

# Chapter 3

## Strategic Stewardship: India's Role in Balancing Maritime Power in the Indo–Pacific Region

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines India's Indo-Pacific maritime vision through soft balancing theory, analyzing how New Delhi navigates China's regional assertiveness while managing internal capability constraints. India's approach integrates normative leadership through UNCLOS advocacy and the evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR doctrine with strategic partnerships via the QUAD, bilateral engagements with Japan and Australia, and ASEAN-centric diplomacy. These frameworks collectively demonstrate India's commitment to a rules-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific order. However, critical gaps exist between ambition and capability: India's naval modernization faces delays, budgetary constraints limit fleet expansion, and defense-industrial weaknesses persist. The study reveals that while India successfully positions itself as a responsible regional actor and norm-setter, realizing its Indo-Pacific vision requires bridging this capability gap through increased naval investment, indigenous defense production, and sustained strategic partnerships.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a critical strategic theater in the 21st century. Encompassing both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, this vast region has witnessed intensified economic integration, cultural exchange, and strategic competition. The term “Indo-Pacific” has gained considerable traction in recent decades, driven by several converging factors: contemporary maritime security challenges, great power rivalry between the United States and China amid Beijing’s expansionist posture, and the growing influence of middle powers such as India, Japan, and Australia (Hiep et al., 2024). The region also contains vital strategic chokepoints—the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb—through which enormous volumes of global trade transit.

As India positions itself as a key Indo-Pacific actor, it has articulated a maritime vision aligned with its national interests. New Delhi champions a “Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific” (FOIIP) in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This vision was initially conceptualized through the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, which aimed to advance regional cooperation and security. Subsequently, this was elevated to the Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) doctrine, reflecting broader geographic and strategic ambitions.

China’s rise presents multifaceted challenges to India’s national security. Beijing’s assertive infrastructure initiatives—notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the String of Pearls strategy—have altered regional security dynamics, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where India is widely acknowledged as a resident power (Kiet et al., 2025a). Evolving security dynamics and non-traditional threats have catalyzed India’s proactive regional engagement. India addresses these challenges through external partnerships with like-minded nations, exemplified by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aimed at establishing a favorable, rules-based, democratic order in the Indo-Pacific. These issue-based coalitions are interest-driven and provide tangible benefits to regional stakeholders. Beyond unilateral frameworks, India pursues bilateral partnerships—with Japan and Australia, for instance—encompassing strategic, economic, and defense cooperation. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) occupies a central position in India’s Indo-Pacific vision, situated at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with ASEAN Centrality closely aligned with India’s Act East Policy (AEP) (Kiet et al., 2025b).

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist. Externally, India confronts an asymmetric power balance with China. Beijing’s increasing assertiveness compels India to respond across multiple domains—diplomatic, economic, and military. Internally, however, India’s expanding naval capability gap and defense production constraints

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