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INDIA AS THE ANCHOR (STABILIZING FORCE) OF THE INDO-PACIFIC IN THE ERA OF THE ROARING 40S

Abstract: *On January 26, 2024, India celebrated its 75th Republic Day and in 2022 it celebrated its 75th year of Independence Day. India's current rise is characterized by rapid and consistent economic growth and political stability, which are ably complemented by its enhanced capabilities. These elements enabled India to play a decisive role at the global level; the recent successful presidency of the G-20 stands testimony to it. Protruding initiatives like Solar Alliance, the Counter-terror convention, hosting the Interpol General Assembly, No Money for Terror (NMFT) conference at the strategic geography of Indo-Pacific reflects India's capabilities characterized by self-reliance. India has always maintained strategic autonomy. In this article, the author analyses India's intense engagement with the prominent stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific in the evolving regional and global dynamics. Stable comprehensive growth and able military capability have bestowed a more significant strategic role for India in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. This truly makes India and its decisive leadership an anchor of a ship in the turbulent dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, i.e., Roaring forties. India's strong leadership and able friendship have prevented the Indo-Pacific policy framework from entering into furious fifties and Screaming Sixties, making it the world's bright spot!*

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific, India, Australia, PLA Navy, Maritime Security, Japan, QUAD*

Introduction

January 26, the largest democracy in the world celebrates its 75th Republic Day in 2024 and 75th year of Independence in 2022. Since 1947, after carving out its rightful place in the world, India has emerged as a prominent entity at regional and global levels. The current rise of India is characterized by rapid and consistent economic growth and political stability, which are ably complimented by the timely development of its enhanced capabilities. These elements enabled India to play a decisive role at the global level by defining prominent initiatives like Solar Alliance, the Counter-terror convention, hosting Interpol General Assembly, No Money for Terror (NMFT) conference, permanent secretariat No Money for Terror, maritime order at the strategic geography of Indo-Pacific reflects its grown capabilities (Interpol, INTERPOL General Assembly closes as Organization moves towards its 100 year anniversary, 2022) (Government of India M. , 2022) (Government of India P. , 2022). While developing its capabilities, India has embraced the growth characterized by a strong focus on self-reliance and consistently maintained and ensured its strategic autonomy that defines its overall domestic, regional, and global outreach of India.

This has reflections at domestic, regional, and global levels, transforming the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific into a cooperative entity characterized by stability, endorsing the evolved maritime capabilities of India on an international canvas. Slightly non-conventional patterns of integration, contradictions and coercions witnessed in the region have led it to conflict and ambiguity due to indecisive orientation by global entities like the US. Existing multilateral institutions' uncertain waves and critical limitations have created strategic flux (Saha, Bland, & Lakshmana, 2020). This underwhelming situation paved the way for India to anchor the region with its stable policy outlook and able leadership that promoted peace and prosperity. India's transformative journey from mid-power to a firm anchoring role is a saga of the recent evolution of capabilities, making it a preferred global destination for strategic alliances for all prominent players worldwide. India, too, has underscored its intent to play a decisive role in the region through various policy initiatives like Digital India, World Solar Alliance, G20 Summit, Establishing headquarters like No Finance for Terror in New Delhi, Interpol General Assembly 2019, etc. Along with policy

initiatives like Act East, Make in India was timely adopted and executed, transforming India into a critical stakeholder of global governance (Interpol, 2022) (Government of India M. , 2022) (Government of India P. , 2022).

Regarding economic development, the same Morgan Stanley, which once had classified India as a 'Fragile Five', has commended India's development and transformative reforms, making it a leading economy and a bright spot for international investment (Desai, 2023). This transformative journey of India has long witnessed the 2004 Tsunami till recent intense anti-piracy operations conducted by the Indian Navy that accentuated the grown capabilities, sustained operational experience and proactive role in the Indian Ocean Region. This truly compliments the cartographic fact of making the Indian Ocean as India's Ocean. Once again, this proves the strategic foresight long ago realized by Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, emphasizing controlling and accessing the key points of the Indian Ocean region connecting from the Atlantic in the West to the Pacific in the East and South East. Truly highlighting the strategic Mahanian foresight, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominated Asia as it is the key to seven seas. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters" (Mahan, 1918) (Khurana, 2004).

Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific will help us analyze recent strategic trends in and around the region. The ongoing Ukraine crisis has caused significant vulnerabilities in the Euro-Atlantic area, landing at Europe's doorstep. As it severely disrupted several global supply chains on the land, it has also taught specific operational lessons in the maritime domain, predominantly a strong network of maritime arteries or sea lanes of communication in the global trading system. Reviving the significance and utility of tactical concepts like naval blockade. The severe grain crisis during the Ukrainian crisis, followed by the dramatic loss of the Russian Black Sea Fleet flagship Moskva, punctuated this significance (Douglas & Childs, 2022).

