

# **India's Connectivity Contours and Indo-Pacific Initiatives**

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade, India has attempted to revitalise its engagement with Asia and the Pacific under the aegis of the Act East Policy. The policy has pursued enhanced economic and security cooperation, connectivity outreach, and infrastructure development. Exemplar initiatives are Sagarmala, Project Mausam, Cotton Routes, and Security and Growth for All in the Region. One of the rationales for this diplomatic initiative is China's rising capacity, however, is it also being undertaken to re-establish India's ties with its ancient trade partners. In the COVID-19 world, over reliance on Chinese supply chain networks is a significant concern and thus these initiatives are of increasing geostrategic importance. Hence this paper highlights the evolving Indian foreign policy approach towards China during the pandemic. It focuses on India's connectivity initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and its engagement with "like-minded" partners. The significance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, India's growing alignment with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partners and its increasing acceptance of the US-led initiatives are all considered.

**Keywords:** Act East Policy, Belt and Road Initiative, China, India, India-China relations, India-Quad relations, Indian foreign policy, Indo-Pacific, Middle Power

## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, India has made strenuous efforts to revitalise its engagement with East, South and Southeast Asian countries, as well as with the Pacific Island states under the aegis of the Act East Policy (AEP). The policy has pursued enhanced economic and security cooperation, connectivity outreach and infrastructure development across the Indo-Pacific states principally for Indian focused development. Increasingly however a secondary reason for this diplomatic initiative has become China's rising might in the region, primarily through its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India aims to enhance its own outreach and balance against Chinese influence. Thus India has launched several initiatives such as Sagarmala (literally, "ocean necklace"); Project Mausam (meaning "weather"); Cotton Routes; and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), in order to re-establish ties with its ancient trade partners in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In the COVID-19 world these initiatives are more prominent as geostrategic tools with more specific goals such as to quickly reduce reliance on Chinese supply chain networks.

Nonetheless, India's foreign policy until recently did not explicitly acknowledge the emerging China threat in its outreach initiatives to the Indo-Pacific states. Rather, it has always stressed India's long-standing "China Connect" policy of economic engagement. However, under the current government, foreign policy has been hued with nationalism in order to boost the "parity of power" with China and showcase India as an emerging power.<sup>1</sup> India's response after the Doklam clash in 2017 did just that. The China connect framework received a further jolt with the recent clash in the Galwan Valley, Ladakh, along the Line of Actual Control.<sup>2</sup> Besides, China's reactions to the crises in Hong Kong and Taiwan, its continued military posturing in the Indo-Pacific and its growing assertiveness with the United States of America (US), too, clearly indicates that the notion of "peaceful rise" is a thing of the past.<sup>3</sup> All things considered, India has realized that the time is up for its China appeasement policy. Hence, in this COVID-19, post-Galwan era, there has been a perceptible shift in India's China policy, which has considered the growing anti-China rhetoric both domestically and globally.<sup>4</sup> India, as either a great or middle power, depending on one's definitional perspective, is thus set to exhibit new forms of statecraft beyond the middle power behavioural approaches expectations of how middle powers should behave.<sup>5</sup>

Hence this paper highlights the evolving Indian foreign policy approach towards China in the emerging context. It focuses on India's connectivity contours in the Indo-Pacific and its engagement with "like-minded" partners. The paper explores the importance of India's AEP in the current environment and re-examines its connectivity initiatives in the region. It also looks into the significance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); India's growing alignment with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners – namely the US, Japan and Australia; and its increasing acceptance of the US-led initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Blue Dot Network (BDN) and the emerging narrative of the Quad Plus.

## **India's Indo-Pacific Connectivity Outreach**

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely tested the global economic order that has been marked by China's dominance in manufacturing and supply chain networks and the world's over reliance on

them. This has reiterated the importance of sustainable and diverse infrastructural connectivity networks. A report by the Asian Development Bank in 2017 had estimated that “developing Asia will need to invest US\$26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, or US\$1.7 trillion per year if the region is to maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and respond to climate change.”<sup>6</sup> With the pandemic further complicating the funding and creation of infrastructure, the infrastructure needs will likely skyrocket. India, therefore, must encourage infrastructure investments in the region to pursue inclusive regional development, boost its image as an emerging global leader, and check increasing Chinese assertiveness.

India’s strategic location – close geographic proximity to vital regions (i.e., Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and China) and position at the centre of the Indian Ocean – can be a viable tool to regain influence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> It’s historic links with the states in these regions must be utilized to chart its post-Galwan and post-COVID-19 connectivity outreach. In this context, it must be noted that India played key roles in Korea, Japan, and China immediately post-independence.<sup>8</sup> However in the late 1950s and early 1960s, due to the second five-year-plan induced economic slowdown; India’s alienation from the West; and the India-China War of 1962, India’s influence began to wane. Between 1962 and 1992, India did not participate in any critical developments in Asia and was out of the regional security or economic architecture, including Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation and ASEAN. The post-Cold War shift in foreign policy, however, helped India regain some of its lost glory.

