that despite India's considerable military and nuclear capabilities, it lacks the capacity for global military intervention, does not exert decisive dominance over its own region, nor does it have the

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of nominal GDP, India reached \$3.54 trillion in 2023, narrowing the gap with Japan (\$4.21 trillion) and Germany (\$4.45 trillion) (World Bank, 2024).

ability to shape the global economic or military system. Nevertheless, its vast size, strategic geographic location, growing centrality in the Indo-Pacific, and increasing economic influence define it as a middle power with global reach, though still without the status of a great power.

The external context, both regional and global, plays a decisive role in shaping India's behavior as a middle power and in its extraregional ambitions. The most significant external factor influencing Indian foreign policy is the intensifying competition between China and the United States, with one of its primary arenas being the Asia-Pacific—or Indo-Pacific—region. The structural pressures arising from this rivalry have compelled India, along with other regional states, to recalibrate its foreign policy in response to this evolving geostrategic landscape (Boon & Teo, 2022). India's approach reflects a strategy of strategic balancing between the two powers (Rajagopalan, 2020; Kukreja, 2020), aligning with the dominant trend among Asia's middle powers (Boon & Teo, 2022).

To understand India's current status in international affairs and the key pillars of its foreign policy, it is essential to examine the concept of a middle power and its application to the Indian context. As analyzed below, India stands out as a middle power through its increasing global prominence, evident in its active engagement in multilateral forums and its capacity to serve as a bridge between major powers. The redefinition of regional boundaries through the Indo-Pacific framework has been instrumental in consolidating India's role not only as a regional power countering China but also as a pivotal actor in shaping a rules-based order in this strategically significant region.

Nevertheless, New Delhi's role in the regional arena is marked by a certain ambivalence. While India's material capabilities firmly establish it as a significant power in the Asia-Pacific and on the global stage, its regional leadership remains constrained. The deep economic interdependence with China discourages the articulation of a clearly defined strategic policy, aside from the unprecedented rapprochement with Washington that has been a hallmark of Modi's diplomacy.

In this article, we analyze India's foreign policy under the premise that, despite its undeniable material conditions—economic, demographic, and geographic—its foreign policy behavior continues to align with the status of a middle power. Beyond the declared ambitions of various officials in Modi's administration, India's actions maintain the stance of a global balancer, characteristic of middle-tier powers. Furthermore, despite the U.S. push to elevate India's regional role, the prioritization of continuity, efforts to manage tensions with China, and the country's persistent and multifaceted internal challenges continue to position India in a secondary role within the region's strategic landscape.

## **2. Is India a Middle Power? Definition, Aspirations and Constraints**

Understanding India's role within the complex Asian landscape begins with the concept of a middle power. Unlike globally recognized middle powers such as South Korea (Karim, 2018), India does not self-identify as a middle power in its official statements or foreign policy frameworks. On the contrary, official rhetoric, parti-

cularly since the early years of Narendra Modi's leadership, reflects ambitions for global leadership that go beyond the traditional scope attributed to middle powers.

Modi's leadership introduced a heightened level of activism and visibility to India's foreign policy and redefined the country's self-perception on the global stage. In early 2015, the Prime Minister challenged senior diplomats to help position India as a global leader, rather than merely a balancing force in international affairs (Tellis, 2016). A few months later, India's then Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar, echoed these ambitions when he remarked: "Are we content to simply react to events, or should we seek to shape them more, even lead them at times? Should we remain a balancing power, or aspire to be a leading power?" (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2015).

However, India's elite aspiration to achieve global leadership remains distant, both in terms of capabilities and regional positioning. Despite its distinctive attributes, India today continues to be a middle power. The concept of a middle power encompasses a broad range of characteristics, both material and ideational, that help define a diverse group of states. According to one of the most widely accepted definitions in international relations, "middle powers are states that are neither great nor small in terms of power, capacity, and international influence, and tend to promote cohesion and stability in the global system" (Jordaan, 2003, p. 165).

This condition implies that middle powers have limited material capabilities compared to great powers in global politics, which significantly restricts their ability to independently influence key regional or global agendas or conflicts (Wang & French, 2013). In terms of autonomy, middle powers enjoy greater flexibility than smaller states because they face fewer structural constraints. However, they lack the ability to exercise coercive diplomacy and therefore tend to prioritize cooperative mechanisms in their foreign policy. In doing so, they also contribute to institution-building and the reinforcement of international norms (Easley & Park, 2017).

In light of these definitions, India falls within the broad and diverse category of middle powers, though it harbors a clear—yet still unrealized—ambition to emerge as a global leader (Sridharan, 2017). In this transition from a balancing role to one of leadership, with the ability to shape elements of the international system to align with its own priorities, India's foreign policy has increasingly evolved into a more explicit instrument in advancing the country's domestic interests, primarily focused on economic development.

