



## INDIA'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260401064>

#### Abstract

In the twenty-first century, a changing context is noticeable in Asian politics. Specifically, from the perspective of geographical location, the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean regions have increased in political importance. In this region, a single dominant China has maintained absolute hegemony by taking ASEAN along. To bring a balance of power to this region, India is engaging in a power rivalry with China. To reduce absolute dominance and project its own power to other states, India is advancing in a direct confrontation with China. By making ASEAN a companion, India is creating pressure on China. To bring the pressure on China to a greater level, India has formed QUAD with America, Japan, and Australia against China in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, to strengthen the balance of power, India is resisting China's String of Pearls.

India has modernised its military systems in these regions. To transform strategic partnerships into close intimacy, it is looking with importance at trade, communication, social, cultural, environmental, and tourism matters with ASEAN member states. By setting aside the areas of limitations in their relationships and moving through friendship, India is adopting an innovative effort to maintain the balance of power with China. In whichever states China is increasing cooperation, India, without falling behind, is showing greater interest in cooperating in those regions. By providing military equipment and military cooperation to the states located in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions, India is increasing the security of the states as well as the security of the geographical area. Through this, the balance of power in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions is being clearly reflected. The various strategies adopted by India against its rival China are being perceived as promising results by the states of this region.

**Keywords:** *Balance of Power, India, China, ASEAN, QUAD, BIMSTEC, Mekong Ganga, Indo-Pacific*

#### Introduction

In terms of geographical location, Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region occupy a significant place in the global system. More than 40 percent of the world's total population resides in this region. The fundamental interests of the population are dependent on the geographical location. The Indian Ocean region of Asia and the Strait of Malacca in the Southeast Asian region are identified as the busiest commercial zones. Not only that, the strategic and tactical matters of the states located in this region are linked to the security aspect of this area. The state that can exert the most dominance in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions will be able to gain the most advantages in terms of security and national interest. For this reason, it has been observed from ancient times to the modern era that political power competition occurs in this region. Sometimes it has been seen that a balance of power was established for a long time; at other times, it is seen that one state is engaging in competition against another state to create a balance of power. During the Cold War era, the balance of power between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, was noticeable in the Asian region. After these great powers moved away from Asia-centric politics in the post-Cold War period—that is, in the current century—China is expanding its power. To prevent this expansion of power, India is advancing its own power. In this way, India is becoming capable of creating power against China in the Asian region and is active in establishing a balance.

#### Balance of Power as a Theoretical Concept

The core meaning of power parity is maintaining balance or achieving balance. That is, when a state, a group of states, or an alliance becomes the possessor of dominant singular power in a specific region, and another state or alliance of states can bring

the power to an equal or nearly equal position against that state or alliance through various means, then it can be considered that a balance of power has been established between the two rival parties. In the context of the world system and looking at historical chronology, it is seen that with the evolution of time, many separate balances of power have been established in different regions. For example, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Germany on one side and France on the other created a balance of power. Immediately after that, during the Second World War, the Axis powers on one side and the Allied powers on the other established parity. In the post-World War II period during the Cold War, the Soviet Union through its Warsaw Pact on one side and the United States through NATO on the other built a balance of power. Not only that, in the post-Cold War century, India is playing an active role in becoming a peer to China or bringing a balance of power in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions. Therefore, power parity is a kind of balancing tendency that prevents states from aggression. In other words, it means resisting the aggression of an opposing state through collective efforts.

### **Some Characteristics of Maintaining Power Parity**

To maintain power parity, it is desirable for the two rival parties to be prepared for several matters. Respectively, these are:

1. Various states, especially the two rival parties, must be conscious of their active political positions.
2. Being aware of the uncontrolled and continuous competition for power in the world.
3. Maintaining harmony with the changes in the international situation, one state will accept the changes in relations with other states.
4. In the ongoing situation of power parity, both rival parties must monitor whether any state or alliance is becoming more powerful than another state or alliance.
5. If a powerful state exercises any form of aggression on a relatively weaker state, all other states will collectively engage in forceful intervention and act against it to reduce that state's aggression.
6. The final stage of maintaining power parity is war. Therefore, every disputing state in the world must remain prepared for war.
7. All rival states must keep an alternative path open so that the victorious side in a war cannot enjoy overwhelming power.

### **Characteristics of the Balance of Power**

If we analyze the balance of power, certain characteristics are observed. These characteristics are:

**1. Balance of Power is Changeable:** In the international field, the balance of power is in no way permanent; as the power of states changes, the balance of power also changes. The balance of power is dependent on the internal elements of a state. It cannot be said that the elements of a state always remain permanent; by nature and due to human ingenuity, the elements of a state change. That is, state power revolves around the changes of the state, and balance is established through the strength of state power, though sometimes it is not. In this way, every aspect changes.