### ***The Need for the “Look East Policy”***

In early 1990s, under the P. V. Narasimha Rao government, India liberalized its economy with several reforms. During the same period, India also experienced a shift in its foreign policy: one of the highlights was the Look East Policy (LEP). This policy aimed to bolster India’s relations with East and Southeast Asian nations to attract foreign direct investment along with other economic benefits. Japan became the first country to offer official development assistance to India, and South Korean companies entered a liberalizing Indian market. Notably, the policy didn’t simply improve India’s ties with the Asian nations, but it also helped India to embrace market trends and work with US allies. This enabled India to view political *blocs* in a more favourable light; hence, by 1992, India established official relations with ASEAN, which is presently at the centre of India’s Indo-Pacific policy.<sup>9</sup>

### ***From “Look East” to “Act East”***

By the 2000s, India’s LEP evolved into the AEP. This resulted from India’s expanded regional capabilities and growing global ambitions, but also in part due to China’s regional assertiveness. Prime Minister Narendra Modi officially articulated AEP at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit (EAS) in November 2014.<sup>10</sup> The AEP focuses on the “extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region”.<sup>11</sup> It also aimed to fill a gap in the post-Cold War security order, by establishing India as a leading regional power, aiming to become a US\$5 trillion economy by 2025;<sup>12</sup> the impact of COVID-19 will make this goal more difficult to achieve.

AEP is thus responsible for all significant Indian tie-ups, initiatives, and projects in the Indo-Pacific. Connectivity is acknowledged as the main economic challenge and demand. As noted above, the Indo-Pacific's \$26 trillion infrastructure deficit is thus the primary target.<sup>13</sup> However, the AEP is also India's political commitment to ensuring a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, where New Delhi itself is a key strategic player. Thus, AEP, as an updated version of the LEP, is more action-oriented and, unlike its predecessor, is not only driven by economic demands. Instead, it factors in broader geopolitical, strategic and security areas that look beyond Southeast Asia. Hence the AEP covers the entirety of the Indo-Pacific and the IOR and focuses on matters of maritime trade and security to bring about a balance of power in the region. In short, the AEP has four main objectives: (1) ensuring a secure Indian Ocean and overall Indo-Pacific; (2) campaigning for more robust integration with South Asian nations; (3) encouraging and engaging in strategic partnerships with "like-minded" countries; and (4) effectively managing India-China relations. Thus, Indian great/middle power is not simply concerned with good international citizenship, avoidance of conflict and compromised through multilateral solutions but aims to purposefully shape its region both economically and politically through all forms of statecraft that will produce outcomes in an effective and efficient manner.

Arguably, therefore, India in 2014 reshaped its Indo-Pacific policy as the AEP, to counter extra-regional challenges. In 2013, China under the new leadership of Xi Jinping announced the launch of its infrastructure-led development and connectivity driven projects, the Silk Road Economic Corridor and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>14</sup> Together, they came to be known as the BRI, which remains the largest and most ambitious state-sponsored mercantilist initiative in the world till date. With the launch of the BRI, the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific came to the fore. The rise of China and its potential plans of global trade dominance threaten the existing global order, and countries have scrambled to reaffirm their own dedication to South Asia and the IOR. The US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia and India have thus now become key collaborators in the Indo-Pacific, a region responsible for over 60 per cent of the global gross domestic product and over 45 per cent of merchandise trade.<sup>15</sup> The actions of these great and middle powers are both a reactions to China's own behaviour but also a validation of their long held values and interests.

### ***The Importance of "Act East" in the Post-COVID-19 Era***

China's recent international behaviour has been increasingly aggressive and confrontational. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic that is raging across the world, China has been posturing militarily in its immediate neighbourhood (land as well as maritime) – including multiple incursions in the contested Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands for Japan) in the East China Sea, increased military presence in the South China Sea (SCS), assertiveness in the Taiwan Strait, the bloody Galwan clash with India and the passing of the controversial new Hong Kong National Security Laws. Concurrently, it has engaged in "wolf-warrior diplomacy", which has resulted in detrimental effects for Beijing. China-Australia relations are at an "all-time low"<sup>16</sup>: retaliating against Australia's leading middle power call for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19,<sup>17</sup> China imposed tariffs on Australian barley and banned beef from its major exporters.<sup>18</sup> Australia called it a "wake-up call"<sup>19</sup> and insisted that it will not be "intimidated" by China's economic threats despite China being its largest trading partner.<sup>20</sup> In the COVID-19 world, Japan is also keen to reduce its economic dependence on China and has already

earmarked US\$ 2.2 billion to shift businesses out of China. Further, China's pre-COVID-19 trade war with the US is showing no signs of abating but appears to be merely the first stage in an expanding conflict. In July 2020, the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo officially termed China's SCS claims "unlawful", rejecting "any push to impose 'might makes right'".<sup>21</sup>

All these bilateral incidents are not isolated, and thus highlight the end of a period of foreign policy restraint by Beijing.<sup>22</sup> India has thus realized China's growing disregard for the existing global order which is rightly based, fundamentally, on the rule of law. India's post-Galwan foreign policy, therefore, appears to be considering China's readiness to manipulate multiple conflicts in the region aggressively. For this reason, middle power or not, it is important for India to quickly expand the AEP and adapt it further to be an action-oriented policy that enables enhanced economic and military alliances.