Similarly, the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific has also witnessed the evolving strategic trend of high-end naval capability development efforts, along with confronting situations just below the threshold of armed conflict in prominent places. It is challenging the status quo within the region, shifting the naval balance to the Indo-Pacific, and testing doctrinal, operational, and tactical approaches of maritime security forces. It has further intensified due to changes in technological dynamics, fuelling the competitive spirit

amongst the prominent entities of the region. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region is witnessing a flaring of friction in the maritime domain similar to that of the Atlantic in 1945, highlighting the growing importance of naval fulcrums within the area (Childs, 2023).

Assertive unilateral Chinese maritime operations

At the beginning of this century, there was a striking rise in naval investment and capability enhancements with a core emphasis on hard-edged and assertive technological transformation by the PLA-N, which raised significant security concerns. Its assertive unilateral attempts of fortification reflect these unilateral intentions. The growing engagements of like-minded navies of the region in response to unilateral attempts have put the naval balance into flux (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016). These concerns can be contemplated in the defense strategy documents produced by the US, India, Australia, and Japan, as well as defense strategy documents produced by their respective defense ministries. One of the core reasons is assertive posturing by the PLAN and its expansion of its fleets across surface, air, and subsurface capabilities, enhancing its reach beyond its conventional island chains into the Indian Ocean.

While making an ahead flank, the Navigation plan was released by the US Chief of Naval Operations in September 2024. It emphasizes strategic ends to prepare the US Navy for the possibility of war with the People's Republic of China by 2027, guiding its efforts to effectively deal with the pacing challenge and focus on the joint warfighting ecosystem. Additionally, it identified the challenges to the US naval force, i.e., ship, submarine, aircraft construction, recruitment, munition production, software acquisition, infrastructure, and platform maintenance, prioritizing it to maintain its advantage to outpace learning and adaptive adversaries. The growing PLA Navy's rocket, aerospace, air, and Cyber Space Force are integrating a warfighting ecosystem, posing a significant challenge to the massive US Defence Industrial base (Franchetti, 2024).

PLA Rocket Force announced the launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) into the high seas of the Pacific Ocean, flying over the northern point of the Philippines on

September 25, 2024 (Global Times, 2024). It is the first time China has launched such a test since the 1980s. Though Chinese daily Xinhua stated that China had informed 'concerned' countries in advance, Japanese and Philippines authorities denied receiving such communication. In 2022, PLA test-fired five missiles during military drills, which landed in the Japanese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), drawing strong protest from the Japanese Defence Ministry. The missile test-fired on September 25, 2024, is estimated to range between 12,000 – 15,000km (Dong Feng 41) (Davidson, 2024). Such assertions by China underscore its unilateral intentions.

In the year 2024, China deployed all three aircraft carriers. Currently, two 65,000-ton aircraft carriers are in service with the PLAN. The Liaoning is deployed in the Philippine Sea; the Shandong was deployed off Hainan Island in Southern China. The third aircraft carrier, Fujian, is an entirely different class and is a supercarrier with a flat deck catapult launch mechanism. It can deploy many fighters and logistics aircraft, including airborne early warning and control platforms like KJ-600 (Military Watch magazine, 2024). The 85,000 tons Fujian is the largest supercarrier built outside the US Navy and smaller than the US Nimitz and Gerald Ford Class supercarriers, which are 1,00,000 tons (Xinhua , 2024). The Chinese carriers are conventionally powered and require low maintenance, ensuring high optimum operational availability and all-time readiness of at least one carrier battle group (Huanzun, 2024).

Chinese Non-conventional challenge – Cyber and Space domain

Unlike the conventional domain, Chinese unilateral assertiveness is often seen as a threat in the non-conventional cyber and space domain. The report/ advisory issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cyber National Mission Force, and National Security Agency of the USA to all its allies (5 Eyes prominently) confirming Botnet operations emanating from China-based Routers and IoT Devices containing compromised nodes and have been positioned for malicious activity (2024). Australia also faced similar threats in 2020, where its institutions, hospitals, and state-owned utilities were under cyber-attacks. Confirming the severity of these attacks, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison mentioned in the press conference that these cyber-attacks were targeted by a sophisticated foreign "state-based" hacker (Hitch & Probyn, 2020).

Due to the ambiguous political, military and diplomatic posture adopted by the US towards its key allies and strategic partners, italicise the need for these allies to develop their capabilities. In addition, frequent reference to the PLAN by the US Department of Defence documents as the largest navy in the world reflects this operational ambiguity on the US front. As per the report, PLAN has 340 vessels (Aircraft carriers, destroyers, surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, mine sweepers and fleet auxiliaries) and further it is likely to become a battle force of 400 vessels by 2025 and 440 by 2030 (US Department of Defense, 2023).

