



International Relations under Xi Jinping's New Era: India's Strategic Options in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

In contemporary international relations, Indo-Pacific is a principal zone of strategic competition. In Xi Jinping's New Era, China is transforming the dynamics of regional geopolitics. In this contest, India holds a pivotal position as an emerging power and a cautious middle power balancing strategic imperatives. Thus, this paper applies Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT) to dissect strategic options available for India in the Indo-Pacific. CIT posits that in international politics, there are various means to interact, there is a lack of issue hierarchy, and there is a limited role of military force. This argument provides a foundation to analyse India's competing priorities. India's relations in the security domain are visible through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and it maintains economic interdependence with China. As a middle power, India's strategy includes hedging, balancing, and diversification. India wants to avoid antagonising the United States and China and prioritises strategic autonomy. This would uplift India's growing function as a norm-shaper and institutional broker in the changing Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: India-China, Indo-Pacific, Xi Jinping, Complex Interdependence Theory, Strategic Autonomy.



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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is becoming a hotbed of contestation in the present century. More than a geographical reimagination of the traditional Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific signifies a paradigmatic shift in how global power is organised and contested, with the Indian Ocean gaining equal prominence alongside the Pacific (Das, 2019). The phrase is controversial because the United States (US), Japan, India, and Australia have institutionalised it through platforms like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and the AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US), while China denigrates the idea as a containment policy against it. China favours the neutral phrase “Asia-Pacific”.

At present, China is distinctly marked as Xi Jinping’s New Era, giving prominence to the incumbent president. The new era is characterised by assertive diplomacy, institutional innovation, and an endeavour to change the world order by schemes like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This recalibration of Chinese posture challenges the hegemony of the US and intensifies the geopolitical contest across the Indo-Pacific. In this complex strategic setting, India is an important actor, which is a middle power whose choices and options would influence the regional order.

Complex Interdependence Theory

In global relations, realism theory is founded on military power and zero-sum games, which offer a partial perspective to understand complexity in global politics. Especially, realism struggles to account for how states simultaneously cooperate and compete across multiple domains in an era of globalisation. Likewise, the challenges for India in the period of Xi Jinping’s New Era are a case in point, demonstrating a strategic dilemma. Currently, India faces direct territorial disputes and security concerns vis-à-vis China; it also maintains significant economic linkages and institutional engagements that constrain the use of outright military coercion. To explain such contradictory patterns, Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT), propounded by Keohane and Nye in *Power and Interdependence* (1977), provides a comprehensive analytical tool.

In the classical realism theory, the assumption is a state-centric international system in which military power and security concerns take the main role in decision-making. This contention is ill-suited to explain dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, where strategic contestation is ingrained in dense networks of trade, institutions, and transnational ties. Keohane and Nye’s CIT counters the realist paradigm by laying down three defining postulations. They are as follows:

1. Multiple channels of interaction exist, not limited to state-to-state relations but extending to transgovernmental and transnational connections.
2. No hierarchy of issues governs international politics; economic, environmental, and political issues coexist with equal salience.
3. Military power has a reduced role in determining outcomes among interdependent actors.

Applied to the Indo-Pacific, these beliefs illuminate why strategic rivalry persists but rarely escalates into direct confrontation. India’s relations with China embody this paradox. It is seen that India and China continue to maintain bilateral trade in spite of border tension and strategic mistrust. This evinces that strategic antagonism and economic reciprocity function simultaneously. Such bilateral relations cannot be explained adequately by realism because the relations are not solely dependent on the security aspect.

CIT identifies the dual nature of interdependence in global engagement. An economic dependence and institutional connection empower and constrain states at the same time. Interdependence exposes states to vulnerabilities while also creating incentives for cooperation. The US–China economic engagement is an example. The US hiked tariffs under the Trump 2.0 administration for Chinese products. In retaliation, China banned rare earth exports to the US (Hoskins & Sherman, 2025). This event is a reminder that interdependence has consequences for unilateral action. International relations are better off with negotiation rather than escalating it.

