

## China in India's Strategy towards South and Southeast Asia

### الصين في استراتيجية الهند تجاه جنوب وجنوب شرق آسيا

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#### Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of China rise on India's shaping of its strategy towards South and Southeast Asia. It argues that India's primary goal in its strategy toward South and Southeast Asia has become to prevent Chinese domination. The region of South and Southeast Asia, which it shares with China, is one of the most important priorities of its foreign policy in light of its ambition and aspiration to become a leading power in the region. Accordingly, India seeks to follow two different paths. On the one hand, it seeks to prevent Chinese domination by achieving internal and external balancing. On the other hand, it seeks to reassure China that it is not working to establish a balancing with it. The article argues that these reassurance strategies rarely succeed in achieving the desired goal because they are combined with a balancing strategy. Therefore, India has to reconsider its strategy by focusing on one of the two sides, taking into consideration the results of each.

**Keywords: India, China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, balance.**

#### المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تناول تأثير الصين وصعودها المتزايد على تشكيل الهند لاستراتيجيتها تجاه منطقة جنوب وجنوب شرق آسيا. وتجادل بأن الهدف الأساسي للهند في لاستراتيجيتها تجاه جنوب وجنوب شرق آسيا أصبح يتمثل في منع الهيمنة الصينية على هذه المنطقة. حيث تعتبر منطقة جنوب وجنوب شرق آسيا - والذي تشترك فيها مع الصين - من أهم أولويات سياستها الخارجية في ضوء

طموحها وتطلعها إلى أن تصبح قوة رائدة في المنطقة. ووفقاً لذلك تسعى الهند لاتباع مسارين مختلفين لتحقيق التوازن في المنطقة، فمن ناحية تسعى لمنع الهيمنة الصينية من خلال تحقيق التوازن الداخلي والخارجي. ومن ناحية أخرى تسعى إلى طمأنة الصين بأنها لا تعمل على تحقيق التوازن معها. وتجادل المقالة بأن استراتيجيات الطمأنة هذه نادراً ما تنجح في تحقيق الهدف المرجو نظراً لاقترانها باستراتيجية التوازن. ولذلك يتحتم على الهند إعادة النظر في استراتيجيتها من خلال التركيز على أحد الجانبين مع الأخذ في الاعتبار نتائج كل منهما.

**الكلمات المفتاحية: الهند، الصين، جنوب آسيا، جنوب شرق آسيا، التوازن.**

## **Introduction**

India's focus on South and Southeast Asia region, particularly the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has increased over the past decade. India has forged strategic partnerships with several key players in the region and has embraced the concept of "Indo-Pacific" with unprecedented speed. While the "look East" policy launched in 1991 seemed to tend towards achieving economic growth by rushing behind the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia, the strategic concerns arising from the rise of China eventually became an important consideration, and India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia has become a subset of India's policy towards China, with other elements fading in the margins (Rajagopalan, 2020). It is worth noting that the Indian government does not recognize China as the main engine of its policy in the South and Southeast Asia region, although its increasing strategic relationship with the United States and its allies such as Japan reflects this interpretation, which was adopted by many analysts who believe that the increasing Indian relations with both the US and Japan are only reactions to China's growing rise despite the reluctance of policy makers to saying so. However, India is also seeking settlement and compromise with China to the same extent, which increases the ambiguity of the Indian strategy in the region (Rajagopalan, 2017).

In fact, it is not only India that pursues these complex policies in the region towards China's rise and its impact, but there are many countries neighboring China that pursue the same complex policies, which led to little consensus in the literature on the characterization of these policies, as some describe them as "hedging," while others insist on describing them as "balancing". Others claim they embody none of these concepts clearly the sum of the contradictory policies

adopted by the countries of this region, including India, and describe these policies as "evasive balancing", which they define as an attempt to achieve balancing, but with the reassurance of the subject; the researcher supports this classification (Rajagopalan, 2020).