Particularly now, when the BRI is witnessing a low phase amidst COVID-19, the AEP connectivity initiatives should be given a new thrust. Many actors in East and Southeast Asia, such as Taiwan and Vietnam, have handled the pandemic far more successfully than those in the West. Increased collaboration with these nations under a COVID-19-containment paradigm should be expanded. In the post-COVID-19 environment, countries will find it difficult to re-open their borders, as such, it makes practical sense to refocus on regional alliances and engagements. Moreover, India seems to have "both short-term and long-term imperatives to deepen its engagement with the region".<sup>23</sup> India must focus on collaborations, particularly in medical research and digital technology.

Apart from the thrust on Southeast Asian nations, pursuing enhanced cooperation with "like-minded" nations, such as Quad partners US, Japan and Australia, and defence partners, such as Russia and France, it is also important to check the growing Chinese influence in the region.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, the success of this new upgraded AEP will lie in its overall connectivity outreach.

### **The "Indian-ness" in India's Connectivity Promotion**

India's central location as the crossroads of Asia has been pivotal in shaping its historical interactions and continues to ensure its position as a key player. India today is increasingly and extensively involved in the Indo-Pacific, improving its presence in regional dialogue mechanisms; it is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as a founding member of the EAS. In 2019, the Ministry of External Affairs even set up an Indo-Pacific division, successfully providing a bureaucratic alignment to Modi's Indo-Pacific vision.<sup>25</sup> India has included a certain "Indian-ness" in its Indo-Pacific narrative to ensure that one is not evaluated without the other. The strategic location of India aids this, and while India itself is a growing economy, it hopes to become the centre of economic and geopolitical power in the Indo-Pacific. To achieve this goal, India aims to draw on its rich historic past as a connectivity hub to further its modern-day interests in the Indo-Pacific.

For this purpose, India has launched several regional initiatives such as Sagarmala, SAGAR, Bharatmala, UDAN, Project Mausam and Cotton Route Project to ensure collaborative opportunities. These Indo-Pacific initiatives cover the economic, trade, security, and cultural

realms of New Delhi's connectivity outreach. The "free and open" spirit of these initiatives is shared by India's Quad and Quad Plus partners, paving the way for more potent economic synergy with these nations. COVID-19 has posed significant challenges to the integration of South and East Asian nations, with prospects of integration depending immensely on coordination amongst countries. With the US-led order faltering in the region and growing anti-China rhetoric emerging regionally and globally, the time for middle powers and emerging economies like India is ripe for shaping a new order of Asian regionalism. The relevance of these inclusive, Indo-Pacific centred programmes has increased immensely in the COVID-19 world. Some of the features of these initiatives are discussed in brief, as follows:

### ***Sagarmala***

Sagarmala is India's most-ambitious port development initiative, which was approved, under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Modi, by the Union Cabinet in 2015. At the National Maritime Summit in 2016, a National Perspective Plan was released highlighting how Sagarmala aims to develop ports across approximately 7,500 km of Indian coastline and 14,500 km of navigable waterways.<sup>26</sup> It envisions boosting India's maritime economy by reducing transportation costs and modernizing national maritime infrastructure. The total estimated cost of this project is about Rs 70,000 crore, and more funds could be dedicated for capacity enhancement industrial development.<sup>27</sup>

Ports are an integral part of the "dynamic and time-sensitive supply chain network". Therefore, their importance in the post-COVID-19 world, which will be rocked by a near breakdown of supply chain networks, cannot be overestimated. The multi-modal connectivity has the potential to establish alternative supply chains – a welcome initiative during these trying times. Though the government has granted ports and shipping an "infrastructure status", there is a need to give a greater fillip to this capital-intensive sector.<sup>28</sup> For this purpose, India could liaise with like-minded partner countries such as the US, Japan, and Australia to enhance this initiative. For example, the US-led BDN could provide a much-needed infrastructure boost.

### ***SAGAR***

SAGAR is a maritime initiative launched in 2016, strictly speaking, under the Sagarmala project. It underscores India's vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> This vision, as reiterated by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in 2019 is "for something" rather than "against someone" – a reference to the initiative's inclusive approach, rather than it being anti-China.<sup>30</sup> India must encourage such initiatives to not only check the Chinese threat but also advance the development of the region. The goal is to ensure a climate of trust and transparency; regard for the rule of law; and respect for one another's sovereignty while pursuing connectivity and economic interests.

### ***Bharatmala***

Bharatmala Pariyojana focuses on "bridging critical infrastructure gaps" via the development of "Economic Corridors, Inter Corridors and Feeder Routes, National Corridor Efficiency Improvement, Border and International connectivity roads, Coastal and Port connectivity roads

and Green-field expressways”. The Government of India approved this project in 2017 at a projected cost of about Rs 5,35,000 crore.<sup>31</sup> In 2019, a total of 225 projects (cumulative length of approximately 9,613 km) had been “appraised and approved” under Phase-I of this project. Bharatmala will allow India to ensure better connectivity to its vast domestic market that will boost trade.<sup>32</sup>

## ***UDAN***

UDAN (which translates to “flight”) is a regional connectivity project of the Airports Authority of India, under the Ministry of Civil Aviation. UDAN stands for “Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik” (loosely translated as “let the common citizen of the country fly”). The International Air Transport Association (IATA) in 2018 foresaw that India would become the world’s third-largest aviation market (defined in terms of traffic to, from and within a country, as per IATA) and overtake the United Kingdom by 2024.<sup>33</sup>

