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India's Indo-Pacific The 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue speech: a conceptual cornerstone?

This note is the first of a series of research papers aiming to provide an overview of India's approach to the Indo-Pacific by focusing on the perceptions and interpretations of key Indian actors and stakeholders. Based on 45 interviews conducted in India, this project highlights the diversity of viewpoints among experts, academics, diplomats, and military officers, and offers a nuanced understanding of India's conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific through cross-referencing subjective perspectives.

Introduction

India's Indo-Pacific vision is often encapsulated in the keynote address delivered by Narendra Modi in Singapore on June 1, 2018, during the 17th Shangri-La Dialogue. Reverberating beyond the event itself, this speech has emerged as a point of reference not only for analysts delving into India's Indo-Pacific engagement but also as a conceptual scaffold for practitioners involved in Indian diplomatic endeavors in the region. Reflecting on its enduring significance, a former ambassador who served across the Indo-Pacific region remarked that *"what has been said in 2018 in the SLD [Shangri-La Dialogue, ed.] speech is what we still follow: security for all, growth for all, sea lanes opened, etc."*¹ Echoing this sentiment, another diplomat from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs underscored: *"There is a certain philosophy of the Indo-Pacific in the mind of India. It is cleared in the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue speech, which remains the reference. And the goal at the end of the day is to achieve that"*.²

The elevation of the June 2018 speech as a cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific trajectory owes more to its clarifying and framing effect in shaping India's current regional stance than to any

¹ Interview with a former Ambassador who served in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi, July 2023.

² Interview with a Junior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, August 2023.

mere terminological shift related to the official use of the term “Indo-Pacific” by Narendra Modi. Notably, the discourse at the Shangri-La Dialogue does not represent the inaugural mention of the term within Indian official circles. In 2012, Prime minister Manmohan Singh had shared his conviction that *“a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”*.³ In 2015, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, then Foreign Secretary, cautiously alluded to it in reference to C. Raja Mohan’s work⁴ while Narendra Modi warily acknowledged its usage by “others”.⁵ By 2016, V. K. Singh, then Minister of State for External Affairs, imbued the term with conceptual significance, portraying the Indo-Pacific as a “theatre” where India’s commitment to freedom of navigation and peaceful conflict resolution finds expression.⁶ For the Prime Minister, it became a foundational concept to underscore political-strategic alignments with key regional partners such as Japan⁷ and Indonesia,⁸ who were already proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept. Subsequently, Modi characterized this concept as a *“larger and inter-linked marine geography”*⁹ underscoring the pivotal role of the Indian Ocean in global affairs, as later echoed by the Foreign Secretary.¹⁰ Addressing ASEAN stakeholders, India mobilized the concept to affirm not only the organization’s crucial position in the transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific framework¹¹ but also India’s commitment to the ASEAN’s centrality principle, around which New Delhi had articulated its *Look East Policy* since the early 1990s, later (2014) evolving into the *Act East Policy*.¹² This discursive trajectory persisted in the months leading up to the 2018 Shangri-La speech, including in engagements such as the third Raisina Dialogue, through Sushma Swaraj,

³ “PM’s opening statement at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit”, [Prime Minister’s Office \(Archive\)](#), December 20, 2012.

⁴ “His [C. Raja Mohan, ed.] next work ‘Samudra Manthan’ addressed the then less than universally recognised phenomenon of Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.” (“Remarks by Foreign Secretary at the release of Dr. C. Raja Mohan’s book ‘Modi’s World-Expanding India’s Sphere of Influence’”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, July 17, 2015).

⁵ “That is why some call the region the Indo-Pacific Region” (“Opening Remarks by Prime Minister at Summit of Forum for India Pacific Island Countries in Jaipur”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, August 21, 2015).

⁶ “It is in this context that we must interpret India’s articulations in favour of freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes in the Indo-Pacific theatre, for example” (“Speech by Minister of State for External Affairs at the Gateway of India Dialogue”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, June 14, 2016).

⁷ “Without doubt, our destinies are interlinked. The ocean waters of the Indo-Pacific that lap the coast of Japan also form the surf that breaks on the shores of India” (“Banquet Speech by Prime Minister during his visit to Japan”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, November 11, 2016).

