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## India's Quest for Energy Security: Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

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### ABSTRACT

As India's economy continues its rapid ascent, its insatiable thirst for energy grows in tandem, making the nation increasingly dependent on maritime imports. This paper argues that India's pursuit of energy security is the primary driver behind its strategic engagement within the Indo-Pacific, an arena no longer defined by geography alone but by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. The sea lanes that carry India's vital energy supplies are the very same waters where this great power competition unfolds, forcing New Delhi to perform a delicate and high-stakes balancing act. This study examines how India navigates these turbulent geopolitical waters. Moving beyond its historical non-alignment, India is actively pursuing a strategy of multi-alignment, strengthening partnerships like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to safeguard its interests while simultaneously maintaining crucial relationships with traditional partners. The paper analyses how India projects its own narrative-that of a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific"-not as an abstract ideal, but as a pragmatic framework essential for protecting its energy lifelines from disruption and coercion. Ultimately, we contend that for India, the grand chessboard of the Indo-Pacific is not about choosing sides, but about skilfully manoeuvring between giants to ensure its path to economic prosperity remains securely fuelled.

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## 1. Introduction

For a nation of 1.4 billion people on a trajectory to become the world's third-largest economy, growth is not an abstract concept-it is a daily reality felt in the hum of new factories, the glow of newly lit homes, and the aspirations of a burgeoning middle class. Powering this monumental transformation is an unquenchable demand for energy. However, India's domestic resources are insufficient to meet this need, making it profoundly dependent on the steady flow of oil and gas from beyond its shores. This dependency forms the very bedrock of India's modern foreign policy.

This paper argues that India's strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally shaped by a single, non-negotiable imperative: the quest for energy security. The vast expanse of ocean, stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of the Americas, is not merely a geographical space but a dynamic geopolitical arena. It is the stage upon which a great power rivalry between the United States and China is playing out, and for India, the sea lanes that crisscross this region are both vital economic arteries and potential geopolitical fault lines. Every barrel of oil and every cubic meter of gas that reaches India travels through these contested waters, making their security a core national interest. This paper will first explore India's immense and growing energy needs, then identify the critical areas of concern within the Indo-Pacific, and finally analyse the strategic balancing act New Delhi must perform to keep its economic engine running.

## 2. India's Energy Needs: The Unquenchable Thirst

India's economic story is a story of energy. Currently the world's third-largest consumer of energy, India's demand is projected to grow faster than that of any other major economy over the next two decades. This demand is driven by a powerful confluence of factors: rapid urbanization, industrial expansion, and an expanding population seeking better standards of living. While the nation has made significant strides in renewable energy, its industrial and transportation sectors remain overwhelmingly reliant on fossil fuels.

This reliance translates into a staggering import dependency. India currently imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil and more than 50 per cent of its natural gas requirements. These are not just statistics; they represent a profound strategic vulnerability. The majority of these imports arrive via maritime routes, carried by massive tankers that navigate some of the world's most precarious waters. This constant flow of energy is the lifeblood of the Indian economy. Any disruption-whether from a conflict, a blockade, or an act of piracy-would not just cause a spike in fuel prices; it would threaten to grind the country's economic progress to a halt. This deep-seated vulnerability has forced Indian policymakers to look



outwards, recognizing that the nation's energy security is inextricably linked to the stability and freedom of the Indo-Pacific Sea lanes. The challenge, therefore, is not just about purchasing energy; it's about securing its journey home.

### 3. Areas of Concern: Charting the Treacherous Waters

The journey of India's energy imports is fraught with challenges that extend far beyond simple logistics. These concerns can be broadly categorized into three overlapping domains: geographical chokepoints, the escalating great power rivalry, and persistent non-traditional threats.

**Geopolitical Chokepoints:** The maritime routes to India are funnelled through several narrow straits, or "chokepoints," where even a minor disruption can have major global consequences.

- **The Strait of Hormuz:** Located between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, this is the world's most critical oil transit chokepoint. A significant portion of India's crude oil imports passes through this strait, making it highly susceptible to the political instability and regional conflicts that characterize the Middle East.
- **The Strait of Malacca:** Connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, this narrow passage is the shortest sea route between the Middle East and East Asia. It is a hotbed of piracy and one of the most congested shipping lanes globally. For China, it represents the "Malacca Dilemma," a vulnerability that has spurred its naval expansion into the Indian Ocean, directly impacting India's strategic environment.
- **The Bab el-Mandeb Strait:** Connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, this chokepoint is shadowed by the ongoing conflict in Yemen and instability in the Horn of Africa, creating persistent risks for tankers heading towards the Suez Canal.