Accordingly, this study argues that India's primary goal in its policy towards South and Southeast Asia is to prevent China's hegemony in this region even if India's leaders do not explicitly declare it, but this is the logic behind its strategy. However, at the same time there are many factors undermining this strategy, topped by India's contradictory attempt to reassure China that it does not seek to achieve balancing with it. Nevertheless, this reassurance strategy rarely succeeds, as the reassurance associated with balance is less likely to work. In addition, India faces known difficulties and problems in its ability to build the necessary domestic infrastructure to realize its ambition for connecting itself with South and Southeast Asia. Accordingly, India needs to reconsider its strategy to achieve the desired results.

Therefore, this study revolves around a main question: How was India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia shaped in the framework of its vision and its dealing with China? This study attempted to answer this question by clarifying India's main strategic concerns regarding China, and then by identifying the elements and pillars of India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia in the framework of its vision for China, and then by evaluating this strategy and finally by clarifying the suggested ways for India to develop and activate its strategy in a way that achieves its desired interests and aims.

The importance of the study stems from its interest in the South and Southeast Asia region, and particularly in the nature of interactions between China and India as being two rising powers and Asian giants, and how the behavior of one affects the policies, moves, and strategic calculations of the other.

The nature of the subject of this study calls for reliance on the analytical descriptive approach to highlight the elements and pillars of the Indian strategy towards South and Southeast Asia region, in addition to reliance on the neorealist approach, which can help interpret how China and its growing rise in the region have influenced shaping and formulating Indian strategy, because it indicates that states, under the anarchical international system, each seek to maintain their own survival and security. And that in the case of weaker countries, it will seek to establish a balance in every way with its stronger competitors (Waltz, 1988). In

fact, looking at the Asian countries, we will find that most of them seek to achieve internal balancing by increasing economic and military capabilities, and external balancing through entering into partnerships and alliances. In addition, it is possible to enter cooperative relations in some areas with the competitor to achieve some benefits.

### **India's strategic concerns about China**

To understand India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia in the framework of its dealing and vision for China, it is necessary to address India's main strategic concerns about China in order to derive the basis for the Indian strategy, as China's involvement with India's smaller neighbors has affected India's perception of the threat in South Asia. China's economic and security openness to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka confirms India's concerns about China's strategy to encircle India, taking advantage of the difficulties India is facing with some of its neighbors in South Asia (Wu, 2020).

Although China did not declare a formal military alliance with any country in South Asia against India, India feared a bilateral attack by China and Pakistan along its northern border, and because of these factors, the government of "Narendra Modi" paid attention to deepening ties of friendship with its smaller neighbors, by fulfilling their economic requirements, especially those related to infrastructure, and given that India does not have physical ability to compete with China in South Asia, India's use of its soft power to influence its neighbors is the right strategy.

India has taken measures toward China's military modernization and naval assertiveness, including increasing bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation with regional actors such as Japan, Australia, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam in unprecedented ways in recent years, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi shifting the Indian "look East" policy to "Act East" Policy. One of the factors of attraction for the close ties with India from the ASEAN countries' perspective is the belief that these relations would help mitigate the effects of China's assertiveness in the region. India views its association with the countries of the region as a counterbalance to China's aspirations to hegemony, as India wants to reach multipolarity instead of Chinese hegemony in the region.

It is worth noting in this context that one of the main determinants of Xi Jinping's policy in South and Southeast Asia is to limit the United States' attempt

to contain China with the support of regional allies. Although the rivalry between the United States and China has remained less intense in the region, it is likely that this scenario will change in the coming years as India gets closer to the United States in global strategic calculations (Freeman, 2018).

Accordingly, there is a major deviation from India's traditional policy of not entering into any military alliances with any major powers. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement between India and the United States has contributed to shifting India's strategic preference in favor of the United States. The decision to sign this agreement in 2016 overcame long-term resistance to the agreement, and although the nature of the agreement was not a large area for military cooperation, it allows both the US and Indian Armies to use their respective military bases for logistical support, which will have far-reaching repercussions on the regional balance of power in South and Southeast Asia. The United States has obtained strategic support from both India and Japan to confront the Chinese challenge, as the Chinese expansion in the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean region risks invoking solutions from within and outside the region, as Obama's administration policy of shifting towards Asia was partly aimed to confront the rise of China; an effort that was not only continued by successive US administrations, but also intensified.