However, in view of the current global scenario, COVID-19 will surely impact the above-mentioned figures. The air transport sector, which has been severely affected by the ongoing pandemic, thus needs the UDAN initiative more than ever. Reportedly, “[Foreign Direct Investment] inflows in India’s air transport sector reached US\$1.8 billion between April 2000 and December 2018”; and the Indian government plans to “invest US\$183 billion for the development of airport infrastructure and air navigation by the year 2026”.<sup>34</sup>

UDAN has two components, domestic and international. The former aims to link under-served airports in tier-2 and tier-3 cities by paying subsidies to airlines to allow them to offer cheaper tickets. The latter aims to connect Indian cities to major travel destinations across the world in order to promote people-to-people ties as well as academic and industrial linkages.<sup>35</sup> In addition, on March 26, 2020, amidst the COVID-19-induced nationwide lockdown, the Civil Aviation Ministry launched the “Lifeline Udan” project to “ensure a steady supply of essential goods to even remote parts of the country” and ease the movement of medical essentials.<sup>36</sup>

## ***Project Mausam and Cotton Routes***

By studying monsoon patterns, Project Mausam<sup>37</sup> attempts to connect Indian Ocean littoral nations by focusing on cultural connections that empower maritime livelihoods. Concurrently, a revival of India’s Cotton Routes has begun that serves as a low-key counter to China’s Silk Road<sup>38</sup> by improving India’s connect with Central Asian nations, which are major cotton producers. The aim is to revive ancient routes of cotton trade, while simultaneously building dialogues with these nations.

## ***ASEAN Centrality***

ASEAN adopted the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” at its Senior Officials Meeting held in Bangkok, Thailand, June 20-23, 2019.<sup>39</sup> The Outlook recognizes the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean; its use of the term *Indo-Pacific* in the title of its vision statement signifies acceptance of the concept. It stresses the need for “collective leadership in forging and shaping the vision for closer cooperation in the



Indo-Pacific” and seeks to “continue to maintain its *central role* in the evolving regional architecture in Southeast Asia and its surrounding regions”.<sup>40</sup> Thus, *ASEAN centrality* remains the central tenet.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, rather than creating new mechanisms, the outlook focuses on the need for existing ASEAN-led forums like the EAS to promote cooperation in the region.<sup>42</sup> The ongoing China-US trade war may have triggered the deliberations for ASEAN to develop such a vision<sup>43</sup>; however, the outlook does not focus on specific countries and envisages closer cooperation in the Indo-Pacific as a whole. India welcomed the 2019 ASEAN Outlook, saying that it saw “important elements of convergence with our own views, especially from the standpoint of principles”: in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi in his statement at the Shangri-La Dialogue had stressed the need for “a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific”.<sup>44</sup>

For India, ASEAN’s centrality in the region has been a defining factor of its regional foreign policy initiatives. Therefore, ASEAN, as a leading stakeholder in the region, gives fillip to its AEP as well, particularly in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. Both India, through its AEP, and ASEAN are geared towards “deepening economic cooperation amongst countries” in East and Southeast Asia to fight the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown. There is an urgent need for sustained mechanisms that “facilitate public-private partnerships”. When ASEAN further liberalizes “the trade and investment regime to maintain the competitiveness of global value chains in the region”, India must be ready to capitalize and engage with the grouping to develop an inclusive regional architecture.<sup>45</sup> India is engaged in connectivity initiatives that include some members of ASEAN, such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The MGC was launched in 2000 by India and five ASEAN countries, namely Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam for cooperation in tourism, culture, education, transport and communications.

Another important economic grouping is BIMSTEC, which comprises countries in the littoral and nearby areas of the Bay of Bengal (i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand). It came into being on June 6, 1997. Prime Minister Modi has pushed for connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region through BIMSTEC dialogues; he even invited the BIMSTEC nations for his swearing-in ceremony in May 2019.<sup>46</sup> India plans to extend its National Knowledge Network to the BIMSTEC countries and is in negotiations with these partners for a Coastal Shipping Agreement and a Motor Vehicle Agreement.<sup>47</sup> Further, India’s active participation in regional forums like the Asia-Europe Meeting, EAS, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum,<sup>48</sup> and the Indian Ocean Rim Association adds to India-ASEAN growing synergy which must take on added focus in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods.

### **India and the Blue Dot Network – Post-COVID-19 Connectivity**

India’s animosity towards China is growing rapidly. The barbaric Galwan valley incident was the deadliest attack since 1975 and it has hastened India to seek enhanced cooperation with like-minded nations, particularly its Quad partners. The Galwan border incident has thus had a severe impact on India’s foreign policy, as India is witnessing a China “dis-connect” and aligning towards the US and its allies, and increasingly independent middle powers such as Australia. In their joint statement<sup>49</sup>, during US President Donald J. Trump’s state visit to India on

February 24-25, 2020, the two leaders expressed a desire for India to engage with the BDN – the US’s joint Indo-Pacific venture with Japan and Australia. However, India has abstained from making any commitment to the network.

The BDN is a multi-stakeholder initiative that was launched by the US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA), the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation.<sup>50</sup> It promotes transparent and sustainable infrastructural investment in the region and is increasingly being seen as an emerging effective counter to China’s BRI. The BDN, is antithetical to the BRI’s “debt-trap diplomacy”, and thus aims to create a “standard of excellence” in infrastructure investment. It naturally endorses the free and open Indo-Pacific vision of the Quad, which recently expanded to form the Quad Plus, comprising New Zealand, South Korea, Brazil, Israel and Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> This expanded strategic consultative framework along with the BDN will undoubtedly help in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery in the Indo-Pacific by building alternative supply chains and promoting quality infrastructure in the region – a convergence with India’s “continental connect” goal.

