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# The Positioning of India in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Based on Alliance Theory

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**Abstract:** This study explores India's positioning in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy within the framework of Alliance Theory. It analyzes the strategic convergence between the U.S. and India, particularly in countering the rise of China, highlighting the evolution of the U.S.-India partnership as a critical element of the Indo-Pacific security architecture. The research addresses challenges faced by this partnership, including differences in geopolitical priorities and India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. Additionally, it examines the role of multilateral mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS, illustrating how India utilizes its "quasi-ally" status to enhance its influence while balancing relationships with both the U.S. and China. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the strategic dynamics between the U.S. and India and their implications for regional security in the Indo-Pacific.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Strategy Alliance Theory U.S.-India Partnership China Strategic Autonomy

## 1.Introduction:

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical geopolitical arena in the 21st century, with major powers vying for influence and control over vital sea lanes and economic corridors. In this context, the strategic partnership between the United States and India has taken on significant importance, particularly in the face of China's growing assertiveness. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, formulated under both the Trump and Biden administrations, seeks to establish a balance of power by strengthening alliances and partnerships with key regional players, with India positioned as a central actor.

Alliance Theory, which explains why states form alliances based on mutual interests, provides a theoretical framework to analyze the evolving U.S.-India relationship. From the perspective of both Balance of Power theory and Collective Security theory, this partnership is viewed as a strategic response to external threats, particularly China's rise as a global power. By aligning with the United States, India seeks to enhance its military and economic influence, while maintaining its strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

This study explores the role of India within the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, analyzing how both nations align their strategic interests under the framework of Alliance Theory. It also examines the challenges inherent in this partnership, including divergent regional priorities and the balance India must strike between cooperating with the U.S. and maintaining autonomy in its foreign policy. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve as a key arena of global politics, the U.S.-India partnership will be critical in shaping the regional security architecture and countering China's influence.

## 2.Alliance Theory

Alliance Theory primarily examines why states choose to form alliances, the motivations behind such alliances, the different forms they take, and their impact. This theory is often utilized by both Realist and Liberal schools of thought to explain the mechanisms of power balance and cooperation within the international system.

According to Balance of Power theory, the primary motivation for states to form alliances is to address external threats, especially the security pressures posed by great powers. Through alliances, states can pool their resources and collectively confront potential threats, preventing the rise of a dominant power. Within this theoretical framework, states seek to maintain a balance of power in the international system by forming alliances with other states. For example, the U.S. alliances with India, Japan, and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region can be seen as a strategic response to the rise of China, aiming to counterbalance China's influence through regional cooperation.

Furthermore, Collective Security Theory emphasizes that states aim to achieve common security goals through multilateral alliances or organizations, rather than relying solely on the power of individual states. Liberals argue that a

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collective security system, through multilateral cooperation, is more effective in preventing conflicts. For instance, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a multilateral alliance system promoted by the U.S. to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Alliances take various forms, including formal military alliances such as NATO, informal regional security cooperation mechanisms such as QUAD, and economic cooperation frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). While these alliances vary in form, their core objective remains to enhance collective security and development through cooperation.

However, alliances are not always stable. Their stability depends on mutual trust between states, the continued alignment of interests, and the persistence of external threats. When external threats diminish or differences in interests arise among alliance members, the alliance may disband. This dynamics dictates the strategic adjustments and flexibility states must adopt within alliances.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S., following the balance of power logic within Alliance Theory, incorporates India into its alliance system through multilateral mechanisms, thereby forming a strategic containment of China. India, in turn, gains greater strategic space in the region through its alliance with the U.S., also enhancing its international standing and influence.

From the perspective of collective security, Liberal Alliance Theory explains the multilateral nature of U.S.-India cooperation. By promoting the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the U.S. seeks to establish a multilateral alliance system to jointly ensure the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. Within this framework, India's role is not just that of a strategic partner of the U.S., but also one of the primary drivers of regional security. This article uses U.S.-India relations as a focal point to explore the U.S.'s increasing strategic engagement with India under the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and its future prospects.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 3. The U.S. Government's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Since the Trump administration introduced the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" at the end of 2017, the U.S. government has continuously deepened and promoted the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In the *National Security Strategy* released by the Trump administration, the U.S. renamed the "Asia-Pacific" region in its diplomatic strategy as the "Indo-Pacific" and provided detailed explanations, marking the formal establishment of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. At the same time, the Trump administration clarified India's role, describing it as a "global leader and a strong strategic and defense partner."<sup>[2]</sup>