The same situation is seen in the India-China bilateral relations. India and China clashed at the frontier in 2020 at the Galwan Valley, but trade between India and China grew, exceeding US\$135 billion in 2022. This complexity substantiates CIT that economic ties block the use of military prowess. And decoupling is a costly proposition, even when political disputes are intense. Thus, the challenge for India is to mitigate vulnerabilities of asymmetric dependence on China while leveraging interdependence as a source of strategic advantage.

Keohane and Nye (2012) further extend CIT by identifying four interrelated models of regime change, each of which offers explanatory power for Indo-Pacific dynamics:

1. Economic process model: Regime change results from global market shifts. The Indo-Pacific in international trade, accounting for 63 per cent of world gross domestic product (GDP) and 46 per cent of commodities trade, demonstrates this logic (Ghosh, Sarkar, & Chaudhury, 2022). For India, integration into regional and global supply chains is an opportunity and a vulnerability.
2. Overall power structure model: Founded in realism, this model implies shifts in material capabilities. India has adopted a hedging approach in contemporary geopolitics, as the progress of China is imminent and the downturn of the US is accelerating (Waseem, 2023).
3. Issue structure model: India relies on foreign suppliers in industries like semiconductors, digital infrastructure, and rare earths. Although India's development in the IT (information technology) sector provides a strategic advantage. The securitisation of technology denotes that cooperation and conflict are issue-dependent.
4. International organisation model: Institutions influence state behaviour and expectations. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) continues to curb conflict and promote inclusivity. Platforms such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and G20 reinforce India's adoption of strategic autonomy, making it possible to engage China in institutional settings while resisting bipolar alignments.

These models capture the features and pluralistic nature of Indo-Pacific politics. It provides an analytical mechanism for India to comprehend and diversify strategic options across economic, institutional, and technological domains.

The Indo-Pacific functions as a laboratory of complex interdependence, where strategic vying coexists with institutional entanglement. The behaviour of India constitutes an adaptive strategy employed by a middle power to stay relevant in great power rivalries. Instead of rigid alliance politics, India engages in selective institutional participation and economic diversification. India's membership in the Quad supports the US-led security forum. Also, India continues to engage in BRICS and the SCO, implying its refusal to subordinate autonomy to bloc politics. This strategic pluralism demonstrates CIT's argument that states do not operate in a single-issue hierarchy but manage competing priorities simultaneously.

Furthermore, India inculcates interdependence as a shield and sword. To cite an example, India is cautious of overdependence on Chinese imports. Also, India exploits its role in the global pharmaceutical and digital sectors as a form of counter-dependence. Such selective engagement reflects an understanding that vulnerability could be converted into a bargaining position, a hallmark of CIT.

India's foreign policy underlines the practical relevance of CIT in navigating Xi Jinping's assertive China. Three implications stand out:

1. Hedging and diversification: India strengthens security relations with the US via the Quad while retaining economic relations with China and institutional linkages with Russia.
2. Institutional broking: India uses its position in multilateral domains (G20 and BRICS) to shape norms and maintain influence without binding itself to rigid alliances.
3. Issue pluralism: India balances security concerns with economic imperatives, such as prioritising supply chain resilience and digital sovereignty while avoiding outright decoupling from China.

India is actively shaping global rules and connecting different international organisations. It is not a neutral country stuck between powerful nations. By accepting that it relies on others (interdependence) but also reducing its own weaknesses (vulnerabilities), India manages to make its own decisions (strategic autonomy).

International Relations under Xi Jinping's New Era

In 2013, Xi Jinping occupied the president's office, leading to a remarkable transformation in the external policy of China. Xi is attempting to redefine the status of China in global relations. Xi does not follow Deng Xiaoping's advice of "hide your strength, bide your time" and rather incorporates a strategy of assertiveness. The imprint of "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2017 signalled an official unveiling of "New Era". The doctrine defines China's confidence in projecting its power, institutionalising its centrality, and restructuring the international structure to address its political and ideological preferences (Rolland, 2020). Xi's foreign policy is neither reactive nor incremental. It is a calculated incorporation of geoeconomic statecraft with normative revisionism with an agenda to advance Chinese interests in international affairs.