The growing threat from China strongly cogitated in the Navigation plan for America's Warfighting Navy declared by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Lisa Franchetti. However, the US Navy's might is being challenged by its hardware issues, severely impacting its critical surface, subsurface and attack capabilities. In a letter to the US Congress dated October 03, 2024, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro informed that 26 US Navy Vessels are affected by faulty welding concerning the safety and security of its Sailors and raising concerns over the seaworthiness of these vessels. These 26 vessels include 13 Nuclear attack submarines SSNs, 5 Aircraft Carriers and 3 Amphibious Ships LHA and LPD are severely affected (Department of Defense, 2024).

The details of vessels affected are; (Table 1)

Type	Name and No	Commissioned Year
Submarines		
(Virginia Class Multiple Units)	USS Virginia – SSN 774	2004
	USS Texas – SSN 775	2006
	USS New Hampshire – SSN 779	2008
	USS New Mexico – SSN 779	2010
	USS California – SSN 781	2011
	USS Mississippi – SSN 782	2012
	USS Minnesota – SSN 783	2013
	USS North Dakota – SSN 784	2014
	USS John Warner – SSN 785	2015
	USS Illinois – SSN 786	2016

	USS Washington – SSN 787	2017
	USS Colorado (SSN – 788)	2018
	USS Delaware (SSN 791)	2020
Aircraft Carriers		
Aircraft Carriers	USS Ronald Reagan – CVN – 76	2003
	USS George H. W. Bush – CVN – 77	2009
	USS Gerald R. Ford CVN – 78	2017
	USS John F. Kennedy CVN – 79	Under Construction
	USS Enterprise CVN – 80	Under Construction
Other Naval Vessels built at Newport News Shipbuilding, Virginia, were affected		
Amphibious Assault Ship	USS America LHA – 6	October 11, 2014
	USS Tripoli LHA – 7	February 28, 2020
Amphibious Landing Dock	USS Fort Lauderdale LPD – 28	March 2022

(Department of Defense, 2024).

The US Navy, which had a nuclear submarine fleet of 140 vessels during the Cold War period, is limited to a fleet of 68 Submarines, out of which 50 are in the Killer category. Amongst these 50 Hunter Killer class submarines, 20 are in dry dock or tied to piers because of the US Navy's 3 year maintenance backlog (Will, 2024).

Is AUKUS a reality or an optional plan?

Because of these severe dock issues, rising costs and stretched operational geographical area to cover, the US Congress is seriously considering alternatives to the US collaborative outreach with its allies. The Congressional Research Service submitted a report to the Congress on October 10, 2024. This report proposes an alternative AUKUS plan: the US would not sell nuclear-powered submarines to Australia but instead build eight new Virginia class submarines that could be retained in the US Navy operated out of Australia (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Before this proposed option, under AUKUS Pillar 1 – the US and UK nuclear submarines will rotate out of Western Australia from 2027 before Australia procures five second-hand Virginia class boats in the 2030s and then

begins constructing a new fleet named SSN-AUKUS (Greene & McClaren, 2024). In this current appropriation fight in Congress, the viability of AUKUS Pillar-I and its timely execution is very much under question. The uncertainty of the execution of the AUKUS partnership highlights the precarious nature of the US legislative process defining the faith of the AUKUS. The present budget cut by Congress and the US Department of Defence for the financial year 2025 reflects the constraints within the mighty US Industrial base. Further, the strategic competition will continue to compel US commitment to AUKUS; however, its timely execution is still challenging and certainly not assured to allies like Australia (Corben & Nason, 2024).

On the other hand, the Australian Industry is critical of its Government's approach towards the development of manufacturing and maintenance capabilities, noting that it takes the US and UK to decide to plan, pay for and build a dry dock capable of handling the unique requirements of a nuclear-powered submarine (Clark, 2024). The Australian Government has approved the establishment of a consolidated Commonwealth-owned Defence Precinct at Western Australia's Henderson Shipyard. It will be developed in two decades to strengthen its shipbuilding capabilities. It will prepare Australia for AUKUS promptly, enabling it to own, operate safely, and sustain conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (Australian Government D. , 2024). For Financial Year 2024, the Australian Government has committed \$127 Million AUD over 3 years to progress planning, consultations, developing preliminary designs and conducting feasibility studies enabling the working progress. Before it, the Australian Government announced AUD 8 billion investment towards the upgradation of HMAS Stirling till the 2030s, marking it as an operational base for Australian sovereign conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines by 2030s (Government of Australia D. , 2024). Against this backdrop, it is worth realizing the utility and operationalization of AUKUS within Australia's current framework, the challenging manufacturing capabilities, and the limited budgetary allocations toward defense.