India needs to work together with countries that can help build on its own goals and initiatives. The US-led BDN has the latent capacity to be extremely beneficial for India’s own Indo-Pacific connectivity initiatives as discussed above. The BDN would give India a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean region, apart from providing capital to pursue quality infrastructure projects and providing a multilateral outlook to these initiatives. Its certification process will also ensure transparency and accountability.<sup>52</sup> An India-plus BDN will promote the regional connectivity and development, much-needed for the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. The BDN, with its emphasis on public-private partnership, will help strengthen this process. It can also help implement India’s “engagement with equilibrium” policy towards China. Thus, India’s engagement with BDN could be an effective way to pursue “decoupling” from China, without offending the regional giant. If India decides to join the BDN, it would be a significant strategic endeavour within India’s evolving Indo-Pacific narrative.

### ***India-Japan Bilateral***

Japan has gradually emerged as India’s key ally and partner in connectivity initiatives, both domestically and regionally. The growing interdependence and strength of Japan-India ties also stem from a strong sense of camaraderie built between Prime Ministers Modi and Shinzo Abe. The relationship between the two leaders has gone a long way in ensuring the smooth functioning of India-Japan initiatives, as well as bilateral ties, and new Prime Minister Suga will find a similarly warm welcome from India and Prime Minister Modi. In the post-COVID-19 order, with both Japan and India looking to actively break away from their economic dependence on China, the connectivity promotion between the two nations must receive primary focus.

India’s potential inclusion in the BDN would add immensely to the India-Japan bilateral connectivity collaboration synergy. In the post-COVID-19 order, with infrastructure needs only expanding, Japan’s recognition as a net-provider of quality infrastructure adds to Suga’s major economic-diplomacy aims, especially in light of an economically predatory China.<sup>53</sup> Japan’s Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI) is complemented by the BDN process; it also builds on Tokyo’s Group of Twenty presidency, which aims at promoting quality

infrastructure via consensus building.<sup>54</sup> BDN also adds to Japan's Vientiane Declaration, announced at the 11<sup>th</sup> EAS in 2016 that seeks to build infrastructure-focused cooperation among ASEAN, India, Australia, Russia, New Zealand and the US.<sup>55</sup>

India and Japan view connectivity through similar lenses, and Africa's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific connectivity outreach is a common interest. The "Platform for Japan-India Business Cooperation in Asia-Africa Region"<sup>56</sup> (formerly, the Asia Africa Growth Corridor) aims to provide transparent financial sustainability to the region – objectives similar to the BDN. The project is part of an intercontinental outreach initiative that incorporates the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Asia in one frame.

Further, the alignment of Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" vision with India's AEP is a great boost for development in the region. For example, the India-Japan Act East Forum provides a platform to identify "specific projects for economic modernization of India's North-East region including those pertaining to connectivity, developmental infrastructure, industrial linkages", and also to expand collaborations with Myanmar and Bangladesh.<sup>57</sup> Japan has invested in multiple projects in India's Northeast, such as the water supply project in Guwahati and the Assam-Meghalaya road network.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the Japan International Cooperation Agency has partnered with India in several transport projects like the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project; Metro Rail projects in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad; Western Dedicated Freight Corridor from the National Capital Region to Mumbai; and Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet-train project.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the Japan-India Business Platform combines Japan's FOIP with EPQI, giving a further boost to inclusive connectivity in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>60</sup>

### ***US Indo-Pacific Initiatives and India***

Beyond the BDN, the US, like India, has released multiple Indo-Pacific-centred connectivity initiatives. The US Department of State in 2019 under Mike Pompeo released its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Advancing a Shared Vision" strategy document.<sup>61</sup> The document named India a key "strategic partner" and prioritized the US's Indo-Pacific outreach in the IOR. The USTDA, too, under the Trump administration has upped its investment in the Indo-Pacific. In 2018, it launched three new government-wide initiatives that are advancing President Trump's Indo-Pacific strategic outlook.<sup>62</sup> These initiatives include the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership, Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network (ITAN) and Asia Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy (EDGE).

The USTDA's Indo-Pacific investments and strategies have rapidly developed and taken primary focus in the past few years, especially post the launch of the BRI. The policies have been shaped solely to fulfil the region's demands for quality infrastructure and are the defining focus of the US's clap back to Chinese advances in the region. The USTDA is the leader of America's infrastructural development programmes in the Indo-Pacific and is viewed as the first line of defence against competition from "economic rivals that pose a threat" to commercial and political interests of the US.