**2. Power Parity is Simple and Complex:** Power parity can be both simple and complex. In simple power parity, one state creates a balance of power against another state on the opposite side. In complex power parity, an alliance of states creates an internal balance of power against an opposing side and becomes active in maintaining power parity against that opponent. That is, the concept of "power parity within power parity" emerges.

**3. Creation of a Conflict Environment:** Power parity or balance of power creates a situation of war. When two rival parties or two states become aggressive to maintain the balance of power, an environment of war is created between them. At this time, they lead their defense systems into competition to demonstrate military strength.

### **Types of Balance of Power**

From the perspective of geography and behavioral positioning, the balance of power can be classified into several types. From the geographical standpoint, it can be divided into local balance of power, regional power, continental balance of power, and balance of power in the international field. From the other side-the behavioral side-these matters can be shown as bipolar balance of power, tripolar balance of power, and multipolar balance of power. Regional balance of power has become important in the present day. In the recent situation, two states have had to resort to rivalry for the development of a regional balance of power, which is becoming evident in the Southeast Asian region and the Indian Ocean region.

**Balance of Power and Strategic India-China Relations:** The main strategies of the balance of power are:

**a. Acquisition of Territory or Use of Territory:** China has become the single dominant power in the Southeast Asian region. The current situation in this region is moving through an imbalanced state. Therefore, to become a peer to China in this region, India has developed relations with ASEAN. It has improved transport and communication systems with ASEAN member countries and set targets for the expansion of trade and commerce. As a method of communication, India is constructing the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Additionally, by integrating sea routes and land routes, India has launched the Kaladan Multi-Modal Project, and through the progress of the India-Myanmar Rhi-Tiddim Project, India wants to keep the geographical territory of ASEAN within its reach. India has realised that to reduce the effectiveness of China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's communication system must reach the territories of ASEAN member countries, where ASEAN countries will become dependent on India. In this way, India is indirectly increasing its own power against China through the use of the territories of ASEAN countries.

**b. Balance of Power and Formation of Alliances by India:** The second main strategy of the balance of power is the formation of alliances. To maintain the balance of power, India is forming alliances against China in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions. To reach a state equal to China's power, India has formed QUAD along with America, Japan, and Australia. Known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, QUAD is a formal strategic forum. One of the primary objectives of QUAD is to work for the security of a free, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

In 2009, it converged with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is considered a security alliance of maritime democracies, and the forum's activities are maintained through meetings, semi-regular summits, information exchange, and military exercises involving all member countries. QUAD was primarily created due to China's military aggression and the disruption of peace in the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean regions. China had disturbed peace and order by posing military threats to the security of every country. In this context, just as India has become an opponent of China, the QUAD member countries have also engaged in a military alliance against China. The specific security-related activities of these member countries were also being hampered day by day. Specifically, China has engaged in a dispute with Japan centered on the Senkaku Islands in the South China Sea. As China is militarily powerful, Japan has had to endure Chinese aggression, whereby Japan's sovereignty, geographical security, and national interests are being undermined. From this situation, Japan has taken an active role in forming an alliance against China.

Another country, America's long-standing concept of hegemony, has faced a setback due to China's commercial expansion. China is creating obstacles to America presenting itself as the world's superpower. For this reason, America has become interested in forming a military alliance for security in South and Southeast Asia against China. Another country, Australia, felt immense pressure regarding the import and export of its internal resources due to long-term Chinese aggression. Around 2007, China forcibly purchased coal from Australia, and when Australia showed interest in selling to other countries, China severed all types of opportunities with Australia. In recent times—that is, after 2017—Australia applied the courage to speak out against China, taking America, Japan, and India by its side. Therefore, India has tried to tackle all types of Chinese aggression through QUAD. In this way, India has taken the active responsibility of resisting regional Chinese aggression. This innovative attempt by India to maintain the balance of power has put China under significant pressure.

**c. Balance of Power and India's Intervention:** The third core strategy of the balance of power is intervention. India has adopted and implemented this strategy very skillfully. To protect power parity in the Southeast Asian region, India is providing military cooperation, arms cooperation, and developing defense systems in this region to enable ASEAN member countries to face China in direct combat. Particularly, India is encouraging countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia by providing advanced, modern BrahMos missiles. Additionally, the Indian Navy has been seen conducting naval exercises with Vietnam and Indonesia, which indirectly and directly incites ASEAN against China. Not only that, Singapore is being allowed to use Indian territory for missile testing. Simultaneously, India maintains diplomatic and military relations with countries like Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Malaysia. India is intervening in the internal matters of these countries through the modernization of their defense systems. In this way, India is engaging as a rival power to China in the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean regions, where the possibility of creating a balance of power is emerging.