⁸ “Your visit allows us to impart vigour and momentum to our Strategic Partnership. And shape our convergences to act as a force of peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region” (“Press Statement by Prime Minister during the State visit of President of Indonesia to India”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, December 12, 2016).

⁹ “We believe that respecting Freedom of Navigation and adhering to international norms is essential for peace and economic growth in the larger and inter-linked marine geography of the Indo-Pacific” (“Inaugural Address by Prime Minister at Second Raisina Dialogue, New Delhi”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, January 17, 2017).

¹⁰ “The growing appreciation and acceptance of the concept of Indo-Pacific further underlines the importance of IOR in global affairs” (“Foreign Secretary’s Keynote Address at the Inaugural Session of Second IORA Meeting of Experts for Maritime Safety & Security, New Delhi”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, November 8, 2017).

¹¹ “Indeed, without ASEAN, the transformation of the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific would have never happened” (“Speech by Dr. S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary to mark 25 years of India-Singapore Partnership at Shangri La Hotel, Singapore”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, July 11, 2017).

¹² “India’s Act East Policy is shaped around the ASEAN, and its centrality in the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region is evident” (“Opening Statement by Prime Minister at 15th ASEAN-India Summit, Manila”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, November 14, 2017).

former Minister of External Affairs,¹³ and the Prime Minister discussing the potential for India-ASEAN cooperation in the maritime sphere.¹⁴ The term Indo-Pacific has also served to stress the political rapprochement and the enduring strategic partnership between India and Japan,¹⁵ which evolved from a strategic and global partnership in December 2006 to a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” by December 2015.¹⁶

The use of the Indo-Pacific concept before the Shangri-La Dialogue speech indicates that its retrospective significance is not rooted in the novelty of its usage. In official statements, the concept dates back to at least 2011 and saw increased deployment after 2015 among government officials at the highest level. However, its application has remained flexible, adapting to the specific contexts and objectives of each event. The foundational importance of this discourse, as perceived by numerous key Indian stakeholders, lies precisely in its substantive contribution, previously more dispersed within the cited statements. It revolves around a comprehensive, conceptualized and constructed vision of India’s stance within this expanded space. In essence, the June 2018 discourse represents a pivotal moment for New Delhi, articulating its vision of the Indo-Pacific at the highest level for the first time.

Another element that explains the remarkable posterity of this speech is also its programmatic significance for Indian diplomatic actors. As a former Senior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) put it, *“the speech itself has laid the foundation for all activities made subsequently (...) whether trilaterals, plurilaterals, multilaterals etc.”*¹⁷

“Speeches are not just speeches”¹⁸: India’s statements diplomacy

Speeches play a singular role in delineating Indian foreign policy orientations, extending their impact beyond foreign audiences. Due to the absence of parallel published strategic documents, speeches, particularly those articulated at the highest levels of government, acquire a structuring function within the diplomatic community. These speeches serve as the primary reference internally, providing a conceptual foundation for coherent operational strategies. Externally, they serve as the main vehicle for exposing and promoting the fundamental tenets of India’s vision.

In the Indo-Pacific region, while some countries have attracted considerable attention for their

¹³ “In our own region, we are finding a renewed interest in collaborative activities in the Indo-Pacific and even in the Bay of Bengal” (“Address by External Affairs Minister at Third Raisina Dialogue”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, January 17, 2018).

¹⁴ “During the Retreat Session, we had an opportunity to discuss ASEAN-India cooperation in the maritime domain as one of the key focus areas for growth and development of the Indo-Pacific region” (“Opening remarks by the PM at the Plenary Session of the INDIA- ASEAN Commemorative Summit”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, January 25, 2018).

¹⁵ “Our growing convergence on economic and strategic issues is important for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region” (“Press Remarks by External Affairs Minister at 9th India-Japan Strategic Dialogue”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, March 29, 2018).

¹⁶ “Japan-India Relations (Basic Data)”, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#), December 15, 2023.