In 2018, the Trump administration secretly formulated *the U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, aimed at curbing China's dominance in the region. In June 2019, the Trump administration, for the first time, released *the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* through the Department of Defense, explicitly outlining the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy within the context of "great power competition." After taking office, President Biden identified global leadership as the core national interest and ultimate goal of the U.S., repeatedly asserting that "the U.S. will lead the world in the 21st century,"<sup>[3]</sup> revealing the administration's hegemonic ambitions. In March 2021, the Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* identified China as the only "potential competitor" capable of combining economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to pose a sustained challenge.<sup>[4]</sup> In February 2022, the Biden administration released the "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," which, for the first time, outlined the Indo-Pacific strategic vision in detail under the government's name. This document labeled China as an "aggressor and threat" in the Indo-Pacific region and proposed ten core actions, including "supporting India's continued rise and regional leadership," to safeguard U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>[5]</sup> The *National Defense Strategy report*, released in March 2022, repeatedly emphasized that the Indo-Pacific region remains the United States' primary focus. In this report, China is identified as the U.S.'s "most significant strategic competitor."<sup>[6]</sup>

Especially after the Biden administration took office, the United States has focused on transforming the Indo-Pacific strategy into a key tool for strategic competition with China. This effort is evident through the formation of the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, the elevation of the Quad (U.S., Japan, India, and Australia), the introduction of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and increased efforts to influence key strategic countries. In this context, India has gradually become a central focus of the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Two decades after the end of the Cold War, U.S. policy in the region has evolved to become more sophisticated and well-informed, with a clear emphasis on positioning India as a key counterbalance to the growing power and assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

According to the Balance of Power theory, the United States seeks to counterbalance China's rise by establishing a close strategic partnership with India. Both the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's Indo-Pacific vision contain elements of strategic competition aimed at containing China's influence. India's geopolitical importance makes it a pivotal anchor for the U.S. in maintaining the regional power balance in the Indo-Pacific. Given the disparity in power between India and China, India alone finds it challenging to effectively constrain China. However, the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy provides India with opportunities to achieve these objectives. Moreover, the Biden administration has chosen to continue the core framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy from the Trump era, emphasizing India's role and ensuring the strategic foundation of the Quad mechanism remains solid.<sup>[7]</sup>

Realist alliance theory posits that states form alliances to counter common security threats. In the Indo-Pacific region, the United States views China's rapid rise as the primary threat, and India's geopolitical competition with China, particularly in border disputes, provides a strong realist foundation for U.S.-India cooperation. Additionally, India's active participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) reflects the application of an "offshore balancing" strategy, wherein the U.S. seeks to contain China's influence through multilateral mechanisms.

India, having embraced the "Indo-Pacific" concept, has leveraged U.S. support for the Indo-Pacific strategy and the influence of the "India as a balancer" theory to successfully position itself as a promoter of an "open, free, and inclusive" order in the region. This has expanded India's strategic space not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in the world, fueling its ambitions as a major power. Early in its second term, the Modi government introduced the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), emphasizing India's maritime strategy and further highlighting its identity as an Indian Ocean power.

#### **4.The U.S.-India Strategic Partnership under the Indo-Pacific Strategy**

The "China factor" is one of the primary drivers behind the U.S.-India strategic partnership. From the U.S. perspective, the territorial disputes between China and India, along with their lack of strategic trust, especially following the rise of the Modi government, have created a clear rift. India has openly rejected China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and engaged in fierce competition with China in multiple sectors, aiming to replace it as the "world's factory." Given India's practical capability to support the U.S.'s offshore balancing strategy, strengthening ties with India and encouraging it to counterbalance China has become a vital component of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

India's influence in the Indo-Pacific region has also expanded. Since Biden took office, deepening the partnership with India has become a key U.S. national policy. The U.S. aims to leverage its cooperation with India to counter China and reshape the so-called rules-based regional order. The Biden administration actively supports India's aspirations for great power status, further advancing the U.S.-India global strategic partnership. In response, the Modi government has positively embraced this alignment, publicly stating that the U.S. and India are natural partners with shared values and geopolitical interests, continuously enhancing their collaboration and coordination.<sup>[8]</sup>Consequently, as a neighboring country with territorial disputes with China, India has naturally become the U.S.'s preferred choice for countering the so-called "threats."

From India's perspective, there is a prevailing belief among anti-China factions that their greatest "threat" comes from the northern neighbor, China. Both nations are rising simultaneously and have territorial disputes,<sup>[9]</sup>and through the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, India can enhance its strategic position in the region and more effectively counter China's influence.

The cooperation between the U.S. and India is becoming increasingly close in areas such as economics, military, defense security, and diplomatic strategy.