Japan, the Rising Sun of the Indo-Pacific

It's been nearly 10 years since Japan adopted a reinterpretation of its constitution, enabling it to be an active part of collective defense (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2014). Since this landmark adaption, the Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF) has charted an

unsettling course of development for itself. It has ably justified its development plan given the rising Chinese military threats. Due to this reinterpretation, JSDF has actively engaged with prominent countries of the Indo-Pacific through drills. In 2023, the JSDF held 56 drills, a mere 3 in 2006, indicating an expanded geographical scope of engagement for JSDF. It added strength with the upcoming deployment of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which provided counter-strike capabilities. The rising defense budget of Japan over the decades to present is USD 68 billion, which makes it the third largest military spender after the US and China. It is also gradually lifting its arms export embargo. The active interaction between Japan and the US Defence Industrial Cooperation towards joint development and production signifies it (Seok-jae, 2024). Japan and Australia have started deploying regional task groups led by one of their large-deck aviation capable vessels, projecting its influence and enabling Japan to engage in multilateral maneuvers aimed at training and strategic signaling (Kyodo News, 2022). It began with the Japanese first deck-oriented deployment in four state exercises involving Australia, Canada, Japan and the US in the South China Sea (US 7th Fleet, 2022).

After reinterpreting its constitution, another landmark Japanese policy outreach is its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative launched in 2016. This is the first time Japanese diplomacy and its integrated economic and security policies have concurrently worked with the external strategy. This can be considered an extension or continuation of the policies adopted by Shinzo Abe, who is deceased but considered the region's first prominent leader, understood and proposed the collective outlook for the Indo-Pacific (Hosoya, 2019). He described it as a confluence of the two seas, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific (Abe, 2007).

In terms of enhancing its engagement with the world in 2018, the US and Australia endorsed Japanese "quality infrastructure" concept collaborations involving joint financing from the government agencies of the US, Japan, and Australia infrastructure projects across Asia like liquified gas terminals, undersea cable connectivity, etc. (Berkofsky, 2019). This remained a significant aspect of Japanese FOIP towards encouraging infrastructure development within the Indo-Pacific, emerged as an alternative to the Chinese BRI, and avoided 'debt trap' concerns associated with China-initiated projects. A new avatar of checkbook diplomacy by Japan. Along with physical infrastructure, the FOIP further emphasized the development of strong digital connectivity. For this, it has invested in submarine cable networks and digital infrastructure (5G Network) across the region,

ensuring secure and reliable connectivity for economic development, e-commerce and information sharing while addressing Chinese unilateral initiatives causing grave security concerns (Cyber Warfare) (Paskal, 2021). It further prioritized collaboration outside the region with the EU and sought cooperation in strengthening digital infrastructure, innovation, cybersecurity, digitization of public services, etc., through the EU-Japan Digital Partnership (Boulia, 2022).

Along with infrastructure development, Japan has also progressively supported initiatives in non-traditional domains like anti-terrorism and anti-piracy and encouraged the establishment of separate maritime police forces in countries, facilitating the transfer of equipment like patrol vessels, etc. In efforts to build up its regional security outreach, Japan updated its National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2022, through which Japan facilitated Official Security Assistance (OSA) as a diplomatic tool towards international cooperation ensuring regional stability (Government of Japan, 2022). These security policy initiatives are seen as the Japanese shift in foreign assistance toward security and defense (Ishimaru, 2024). The limited export of defense hardware and technology transfer is based on the arms export principles and related policy guidelines of 2014. It enables Japan to control exports, prohibits transfers violating international treaties and resolutions, and controls audited exports, preventing misuse (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014).

In addition to these evolved capabilities, the JSDF intensely engages in great interconnectedness and cooperation with key players and has signed reciprocal access agreements with Australia and the UK (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). Along with the military cooperation, Japan has expanded its security consultations with prominent stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific like India, South Korea, and the Philippines and has relaxed restrictions on the transfer of military technology, making JSDF a crucial player in forming a regional strategic outlook (Smith, 2014).

In terms of its relationship with India, Japan has prioritized India as a key strategic partner for an extended period, which was further elevated after initiating 2+2 ministerial dialogues between India and Japan (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2022). The FOIP strategy also emphasized furthering strong ties, positioning India's crucial significance in realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific, fostering action-oriented collaboration, developing

collective capacities, and shaping strategic contours of the region. The comprehensive partnership between India and Japan in security, economic, and infrastructure development has facilitated the convergence of regional strategic interests while addressing unilateral Chinese assertiveness (Kaura & Kumawat, 2022).