In this context, strategic affairs analysts assert that it is in India's interest to seek greater cooperation with the United States for two main reasons. First, despite the increase in India's financial capabilities in the past two decades, they are not in a position to contain Pakistan unilaterally nor to balance Chinese power, and secondly any strategy adopted by India that emphasizes the achievement of these results would strengthen India's position in pooling its resources with the resources of other powers that share these interests (Stromseth, 2018).

As for India's concerns about the Belt and Road Initiative, it did not seek to discuss its implications on it until China deepened its involvement in infrastructure with India's neighboring countries in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, and while India was making its political calculations regarding the initiative, there were important voices wondering whether India should have participated in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Initiative's Forum in May 2017.

On the one hand, some of the advocates of the Indian participation in the Belt and Road Initiative indicated means to benefit from the initiative, topped by the fact that it would provide a way to help finance local infrastructure projects in the

country, which would result in economic benefits, especially in the northeastern part of the country, and which has, given its geographical remoteness from the rest of India, remained away from the main cross-border trade routes. Despite this, Indian opposition to the initiative has triumphed, as India fears that Chinese-funded infrastructure projects may:

- contradict established international standards and norms.
- undermine India's sovereignty claims over disputed border areas as well as other security interests, particularly with regard to China and Pakistan.
- China confers greater geopolitical influence and stronger economic and diplomatic influence over policy-making decisions of India's neighbors in ways that may harm India (Wu, 2020).

Accordingly, India's position on the initiative seemed obvious with its absence from the forum. In response to media inquiries about whether India had been invited to attend the forum, India issued a statement in May 2017 stating that the initiative is not based on principles such as good governance, rule of law and transparency, and also creates debt burdens that are unsustainable in some recipient countries. For example, Colombo and Hambantota's growing debts to China are reason enough to worry about the unsustainable debt burden, which will eventually allow China to gain significant economic and strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean region (Kumar et al., 2018).

India is also increasingly concerned about China's use of regional connectivity and communication projects to change the perception of disputed territories in its favor. India's May 2017 statement alleges that China has ignored its territorial unity, particularly with regard to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that passes through the disputed Kashmir region. According to India, it is a violation of its sovereignty which makes India's participation in the initiative an opportunity to undermine its position on the dispute, as China supports Pakistan's point of view in the dispute.

In India's view, the China-Pakistan Corridor and some other aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative tend to ignore India's concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity, since, on India's eastern border, China claims the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh in the north, which are states under the rule of India and the Sino-Indian war arose in 1962 due to the dispute over them, a fact that makes many Indians more suspicious of China's motives to build infrastructure projects in the

border areas and in the disputed areas, in addition to India's serious concern about China's efforts in establishing projects in India's neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, projects that may give China a strategic advantage in its competition with India, and given the border tensions between India and China, India emphasizes that China must show its respect for India's territorial integrity in order to view the Belt and Road swap in a positive light.

Also, from a strategic point of view, China's increasing expansion in India's neighboring countries in the maritime and continental spheres has strengthened India's resistance to the Belt and Road project, as India is especially concerned about the deep bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal in terms of the continental route, as well as with the Maldives and Sri Lanka, along the maritime route, and given that the Indian Ocean is a major area of interest for the Indian Navy, the Maritime Silk Road itself constitutes a major concern for India, so India has not only expressed its concerns about China's expansion in India's neighborhood at the maritime and continental levels, but has also made clear its position on the Belt and Road Initiative as a whole (Sharma, 2019).