In the economic sphere, in June 2017, Trump and Modi announced the establishment of a U.S.-India "Strategic Energy Partnership" to enhance energy security and promote interaction within the energy sector.<sup>[10]</sup> The Biden administration similarly emphasizes cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations in infrastructure development and actively promotes the establishment of regional economic and trade rules. In the Indo-Pacific region, the Biden administration particularly emphasizes coordinating with Japan, Australia, and India to advance high-quality infrastructure projects, linking initiatives such as "Building Back a Better World" with the "Blue Dot Network." In October 2021, at the East Asia Summit, Biden announced plans to explore the creation of an "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" (IPEF). Following this, the U.S. engaged in a series of discussions with Japan, Australia, India, and other nations. By May 2022, the U.S. and 13 other countries officially launched the IPEF, which encompasses four key pillars: equitable and resilient trade, supply chain resilience, infrastructure and clean energy with decarbonization, and tax and anti-corruption measures.<sup>[11]</sup>

As U.S. and Indian apprehensions about the PRC converged, the security cooperation between the two nations saw continued growth. A significant example of this was during the extended Sino-Indian standoff in the Ladakh region, which began in the summer of 2020. During that period, both U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly expressed strong support for India.<sup>[12]</sup>

Under Modi's leadership, defense collaboration with the United States has expanded considerably, particularly through the Quad partnership. Recently reelected for a third term, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with U.S. President Joe Biden, highlighted their commitment to enhancing the U.S.-India Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership and advancing their mutual vision for a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, following India's elections.<sup>[13]</sup>

The United States will continue to develop a strategic partnership where the United States and India collaborate through regional groups to enhance stability in South Asia; work together in emerging areas such as health, space, and cybersecurity; deepen economic and technological cooperation; and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States recognizes India as a like-minded partner and a leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, actively engaged with Southeast Asia, serving as a driving force in the Quad and other regional forums, and acting as a catalyst for regional growth and development.

The United States has always regarded defense and security cooperation as a key component in establishing and maintaining alliances. U.S.-India security cooperation is primarily reflected in the enhancement of the defense cooperation framework and the expansion of military goods trade.<sup>[14]</sup>

During the Trump administration, U.S.-India military cooperation made significant progress, with the armed forces of both countries maintaining frequent strategic dialogues. In February 2017, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar expressed their commitment to continue advancing defense cooperation. In June 2017, Trump and Modi decided to expand and deepen the strategic partnership and defense security cooperation between the two countries. From late April to early May 2018, the U.S. and India held the third round of maritime security dialogue, where they discussed the progress of maritime security cooperation and the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, exploring ways to further strengthen bilateral maritime security collaboration. In September 2018, the U.S. and India signed the *Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)*, which can facilitate deepening military cooperation and sharing advanced defense technological capabilities between the two nations. In March 2019, the two countries held the third round of space dialogue and the ninth round of strategic security dialogue. In December 2019, the second "2+2" dialogue was held, emphasizing enhanced security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region and signing the *Industrial Security Annex*.

Since Biden took office, U.S.-India military relations have been further strengthened. In January 2021, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, reaffirming the commitment to the U.S.-India "Major Defense Partnership." In March 2021, Austin and Singh discussed opportunities to enhance this partnership and agreed to strengthen cooperation in new areas such as information sharing, logistics, artificial intelligence, space, and cybersecurity. In September 2021, Biden reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to India, promoting information and logistics sharing, military interaction, enhancing cooperation in advanced military technologies, and expanding engagement within multilateral frameworks. In October 2021, the U.S. and India held the 16th Defense Policy Group dialogue, pledging to deepen military cooperation and interoperability between the two forces.

In the military domain, the United States places great emphasis on maritime military cooperation with India, expecting India to play a more active role in the Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly in balancing China. India, on the other hand, hopes to enhance its international influence through this strategy, especially by making breakthroughs in military technology cooperation to accelerate its national development. By moderately aligning with U.S. strategy, India can acquire advanced American military equipment and share strategic and tactical intelligence related to China. Furthermore, through bilateral and multilateral military exercises, India contributes to improving the coordinated operational capabilities of its own forces. The U.S. also announced the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), marking the development of U.S.-India military cooperation to a "quasi-alliance" stage.

In the Trump administration's foreign strategy, India's role was highly valued, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. In the U.S. Department of Defense's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* in 2019, India was identified as an important regional partner. From 2018 to 2020, the U.S. and India held consecutive "2+2" dialogues between their foreign and defense ministers for three years.