To support President Trump's Indo-Pacific vision, the USTDA launched Asia EDGE in July 2018.<sup>63</sup> The main aim of this fully funded government programme is to bolster secure, sustainable, and affordable energy markets across the Indo-Pacific. The initiative, drawing from US expertise in the field, seeks to incorporate international financial institutes through its resources and private sector engagements. In October 2019, the US State Department announced the first Asia EDGE-driven India-US energy initiative – the US Assistant Secretary for Energy Resources Francis Fannon launched the Flexible Resource Initiative (FRI) as part of the US-India Clean Energy Finance Task Force.<sup>64</sup> The FRI is part of Asia EDGE and is meant to attract new investment openings for resources ranging from natural gas to batteries. India has gradually shown a willingness to move further away from its “power-partner” parity with China and take the US-India energy sector synergy into the SCS, especially post the release of US's official “position” on the same, and is thus a step in the right direction.<sup>65</sup>

In 2019, the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan stated that India's “projected energy demand growth is 4.2 per cent per annum up to 2035”; it will overtake China as the “largest growth market for energy in volume terms by 2030”, as per a BP Energy Outlook.<sup>66</sup> Pradhan had also stated that India's energy trade with the US was expected to grow by over 42 per cent to US\$10 billion during 2019-20.<sup>67</sup> In recent years, India has been keen to explore alternative sources of energy and move beyond the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries to meet its surging demands. In 2019, the India-US bilateral energy cooperation was further deepened when Prime Minister Modi and President Trump addressed the “Howdy, Modi!” event in Houston, the world's energy capital. The growth in energy cooperation works well for both countries. India looks to fulfil its growing demand, and the US gets to secure a major market for its energy products.

The USTDA's ITAN is another initiative that aims to develop sustainable and secure energy markets throughout the Indo-Pacific, which it defines as spanning “the California coast to western shores of India”.<sup>68</sup> It focuses on providing infrastructure-related funds to Indo-Pacific nations in an attempt to lure them away from China. Furthermore, the US also introduced the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act in 2018 that established the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), “America's development bank”.<sup>69</sup> The DFC, in partnership with the private sector, seeks to finance projects in the developing world. It even funds emerging economies for projects in an underdeveloped part of the country for national security reasons. In the post-COVID-19 world, a stronger US-India relationship is needed not only to check China's growing influence in the region but also to bolster the region's post-COVID-19 economic recovery process.

### ***Australia and Quad Plus***

The Australia-India bilateral relationship has historically seen slow growth but the recent upgrade to “comprehensive strategic partnership” at the July 2020 virtual summit was a ground-breaking step!<sup>70</sup> This increased the likelihood of Australia's inclusion in the US-Japan-India trilateral Malabar naval exercise, that has recently been confirmed. Although the regional, bilateral synergy between the two countries has not grown at a scale like India's ties with Japan or the US, in the post-COVID-19 order building both bilateral and military synergy with Australia has gained cognizance and is a priority for both nations. Prime Minister Modi's

“Aatmanirbhar Bharat” scheme has shown immense potential for enhancing Australia-India ties; the scheme aims at making India “self-reliant” in a manner that “merges domestic production and consumption with global supply chains” without “being self-contained or being closed to the world”.<sup>71</sup> Australia can emerge as a significant partner in areas such as maritime connectivity, economic resilience, supply chain diversification and digital infrastructure capacity building. As India transitions from favouring multi-alignment to pointed alignment with like-minded countries to increase its footprint in the Indo-Pacific, ties with Australia will grow quickly.<sup>72</sup> Australia is an innovative leading nation, a unique independent middle power, has a strong economy and robust democracy. It has developed leading and effective China-engagement policies such as banning Huawei and foreign interference and has significant scholarly knowledge and regional communities such as the East Asia Security Centre. The significant mutually beneficial opportunities of India-Australia bilateral relations should be seized.

The same is also true for India’s engagements with Quad Plus nations, including Israel, Brazil, Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand. It will in the given scenario look to enhance military, strategic and economic cooperation with these countries. India seems ready to build a “corridor of communication” with the Quad Plus countries so as to fulfil its long-standing objective of “continental connect”.<sup>73</sup>

## **Conclusion**

India is looking to attain robust connectivity and sustainable infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific, which will also have an impact on its geostrategic interests in the region. In the current global scenario, India’s efforts towards inclusive connectivity in the region will require a synergistic engagement with partner countries. Though the pandemic has disrupted the global economies in an unprecedented manner, it has also provided opportunities for cooperation and connectivity. However, given India’s increasingly fragile relationship with China, especially post its recent hostilities in the border area of Ladakh, India needs to reshape its foreign policy and fill the gaps, particularly in terms of its regional infrastructure connectivity objectives. It also means that India will need to re-examine its dealings with China-sponsored institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – India remains the bank’s top borrower. Nonetheless, India’s growing partnership with Quad and Quad Plus partners is a positive sign. The partnerships will also give a stimulus to India’s AEP and its Indo-Pacific initiatives like Sagarmala. If India’s wishes for a more significant, leading role in the Indo-Pacific and wants to strengthen its connectivity contours, it must take advantage of its historic linkages and revitalize its initiatives in the region.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Rahul Singh, “A Timeline: India-China’s Deadliest Border Clash since 1975 Explained”, *Hindustan Times*, June 17, 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/a-timeline-india-china-s-deadliest-border-clash-since-1975-explained/story-9Ct6lHQKkRuXM5w2K5xmwO.html> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Johnny, “Is China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ Over?” *The Hindu*, June 17, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/analysis-is-chinas-peaceful-rise-over/article31853332.ece> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan, “The Galwan Valley is a Gamechanger for New Delhi”, *The Diplomat*, June 18, 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-galwan-valley-india-china-skirmish-is-a-gamechanger-for-new-delhi/>. (Accessed July 17, 2020); Jagannath Panda, “India’s China Policy Signals a Shift Post-Galwan”, *India Inc.*, June 28, 2020, at <https://indiaincgroup.com/indias-china-policy-signals-a-shift-post-galwan/> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Ping, *Middle Power Statecraft*, Routledge, London, 2017, eBook <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351153041>.