¹⁷ Interview with a former Senior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs, Pune, August 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

early adoption or innovative use of the term “Indo-Pacific”,¹⁹ as well as for highlighting critical components of their regional strategies,²⁰ the principal mechanism for formalizing and articulating their Indo-Pacific visions is through the publication of written guidelines, outlooks, or strategic documents. Consequently, reference tends to be directed more readily towards these more comprehensive texts rather than towards speeches when discussing the French²¹ or American²² approaches of the Indo-Pacific. Tokyo’s vision of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific²³ has also been elucidated through detailed documents. Similarly, for understanding the perspectives of ASEAN or the European Union, experts and strategic communities commonly turn to documents such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific²⁴ and the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²⁵

In India, the absence of such documents is part of a larger political and diplomatic posture of reluctance towards written publications in favor of an essentially oral *modus operandi*, especially when it comes to formulating and announcing major foreign policy orientations.²⁶ These are elaborated through speeches, statements, and successive communiqués without necessarily being systematically brought together, structured and developed into a single strategic document. The reference framework of many actors within India’s strategic community is, in fact, mainly composed of major speeches which serve as principal markers for its foreign policy.²⁷ The same goes for the speech delivered by the Indian Prime Minister at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok in November 2019, where he announced the launch of India’s flagship project in the region, the Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI).²⁸ Without an official document, even purely communicative, the initiative is substantiated primarily with relatively dispersed elements in the form of speeches and official communiqués, in other words, punctual and contextually situated (an event, a visit, a summit, etc.) communications. The objectives of the IPOI and its seven “pillars” have been recalled in many speeches, such as the one in February 2022 by Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East), during a round table of the think tank Gateway House, which also detailed the spirit of the SAGAR vision revealed in 2015 by the Prime Minister.²⁹ While the fundamental principles of the IPOI can also be found more sporadically in other official sources such as written parliamentary questions,³⁰ the

¹⁹ A notable reference here is the speech by Shinzo Abe, then Prime Minister of Japan, at the Indian Lok Sabha in 2007 (“Confluence of the Two Seas”, Speech by H. E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#), August 22, 2007).

²⁰ For example, French President Emmanuel Macron’s speech in Sydney in 2018 on the vision of a Paris-New Delhi-Canberra axis, heralding an official trilateral dialogue between the three countries starting in September 2020 (“[Speech of the President of France at the Sydney Naval Base, Garden Island](#)”, May 3, 2018).

²¹ “La stratégie de la France dans l’Indo-Pacifique”, [French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs](#), February 22, 2022.

²² “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, [The White House](#), February 2022.

²³ “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP)”, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#), March 2023.

²⁴ “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#), June 22, 2019.

²⁵ “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, [European Commission](#), September 16, 2021.

²⁶ Interview with a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

²⁷ “Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius (March 12, 2015)”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, March 12, 2015.

²⁸ “Prime Minister’s Speech at the East Asia Summit, 04 November 2019”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, November 4, 2019.

²⁹ “Address by Secretary (East) at the Gateway House Round Table on ‘India: Pursuing Prosperity & Security in the Indo-Pacific’”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, February 1, 2022.

³⁰ A response from the Minister of State for External Affairs, Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, to a written question from an opposition parliamentarian reminded, in this regard, that the IPOI “was announced [...] as an inclusive concept with a

events justifying these speeches also create opportunities to explore new avenues of cooperation through the framework the initiative offers. Through discourses, Indian leaders can then promote timely and targeted rapprochements, highlighting, for example, the synergies between the Indian IPOI and the vision promoted by other actors, such as the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific³¹ or the activities of the Arctic Council,³² of which India is an observer, or even directly encouraging them to join the initiative as was the case with the European Union.³³

It is incumbent upon expert communities to reconstruct a unified and coherent vision from the various elements presented in a dispersed manner through speeches. Think tanks, in particular, are frequently tasked with further conceptualizing these elements,³⁴ and may even take the lead in reflecting on their operationalization.³⁵ This aspect finds a particular embodiment in the national consultation conducted by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), a think tank chaired by the Vice President of India and vice-chaired by the Minister of External Affairs, in September 2021 in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs. Bringing together “*a multi-disciplinary group of academicians, scientists, and naval analysts specializing in maritime affairs*”,³⁶ the report explores through each chapter one of the seven thematic pillars of the initiative, while eluding the political and strategic logics underpinning its creation by the Indian government. These are rather the prerogative of the introductory remarks, offering to key official actors multiple and, most importantly, informal opportunities for expression in a context seen as less politically binding. However, these introductions do not replace an official document clarifying the contours and content of the initiative, as well as its concrete operational scope, which would make it more accessible and understandable to a sometimes confused international audience, including within the administrations of key partners. In the same way, the 2022 edition of the Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue organized annually by the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) aimed at “*operationalising the ‘Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative’ (IPOI)*”, as highlighted in a press release of the Ministry of Defence published during the three days of the dialogue³⁷.