The crux of Xi's major policy is the BRI, which was started in 2013. More than an infrastructure and economic programme, the BRI functions as a geopolitical tool crafted to embed China at the heart of global connectivity. The BRI intends to replicate the historical Silk Road by re-establishing a modern "PaxSinica". This would enable Chinese influence across different continents like Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America (Ferdinand, 2016). Chinese BRI investments crossed US\$1.175 trillion in 2024, with more than 150 countries joining the BRI and constituting ports, digital corridors, and transport centres (Wang, 2025).

The BRI achieves three targets. First, it externalises China's surplus capital and industrial capacity, thereby mitigating domestic economic pressures. Secondly, it creates asymmetric dependencies for states reliant on Chinese infrastructure. Thirdly, it creates political goodwill, enabling Beijing to institutionalise Chinese norms of connectivity and development. Thus, the BRI is a mixture of material and ideational power, a mechanism that enhances China's position without direct coercion.

However, for India, the BRI is a profound strategic dilemma. The South Asian countries have accepted the BRI, benefitting from the investments, whereas India is sceptical about the BRI, viewing it as a policy that is undermining India's influence. To corroborate, India is vehement in opposing the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) because it touches Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK), a contested area. This dynamic set a precedent that China disregards sovereignty issues while advancing its national interests.

Apart from Xi's foreign policy as materialist, it is equally rooted in an ideological project. The China Dream, projected as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, connects domestic legitimacy to international restoration of status (Li & Yuan, 2021). This civilisational narrative provides the normative basis for the BRI to position China as a developmental actor at the centre of global order.

Through what Xi calls Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics, Beijing promotes multipolarity, rejects Western universalism, and seeks to institutionalise pluralism in global governance. Rather than aligning with traditional alliance systems, Xi prioritises flexible partnerships and regional mechanisms that accommodate Chinese preferences. This orientation is prominent in the Indo-Pacific, where Beijing interprets US-led initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS as containment strategies (Singh, 2023). At the same time, Xi advocates respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit in order to project China as a possible option to the US-dominated liberal structure, appealing to states in the Global South in particular.

The problem for India lies in the ideational domain. On the one hand, India has a common interest with China in multipolarity and resistance to hegemonic dominance. On the other hand, China's framing of sovereignty clashes with India's territorial integrity, especially in border disputes. Thus, Xi's ideological grammar generates convergence and contestation, complicating India's foreign policy calculus.

Xi Jinping's foreign policy demonstrates a dual-track approach combining inducements and coercion. On the inducement side, Beijing promotes establishments like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which now counts 110 member states and provides a corpus of US\$100 billion for development financing, and the Digital Silk Road, which exports Chinese technology and digital standards across the developing world. These initiatives promote the image of China as a responsible country while expanding its influence through economic means.

Correspondingly, Xi has deployed coercive tools to attain the agenda. Chinese military activism in the South and East China Seas, cyber operations, and trade retaliation, like sanctions on South Korean industries after the deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence), an air defence system, are messages that China would not hesitate to punish states that challenge Chinese core interests (Kim, 2022). And the combination of “bullying and beneficence” (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016) represents a strategy that maximises advantage without resorting to direct confrontation.

The pressure is visible on India. Beijing merges economic interdependence as India heavily imports from China, and with military pressure on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This juxtaposition of inducement and duress is the strategic environment under which New Delhi must operate. In such a political atmosphere, opportunities for cooperation coexist with persistent vulnerabilities.

Xi Jinping has also repositioned China as an advocate of globalisation and multilateralism, albeit on Chinese conditions. Xi, at the World Economic Forum in 2017 held in Davos, defended open markets and criticised Western protectionism, casting China as a custodian of globalisation (Parker, 2017). At the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit in Peru (2024), Xi condemned the decoupling narrative as an artificial disruption of supply chains. Although this commitment is not based on liberal institutionalism, rather, it is a reflection of strategic multilateralism, a selective acceptance of institutions designed to readjust global rules to embed Chinese preferences.