The two sides not only discussed strengthening defense cooperation and ensuring the openness of the Indo-Pacific region but also signed three key agreements. The first was the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which allowed India to access advanced communications technology from U.S. defense equipment, enabling to share real-time information between the two militaries. The second was the *Industrial Security Annex (ISA)*, which allowed India's private enterprises to co-develop sensitive technologies with U.S. companies. The third was the *Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geospatial Cooperation*, the last one of four foundational military agreements signed between the two countries over the past 20 years. It allows both sides to share sensitive geospatial data, thereby improving the accuracy of India's drones and cruise missiles.<sup>[15]</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Congress has repeatedly approved the sale of military equipment, such as transport aircraft and patrol planes, to support India in countering China's persistent threats in the Indian Ocean. Besides arms sales, the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia conducted the Malabar joint military exercises under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) framework, enhancing the strategic alignment of "like-minded nations" in countering China's expansionist actions.<sup>[16]</sup> In January 2021, in a document titled *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* that was declassified before Trump left office, India was referred to as the "premier South Asian country," with an emphasis on ensuring India's leadership in security within the Indian Ocean region.<sup>[17]</sup>

Within the framework of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States seeks to curb China's influence in various fields through Quad, aiming to maintain regional balance and provide India with opportunities to expand its power. In Biden's first phone call with Indian Prime Minister Modi in 2020, he emphasized strengthening U.S.-India cooperation to promote a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, including supporting freedom of navigation and territorial integrity, and building a stronger regional architecture through the Quad. The Biden administration, through mechanisms such as the AUKUS trilateral security partnership, the U.S.-Japan-India-Australia Quad, and the Five Eyes alliance (FVEY), has woven a complex security network that significantly alters the security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region, increasing the risk of conflict. In this context, India, as a "quasi-ally" of the United States, plays a key role in the U.S. defense

coalition against China. The U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific clearly states that the U.S. will strengthen its strategic partnership with India through comprehensive cooperation to address China's challenges.<sup>[18]</sup>

It is evident that the target of the Indo-Pacific strategy is China, with the Quad serving as its core pillar, and India playing an important role within it. The Biden administration has elevated the Quad to a leader-level mechanism, viewing it as the main policy coordination platform for advancing the Indo-Pacific strategy. This strategy emphasizes a return to multilateralism, aiming to balance China through existing regional multilateral mechanisms.

The U.S. has explicitly expressed its support for India's leadership role on the international stage, encouraging it to take on a greater role in regional affairs, especially in the South Asian component of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Additionally, the U.S. supports India's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and its inclusion in the Nuclear Suppliers Group.<sup>[19]</sup> These actions demonstrate the U.S.'s strategic intentions in the Indo-Pacific and the critical positioning of India within this strategy.

## 5. Challenges in the U.S.-India Partnership

Within the framework of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S.-India strategic partnership has deepened significantly, particularly in addressing the rise of China, where the convergence of interests between the two countries has become a key driver of their cooperation. However, despite important progress in security, economic, and multilateral mechanisms, the partnership still faces many challenges.

First, there is doubt about whether India has the political will and resources to effectively support the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. On the one hand, India hopes to enhance its international standing by leveraging U.S. power, but on the other, its concept of "strategic autonomy" may limit deeper cooperation with the U.S. Uncertainty in India's policy execution also increases the instability of the partnership. For instance, counter-China strategies like "Project Mausam" have yet to achieve the expected results, indicating India's lack of execution in certain key areas.

Second, the strategic priorities of the U.S. and India in the Indo-Pacific are not entirely aligned. The U.S. tends to focus more on security issues surrounding the Pacific, while India is more concerned with the Indian Ocean and regions such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. These differences in geopolitical goals may pose coordination challenges in advancing specific cooperation efforts, leading to a lack of strategic implementation.<sup>[20]</sup>

Additionally, the U.S.'s narrow focus on China exposes its insufficient understanding of the complexity and historical dynamics of the region. The U.S. strategy overlooks the social, economic, political, and civilizational ties that closely bind the countries of the region. The Indo-Pacific strategy, centered on China, fails to recognize the transformation of the region since the end of the Cold War. Regional actors are no longer passive recipients of externally shaped order but active shapers of the region. Although Washington emphasizes working with democratic partners to build a rules-based order, its "with us or against us" mentality does not align with the realities of the region.

In the future, the development of U.S.-India relations will depend on whether the two sides can strike a balance in their strategic focus, coordination of interests, and execution of specific actions. If the U.S. continues to increase military support for India and deepens cooperation through multilateral mechanisms such as the Quad and AUKUS, India is likely to further consolidate its influence in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India must carefully balance its approach to containing China while maintaining its strategic autonomy in the face of two major powers, the U.S. and China. This balance will not only shape the future of U.S.-India relations but also affect the security architecture of the entire Indo-Pacific region.

In conclusion, the deepening of U.S.-India cooperation presents new strategic opportunities for both nations, but it also requires flexibility and sustainability in facing the challenges. Amid escalating U.S.-China competition, how India leverages its geopolitical advantages to maximize its national interests will determine its role in the Indo-Pacific strategy and its future international position.

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