view to promote practical cooperation among the countries for the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific” (Lok Sabha, Question n° 1435 – Indo-Pacific Vision, [Ministry of External Affairs](#), July 28, 2021).

³¹ “Transcript of Special Briefing on Prime Minister’s visit to Indonesia (September 05, 2023)”, [Media Briefings](#), Ministry of External Affairs, September 5, 2023.

³² “*The overlap with the focus areas of the Arctic Council is obvious*” (“Remarks by Secretary (West) at the SaGAA 7 Conference on ‘The Future of Arctic Ice: An Indo-Pacific Connect’”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, April 27, 2023).

³³ “*The EU will be comfortable with its objectives and may consider partnering in one of its pillars*” (Ministry of External Affairs, “Concluding Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, May 13, 2023).

³⁴ Premesha Saha, Abhishek Mishra, “The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India”, [ORF Occasional Paper](#), n° 292, Observer Research Foundation, December 23, 2020.

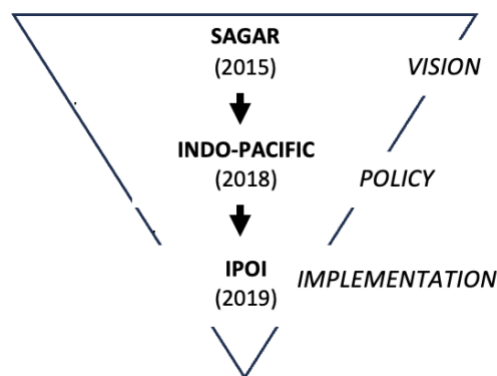
³⁵ Organized from November 23rd to 25th, 2022 by the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), the 4th Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue had as its theme “Operationalising the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)” (“Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue 2022 (IPRD): 23 to 25 Nov 2022”, [Press Information Bureau](#), Ministry of Defence, November 22, 2022).

³⁶ *IPOI Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. Towards a Sustainable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, [Indian Council of World Affairs](#), 2022.

³⁷ “2022 edition of the Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD 2022) – Proceedings of Day II”, [Press Information Bureau](#), Ministry of Defence, November 24, 2022.

Therefore, regarding the Indo-Pacific, the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue speech serves as a “*de facto strategy*”,³⁸ without the perceived drawbacks of publishing a strategic document. “*We don’t want anything to be carved in the stone*”, a former high-ranking diplomat at the Ministry of External Affairs clarified.³⁹ This “discursive method” offers a degree of flexibility, even volatility, in posture. As a result, it tends to be perceived as less politically engaging and, consequently, less politically costly – particularly because it allows for shifts in stance without the need for formal updates to documents, which are often more politically and administratively burdensome. However, this calculation does not come without drawbacks. Because of their inherent impermanence of spoken statements compared to written ones, spoken statements carry the risk of becoming quickly outdated as the strategic environment evolves. In contrast, written practices often promote a more long-term politico-strategic outlook. Thus, several diplomats of the Indian Foreign Service who served as ambassadors to key partners of India in the Indo-Pacific have highlighted the different realities with which their country must now deal compared to the context in which the speech was delivered,⁴⁰ particularly regarding its relationship with China.⁴¹

However, some actors consider that it would be mistaken to treat these major speeches shaping India’s regional foreign policy in isolation. On the contrary, they should be seen as part of an evolutive logic as they ultimately converge into a coherent architecture where each speech serves a specific function in defining the orientations of India’s regional strategy. An officer of the Indian Navy speaks of a funnel structure where the 2015 speech on SAGAR defines India’s ambitions and approach to its regional environment while the 2018 speech on the Indo-Pacific acts as a geographical and conceptual anchor for this same vision, allowing it to be specified politically around key references (inclusivity, respect for international law, regional prosperity, etc.). As for the 2019 speech announcing the IPOI and its seven pillars, it serves as a lever for operationalizing this policy.⁴²



The widespread dissemination of the Shangri-La speech, along with its discussion within Indian strategic circles,⁴³ has elicited a somewhat diverse response. While many have applauded India’s

³⁸ Interview with a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

³⁹ Interview with a former Senior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁴⁰ Interview with a former Ambassador who served in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁴¹ *Idem.*

⁴² Interview with a Senior Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, July 2023.