### **The basic elements and pillars of the Indian strategy**

India's strategy towards the South and Southeast Asia region stems from its need to balance the Chinese threat, and at the same time, given its limited capabilities, India cannot bear the cost of antagonizing China. Therefore, India has devised a strategy that combines developing partnerships in the region to balance China's influence, and reassuring China that these balancing efforts are not targeting it. Accordingly, the main pillars and elements of the Indian strategy towards South and Southeast Asia in the framework of its vision and dealing with China consist in the following:

- ***Balance with China***

India sought to form a partnership with other countries to achieve balance with China, and this constituted an important element in its strategy towards the South and Southeast Asia region, although this strategy contradicts the traditional Indian aversion to the policy of balance of power, as India was never keen on striking a balance with China even before independence, since viewing China as a partner was due to the common anti-colonial heritage, and this view continued after the end of British rule in India in 1947 and the victory of the Communists in the

Chinese Civil War in 1949. But over the past two decades, the economic and military disparity between the two countries has grown considerably. As a result, India has become more receptive to the idea of external balance. This shift made India's approach closer to that of others, for example the United States, which became more interested in enlisting India in such efforts, although both sides formally rejected these concepts, and while a number of researchers questioned India's ability or even willingness to strike a balance with China, India's behavior in the South and Southeast Asia region can only be described as for striking a balance, yet these behaviors lack efficiency in implementation.

It is worth noting that India's current balancing efforts have a number of components including partnerships, not only with the United States, but also with a number of other countries in the region at the bilateral and multilateral levels, and given that the main innovation in India's strategy is the external balance component, India's domestic efforts to build its power will be briefly tackled (Tellis, 2016).

- ***US-India Partnership***

The India-US partnership is the most important component of the Indian strategy and that partnership was at its best during the Cold War, although it began to be active during the eighties, and by the early twenty-first century, with the rapidly growing power of China, the Indian leadership and US decision-makers saw the need for their two countries to cooperate more intensely, as the re-emergence of China as a global player constituted a challenge to both the United States and India in different but complementary ways. The US-India 2008 nuclear deal, in which Washington scrapped existing global norms and rules to make India an exception, helped convince India of the US commitment to this partnership (Andersen and Verma, 2015).

Over the past decade, the security relationship between India and the US has grown rapidly; In fact, the United States declared India its "major defense partner" in 2016, and in the same year the two countries signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, followed in 2018 by the conclusion of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which is India-specific version of the Communication and Information on Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA). The implementation of these two agreements has been delayed mainly due to political concern in India about moving too quickly in the relationship with the United States. However, the fact that they



were eventually signed is an important indication of the changing nature of the security relationship between the United States and India, as well as an indication of how far India has come in this relationship in particular (Rajagopalan, 2020).

Another indicator that shows the deepening of defense ties between the two countries is arms trade exchange. Although the United States is still second to Russia in arms supplies to India, US arms exports to India increased by 557% in 2013-2017 compared to 2008-2012. Over the past decade, the value of Indian imports of U.S. arms has increased from nearly zero to about \$15 billion, making defense and security cooperation the mainstay of the U.S.-India partnership. In addition, India currently conducts military exercises with the United States more than with any other country. However, the significance of these changes cannot be overstated, because there is still considerable disagreement among Indian elites about the usefulness of close military relations with the United States, which is one reason why each additional step in the relationship is taken only after considerable deliberation and delay. If this relationship is going forward despite these uncertainties, it is mainly because India considers it a necessary tool for achieving balance with China in the South and Southeast Asia region (Shekhar, 2019).

- ***Partnership with major Asian powers (Japan and Australia)***

India's relations with key US allies such as Japan and Australia have traditionally been fairly moderate. Although there was some harmony especially with Japan, India rejected these powers for two reasons: first, as a non-aligned country, India looked down upon the countries that had chosen the path of alignment, considering them as nothing more than vassal states having no independent personality, but this was not explicitly stated. Secondly, India has been particularly dismissive of states that were allied with the West and are now under American command. Although India had cultural and commercial links with the West, including democratic ones, it seemed more sympathetic towards countries that were allied with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc more than those allied with the United States. Yet, the change in India's attitude towards these countries followed the change in its approach towards the United States. However, the main reason for the different perspective in which India currently sees these countries is the same perspective through which the United States sees China, which is the rise of China and the joint pressure that is being imposed on all these countries.