<sup>6</sup> *Meeting Asia’s Infrastructure Needs*, Asian Development Bank, February 2017, at <https://www.adb.org/publications/asia-infrastructure-needs> (Accessed August 6, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Akhilesh Pillalamarri, “Geography and Indian Strategy”, *The Diplomat*, July 30, 2014, at <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/geography-and-indian-strategy/> (Accessed August 6, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> India played a key role during the Korean War, while it maintained a neutral position and yet believed in the reunification of both the Koreas. Its role in the developments in the Korean Peninsula was majorly highlighted as it was V.K. Kirshna Menon, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN and member of the UN’s Special Political Committee, who led the charge to find an answer for the vital issue of the prisoners of war (POW). Post intense deliberations, India at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 1952, proposed the establishing of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) to facilitate the repatriation of prisoners. The resolution was accepted in December 1952 at the UNGA and the NNRC was set up with the leadership of India. Please read, Robert Barnes, “Between the Blocs: India, the United Nations, and Ending the Korean War”, *The Journal of Korean Studies*, 18 (2), Fall 2013, p. 265; Vineet Thakur, “India’s Diplomatic Entrepreneurism: Revisiting India’s Role in the Korean Crisis, 1950–1952”, *China Report*, 49 (3), 2013, pp. 273–274; Nabarun Roy, “India’s. Forgotten Links to the Korean War”, *The Diplomat*, October 27, 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/indias-forgotten-links-to-the-korean-war/> (accessed August 7, 2020). In a similar manner, India had a key role to play in Japan as the former’s positive image for Tokyo came to the forefront with the appreciation of Justice Radhabinod Pal’s maverick judgement at the Tokyo International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1948. In a landmark judgement concerning the trial of several Japanese leaders post the World War II, Justice Pal gave the only dissenting vote declaring all 28 war-time Japanese leaders not guilty. This became a milestone development between India and Japan as the trial by the 11-nation tribunal in 1946 had convicted about 28 Japanese leaders, sentencing 7 to death and 16 to life imprisonment. Certainly, Justice Pal became the semblance of veneration in the India-Japan relations, prominently featuring in the bilateral relations even today. Please read, Norimitsu Onishi, “Decades After War Trials, Japan Still Honors a Dissenting Judge”, *The New York Times*, August 31, 2007, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/31/world/asia/31memo.html>. (Accessed August 6, 2020); Arpita Mathur, “India-Japan Relations: Drivers, Trends and Prospects”, *RSIS Monograph No. 23*, p. 10, at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Monograph2313.pdf> (Accessed August 6, 2020); India’s essential role in China was established in regards to New Delhi’s strong advocacy for PRC’s admission to the UN as a permanent member at the Security Council. Since the emergence of the PRC, the UNSC seat was represented by the Republic of China (ROC)- Taiwan, while the US was instrumental in denying China a seat at the UN owing to the Cold War politics. It was New Delhi under the Jawaharlal Nehru’s leadership which supported China’s case as a member to the

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international organization. Please read, “Nabarun Roy, “Why did Nehru Want the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations?”, *The Diplomat*, April 07, 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/why-did-nehru-want-the-peoples-republic-of-china-in-the-united-nations/>. (Accessed August 6, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Dhruva Jaishankar, “Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific”, Brookings India Impact Series, October 2019, at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Acting-East-India-in-the-INDO-PACIFIC-without-cutmark.pdf> (Accessed November 28, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> “India-ASEAN Relations”, Ministry of External Affairs, India, August 2018, at <https://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/20-years.htm> (Accessed August 6, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> “Question No. 3121: Look East and Act East Policy”, Lok Sabha, Ministry of External Affairs, India, March 16, 2016, at [https://mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/26554/QUESTION\\_NO\\_3121\\_LOOK\\_EAST\\_AND\\_ACT\\_EAST\\_POLICY](https://mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/26554/QUESTION_NO_3121_LOOK_EAST_AND_ACT_EAST_POLICY) (Accessed August 6, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> “India on Course to be 5 Trillion Economy by 2024: PM Modi”, News on AIR, October 18, 2018 at <http://www.newsonair.nic.in/Main-News-Details.aspx?id=373114> (Accessed August 3, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Roland Rajah, “An Emerging Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Strategy”, *The Interpreter*, August 3, 2018, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/emerging-indo-pacific-infrastructure-strategy> (Accessed August 3, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Terry Mobley, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China’s Backyard”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 13 (3), 52-72, 2019, at [www.jstor.org/stable/26760128](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26760128) (Accessed December 29, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Prabir De, “Navigating the Indo-Pacific Cooperation”, *The Economic Times*, March 11, 2019, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/navigating-the-indo-pacific-cooperation/> (Accessed December 1, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> “Mutual Trust between Australia and China at All-Time Low”, *Global Times*, June 25, 2020, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192669.shtml> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Dziedzic, “Australia Started a Fight with China over an Investigation into COVID-19 – Did It Go too Hard?” ABC News, May 20, 2020, at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-20/wha-passes-coronavirus-investigation-australia-what-cost/12265896> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> “China Punishes Australia for Promoting an Inquiry into Covid-19”, *The Economist*, May 21, 2020, at <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/05/21/china-punishes-australia-for-promoting-an-inquiry-into-covid-19> (Accessed August 3, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Karp, “China’s Coercive Behaviour a ‘Wake-Up Call’, Australia’s Former Top Public Servant Says”, *The Guardian*, May 7, 2020, at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/08/chinas-coercive-behaviour-a-wake-up-call-australias-former-top-public-servant-says> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> “Australia Will Not Be ‘Intimidated’ amid China Economic Threats: PM Scott Morrison”, CNA, June 11, 2020, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/australia-china-trade-scott-morrison-covid-19-12825200> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea”, US Department of State, July 13, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/> (Accessed July 17, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “China Is Done Biding Its Time the End of Beijing’s Foreign Policy Restraint?” *Foreign Affairs*, July 15, 2020, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-07-15/china-done-biding-its->