This creates a paradoxical environment for India. On one hand, platforms like the G20 and BRICS allow India to collaborate with China on global issues. On the other hand, Beijing's selective multilateralism constrains India to rely on institutions as neutral arbiters. Thus, Xi's selective strategic multilateralism generates challenges for India, and it has to balance cooperation with caution.

China is a revisionist country in the eyes of Western countries with an intention to dismantle the liberal international order (LIO). But Xi's strategy is better understood as reformist. China has benefited from existing interdependence structures of LIO, in particular trade regimes, financial institutions, and global supply chains. Because of these reasons, China seeks to reform rather than overthrow the present LIO (Rühlig, 2018). The New Model of Major Power Relations, propounded by Xi, reflects this inclination: China does not aim to replace U.S. hegemony with its own but rather to dilute unipolarity and institutionalise a more symmetrical, culturally plural system (Cheng, 2016).

This reformist agenda has consequences for India. Although a diluted unipolarity where the US plays a diminishing role could create space for India's strategic autonomy, there is a possibility that China would prioritise its interests if it remains uncontested. This probability reinforces the necessity for India to hedge and adopt selective alignments.

Xi has also centralised foreign policy decision-making, transforming the Chinese diplomatic apparatus into an extension of CPC ideology. For example, Wolf Warrior diplomacy has assertively defended the Chinese narrative, and coordinated norm-challenging initiatives are not a digression from mainstream but systemic manifestations of centralisation (Loh, 2018). Beijing has politicised diplomacy that could be deployed swiftly in response to economic, discursive, and military crises. Thus, it enhances China's capacity to project legitimacy, especially in the Global South.

This institutional centralisation amplifies unpredictability for India. In contrast to the preceding Chinese leaderships that had prioritised pragmatism, Xi's diplomacy frequently intertwines ideology and strategy, reducing the area for compromise and cooperation.

Along with the BRI, Xi's New Era has four flagship initiatives:

1. The Global Development Initiative (GDI), started in 2021, which parallels and bolsters the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. It appeals to developing countries by focusing on infrastructure development and poverty alleviation.
2. The Global Security Initiative (GSI), announced in 2022, promotes a cooperative, indivisible, and non-aligned principle of security, which opposes alliance-based security approaches.
3. The Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), introduced in 2023, gives a clarion call for mutual respect among civilisations and rejects the imposition of values by other nations. Cultural relativism needs to be respected.

4. The Global Governance Initiative (GGI), launched at SCO 2025, proposed sovereign equality based on multilateralism.

These initiatives, in combination, provide an alternative to Western LIO. It is an expansion of China's normative footprint and institutional reach around the globe. They present risks and opportunities for India. India's participation could enhance its status in rule-making, but acquiescence risks legitimising China's position in influencing norms.

India's Strategic Options

Xi Jinping's presidency has introduced a new period of assertive external policy for China. It is reshaping the geopolitical balance of the Indo-Pacific. Xi's vision under his "New Era" is attempting to combine geoeconomic expansion, civilisational narratives, and institutional activism to question the US-dominated LIO and reform world order in a way that would be conducive to Chinese interests. In this context, India, which is neither a hegemon nor a small state, occupies the position of a middle power, beset with strategic constraints and opportunities. Thus, India's strategic options need to be understood as responses to assertive China and the renewed interests of the US in the Indo-Pacific. India has adopted balancing or bandwagoning, as well as employing a multidimensional approach that blends autonomy, coalition-building, and institutional engagement.

Traditionally, strategic autonomy is the foundation of the external policy of India. Strategic autonomy is flexible, enabling New Delhi to avoid entrapment in major power rivalries while maintaining room for manoeuvre. It is seen that in the Indo-Pacific, India's action is a conscious act of embracing ambiguity in order for New Delhi to hedge from the uncertainties of Chinese action without committing to rigid alliances (Prasad, 2019). This feature forms the identity of India's middle power, which thrives on issue-based alignments and selective partnerships rather than binary choices.