⁴³ Interview with a Senior Research Analyst on the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi, July 2023.

elucidation of its stance on the Indo-Pacific, some have lamented its perceived lack of substantive and innovative content,⁴⁴ or the absence of subsequent financial and operational effects that certain Indian Navy officers had notably hoped for to complement the rhetoric.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there is appreciation for the robust maritime foundation that underpins the Indian vision in the fourth paragraph of the speech. Importantly, the maritime framework presented in the speech follows a “holistic” approach, eschewing a narrow focus on hard security concepts in favor of a more comprehensive understanding of security. This broader perspective incorporates economic considerations, such as the blue economy, as well as environmental concerns, reflecting a nuanced and integrated approach.

For others, the 2018 discourse is seen as a particularly welcome change of stance that gives a degree of coherence and articulation to sub-regional policies which until now have co-existed in silos, such as the *Neighborhood First* policy in the immediate neighborhood (South Asia), the *Act East Policy* towards ASEAN and South-East Asia then extended to East Asia, or the *Look West Policy* (West Asia/Middle East). The nature of the change in posture described here is not conceptual. It reflects an intent to clarify⁴⁶ and orchestrate the various aspects of India’s regional foreign policy. It also directly labels under the Indo-Pacific framework the cooperation projects conducted by India, particularly with certain Indian Ocean states (Seychelles, Mauritius), granting enhanced visibility to these initiatives. A former Senior Official at the Ministry of External Affairs, while acknowledging moments of ambiguity in the speech and the need for further clarification, emphasized a notable increase in Indo-Pacific-related events organized by Indian diplomatic missions in the region following the speech, along with a surge in official press releases – two trends he saw as indicators of a heightened commitment to the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁷

The argument of a shift in stance is often used to highlight the “unique activism”⁴⁸ of the Indian head of government in shaping, promoting, and executing the country’s foreign policy. However, this perceived break in approach is not necessarily reflected in the substance of the speech, which tends to align more with a logic of continuity. What is then described as a “*bold statement*”⁴⁹ or a “*momentous speech*”⁵⁰ also serves to celebrate India’s enhanced ability to make itself heard as a committed actor in the Indo-Pacific⁵¹: “*This administration has been much more vocal. There is a self-awareness of how vocal India can be and where it can push back. This is the major change*”.⁵²

⁴⁴ Interviews with a retired Senior Officer and a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁴⁵ Interviews with two retired General/Flag Officers and a retired Senior Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi and Goa, August 2023.

⁴⁶ Interviews with a former Ambassador who served in the Indo-Pacific and a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁴⁷ Interview with a former Senior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁴⁸ Interview with a think tank expert/Associate Fellow on East and Southeast Asia, New Delhi, July 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview with a retired Senior Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁵⁰ Interview with a Senior Research Fellow on the Indo-Pacific, August 2023.

⁵¹ Interview with a retired General/Flag Officer of the Indian Navy, Mumbai, August 2023.

⁵² Interview with a Senior Research Analyst on the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi, July 2023.

Conceptually, however, many interviewees nuance the critical readings of the 2018 speech that point to a perceived lack of substance. They highlight what they identify as India's main conceptual contribution to the Indo-Pacific: the notion of inclusivity.⁵³

Inclusivity as India's contribution

"The Shangri-La Dialogue has become a platform about the US or China. But here, the Prime Minister stood up saying 'yes, this is a valid concept, but let's make it inclusive, let's work all together and not make it one versus the others. This is what other countries liked'".⁵⁴