Further, India and Japan collaborated with Australia for the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (RSCI) and Vaccine Partnership (Government of India M. P., 2021). As a result, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida chose New Delhi as a destination to release his new plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,' strongly indicating India as an indispensable strategic partner, in line with the US Security assessments. As per the new FOIP strategy of Kishida, India plays a decisive role across its four pillars, establishing principles for peace, ably addressing security concerns through collaboration, furthering strong connectivity and ensuring security in maritime and airspaces across Indo-Pacific (Kishida, 2023).

In the rapidly evolving strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, the relevance of the new FOIP depends on various factors, including the evolving balance of power in the region, the strategic interests of the US in the area and its assuring military presence in support of its allies, policies of stakeholders such as US, China and India and their adaptability towards new security challenges.

Quad's Perspective

In this happening strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific, a significant entity that has turned out to be the defining feature is QUAD. The grouping of four major global players, India, USA, Japan and Australia, is coming together for good. The year 2023 has witnessed outstanding leadership by these four countries in the form of India's G20 presidency, Japan's G7 Presidency, USA hosted APEC, and Australia hosted Quad, combining resolute leadership executing tangible projects significant to the partner countries across the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, it showcased these four countries' unprecedented scope and scale towards the Indo-Pacific. These priorities include proactive HADR management, addressing pandemics and diseases through vaccine partnerships, strengthening maritime domain awareness and security cooperation, and developing high-standard digital infrastructure. For that, timely investment in sunrise sector technologies, collectively

dealing with the challenge of climate change, strengthening security capabilities, etc (The White House, 2024). To effectively address the priorities mentioned above and fulfill the aspirations of the partner countries in the region, each Quad government has committed to providing significant funding for the highlighted Quad priorities to ensure an enduring impact in the Indo-Pacific. In developing future partnerships, the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership was announced to harness the Quad's expertise towards creating sustainable and resilient port infrastructure in the region. The Inaugural Quad Regional Ports and Transportation Conference is scheduled in Mumbai, India²⁵ (US Embassy and Consulates in India, 2024).

Militarily, the quad strength of these like-minded democracies is aptly contemplated engagements through the annual Exercise Malabar, featuring India's pivotal role in the maritime security framework of the Indo-Pacific. It further emblazons India's grown capabilities and broader influence in the region, signifying its strong strategic partnership and an effective counterweight to Chinese unilateral assertiveness in and around the area. The strategic assets which are deployed by the Quad navies in the Malabar Exercise 2024, started on October 08, 2024, in the Bay of Bengal, show the deepening trust evolved through interoperability across the military of these countries united to address the shared maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The Exercise Malabar concluded with an engaging sea phase on October 18, 2024, witnessed live weapon firings, complex surface, anti-air, and anti-submarine warfare drills, and joint maneuvers that serve as a testament to the QUAD nations towards enhancing understanding, collaboration, and engagement in the maritime domain as it faced rising complex maritime security challenges (Government of India P. M., 2024).

In this Exercise, the US introduced strategic assets from its largest forward-deployed numbered fleet i.e. 7th fleet comprised of Nimitz class aircraft carrier nesting F/A-18 Super Hornets along with a P – 8 Poseidon Aircraft from Commander, Task Force 72 and Arleigh Burke Class Guided missile destroyer USS Dewey (DDG 105) deployed with the Commander Task Force 70 and Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 15 the largest DESRON of the US Navy constituting 7th fleet's principal surface force. The JSDF has recently sent its Izumo-class helicopter carrier, upgraded to nest F-35B stealth fighters and a Maya class destroyer. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) deployed its Hobart-class destroyers, Anzac-class frigate HMAS Stuart (FFH 153), along with MH-60 Seahawk helicopters (Department

of State, 2024). The Indian Navy introduced its prominent strategic assets as INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier, Talwar class frigates, and Kalvari class Submarine. The Indian Navy deployed its Mig-29 and P-8I Poseidon Maritime anti-submarine and reconnaissance aircraft.

The high-ranking officials representing respective navies like Vice Admiral Rajesh Pendharkar, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, Indian Navy along with General Yoshihide YOSHIDA, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, Japan, Admiral Stephen Koehler, Commander US Pacific Fleet, Vice Admiral Katsushi OMACHI, C-in-C, Japan Self Defence Fleet and Rear Admiral Chris Smith, Commander Australian Fleet establishes the commitment for collective outlook of participating countries.

This lays out the evolving dynamics of maritime and naval maneuvers resembling the 'great game' at sea, i.e., global in nature, emphasizing Indo-Pacific (Gresh, 2020). The rising naval engagements across various external players underscore the broader recognition of the growing significance of the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific as a center of gravity of global economic development and strategic fulcrum.