This approach is salient in Xi Jinping's New Era, in which China projects inducement and coercion equally. In this case, India interprets Chinese strategies like the BRI as tools of geopolitical dominance; however, it also resists being fully subsumed into US-led counterbalancing coalitions. Therefore, strategic autonomy becomes a shield against overdependence and a resource for diplomatic flexibility for India.

A central strategic option for India lies in coalition-building. India's membership in the Quad alongside the US, Japan, and Australia signifies a middle-power strategy. The ascent of Xi Jinping has magnified the importance of Indo-Pacific coalitions. It has driven India closer to like-minded countries (Panda, 2020). The Quad prioritisation of maritime security, technological cooperation, and supply chain resilience implies India's willingness to engage in "soft balancing" mechanisms.

The coalitional dimension also extends to minilateral formats such as India–Japan–Australia trilaterals. The strategic relations between Japan and India are a convergence of interests between middle powers aiming to cushion China's rise (Kaura&Kumawat, 2021). These partnerships soften the burden of counterbalancing and bulwark the middle-power rationale of influencing through network building. In the Indo-Pacific, it is necessary that India negotiate the current geopolitical reality without alienating the US and PRC.

India's discernment of China is neither monolithic nor static. While India acknowledges the difficulty of complete disengagement. The insight on China as a rival as well as a necessary

partner defines India's ambivalent strategic calculus (Panda, 2021). The contemporary economic interdependence, geographical contiguity, and multilateral forum engagement are factors that keep the relations intact despite border disputes and maritime discordance.

This ambivalence illustrates the complexity of India's middle-power strategy. India's position is neither purely containment nor full accommodation but a dynamic resistance and engagement. Thus, it moves beyond realism's binary logic, accepting a form of pragmatic pluralism to tackle Xi's assertiveness.

The strategic engagement of India across the Indo-Pacific expands its options beyond the US-China dyad. Xi Jinping's presidency has tightened its hold on world governance initiatives. This has compelled India to respond by strengthening its web of strategic networking. New Delhi's linkages with the US, Japan, Australia, ASEAN states, and even smaller Pacific nations are an example of what has been described as an "allies in the making" trajectory (Lin, 2024).

Such partnerships could be viewed as neither ad hoc nor symbolic. It represents an emerging architecture of economic and security cooperation that thwarts the asymmetries between India and China. To illustrate, India's maritime collaborations with Australia and its infrastructure initiatives with Japan diversify its strategic toolkit. These strategies buttress the legitimacy of a rules-based architecture. These engagements disclose the middle-power method of "networked balancing" rather than reliance on singular alliances.

The Indo-Pacific is a central theatre for security calculations of India, especially as Xi's assertiveness manifests in border standoffs and maritime expansion. India has been unprepared to deal with China's assertive diplomacy, revealing the urgency for recalibration (Pant & Rej, 2018). The 2020 Galwan Valley clash is an obvious case of India's limitations in defence posture. In this context, India's security strategy involves both capacity-building and external partnerships. India is aware of China's expansive military power, and therefore, it is making investments in naval modernisation and expanding defence ties with the US. Concomitantly, India is avoiding ceding strategic autonomy by formalising alliances. India prefers to remain a pivotal but independent actor in determining Indo-Pacific security.

Also, India's strategic options extend to multilateralism with other middle powers. As Soeya (2020) argues, the Indo-Pacific elicits middle-power activism. Nations like India, Japan, and Australia have critical roles in advancing rule-based architecture. Furthermore, India's involvement in ASEAN-led institutions demonstrates the trend of enabling it to participate in normative contestation without direct confrontation with Beijing.