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<sup>23</sup> Smritirekha Sarma Haloi, “Why Should India Act East in the Times of COVID-19”, *Diplomatist*, May 20, 2020, at <https://diplomatist.com/2020/05/20/why-should-india-act-east-in-the-times-of-covid-19/> (Accessed August 3, 2020)

<sup>24</sup> Amitendu Palit, “India’s Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia”, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2016, pp. 81-92, at [www.jstor.org/stable/26466920](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26466920) (Accessed November 25, 2019).

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<sup>28</sup> Paras Parekh, “Post-Covid Economic Growth Will Come through India’s Ports”, NITI Aayog, June 5, 2020, at <https://niti.gov.in/post-covid-economic-growth-will-come-through-indias-ports> (Accessed August 7, 2020).

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<sup>30</sup> “India Treads a Fine Line in Indo-Pacific Region”, *The Economic Times*, June 28, 2019, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-treads-a-fine-line-in-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/69984218.cms> (Accessed November 26, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> “Bharatmala Pariyonana”, Indian Government, at <https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/bharatmala-pariyojana-stepping-stone-towards-new-india> (Accessed November 27, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> “Bharatmala Project”, Press Information Bureau, July 22, 2019, at <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1579797> (Accessed November 27, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> “India to Become 3rd-Largest Aviation Market by 2024, Surpass the UK: IATA”, *Business Standard*, October 28, 2018, at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-to-become-3rd-largest-aviation-market-by-2024-surpass-the-uk-iata-118102401381\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-to-become-3rd-largest-aviation-market-by-2024-surpass-the-uk-iata-118102401381_1.html) (Accessed November 29, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> “Indian Aviation Industry”, India Brand Equity Foundation, September, 2019, at <https://www.ibef.org/industry/indian-aviation.aspx> (Accessed November 29, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Anand Kalyanaraman, “All You Want to Know about International UDAN”, *Business Line*, October 22, 2018, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/slate/all-you-wanted-to-know-about-international-udan/article25289960.ece> (Accessed November 28, 2019).

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<sup>39</sup> “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, June 22, 2019, at [https://www.google.com/search?q=asean+outlook+on+the+indo-pacific&rlz=1C5CHFA\\_enIN852IN852&oq=ASEAN+Outlook+on+the+Indo-Pacific&aqs=chrome.0l8.423j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=asean+outlook+on+the+indo-pacific&rlz=1C5CHFA_enIN852IN852&oq=ASEAN+Outlook+on+the+Indo-Pacific&aqs=chrome.0l8.423j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8). (Accessed August 7, 2020)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Melissa C, Tyler, “The Indo-Pacific in the New Asia”, *The Interpreter*, June 28, 2019, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indo-pacific-new-asia> (Accessed November 28, 2019); Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, “From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges”, *SWP Research Paper 9*, July 2020, pp. 26-28, at [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research\\_papers/2020RP09\\_IndoPacific.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2020RP09_IndoPacific.pdf). (Accessed August 7, 2020).

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<sup>45</sup> “COVID-19 and Southeast and East Asian Economic Integration: Understanding the Consequences for the Future”, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, April 22, 2020, at <https://www.eria.org/publications/covid-19-and-southeast-and-east-asian-economic-integration-understanding-the-consequences-for-the-future/> (Accessed August 7, 2020).

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<sup>51</sup> Jagannath Panda, “India and the ‘Quad Plus’ Dialogue”, RUSI, June 12, 2020, at <https://rusi.org/commentary/india-strategic-quad> (Accessed August 3, 2020); “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo’s Videoconference with Partners on COVID-19”, US Department of State, May 11, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeos-videoconference-with-partners-on-covid-19/> (Accessed July 18, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Jagannath Panda, “India, the Blue Dot Network, and the ‘Quad Plus’ Calculus”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, at <https://idsa.in/system/files/news/india-bdn-quad-plus.pdf> (Accessed August 3, 2020).

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<sup>56</sup> “India-Japan Vision Statement”, Press Information Bureau, October 29, 2018, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1551159> (Accessed August 3, 2020).

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<sup>64</sup> “Assistant Secretary Fannon Travels to India”, US Department of State, October 1, 2019, at <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-fannon-travels-to-india/> (Accessed November 25, 2019).

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