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# Negotiating Borders: India's Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Age

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## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has rapidly emerged as the central theatre in global geopolitics, serving as a fulcrum for both strategic competition and cooperation in the twenty-first century. Stretching from the eastern shores of Africa through the vast Indian Ocean to the Pacific Rim, this region now anchors the world's economic growth, trade, and security priorities. Within this intricate landscape, India occupies a pivotal position—geographically, economically, and strategically. Its long coastline, formidable navy, regional ties, and growing influence have placed it at the epicenter of debates about the future order of the Indo-Pacific.

India's foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific is neither accidental nor improvisational. It is the result of a gradual, conscious evolution responding to shifts in the regional and global balance of power. From a policy grounded in non-alignment and inward-looking development, India has moved towards an activist, multi-aligned approach, responding to new challenges and opportunities. The emergence of China as a maritime power, the recalibration of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, and the increased activism of other regional actors have together compelled India to rethink its posture and partnerships. Policies such as the Act East Policy, the SAGAR Vision, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative now form the backbone of India's strategy and signal its intent to shape the contours of regional order.

This book, "Negotiating Borders: India's Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Age," offers a comprehensive analysis of India's evolving approach to the region. It examines the transformation of India's strategic posture, assesses the growing complexities of diplomatic engagement with both neighbors and distant partners, and evaluates how India balances its simultaneous desire for strategic autonomy and deeper alliances. The book explores key relationships with the United States, Japan, Australia, France, ASEAN, and other Southeast Asian nations, contextualizing them within India's careful, sometimes cautious, embrace of multilateral cooperation such as the Quad.

Equally central is India's maritime policy and the modernization of its naval forces. As the Indo-Pacific's competitive dynamics increasingly play out at sea, safeguarding critical trade routes, countering piracy, and responding to humanitarian emergencies have become core priorities. Yet, India must also contend with non-traditional security threats, limited capacity, and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Its maritime strategy is not only a reflection of realism and necessity, but also of aspiration and normative ambition—advocating for an open, inclusive, rules-based order.

Through a mix of detailed case studies and scenario planning, this book aims to give policymakers, analysts, and interested readers a clear-eyed assessment of India's

options, opportunities, and constraints in the Indo-Pacific. It interrogates the underlying assumptions of India's foreign and defense policy, scrutinizes the effectiveness of existing initiatives, and contemplates the plausible futures India may face as the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve.

Ultimately, "Negotiating Borders" invites readers to consider the ways in which India's strategic vision—rooted in its own experience and ambitions—might shape, and be shaped by, the shifting currents of the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, it illuminates the possibilities and dilemmas confronting a rising power as it seeks to assert itself on the world's most dynamic stage.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: India and the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Context and Historical Evolution**

The term "Indo-Pacific" has, in a surprisingly short span, transitioned from an academic construct to a central pillar of global strategic discourse. It encapsulates a vast and dynamic super-region, spanning the intertwined waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and connecting the continents that abut them. For India, this geographical reorientation isn't merely a semantic shift; it represents a fundamental recalibration of its strategic outlook, moving beyond traditional regional confines to embrace a broader, more interconnected sphere of influence and interest. Understanding India's role in this burgeoning concept requires first grasping the sheer scale and inherent complexities of the Indo-Pacific itself.

Historically, the world was often viewed through the lens of distinct oceanic theaters: the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Indian Oceans. Each had its own dominant powers, geopolitical dynamics, and economic flows. However, the dawn of the 21st century, propelled by globalization, interconnected economies, and the rise of Asian powers, has blurred these traditional divisions. The concept of the Indo-Pacific acknowledges this confluence, recognizing that events and power shifts in one part of this expansive region inevitably reverberate across its entirety. It's a recognition that maritime trade routes are inextricably linked, that security challenges are transnational, and that economic prosperity in Mumbai can be directly influenced by events in Manila or Melbourne.

For India, this conceptual shift holds profound implications. For decades, its foreign policy gravitated around its immediate neighborhood, the Indian Ocean Region, and a global non-aligned stance that sought to maintain equidistance from major power blocs. While this approach served India well during the Cold War, the post-Cold War era, characterized by unipolarity and later multipolarity, demanded a more expansive and proactive engagement. The Indo-Pacific framework provides just that—a conceptual umbrella under which India can articulate its wider aspirations and secure its burgeoning interests. It allows India to position itself not merely as a regional player but as a significant global actor with a vital stake in the stability and prosperity of a super-region that is home to over half the world's population and a substantial portion of its economic output.