The agency of middle powers is situated in their ability to transmute the environment through incremental rule-setting, institution-building, and coalition politics. India's diplomacy is an example. Like in the sectors of maritime norms, digital governance, and supply chain resilience. India, by aligning with middle-power strategies, is leveraging its position to increase its voice in changing the regional structure beyond great-power binaries.

India is engaging in programmes like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to counterbalance China's dominance through inclusivity. India is projecting itself as a responsible middle power by building partnerships with states wary of overdependence on Beijing. This is India's strategic game plan of "competitive institution-building" as a medium to influence the regional order.

This structural rivalry between India and China is becoming prominent under Xi. The Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the Maldives threatens the traditional sphere of influence of India. This creates a serious security problem for India (Narvenkar, 2025). India is reacting to China's inroads in its backyard by increasing investments in regional diplomacy and infrastructure development. India is engaging with sovereignty and transparency as counter-narratives to China's debt-driven loans.

Nevertheless, India faces dilemmas in balancing assertiveness with restraint. India wants to avoid confrontation risks, and at the same time, excessive accommodation would marginalise India's interests. The middle-power status of India restricts it from imposing unilateral decisions. India has to carefully formulate a policy that oscillates between deterrence and diplomacy. The fragility of strategic options in Xi's New Era exists because power asymmetries limit unilateral efficacy but provide opportunities for multilateral relations.

Apart from material competition, India is engaged in ideational contestation with China. Xi's narrative on civilisational centrality and rejection of liberal universalism contrasts with India's advocacy of pluralism and democratic norms. In this regard, India views China as a normative challenger along with a geopolitical rival. Thus, India's strategic options constitute promoting its democratic identity as a spring of legitimacy and soft power.

The ideational contest is visible in the discourse of India on freedom of navigation in the oceans, sovereignty, and inclusivity. India is seeking to establish itself as a normative counterweight to China's narrative by installing its pluralistic values in international relations. This is the significance of narrative power, which forms a part of India's strategic repertoire.

India's strategic options in the Indo-Pacific under Xi Jinping's New Era can be synthesised into four broad pathways. First, strategic autonomy is a flexible tool to hedge against Chinese coercion and the US's dominance. Second, coalition-building permits India to utilise middle-power networks to balance China's rise without formal alliances. Third, competitive institution-building positions India as a provider of alternative governance models in response to China's initiatives. Finally, normative contestation enables India to use its democratic identity in moulding the Indo-Pacific order.

Conclusion

In the Xi Jinping New Era, the international politics in the Indo-Pacific is a paradox with interdependence amid intensifying strategic rivalry. These tensions translate into concrete dilemmas rather than abstract theory for India. India's strategic behaviour cannot be reduced to realist binaries of balancing or bandwagoning; instead, the prism of CIT better explains the coexistence of rivalry and cooperation influencing the choices of India.

The ethos of strategic autonomy persists to guide the external policy of India. But it has evolved from equidistance to adaptive manoeuvrability within asymmetric interdependencies. This is substantiated by participation of India in coalitions like the Quad and the IPOI, demonstrating autonomy as a flexible instrument. It enables India to hedge against Chinese assertiveness without subsuming itself under US-led alliances. This is the middle-power logic of enhancing its agency by shaping collective bodies and distributing the burdens of regional stability.

India's membership in Chinese-led (BRICS, SCO) and alternative (Quad, IPOI) institutions exposes a dual strategy of "competitive institutionalism", in which participation and contestation coexist. The institutional pluralism contends that multilateral platforms are arenas of

normative struggle instead of neutral cooperation. Concurrently, India's reliance on democratic pluralism and sovereignty constitutes an ideational counterpoint to China's civilisational narrative.

India's hybrid strategy, combining autonomy, coalition-building, institutional brokering, and normative engagement, illustrates how middle powers tacitly handle complex interdependence. In this interdependent setting with Xi's New Era, it has limited and expanded India's strategic scope. The assertive new era has compelled India to act as a pivotal balancer and structure-changer. Finally, the prospect of order hangs on India's calibre to transform interdependence into influence, asserting agency via adaptability in uncertain global politics.

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