This pragmatic approach to foreign policy, in contrast to the more idealistic stance of previous periods (Bhattacharya, 2023; Miller & Sullivan de Estrada, 2017), is closely aligned with the multidimensional "Vision India 2047" initiative (also known as Viksit Bharat@2047). This initiative provides a comprehensive framework aimed at transforming India into a developed nation by the centenary of its independence. The vision encompasses various dimensions of development, including economic prosperity, social equity, environmental sustainability, and effective governance. It reflects a pivotal moment in India's trajectory, emphasizing the need for holistic growth that not only meets global standards but also addresses the country's internal challenges.



Domestic development priorities have laid the foundation for a redefinition of India's foreign policy, which over the past 15 years has been characterized by a closer alignment with the United States, the expansion of strategic partnerships, greater activism in global and regional multilateral forums, and the active promotion of strategic relationships with U.S.-aligned countries. To better understand these adjustments in India's foreign policy, we will first examine the definition of the Indo-Pacific region, the role of U.S. policy, China's expanding influence in the region, and the resurgence of the QUAD as key external factors shaping New Delhi's foreign policy since 2014.

### **3. The Reconfiguration of the Asian Landscape: The Indo-Pacific as a Platform for India's Role**

Understanding India's foreign policy and its current position as a middle power in the intricate Asian landscape requires an examination of how the region has been reshaped over the past two decades. Central to this transformation is China's consolidation as both a regional and global power, driven by the expansion of its economic, political, and military influence. Equally significant has been the array of U.S. policies and initiatives aimed at reaffirming its role as a major power in Asia, in response to the shifting regional power dynamics.

Among the processes that contributed to India's redefinition as an Asian power, the expansion of China's presence was perhaps the most decisive. In response, the United States was compelled to reaffirm its position in the region, which led to the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, introduced in 2010 during the Obama administration. Concerns over Beijing's growing influence in the South China Sea and its strengthening position as a regional power, combined with the Obama administration's perception of waning U.S. leadership in Asia (De Castro, 2013), prompted this new strategic approach, marking the beginning of a more comprehensive and sustained policy in the region.

Gradually, the relationship between Washington and Beijing adopted an increasingly competitive tone, with the Asia-Pacific region emerging as the primary stage. U.S. sought to reaffirm its presence, not only through unilateral actions but also by strengthening its ties with like-minded countries in the region, all within the context of a broader conceptual reconfiguration of the Asian geopolitical landscape: The Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific emerged as a geopolitical category, positioning India at the center of Washington's Asian policy in an unprecedented way. This region, defined by the U.S. National Security Strategy as extending from India's western coast to the western shores of the United States (Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada, 2018), has become the cornerstone of renewed American strategic activism in the region. Since its strategic conception, the Indo-Pacific has gradually gained prominence in the foreign policy lexicon of several countries, particularly Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, since 2010.

In 2007, Japan's then Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, introduced the concept of the Indo-Pacific to the Indian Parliament, as part of his vision for freedom of the seas

and prosperity. The idea of a “broader Asia” (Abe, 2007), positioning Japan and India as democracies anchoring the two ends of this strategic space, signaled a clear intent to counter China’s growing dominance in the Asia-Pacific region by fostering closer ties between these two regional powers and incorporating India into this geopolitical framework. Australia later became the first country to formally adopt the concept in a government policy, embedding it in its 2012 White Paper (Parry, 2022).

Two initiatives intertwined with this reconceptualization of the Asia-Pacific geographic region are the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the resurgence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2017.

The first of these initiatives refers to the foreign policy vision that Washington seeks to project in the region. It was originally proposed by Japan in 2016, in a speech by Shinzo Abe at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in Kenya. Abe’s vision emphasized the economic and strategic interconnection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the linkage between Asia and Africa, connected by these two seas. It outlined broad and abstract principles aimed at sustaining a rules-based regional order through a commitment to the existing international system (Koga, 2021). Although it did not specify concrete political objectives or strategies for achieving them, the concept quickly became a key reference point for U.S. policy in and towards the region.

The term gained greater prominence after Donald Trump repeatedly used it during his first trip to Asia as U.S. President in late 2017 (He & Feng, 2020). In 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense affirmed in its strategy document that “the Indo-Pacific is the priority theater” of its global strategy (Department of Defense, 2019).

The QUAD, originally launched in 2007 but stalled following Australia’s withdrawal, was revitalized during a meeting held alongside the ASEAN Summit in the Philippines in November 2017, with representatives from Japan, Australia, the United States, and India. Although the four countries share concerns about China’s policies, particularly in the region, the scope of their multilateral security commitments and the definition of their interests have differed (Roy-Chaudhury & Sullivan de Estrada, 2018). The low level of institutionalization and the *ad hoc* nature of the QUAD meetings until 2020 reflected these internal differences. However, Koga (2021) highlights that since 2020, the QUAD has seen increased institutionalization, an expansion of its objectives beyond military cooperation, and improved internal coordination. The fourth QUAD Leaders’ Summit, held in 2024 in Delaware, USA, highlights this process of deeper institutionalization and thematic diversification, addressing issues such as health security (QUAD Health Security Partnership), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, climate change adaptation and clean energy, as well as cybersecurity and maritime security (US Embassy and Consulates in India, 2024).