India's relations with Japan in particular have improved significantly, as in fact, the political roots of the idea of the Indo-Pacific region can be traced back to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech before the Indian Parliament in August 2007, entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas". The security cooperation between the two sides was institutionalized in 2008 when India and Japan signed the "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation". The rapprochement continued to grow when Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014; back then, the existing Partnership Agreement signed in 2006 was upgraded to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership. It was Narendra Modi's first state visit outside India to Japan which lasted five days, the longest trip he had made to any Asian country. The following year, India and Japan signed a "vision statement" on joint action in the Indo-Pacific region, and the two countries reiterated their firm commitment to achieving a peaceful, open, just, stable and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, and supporting the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity; and settlement of disputes by peaceful means, and freedom of navigation and overflight (Uttam and Kim, 2018).

These statements have been supported by concrete procedures, as the two countries have been conducting annual maritime warfare exercises (JIMEX) since 2012, and their warships regularly visit each other's ports at the present time. Many avenues of such cooperation became possible since both countries, particularly Japan, decided to put aside their differences regarding the nuclear issue and conclude a civilian nuclear agreement. India's security relationship with Australia has not developed as dramatically as it has with Japan, however, today India enjoys significant levels of security interaction with Australia, including frequent joint and bilateral military exercises, and security consultations at various levels, as India and Australia signed a joint declaration on security cooperation in November 2009, and the two countries' armies began conducting joint exercises, including the biennial maritime exercise AUSINDEX. In 2011, Australia also agreed to sell uranium to India, hence reversing its previous decision not to sell it to India, and thus this decision removed a major source of irritation in the relationship between the two countries. However, there is no doubt that there are greater difficulties in India's relations with Australia than in its relations with Japan, as India rejected Australia's invitation to participate in the Malabar Maritime Exercise even as an observer, due to continuing mistrust in Australia's commitment to the security relationship, and due to India's concern about angering China. It is worth noting that some of these problems existed even in India's relations with the United States

and Japan. Consequently, India is likely to move cautiously but steadily forward in building its strategic and security relations with Japan and Australia (Kaura and Rani, 2020).

- ***Partnership with major Southeast Asian powers (Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia)***

As it is the case with Japan and Australia, India also sought to build security relations with Southeast Asian powers, as Southeast Asia, in fact, was the original axis of India's "Act East" policy. But, as we have shown earlier, security relations are becoming increasingly important in India's approach towards the region, beyond its concentration on trade and communication, as this security focus is particularly evident in India's relations with Vietnam, Singapore and, more recently, Indonesia (Bajpae, 2017).

While India has always enjoyed close relations with Vietnam, the latter has recently become a pivotal country in India's "Act East" policy. In 2007, India and Vietnam signed a "Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership", and in 2016 this declaration was upgraded to "A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". This agreement and previous defense agreements gave impetus to defense cooperation between India and Vietnam, which currently includes military exercises involving the armies and navies of both countries. India also provided a \$500 million credit facility to Vietnam for the purchase of Indian military equipment, and also agreed to train Vietnamese fighter pilots and submarine crews. In general, India's security relationship with Vietnam has moved forward steadily, albeit slowly.

India's longest security relationship in Southeast Asia is undoubtedly with Singapore. In 2015, the two countries signed an advanced defense cooperation agreement, which includes an annual dialogue between the two countries' defense ministers. In the same year, the two countries also concluded the strategic partnership agreement. India also allowed Singapore to train its army and air force in India; a major transformation for a country that has long opposed foreign military presence on its territories.

As for India's relationship with Indonesia, until recently, and although the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2005, and while the Indonesian Navy repeatedly participated in multilateral naval exercises in India, the relationship between them cannot be described as close. But Indonesia's growing concern about China's behavior in the South China Sea has aligned its

concerns with those of India and laid the foundation for a more intense security relationship. In 2018, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Indonesia, the original strategic partnership agreement was upgraded to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". The two countries agreed to enhance their defense cooperation, as Narendra Modi noted that they have similar concerns, and it is their duty to ensure maritime safety and security. The visit also led to the signing of a joint agreement to develop the strategically vital Indonesian port of Sabang, which is located on the Strait of Malacca (Muni, 2017).