**d. India's Participation and Resistance in Creating Balance of Power:** The fourth main part of creating a balance of power is participation and resistance. India has taken this diplomatic strategy as a key determinant of power parity. Since the 1990s, India has projected itself against China by spreading a diplomatic web. India is trying to participate in the internal matters of ASEAN countries by adopting diplomatic methods. One such matter is the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. This project initially spoke of improving the flow of bilateral investment between China and ASEAN. China and ASEAN were connected with each other to increase mutual cooperation, trade expansion, improvement in internal agriculture, and progress in the tourism system. But when China started to withdraw its hand from this matter, India joined with ASEAN and became fully eager to participate in this project. For this, ASEAN has welcomed India warmly. In the recent period, India has strengthened and increased the mutual exchange of ideas in the India-ASEAN Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. Taking ASEAN along, India is protesting against the adverse reactions of China regarding the Mekong-Ganga. ASEAN is suffering due to China building excessive dams on the Mekong River. In this crisis, finding India by its side, ASEAN is directly protesting against China. India is putting China under heavy pressure.

Another example is India forming BIMSTEC. To keep neighboring countries by its side, India is participating in BIMSTEC by giving importance to mutual cooperation, exchange of ideas, socio-cultural cooperation, and tourism matters with the included countries. In this way, India is resisting China's String of Pearls policy. India is maintaining good relations with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, where China's power is facing unfavorable situations. By being involved in the internal systems of various countries in this manner, India is resisting China's power in the Southeast Asian region. India is protecting the balance of power by applying various methods.

**e. The Role of Buffer Zones in Establishing Balance of Power and India's Activism:** The buffer zone or intervening region is identified as the fifth most important strategy of the balance of power. This region maintains an equal distance from the two conflicting parties. Geographically, there is a necessity for a buffer zone or intervening region in the establishment of a balance of power. This region works to avoid frequent clashes between two disputing states kept in a balance of power. Moreover, between two conflicting parties, the side that can keep the buffer zone or intervening region in its hands will see its power increase many times compared to the opponent. Here, the buffer zone is the Southeast Asian region, where the ASEAN countries are located. In the competition for power parity between India and China, ASEAN is acting as a buffer zone region. To reduce

China's aggression and increase its own power, India is establishing close friendship with ASEAN. To keep ASEAN on its side, India has adopted many social action plans. It is emphasizing the social, economic, and cultural development of ASEAN member countries. To keep ASEAN's progress rapid, India is advising ASEAN on sustainable development to take the use of natural resources and the tourism industry to a better place. To reduce the internal economic expenses of these countries, India is cooperating with modern machinery for the innovation and replacement of non-conventional energy centers. India is exporting its manufactured goods to ASEAN countries with customs duty exemptions. Additionally, India has provided massive financial assistance for the establishment of power generation and construction centers. Due to this, ASEAN has tilted slightly towards India, which has become a cause of headache for China. In this way, India is advancing in the competition for power against China by taking the buffer region along.

**f. India's Strategic Preparations in Maintaining the Balance of Power:** The main and final strategy of power parity is strategic preparation or war preparation. As China is bolstered by military and economic strength, it has exerted single dominance in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions for a long time in the post-Cold War era. This has also forced India, the second-largest power in this region, into direct confrontation. Therefore, India has focused on strategy for the purpose of maintaining the balance of power in this region. As war preparation, India is making extensive changes inside and outside the country. India has become a full strategic partner to strengthen the security matters of its neighboring ASEAN countries. To make the SAGAR Mission effective in the South Sea, Southeast Asian region, and the Indian Ocean region, and to resist China's aggression, it has modernised and overhauled its defense system. It has boosted the morale of the countries located in these regions by sending defense equipment. In the internal field, India has purchased high-powered modern fighter aircraft Rafale. To secure the security system, India has installed high-capacity information-seeking technology on the Indo-China border. To stop China's aggression, India has deployed a huge number of soldiers along the India-China border and other borders, alongside installing Anti-Ballistic Missiles. To keep China under pressure, India is building various types of warships and warplanes using its own technology. India has developed the Agni-V missile, which is nearly equal to China's hydrogen missiles, and is conducting repeated tests to perfect it. Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) and Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM) are being kept ready at various borders of India. To reach a parity of power with China, India has signed agreements with America to bring strong, high-capacity modern machines in the defense sector. India did not stop here. To rival China's power, it is achieving improvements in space technology systems. Just as India's rockets are journeying into space, which is a good aspect, these spacecraft are also securing India's strategy and defense system. India is making its strategy computer-mediated and computer-controlled. For this, India is installing many artificial satellites, from which India is constantly gaining accurate and transparent information. Looking China in the eye, India is achieving the application of Artificial Intelligence in the defense sector. Through this, India's security system is being secured. To reduce China's power, India is preparing Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV) in various fields, from which it is possible to send multiple missiles simultaneously to specific separate targets. In the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions, India is standing up together with ASEAN member countries, America, Japan, Australia, and its neighboring countries to reduce China's aggressive dominance and protect the balance of power in the Southeast Asian region. India had accepted China's long-standing authority, but in the 21st century, China's hyper-aggressive thinking is making India think specifically. In this context, it is necessary to mention the Doklam dispute of 2017, where China tried to apply its excess power. Additionally, in 2020, Chinese soldiers engaged in aggressive steps, face-to-face fights, and clashes at multiple locations on the China-India border. Clashes occurred near Pangong Lake in Ladakh and Nathu La Pass in Sikkim, where China's highly aggressive thinking was revealed.