However, differences in approaches among the four QUAD members persist, particularly in relation to China policy. As we analyze in the following section, India adopts an ambivalent or balancing approach toward both the FOIP strategy and the QUAD (Rajagopalan, 2020a), a posture that reflects a defining characteristic of middle powers.

India's material capabilities undeniably affirm its structural significance both regionally and globally. However, the primary forces driving the reconfiguration of its foreign policy have stemmed from external factors. The United States' outreach and the strengthening of bilateral ties, particularly in the context of competition with China, where India aligns closely with the Washington's strategic vision, have become a pivotal influence in its foreign policy. Concurrently, China's consolidation as the dominant Asian power, along with its economic and strategic expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), represents a significant constraint for New Delhi.

In the next section, we address the impact of these geostrategic, institutional, and narrative reconfigurations in the Asia-Pacific on India's foreign policy.

#### 4. Modi's Foreign Policy: Balancing Continuity and Regional Dynamics

A central debate surrounding India's foreign policy under Modi concerns the extent of continuity versus change since he assumed office in 2014. The evolving external dynamics in the world's most rapidly changing region have created both constraints and opportunities for New Delhi, coupled with the internal demands of a growing population and the pressures from a booming economic and industrial sector. In this regard, Modi's foreign policy does not represent a fundamental break or shift from previous administrations (Basrur, 2017; Sridharan, 2017; Rajagopalan, 2020b).

There is broad consensus that India's foreign policy has generally maintained continuity despite changes in government. However, gradual adjustments and the intensification of certain processes have occurred gradually (Rajagopalan, 2020b). In this context, Sridharan (2017) highlights that the most significant change in India's foreign policy since the late 1990s has been its relationship with the United States, marked by a deepening of ties across multiple dimensions. This change is largely seen as an adaptation or response to U.S. outreach, which has intensified notably since 2010. In this regard, Sridharan (2017, p. 63) notes that:

*While India has drawn significantly closer to the United States since at least 2005, and since 2011 has also strengthened ties with its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia, Japan, and several ASEAN countries, it is important to remember that the broader context of these developments (...) has been the shift in Washington's security policy in the Asia-Pacific region, driven by China's rise.*

In the same vein, Basrur (2017) emphasizes the continuity in Modi's foreign policy compared to that of his predecessors, Vajpayee and Singh. The increased confidence and pursuit of greater international recognition for India's global leadership are not breaks from the past, but rather a deepening of the course set during the 1990s.

With respect to external economic policy, Narlikar (2022) illustrates, through an analysis of Modi's policies in the WTO context, that despite the prime minister's

rhetoric of economic reform, his approach has remained conservative, reinforcing the pursuit of economic security through sustained trade protectionism. In line with this, Modi's concept of "Atmanirbhar Bharat"<sup>2</sup> envisions the long-term goal of transforming India into a self-reliant and prosperous power by reducing external dependence (Jain & Gill, 2022).

In the security domain, Modi's government deepened ties with the United States, taking advantage of Washington's renewed interest in enhancing its presence in the region through institutional links with like-minded countries. Modi's administration prioritized the enhancement of defensive capabilities, maritime security, and bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation. Consistent with his predecessors, Modi has maintained a defensive approach to India's security forces, rather than developing offensive capabilities or expanding influence into neighboring regions. Currently, India's military is capable of defending its own borders but lacks the capacity to assist neighboring countries in South Asia (much less those in Southeast Asia) (Tellis, 2016).

Prior to Modi's rise to power, India had already begun strengthening its strategic ties with neighboring countries, with Japan emerging as one of its key partners in this area. In 2008, the two nations signed a defense cooperation agreement, followed by a Strategic and Global Partnership Agreement in 2014. In 2007, the United States, Japan, and India held their first trilateral naval exercises in the Western Pacific, and from that year onward, the Malabar naval exercises between India and the United States expanded to include Australia, Japan, and Singapore (Sridharan, 2017). Since 2012, India and Japan have conducted joint naval exercises known as JIMEX. The eighth edition was held in 2024, which, according to India's Ministry of Defense (2024):

*It provides an opportunity to learn from each other's best practices and enhances operational interactions between the Indian Navy (IN) and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), fostering mutual cooperation and reaffirming their shared commitment to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.*

In terms of security ties with the United States, 2016 marked a significant milestone in the bilateral relationship. Washington designated India as a "Major Defense Partner," and in the same year, the two countries signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), a tailored version of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) specifically for India. This was followed in 2018 by the signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), a customized version of the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) for India (Rajagopalan, 2020).