Under these circumstances, the strategic currents and wave structure are slowly transcending from roaring 40s to furious fifties, highlighting the need for strong leadership that not only withstands the winds but also ably navigates through them (Domenisino, 2023) (National Ocean Service, 2021). In this regard, India's evolved strength, characterized by its proactiveness and self-reliant endeavor, makes it an experienced hand to effectively deal with such challenging strategic currents and navigate through stretching winds.

Amid rapidly swirling strategic currents characterizing the competitive to the edge, it is difficult to determine the naval balance and future trajectory. The inability of the US to ensure its allies and unilateral and assertive mobilization by the PLA Navy with its rapid transformation has produced a critical mass of naval power both for operations close to the US and incipiently for blue-water operations for its partners in the Indo-Pacific. The absence of high-intensity naval warfare and rapid naval developments through transforming technology have further complicated the strategic charts to navigate smooth sailing in the region. Due to the emphatic orientation adopted by various stakeholders operating in the area, this evolving situation has not only strengthened deterrence but increased the danger of miscalculation (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

Instead of Conclusion: India the Stabilising Anchor of the Indo-Pacific

India's inspiring growth and rising influence regionally and globally have yielded from its transformative policy initiative of 'Look East' and further matured to its recent 'Act East' policy directive initiated by Prime Minister Modi declared in November 2014 (Parameswaran, 2014). The core objective of the 'Act East' is to facilitate economic cooperation, strengthen cultural ties, and develop strategic relationships with the countries of the Asia-Pacific through continuous engagements at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels (Government of India P. M., 2015). While providing the policy direction, Indian leadership has provided stability. The re-election of Prime Minister Modi for the third consecutive term has not only resulted in political stability but further facilitated strongly metamorphose reforms and policies that have transformed the economic, military, and diplomatic sphere of influence, strengthening it in various areas of governance (Election Commission of India, 2024). India's sphere of influence, which was jutting out ASEAN centric during the east days to further matured, extending its sphere of interests up to Australia, which is the very crucial strategic partner of India in the QUAD, providing a defining feature to the map of the Indo-Pacific (Jaishankar D. , 2024). A similar spirit is also reflected in Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Jaishankar D. , 2024).

Is the sphere of influence for India only restricted to its neighborhood, i.e., Indo-Pacific? No, Its sphere of influence has extended westward, intensely engaging with the Gulf countries, making them India's top trade, investment, and energy partners. India's ambitious India-Middle-East-Europe corridor attracts interest from all stakeholders within this region, which connects India to Europe through the Arabian Peninsula and could significantly mitigate or de-risk maritime shipping.

India has equally intensified its engagements with Central Asian states in the North and the Indian Ocean Region in the South. Westward engagements with Africa are at their peak, especially along the East African Coastline. In addition, India's all-inclusive approach to quality governance can be seen in its progressive initiative of the International North-South Transport Corridor, which has emerged as a substantial alternative to access Eurasia and beyond. Its natural emergence in the global South is characterized by the organic support it has received for its inclusive initiatives like the Voice of Global South Summit and the

Membership of the African Union as a collective entity in the G20 groupings (Government of India M. , 2024). India's leadership role and strong advocacy towards vaccine equity were greatly admired by countries worldwide. India has supplied more than 301 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines till 2023 across 99 countries of the World (Government of India M. , 2023). The International Solar Alliance (ISA) proposed by India has received tremendous support 119 countries have signed the ISA framework, and 99 countries have ratified the ISA framework Agreement till August 2024 (Government of India M. , 2024). India has provided nearly USD 3 billion in funds across countries for the development of infrastructure and various projects as per the requirements of the host countries.

From 2008 till August 2024, India fulfilled the aspirations of 78 countries. It has disbursed \$951.22 billion USD through grants and lines of credit, the ring strong development partnerships across the world (Government of India M. , 2024) (Jaishankar D. , 2024). This makes India a true friend of the developing world, underlining the fact that democracies can deliver, and the delivery is seen through its socio-economic benefits efficiently distributed across the spectrum of society at an impressive scale. This scale and transformative operations are aptly witnessed in the global ranking of ports, where nine major ports of India are in the worldwide top 100 by the World Bank. Amongst these ports, the Visakhapatnam Port and Mundra Port are in the top 30 ports of the world (Government of India M. P., 2024). One major factor determining the efficiency of port operations is median turnaround time. The median turnaround time for Indian ports has effectively improved from a sluggish 28 days in the 20th century to 0.9 days in 2024, indicating efficient port management that accentuates India's capability to deliver. Today, the median turnaround time is in the US (1.5 days), Australia (1.7 days), and Singapore (1 day) (Anklesaria Aiyar, 2024).