**Great Power Rivalry:** The Indo-Pacific has become the primary theatre for competition between the United States and China. This rivalry affects India's energy security directly. China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, often analysed through the "String of Pearls" theory—a network of Chinese-funded ports and military installations like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka—is perceived by New Delhi as a strategic encirclement. This presence raises concerns about China's ability to monitor or even interdict Indian shipping in a crisis. Conversely, the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy pressures India to take on a greater role as a regional security provider, pulling it into a strategic alignment that requires careful management to avoid antagonizing Beijing unnecessarily.



Non-Traditional Threats: Beyond state-level competition, India's energy lifelines are threatened by persistent, non-state actors and challenges. Piracy remains a significant problem, particularly around the Horn of Africa and in the Strait of Malacca. The risk of maritime terrorism, where energy tankers could be targeted to cause mass economic disruption, is an ever-present concern for the Indian Navy. Finally, the growing frequency of extreme weather events due to climate change poses an increasing risk to the safety and reliability of maritime shipping routes.

#### **4. India's Strategic Response: A Doctrine of Multi-Alignment**

Faced with this complex web of vulnerabilities, India has moved decisively away from its post-colonial doctrine of non-alignment towards a more pragmatic and dynamic foreign policy best described as "multi-alignment." This strategy allows New Delhi to build issue-based coalitions and partnerships to safeguard its interests without being locked into a rigid alliance structure. This approach is manifested through several key initiatives.

**Military Modernization and Maritime Domain Awareness:** The primary guarantor of India's maritime security is the Indian Navy. Recognizing this, India has been steadily investing in modernizing its fleet, acquiring new aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and destroyers. Beyond hardware, there is a significant focus on enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Through its Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, India is positioning itself as a net security provider, collecting and sharing real-time maritime data with partner countries to monitor threats ranging from piracy to submarine movements.

**Deepening Strategic Partnerships:** India has actively sought partnerships with like-minded maritime powers.

- **The Quad:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has evolved from a disaster-relief forum into a central pillar of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. While carefully avoiding the label of a military alliance, the Quad's coordinated activities, including the annual Malabar naval exercises, send a clear signal about its members' commitment to a rules-based maritime order—a direct counter to unilateral assertions of power.
- **Bilateral Engagements:** India has strengthened its naval and security ties with countries across the region. Logistics-sharing agreements with the U.S. (LEMOA), France, Australia, and Singapore grant the Indian Navy access to ports and bases, extending its operational reach and ability to sustain presence far from its own shores.



Diplomatic and Economic Initiatives: India's strategy is not purely military. Initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) frame India's vision for the Indian Ocean as one of collective security and shared prosperity. This diplomatic outreach aims to build capacity and goodwill among smaller littoral states, offering an alternative to the debt-heavy infrastructure models proposed by other powers. On the economic front, India is collaborating with Japan and other partners on quality infrastructure projects in Asia and Africa, aiming to create reliable and transparent alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

## 5. Conclusion: The Long Voyage Ahead

India's journey in the 21st century is inextricably tied to the sea. Its quest for energy security has propelled it into the heart of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical vortex, a position of both immense opportunity and significant risk. The nation's profound dependence on maritime energy imports has become the central organizing principle of its foreign policy, forcing it to craft a nimble strategy that balances its immediate needs with long-term ambitions. By investing in its naval capabilities, forging a web of strategic partnerships, and projecting a narrative of inclusive security, India is striving to shape the regional environment to its advantage.

The path forward is not simple. India must continue to skilfully navigate the crosscurrents of the U.S.-China rivalry, asserting its own autonomy while leveraging partnerships to secure its interests. The ultimate goal is not to dominate the ocean, but to ensure it remains a global common, free and open for the transit of commerce and energy that will fuel the aspirations of its people for decades to come. India's success in this endeavour will not only determine its own economic destiny but will also play a crucial role in defining the future of the Indo-Pacific.

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