One of the most prominent aspects of Modi's foreign policy activism is India's participation in global and regional multilateral forums, coupled with a signifi-

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2 For detailed review of the historical and cultural foundations of the Atmanirbhar concept and its pillars in India's current policy framework, see: Jain, V. & Gill, S. (2022). Atmanirbhar Bharat: India's Quest for Self-reliance in the Post-Covid-19 World. *Journal of Polity & Society*, 14(2), pp. 109-123.



cant increase in high-level official visits and the signing of numerous agreements (Baroni and Spagnolo, 2022). Among other multilateral platforms, India has joined the expanded Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the BRICS-promoted New Development Bank (NDB). Furthermore, India has played an active role in regional organizations, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (Kukreja, 2020).

In terms of foreign policy dimensions, there is clear continuity with the country's previous orientation. Despite shifts in narrative, visibility, and the self-perception that Modi has infused into India's domestic and foreign policy, its external conduct reflects consistent continuity.

India's approach to China and its embrace of Washington's Indo-Pacific vision have gained increasing prominence in the foreign policy decisions of the current prime minister, particularly in the context of regional shifts. Nevertheless, these decisions continue to be shaped by India's strong emphasis on neutrality and autonomy, both regionally and globally, as well as its ongoing pursuit of balance in external relations.

In its approach to the Indo-Pacific and the initiatives that have emerged around this strategic reconfiguration, India has maintained a cautious commitment. While adhering to the U.S. principles of freedom and openness, it has distanced itself from the implicitly anti-China tone of these initiatives. In this regard, Rajagopalan (2020) notes that India employs a strategy of "evasive balancing," as it views China's rise as a primary concern within this context, yet stops short of fully aligning with the U.S. vision under the FOIP or QUAD initiatives.

India's commitment to the Indo-Pacific concept and its implications for regional policies are closely tied to the legitimacy crisis of the international order at the regional level, as well as the relative decline of U.S. influence in the face of China's rise. India's adoption of the Indo-Pacific narrative, along with its cautious—though limited—commitment to related initiatives, reflects a response to these combined factors (Harijanto, 2023).

In terms of participation in the QUAD, India has maintained a steady yet measured engagement. The Indian government has affirmed its adherence to the principles of freedom of navigation and respect for international maritime law, which align with the core tenets of the QUAD. As India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, stated:

*We envision a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, built on a rules-based international order, sustainable and transparent infrastructure investments, freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce, mutual respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, and equality among all nations (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2022).*

New Delhi's vision of the Indo-Pacific is closely tied to its "Act East" policy, implemented in 2014 as a continuation and enhancement of the earlier "Look East" policy initiated in 1991. In this context, India's perspective on the Indo-Pacific and the role of the QUAD is more inclusive and challenges Washington's approach to the scope of regional initiatives. In fact, while New Delhi upholds freedom of navigation as a core principle in its maritime policy, it has declined U.S. invitations to participate in patrol activities in the South China Sea (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023).

In this context, New Delhi has maintained an ideological alignment with the U.S.-led framework but has shown clear differences in the implementation of joint military and strategic initiatives. While India has strengthened its cooperation with the United States and other like-minded nations through platforms such as the QUAD, it has chosen a more cautious and balanced approach, avoiding full commitment to more formal security structures. This nuanced stance is designed to safeguard India's strategic autonomy, ensuring it does not align too closely with any single power or regional alliance.

## Conclusion

We begin with the premise that, despite its exceptional size and its aspirations for international leadership, India aligns with the definition of a middle power, both at the global and regional levels.

With a GDP that ranks it as the fifth-largest economy in the world, its significance among other middle powers is unquestionable. However, India's nominal GDP accounts for only 3.3% of the global total, a sharp contrast to China's 16.8% (World Bank, 2024). Perhaps more significantly, with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, India's per capita GDP is the lowest among the BRICS countries, underscoring the deep internal challenges the country still faces in terms of development.

In a global context of power rivalry and transition, India's role has gained unexpected significance despite its internal vulnerabilities. Even with renewed attention from the United States and its elevated status as a focal point in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi has pursued a balanced approach and limited engagement with Washington's regional initiatives. The crux of the matter is that Modi's government cannot, and is not willing to, jeopardize its relationship with China—its largest global economic partner—over external strategic interests and objectives.

Looking ahead, given both domestic and external conditions, India's foreign policy is likely to continue balancing between the U.S. and China, sustaining its participation in multilateral initiatives with like-minded countries, while avoiding direct challenges to Chinese interests. Modi's foreign policy is expected to prioritize pragmatism and limited strategic engagement, with external actions subordinated to India's internal development needs.

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