Accordingly, there is no doubt that there is a pattern to India's efforts in Southeast Asia, but its implementation is certainly likely to be criticized, as India's broad strategic intent consists in seeking to partner with countries in the region that have expressed similar concerns regarding China's behavior, and repeatedly emphasizing common issues (such as freedom of navigation and the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), which are symbolic phrases targeting China, and indicating a clear commitment to forming a united front to realize balance with China in the region (Bajpae, 2019).

- ***Internal balance***

The balancing component of India's strategy towards China includes both internal and external balancing elements, as India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia is only a subset of the larger strategy that focuses primarily on external balance, as we have shown previously, but there is an internal balancing element as well. This internal balance includes the formation of new military offense groups that are capable of confronting China, constructing Indian infrastructure along the common border, repositioning Indian Air Force on these borders, and building India's nuclear and space deterrence capabilities. But all these efforts face difficulties, as the Army's offense divisions have been reduced due to their high cost, infrastructure construction has been delayed due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the Indian Air Force's squadron strength shrank by a quarter due to delays in obtaining material; After two decades of nuclear testing, India still does not possess a long-range missile that can be launched from any part of its territories and is capable of entirely covering China.

India is also seeking to build its naval force as it has purchased a number of advanced I8-P Maritime Patrol Aircraft from the United States, and there are plans

to increase the number of aircraft carriers and submarines, but these plans are far behind schedule due to the general difficulties experienced by all the processes of acquiring Indian defense equipment; as Indian naval modernization faces a more fundamental problem as well, since resource allocation to the Indian Navy not only remains the lowest among the three military services, but has in fact decreased from 19% of the total military budget in 2010/2011 to only 15.5 % in 2018/2019. In addition to reducing the Navy's share of capital expenditures from 30% to 25% during the same period (Chatterjee, 2019).

- ***Seeking to reassure China***

While India's strategy for South and Southeast Asia can certainly be seen as helping to realize balance with China by building security relations and strategic partnerships throughout China's surrounding and neighborhood, India is also trying to prove to China that these efforts are not directed at China or designed to achieve the containment process of China. This reassurance attempt is consistent with India's traditional reluctance to form or join alliances, and the difficulties and pauses that have characterized the shift toward a closer relationship with the United States and other allies indicate this reluctance. Changes to the concept of nonalignment still resonate even with Narendra Modi's government, although the term itself has been abandoned in favor of its equivalents such as "strategic autonomy". Moreover, the restraints inherent in reassuring China also suit India's self-image and highlighting it as a responsible country that adheres to international norms and standards. There are five specific paths to India's reassurance strategy with China.

The first is that India has issued direct and repeated statements that India has no interest in containing China, and Indian leaders have directly addressed the concern that China might view India's partnerships as an attempt to create an anti-Chinese alliance. For example, in the Prime Minister's address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, he explicitly indicated that India's strategy in the region is not directed against any country, and that India's friendships are not alliances intended to containment. A few months later, India's ambassador to China affirmed that his country will work with all powers, including China, and that the only side where India was aligned is only India's. In 2014, former Vice President of India Hamid Ansari used words somewhat similar to those of Narendra Modi, asserting that

India does not subscribe to alliance building nor does it believe in the logic of containment, adding that the common interests between India and China far outweigh our differences (Bajpai, 2018).

Second, India has invested heavily in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with the aim of convincing China that its policy is not an attempt to join an anti-China coalition or contain it. Although frequent diplomatic and military confrontations have repeatedly hampered the relationship, India has joined a number of multilateral organizations that are dominated and favored by China, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and, more recently, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It has also taken common positions with China on international issues including climate change and global trade liberalization. While India has its own interest in doing so, it has also emphasized that both countries want to further enhance coordination and cooperation within multilateral organizations to jointly deal with global issues (Wagner, 2016).

Third, India has also taken unilateral measures to convince China of its good faith, particularly in the period following the Doklam confrontation in late 2017. Among these measures, issuing instructions to government employees to not attend a rally organized by exiled Tibetans in India to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Tibetan failed uprising against China. In addition, the Indian government also asked officials to tone down anti-China rhetoric and cancel the annual "Asian Security Conference" of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), a forum funded by the Indian Ministry of Defense, because its theme was supposedly considered sensitive.