The central role of inclusivity as India's key conceptual contribution to the Indo-Pacific framework, as articulated by a former Indian Navy officer, was evident not only in the 2018 speech but also in subsequent discussions and publications. This emphasis on inclusivity was particularly apparent in the adaptation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept – originally promoted by Japan and later adopted by the United States—into the "Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific". This notion, introduced in the Shangri-La speech as the foundational pillar of India's Indo-Pacific vision,⁵⁵ was swiftly followed in Narendra Modi's address by a broad definition encompassing all nations within the Indo-Pacific geography: *"it includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it."*⁵⁶

The rhetoric of inclusivity in the Shangri-La speech is reinforced by lexical choices emphasizing India's commitment to respect (सम्मान), dialogue (संवाद), cooperation (सहयोग), peace (शांति), and prosperity (समृद्धि) (in the region, or through repeated references to the notion of friendship. In particular, it is articulated in the speech around three primary elements:

- **Avoiding references to democracy.** While democracy is positioned towards the conclusion of the discourse as an ideal to be championed alongside a rules-based international order, the Indian narrative places less emphasis on the promotion of shared values compared to, for instance, the American or Japanese visions, or certain European perspectives.⁵⁷ India's approach thus follows a cautious logic, avoiding frequent mentions of values, particularly democratic ones, which could undermine the claimed commitment to inclusivity by excluding states that may not entirely meet such criteria. At the time of the speech, The Economist's 2018 Democracy Index categorized several countries in India's immediate vicinity as "hybrid regimes" (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Thailand), and certain ASEAN members as "authoritarian regimes" (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos).⁵⁸ However, this stance

⁵³ Interview with a Senior Research Fellow on the Indo-Pacific, July 2023.

⁵⁴ Interview with a retired Senior Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁵⁵ *"One, it stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity"* ("Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)", [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018).

⁵⁶ *Idem.*

⁵⁷ In the Netherlands for instance, the reinforcement of cooperative endeavors with regional partners is contingent upon engagement with *"like-minded democracies and countries with open market economies"* (*Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia*, [Government of the Netherlands](#), November 13, 2020).

⁵⁸ *Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy*, [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), 2018, p. 24.

has since shifted, notably due to escalating tensions on the border with China. India has ultimately consented to incorporate, in a joint statement by the Quad,⁵⁹ robust support for freedom and democratic values shared among the four nations, despite the mounting criticism directed towards India itself.⁶⁰

- **Reaffirming its adherence to the principle of ASEAN centrality.** For Narendra Modi, *“inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity [...] lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific”*.⁶¹ Inclusivity is explicitly linked to ASEAN centrality and more broadly to *“India’s faith in multilateralism and regionalism”*.⁶² ASEAN is mentioned twenty-one times in the speech, underscoring India’s longstanding *rapprochement* efforts with the association since the early 1990s,⁶³ subsequently elevated as the cornerstone of India’s Indo-Pacific vision and its geographical nexus. However, within diplomatic circles, the rhetorical emphasis placed on ASEAN is occasionally criticized as excessive, as it is seen as introducing a form of sub-regional prioritization that not only risks undermining the principle of inclusivity but also translates into limited practical effects. A former ambassador who was stationed in the region suggests that *“it is not only ASEAN centrality, but also South Asia centrality, Small Islands Countries centrality, etc.”*⁶⁴ In fact, the mobilization of the ASEAN centrality principle has become a widespread theme in the Indo-Pacific discourse internationally. Japan expresses support to the *“centrality and unity”*⁶⁵ of ASEAN, while Australia demonstrates its *“steadfast commitment”* to the principle of ASEAN centrality.⁶⁶ For the United States, the association *“remains central in our efforts to ensure peace and underwrite prosperity in the Indo-Pacific”*.⁶⁷ The nearly systematic invocation of this principle raises questions about both the interpretation assigned to it by the various players and the substance it encompasses. Amitav Acharya identifies three facets of the principle of ASEAN centrality: the association’s central role in shaping the regional security architecture; its pioneering and leading role in formulating the norms and cooperation

⁵⁹ “Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement”, [Statements and Releases](#), The White House, May 24, 2022.

⁶⁰ For example, in 2023, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) requested, for the fourth consecutive time, that the Department of State designate India as a “country of particular concern” due to the treatment of religious minorities. In 2024, the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute, in its “Democracy Report”, which was already categorizing India as an “electoral autocracy” since 2018, described the country as *“one of the worst autocratizers”* (“India ‘one of the worst autocratizers’: V-Dem report on democracy”, [The Hindu](#), March 11, 2024).