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific cannot be overstated. It is the primary conduit for global trade, particularly energy resources, with crucial choke points like the Malacca Strait, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz acting as vital arteries for international commerce. Approximately 80% of the world's maritime oil trade passes

through this region, making the security of these sea lanes a paramount concern for all major powers, especially energy-dependent nations like India. The economic dynamism of the Indo-Pacific, driven by rapidly growing economies in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, further amplifies its importance. The region is a hub of manufacturing, innovation, and consumer markets, attracting global investment and shaping the future of international trade.

Beyond economics, the Indo-Pacific is a crucible of geopolitical competition, primarily driven by the rise of China and its assertive posture across the region. China's expanding economic footprint, coupled with its significant naval modernization and territorial claims in the South China Sea, has created ripples of concern among many regional states. This has, in turn, spurred a renewed focus on alliances, partnerships, and multilateral frameworks aimed at maintaining a balance of power and upholding a rules-based international order. India, sharing a contested land border with China and witnessing its growing presence in the Indian Ocean, finds itself directly impacted by these evolving dynamics.

India's historical engagement with the maritime domain, while significant, has often been overshadowed by its continental concerns. The vastness of the Indian Ocean has traditionally been seen as both a protective barrier and a highway for trade and cultural exchange. Ancient Indian kingdoms fostered extensive maritime networks, reaching as far as Southeast Asia and beyond, leaving a lasting legacy of cultural and economic ties. However, the colonial era saw a decline in indigenous maritime power, with foreign naval forces dominating the Indian Ocean. Post-independence, India's initial focus remained largely on nation-building, poverty alleviation, and addressing immediate security challenges on its land borders. The Indian Navy, while professional and capable, operated for many decades under resource constraints and with a more defensive mandate.

The shift towards a more proactive maritime policy began to gain momentum in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, driven by a confluence of factors. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s led to a dramatic increase in India's seaborne trade, making the security of sea lanes directly linked to national prosperity. Simultaneously, India's growing energy dependence, with a significant portion of its oil and gas imports traversing the Indian Ocean, underscored the vulnerability of its economic lifelines. The changing geopolitical landscape, particularly the increasing assertiveness of China, further catalyzed this strategic reorientation.

The formal articulation of India's Indo-Pacific vision came into sharper focus with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. His pronouncement of a "free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific" laid out India's normative framework for the region. This vision emphasizes principles such as respect for international law, peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation and overflight, and unimpeded commerce. It underscores India's commitment to

multilateralism and cooperation, seeking to build a regional order that is not dominated by any single power but is instead founded on shared norms and mutual respect. This approach is distinct from some other interpretations of the Indo-Pacific, which can sometimes be perceived as narrowly focused on containing a specific power. India, instead, advocates for an inclusive framework that allows all nations, regardless of their size or military strength, to thrive and contribute to regional stability.

The evolution of India's foreign policy from its traditional non-aligned posture to a more multi-aligned and proactive stance is a key aspect of its engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Non-alignment, while providing India with strategic space during the Cold War, also constrained its ability to forge deeper security partnerships. Under Modi's leadership, India has increasingly embraced a policy of "multi-alignment," which entails cultivating strategic partnerships with a diverse set of countries, often with differing geopolitical interests, on an issue-by-issue basis. This approach allows India to pursue its national interests without being tied to a particular bloc or ideology. It provides the flexibility to engage with partners like the United States, Japan, and Australia on security matters, while simultaneously maintaining economic ties and managing border tensions with China.

This strategic flexibility is crucial in a region as complex and fluid as the Indo-Pacific. India recognizes that a purely confrontational approach with any major power is neither desirable nor sustainable. Instead, it seeks to build a network of partnerships that can collectively contribute to regional stability, economic prosperity, and the upholding of international law. This involves active participation in minilateral groupings, robust bilateral engagements, and a renewed focus on multilateral institutions. The overarching goal is to create a resilient and balanced regional architecture where India can play a significant and constructive role, shaping rather than merely reacting to geopolitical developments.

The confluence of these factors—the intrinsic geopolitical and economic importance of the Indo-Pacific, India's evolving strategic vision, and its shift towards a multi-aligned foreign policy—sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of India's role in this critical region. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the specific policies, alliances, and maritime priorities that underpin India's engagement, providing a nuanced understanding of its journey in negotiating the complex borders of the Indo-Pacific Age. This initial chapter, however, establishes the essential context, underscoring that India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is not a matter of choice, but a strategic imperative driven by a profound understanding of its national interests in a rapidly transforming world.

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