Fourth, India has consistently sought dialogue with China, despite the recurring difficulties in their relationship, as from time to time, regarding India's request to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group, India seemed convinced that it had managed to change China's mind, despite its disappointment later. However, even after Doklam confrontation, India sought to restore balance in the relationship via dialogue, as this suits the dominant Indian point of view stipulating that India should seek establishing balanced relations with all powers. A senior adviser to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party echoed that sentiment when he called for following a multistakeholder approach to India's foreign policy in early 2018, which implies criticism of the United States.

The fifth and most important element consists in India's obvious hesitancy about the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), which Australia, Japan, and the United States joined, as bringing together the four most powerful powers in the Indo-Pacific (excluding China) has clear security benefits. Conversely, slowing down or abandoning such a joint effort could have potentially negative security consequences. Although India was a reluctant participant in the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meetings in 2007, it was Australia that withdrew from the initiative the following year. But recently, it has become clear that India is the most hesitant of the four, leading some analysts to call it the "weakest link" in the Quad. Despite frequent attendance at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meetings, India has consistently avoided referring to the Quad meetings by name, describing them as meetings between India, the United States, Japan and Australia. Indeed, Indian officials have insisted on refusing to use the name even in response to an explicit parliamentary question about the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Such reluctance to engage positively with the Quad is potentially dangerous, as it may increase India's security vulnerability. Although the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meetings are generally viewed as an attempt to achieve balance with China, India's delay in moving forward with them can also be seen as an attempt to reassure China (Rajagopalan, 2020).

China objected to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meetings when the four countries first met in 2007, and it is expected to object again if the Quad states decide to strengthen or institutionalize the group. There are, of course, a number of reasons for India's reticence about the Quad meetings, including a lack of confidence in the commitment of some partners, particularly Australia. But there was also certainly some concern in India about unnecessarily antagonizing China, even though India did participate in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meeting that took place in November 2017. Indeed, the Indian statement about the meeting again did not mention the term "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue".

Based on this, India's efforts to reassure China constitute an important component of its strategy towards South and Southeast Asia region, although it is not known whether these efforts will convince China, it is doubted (Ranjan, 2019).

### **Strategy evaluation**

Correspondingly, this combination of balance and reassurance strategies is usually described as hedging, but as many intellectuals and researchers have pointed out, hedging is generally a mischaracterization of the strategies pursued by

East and South Asian countries; Balance was in fact the dominant response to the rise of China, and India's behavior was a good example of this, since, despite its attempt to adopt strategies of reassurance along with balance, India's primary approach towards the South and Southeast Asia region was to develop a set of tools and relations to help it counter the rise of China. Therefore, India is balancing, not hedging, because hedging requires at least taking an equal distance from the US and China, but India does not do so like many countries in the region. What India is doing is to achieve balance with China despite attempts to reassure it.

The reassurance strategy, in this combination, has been designed as a complementary approach to mask balancing efforts rather than as a substitute for balance. Although India has regularly delayed building a coalition that achieves balance in the region, it has not stopped doing so, let alone changing its course. The question here is whether this combination of balance and reassurance will work. It is worth noting that although there is much debate about the rationale and usefulness of reassurance strategies in international politics, there is little empirical evidence that countries actually use such strategies because of the risks involved. It is also unlikely that reassurance strategies will either help reassure potential adversaries or effectively strike a balance with them (Rajagopalan, 2020).

This major problem also highlights the challenge facing India's comprehensive strategy for South and Southeast Asia. The dilemma facing India and other countries in the region is that China has not and will not take these reassurance measures seriously unless they are major security sacrifices, including shunning partnerships with other powers such as the United States, but this would potentially be a very dangerous step if taken by India, which makes it unlikely to take place. Also, the measures that India would be willing to take, such as a commitment to non-hostility through bilateral rhetoric and dialogues, and slowdown in building partnerships like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, would not be enough to convince China that India is not making balance. There are even potential negative security consequences for these steps such as slowing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, so this is likely to be India's biggest step. To underscore this point, this is one reason why reassurance strategies are rarely adopted in international politics, as states are generally unwilling to accept weakness in order to demonstrate non-hostility due to the dangers involved in an out-of-control international order. This will prove to be a hindrance to India's strategy toward the region, since at the same time; India's reassurance efforts are



likely to reduce its credibility with its new partners, potentially undermining its efforts to strike an effective balance with China.