⁶¹ “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018.

⁶² *Idem*.

⁶³ India became a “Sectoral Partner” of ASEAN in 1992 before becoming a “Dialogue Partner” in 1996, the same year it also joined the ASEAN Regional Forum. In addition to its gradual accession to other ASEAN satellite forums (such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus), India has also contributed to the establishment of parallel cooperation mechanisms with several ASEAN members. This includes the BIMSTEC, launched in 1997, comprising Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, which has brought together India and five ASEAN member countries (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) since 2000.

⁶⁴ Interview with a former Ambassador who served in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi, July 2023.

⁶⁵ “The 24th ASEAN-Japan Summit Meeting”, Japan-ASEAN Relations, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#), October 27, 2021.

⁶⁶ “Australia’s steadfast commitment to ASEAN centrality”, [Media Release](#), Department of Foreign Affairs and Commerce of Australia, September 20, 2021.

⁶⁷ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region, [Department of Defense of the United States](#), June 1, 2019.

practices underpinning the institutional frameworks of this architecture; finally, the model it offers for other sub-regional arrangements.⁶⁸ As a minimum, it functions as a common rhetorical landmark for countries and organizations which use it as part of their Indo-Pacific narratives to reassure the regional community about the legitimacy of their approach to an Indo-Pacific concept that may lack consensus, if perceived as too exclusive by regional actors. The prominence of ASEAN centrality in India's official discourse partly reflects the priority it gives to Southeast Asian partners in its regional foreign policy, in line with the reformulation in 2014 of the *Look East Policy* to *Act East Policy*. However, this comes at a time when strategic communities in Southeast Asia do not appear to prioritize New Delhi as a go-to strategic partner. When asked “[i]f ASEAN were to seek ‘third parties’ to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China rivalry, who is your preferred and trusted strategic partner for ASEAN”, respondents to the ISEAS’ State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report do not make India a first choice, with only 11.3 percent of positive opinions (up from 5.1 percent recorded in 2022), far behind the European Union (42.9 percent in 2023) and Japan (26.6 percent), but before Australia, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Korea.⁶⁹

- **Refraining from antagonizing China.** *“India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members [...] nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country”.*⁷⁰ While the American and Japanese strategies are often identified as bearing anti-Chinese overtones, the inclusivity in Indian discourse is further underscored by the absence of any reference to China as a potential threat in the Shangri-La’s speech, despite ongoing tensions at the border⁷¹ and the increasing presence of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean. Instead, the discourse reflects a decidedly conciliatory posture towards Beijing. For instance, Narendra Modi emphasizes that *“no other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China”* and expresses his conviction that *“Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence”.*⁷²

As the concept of inclusivity is widely regarded as a distinguishing factor in the Indian perspective on the Indo-Pacific, the speech delivered at the Shangri-La Dialogue could therefore be seen as reflecting a *“certain philosophy of the Indo-Pacific in the mind of India”*,⁷³ embodying a *“third approach”*⁷⁴ which followed a gradual maturation process within strategic circles in New Delhi. A second stage in this reflection on India’s Indo-Pacific will aim to trace precisely the origins of the

⁶⁸ Amitav Acharya, “The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?”, [Contemporary Southeast Asia](#), vol. 39, n° 2, August 2017, pp. 273-279.

⁶⁹ *The State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report*, [ASEAN Studies Centre](#), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, February 9, 2023, p. 38.

⁷⁰ “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, [Speeches & Statements](#), Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018.

⁷¹ The years following the speech were, however, marked by skirmishes in May and June 2020 in Ladakh, respectively at Pangong Tso and in the Galwan Valley, or more recently in December 2022 in the Yangtze region near Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh).

⁷² “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Interview with a Junior Officer of the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, August 2023.

⁷⁴ Interview with a retired Senior Officer of the Indian Navy, New Delhi, August 2023.

concept in the Indian context, looking beyond the official narrative, and identify the different actors who contributed to its circulation until its official adoption in 2018.

Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS)

55 rue Raspail 92300 Levallois-Perret

Fondation reconnue d'utilité publique par décret du 26 février 1993

Directeur de la publication : Bruno Racine

ISSN : 2273 - 4644

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