This socio-economic transformation and impressive infrastructural growth make India a favored partner worldwide, adding strength to the multipolar world order. This has balanced the global world order, strongly supporting freedom, openness, transparency, and rule-based order. Its inclusive sense of responsibility has made a difference in the developing world. This responsible outreach has been pivotal in making India a 'First Responder' and 'Preferred Security Partner' across the Indo-Pacific (Government of India M. P., 2024).

India's responsible behavior is visible in its technology and defense trade use. India joined as the Wassenaar Arrangement (WA) dated December 08, 2017; in a short span, it assumed its chairmanship in 2022 (Government of India M. , 2022). As a member of the multilateral export control regime, India has enforced and seized Chinese vessels that transport goods to Pakistan (Times News Network, 2020) (Press Trust of India, 2024). It is often seen that the Chinese Government is critical of India, especially when India scrutinizes any Chinese merchant vessel for transporting dual-use goods to Pakistan. China is not a member of Wassenaar Arrangement as it was unable to meet the requirements for membership (Guillard, 2024) (The Wassenaar Arrangement Secretariat, 2024). All these initiatives are executed by the Government of India's Act East policy directive highlighting its strong commitment and interest towards Asia and the Pacific region. It further prioritized the neighborhood-first policy with greater significance to establish strong ties with its neighbor and extended neighborhood in the Pacific (Government of India E. M., 2019). It fulfills the aspirations of the neighboring countries without making them fall trapped in any debt or land trouble, but it supports them as per their needs. This indicates India's strategic culture, which closely monitors the external environment and highlights India's proactive military engagements that prioritize India's sphere of operations. In terms of net security providers, the Indian Navy, from December 2023 till March 2024 (100 days), demonstrated its operational might to resolve 'secure the seas' and have protected the maritime community from various non-traditional threats. From December 04, 2023 (Indian Navy Day) till March 24, 2024, within 100 days deployed over 5000 personnel at sea, over 450 Ship days (With over 21 ships deployed), and 900 hours of flying by the maritime patrolling aircraft while addressing the threats in the marine domain. In this present security scenario, the Indian Navy saved 110 lives, escorted 1.5 million tons of critical commodities, undertaken nearly 1000 boarding operations, seized more than 3000kgs of narcotics at sea, and assured over 450 Merchant vessels, strongly highlighting Indian Navy's presence and its decisive capabilities as responsible maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) of the Indian Navy has played a decisive role by facilitating real-time information exchange. Its coordination with the Indian Air Force and the Indian Army, along with various law enforcement agencies, highlighted the synergy and interoperability of the services in an integrated manner (Government of India M. P., 2024).

Along with bilateral engagements, the Indian Government has understood the evolving dynamics of the oceans and has begun to take note of managing them seriously. The proven demonstration of capabilities at sea plays a prominent role in shaping the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific (Jaishankar D. , 2024). While strengthening its strengths in the maritime domain, Indian deterrent capabilities have also evolved decisively recently. India has strengthened its nuclear triad, bolstering its deterrence capabilities with the commissioning of its second Ship, the Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear Submarine (SSBN) INS Arighaat, which establishes its strategic balance and peace, which plays a crucial role in India's security. INS Arighaat is India's second Arihant class SSBN commissioned in 2024 and strongly characterizes India's policy quest of self-reliance (atmanirbhar) in the defense sector, showcasing advanced design, manufacturing, technology and detailed research and development capabilities that persuaded complex engineered Indigenous systems. The Arihant class SSBNs are conceptualized, designed, developed, manufactured and integrated by Indian scientists, industry and navy personnel (Government of India M. P., 2024). India launched its 4th SSBN Submarine at Visakhapatnam, indicating India's growing emphasis on securing its maritime interests in a volatile geopolitical strategic geography (Economic Times Online, 2024) While widening its strategic horizon with more excellent interoperability skills and capabilities, two major exercises presided over by India have not only showcased the military might of India but have highlighted its decisive strategic adaptability to operate in all operational circumstances. The first one is a mega biennial exercise led by the Eastern Naval Command of India named Milan 2024 from February 19 – 27, 2024, at Visakhapatnam (Government of India M. P., 2024) This Exercise received the largest ever participation across six continents; 51 countries, 35 ships, 50 aircraft and 11 heads of maritime agencies participated. The Exercise Milan 2024 has evolved in terms of operational size and complexity of missions since it began in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 1995 with the participation of assets from four navies (Shankar, 2024). Milan 2024 truly reflects India's maritime capabilities at the global level.