Some of these potential allies may try to imitate India's strategy, or even switch completely to joining China, to the detriment of any effort by India to achieve balance with China (Shukla, 2016). And although it is too early to offer anything more than a quick assessment of how what we might call "Evasive Balancing" strategy, followed by India with China, works; particularly if it will fail in its attempts to reassure China, as theories predicted, the early evidence supports previously mentioned expectations. For example, although India seeks to reassure China that India's partnerships are not an attempt to contain it, we must find some evidence that China is no longer opposing such partnerships, but there is no such evidence, and even China continues to question the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes India, noting that "politicized and exclusionary" gatherings should be avoided. Although the general state of bilateral relations may not be a good indicator of the effectiveness of India's strategy to reassure China, it should be noted that there has been an overall improvement in bilateral relations since the Wuhan Summit in 2018. However, there has been no change in China's policies on a number of issues that are problematic for India, such as its support for Pakistan, its commitment to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (which passes through Indian-claimed Kashmir), and China's opposition to India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (Jha, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

India's strategy towards South and Southeast Asia region, as concluded by this study, has evolved from its previous desire to build links with regional countries in an aim to support its endeavor to realize economic prosperity, but when the challenge posed by the rise of China became greater, this focus on the South and Southeast Asia region has expanded and changed its two priorities, so that it became now more concentrated on security instead of trade and investment. India's evasive efforts seek to merge two incompatible paths to achieve balancing in the region, namely, preventing China from dominating the region through forming balanced alliances, without antagonizing China, and attempting to convince it that India is not actually trying to realize balance with it. The likely outcome is that India will not please China and even its new partners, will not lead to stability to the South and Southeast Asia region, and will not stop Chinese hegemony over it.

Consequently, and in light of the important strategic shifts taking place in the Asia-Pacific region, most prominently the alliance announced in the Indo-Pacific region called AUKUS between the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom that includes selling American submarines to Australia, in addition to a strategic co-operation between the three countries. This announcement was preceded by another strategic development in the same region, namely the co-operation initiative between the United States, Japan, India and Australia known as QUAD referred to earlier. In addition, Japan announced, at an earlier time, a major strategic initiative titled " Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which aims to achieve co-operation between the countries located on the two oceans and lay the foundations for free maritime trade (Samaan, 2021). Therefore, it can be said that India has one of two paths to strengthen and activate its strategy towards the South and Southeast Asia region. It can either focus on the balancing aspect of its strategy and thus try to join the existing new alliance "AUKUS", as it is clear that its real goal is to counter the rise of China in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, in Asia and the world as a whole, in spite of the diplomatic language that was used in announcing this alliance or other alliances that were previously mentioned. Therefore, if India joins this new alliance and actually takes serious steps in it and also in the QUAD alliance, then it will be able to achieve an effective balance with China. However, it must be taken into account that such step will complicate the security dilemma between China and India, and will inevitably affect their relations negatively in various fields, and the region will witness very massive strategic interactions in order to achieve balances, which will lead to undermining stability and security in the region as a whole.

As for the other way that India can focus on is the aspect of co-operation and strengthening relations with China, particularly in the economic field, as China has already emerged as India's largest trading partner in the first half of the 2020-2021 fiscal year, surpassing the United States, which has taken this place since 2018 – 2019 (Das, 2021). In this way, the two countries can resolve their differences through dialogue and negotiations. Regional organizations may play a prominent role in this framework, which in turn will eventually create opportunities and ways to reinforce peace and stability in the Asian region.

To conclude, it can be said that India can skillfully stand at equal distances from China and other powers in the region without becoming too far away from any of them or too close to any of them, thus realizing the benefits resulting from its positive relationship with each of them.

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