Several such aggressive thoughts from China active India in moving towards a policy of resistance. That is, it can be said that China's aggressive thinking has practically forced India to create a balance of power.

### **China's Reaction**

The way India is advancing in South and Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, China has not taken this matter well. India's advancement is contrary to China's interests. China is expressing reactions to resist India from South and Southeast Asia. It is developing the concept of its reaction in various ways. Sometimes through direct confrontation, and sometimes through trade and commerce with neighboring countries, providing advance funds, and applying diplomatic maneuvers, it is increasing the tendency of reaction against India. In the 21st century, China's language of protest has reached an ultimate stage. Since joining the WTO in 2001, China has been transforming its reactions into aggressive thinking. China's aforementioned steps are preventing India from reaching its specific goals. China is engaging in direct clashes with India regarding border issues and is trying to maintain absolute dominance against India by providing massive advance financial assistance to Southeast Asian neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, and Pakistan. Not only that, China is aiding the anti-India terrorism of India's perennial enemy, Pakistan. As a result, it has been noticeable from time to time that terrorist attacks are occurring in large numbers on Indian territory. For example, events like the Pulwama attack, Uri, Balakot, pahalgam and the Mumbai Taj Hotel attack can be mentioned. China's direct and indirect support behind such activities of Pakistani terrorists is clear. At the same time, it can also be said that as India shares borders with various countries, China is continuously providing provocation regarding border clashes to different countries. In this context, the Myanmar-India conflict and India-Pakistan clashes can be mentioned. China's advance massive funding is playing an effective role in severing India's relations with its neighboring countries. Additionally, China is involving people living in various countries with counterfeit rackets against India. China did not stop here; it is creating pressure by using biochemical weapons against India. Not only that, by increasing

diplomatic communication with SAARC member countries, it is trying to form an adverse reactionary alliance against India. In this way, China is maintaining a sharp reaction against India.

### **Evaluation**

Analyzing the dynamics of India-China relations, the dominance of powerful China gives rise to the latent thought in India of becoming a peer to China in the Southeast Asian region. India has never applied single dominance in any region. To explain it a bit differently, India has not behaved against any country in the world. Then why is it engaging in a power rivalry with China? To find the answer to this question, it must be said that China will not let any power raise its head in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions. When India is slowly gaining strength through trade and commerce in these regions, China has adopted a Containment Policy to surround or block India. India has attempted to emerge from such a situation and give a fitting reply to China's face. From this point, their relationship becomes one of mutual rivalry. The two rival states have continued trying to apply power over each other. Since India is weaker than China, China's hyper-aggressive thinking is having a harmful impact on India. Therefore, to neutralise China's power, India is forming alliances with various states. India has emerged from the situation where it would leave ground without a fight as before, and is making desperate attempts to bring a balance of power in the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific regions, sometimes taking ASEAN along and sometimes with Japan, Australia, and other countries. While trying to bring this balance of power, India is facing some problems. These problems can be seen this way: to become a peer to China in military and economic terms, India will have to work very hard and achieve structural development in internal matters, which is a time-consuming affair. Some limitations of India's economy are also noticeable, because of which many countries maintain a tendency to align with China. To create a balance of power, India must first achieve economic development. Just as China is adopting large projects to maintain its dominance, India must adopt some exemplary steps where ASEAN countries will tilt significantly towards India.

The balance of power will attain a strong form only when the projects adopted by India are implemented and become acceptable to every state. There is no limit or boundary to maintaining the balance of power, and there is no way to measure the power, qualification, skill, and morale of a state's military. There is no measurable yardstick as to whether the balance of power between two disputing states has decreased or increased. Therefore, as there is no way to understand, the balance of power between two rival states is always questionable, making it difficult to accurately explain and analyze the balance of power between two rival states. Thus, through the above discussion, a comparative analysis of maintaining the strategic balance of power between India and China has been presented for evaluation in light of recent times.

**Acknowledgment:** The author acknowledges Prof. Partha Pratim Bajju, Prof. Bijoy Kumar Day, Prof. Anindya Jyoti Majumdar, and Sukhen Baidya.

**Author's Contribution:** *Raghunandan Maity*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** Not Applicable

**Competing Interest:** No

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