Figure 1 - Image Courtesy – Indian Navy Media

Complementing its maritime capabilities, the Indian Air Force hosted its first multinational exercise, 'Tarang Shakti 2024' literally meaning waves of power. The Exercise, spanning from August 06 – 14, 2024, aimed to enhance interoperability and operational coordination amongst Friendly Foreign Countries (FFCs). The inclusion of Tejas in this mission manifests the critical role Indigenous platforms are playing in modernizing India's defense infrastructure (Government of India P. M., 2024).



Figure 2 – Image – Logo Tarang Shakti depicting countries participating

A total of 51 countries have deployed their strategic assets spanning all continents. One prominent, noticeable absence in these exercises is that India's strategic partner, Russia, and Israel, have not registered their participation. The mega multinational Exercise under the aegis of the Indian Air Force allowed participating countries to synchronize their Concept of Operations (CONOPS), Mobilising and maintaining detachments at distant locations and hone their capabilities in different operational environments. The Exercise witnessed the participation of cutting edge technological advanced strategic assets like F/A – 18 Super

Hornets, French Rafale, European Typhoon, F-35 engaging with IAF's LCA Tejas, Su-30 MKI, Rafale, Mirage 2000, Jaguars along with LCH Prachand, ALH MK – IV Rudra, C-130, Netra and Phalcon AEW&C which are typically not deployed abroad for exercises (Government of Australia D. G., 2024). It has showcased India's advanced capabilities that ensure rapid response and adaptability to emerging threats and security challenges evolving into the strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific.

As a prominent military force, the Indian Air Force has recorded its participation in 91 international air exercises across the globe and since last decade, the participation has seen an exponential rise (Chopra, 2024). Before the Tarang Shakti the Royal Australian Air Force hosted Exercise Pitch Black 24. The Exercise witnessed three weeks of high-intensity training in one of the world's largest military training areas, encompassing 4400 personnel and 140 aircraft from 20 countries. In this Exercise, the air assets were deployed by France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, UK, the USA, and embedded personnel from Canada and New Zealand (Australian Government D. , 2024).

The Indian Air Force deployed 150 highly skilled Air Warriors along with strategic assets like Su-30 MKI, C17 Globemaster, and IL-78 Air Refuelling tankers, which operated alongside F-35, F-22, F-18, F-15, Gripen and Typhoons of participating 20 countries. The IAF previously attended in 2018 and 2022 editions (Government of India P. M., 2024). The Exercise involved deploying some of the most advanced air combat capabilities, flown and supported by a highly skilled workforce in a challenging environment, underscoring the strong relationship reinforcing the value placed on regional security across the Indo-Pacific Region (Pandey, 2024).



Figure 3 - Exercise Pitch Black at the Darwin and Tindal Air bases

Image – Australian Government – Defence - Chief of the Australian Air Force, Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, DSC, CSC, OAM visits the Indian Air Force contingent during Exercise Pitch Black 24 (Australian Government, D. – JPG, 2024)

In addition to the Pitch Black, the US Air Force Bomber Task Force Mission, involving B-2 Spirit stealth bombers operated from the Royal Australian Air Force base at Amberly throughout August and September 2024, concluded missions in Australia. This military cooperation from the 110th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron of the USAF is part of the Enhanced Air Cooperation Program between the USAF and RAAF for enhancing interoperability and bolstering collective ability towards a free and open Indo-Pacific. The training sorties by the B-2 bombers covered a vast distance throughout Australia and the Indo-Pacific region, including 'hot pitting' at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean Region (Hodgson, 2024).



Figure 4 - Image – Press Release – Australian Government, Defence (Australian Government, D.2, 2024)

This evolved transformation of India is critical to further strengthening the multipolar world and ensuring that the overall balance remains in favor of freedom, openness, transparency, and a rules-based order. India's proactive operations with a greater sense of responsibility through its maritime operations in the Indo-Pacific are making a difference and are duly recognized by the world. The uncertain approach by the stakeholders involved in the region has broadened India's strategic horizons, widening its sphere of interest and allowing it to adapt by conducive reforms at home. This indeed projects India's role as a stabilizer of the region and zeniths India's operational ethos that a free, open, secure, peaceful, and stable Indo-Pacific is a necessary precondition for peace, security, and prosperity of the world (Jaishankar D. , 2024). When one analyses recent trends in the strategic spheres of the world, one can realize that it is the return of history, where the growth is because India is recovering from COVID, clocking staggering growth of 7 percent GDP with confidence that it will continue to grow multiple decades ahead of it (International Monetary Fund, 2024). In such circumstances, India is committed to proactively investing in its extended neighborhood, which is very much at the cutting edge of globalization. The greater centrality of India in the present and future makes it an anchor (stabilizing force) in the rapidly evolving strategic chaos causing turbulent waves in the Indo-Pacific.

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