

## Strategic Pivot: Russia's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region

---

Russia has always been an important player in the international politics. Ever since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics broke apart, Russia has been trying to regain its standing in world politics. The end of the Cold War reshaped Russia's global stance and considerably changed its foreign policy. From being a global contender of international power to a middle power trying to find its identity in a newly emerged international order, Russia needs to rethink its strategy on many fronts. One of these fronts is the emerging region of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>[1]</sup> This up-and-coming buzzword has taken the world of international politics by storm. Indo-Pacific has emerged as a region for contention between the world powers. Its growing geopolitical significance can be attributed to its economic and trade significance. With the United States (US) and China already vying for important strategic gains in the region, Russia and its strategy are being assessed from various standpoints, as it aims to challenge these powers in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR).<sup>[2],[3]</sup>

Figure 1: Indo-Pacific Region, Source: forces.net

### Russia's Strategic Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Russia in the 21st Century has been bogged down in various wars, mostly with the previously controlled socialist republics. These wars have affected Russia in a number of ways, with the Russian economy taking a major hit.<sup>[4]</sup> The emergence of IPR as a significant region presented Russia with opportunities to engage economically with Indo-Pacific countries. Russia actively trades with these countries and engages with them through investment and energy cooperation. Russia is acting as an energy supplier in the region and fulfils the energy needs of countries such as India and Vietnam.<sup>[5],[6]</sup> In addition to energy needs, Russia also supplies arms and weapons to these countries, by acting as an alternative to US and China. Arms trade helps Russia generate revenues while strengthening defence ties with the countries involved.<sup>[7]</sup>

In addition to being an active supplier of goods to this region, Russia also acts as a counter-balance to already present regional powers in the IPR. The Southeast Asian nations at times look for alternative partnerships, and Russia presents them with this opportunity to go the other way. This way of challenging the dominance of Western-centric institutions weakens their standing in the international community and divides the power between multiple centres by creating a multipolar world order.

### Arctic Exploration and its Impact

The 21st Century is very often referred to as the age of Arctic exploration.<sup>[8]</sup> Climate change is affecting the world in several ways and has presented Russians with an opportunity to explore the Arctic region. The resources in the Arctic region could be a potential flashpoint for the major powers in the Northern Hemisphere.<sup>[9]</sup> This significantly increases its strategic importance. The melting ice caps could also be game changers in the region, with potential shorter trade routes on the cusp of formation. This development could potentially be game-changing for the Russian economy due to its proximity to the Arctic Region. The Northern Sea Route can act as an alternative to the Suez Canal route, making it easier for the European countries to supply goods to the Indo-Pacific Countries by making it cheaper for them.<sup>[10]</sup> Suez Canal is prone to clashes

between countries in the Gulf region, further complicating the trade routes. The dynamics of the Indo-Pacific could change drastically in case this development becomes a reality, as a shift could be expected to the Arctic region in case this happens.

Figure 2: Northern Sea Route, Source: The Economist

### **Russia's Strategy**

Russia aims to balance the US interests in the region, by providing an alternative to the Western countries. Russia is also fostering closer ties with the Chinese, who already have a significant presence in the IPR. This could substantially affect the strategic goals of the Western world order, as they compete to gain strategic advantages in the region. Russian strategy also involves strengthening bilateral ties with the South and Southeast Asian countries. Russia has leveraged their historical ties with countries like India, Vietnam and Indonesia. Bilateral military exercises are often conducted with countries in the IPR region, offering them an alternative to the Western Bloc.[\[11\]](#)

Russia also aims to engage selectively with the topics in the domain of the Indo-Pacific, by targeting the ones which will prove beneficial for its narratives and interests in the IPR. Russia promotes the idea of a 'Multi-Polar' world order, and the strategy of selective engagement helps in the achievement of the same.

The Russian strategy in the IPR is still under development since it has taken the brunt of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. The balancing act of Moscow needs a lot of work, as its diminishing influence in the IPR could be a sign of its growing insignificance in the world order.

### **Challenges and Hurdles**

Russia is facing a lot of hurdles when it comes to dealing with the challenges related to the IPR. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has impacted its strategy the most. Due to the questionable nature of the reasons given by Moscow for the War, the global standing of Russia has taken quite a serious hit. There's a reluctance in countries worldwide to engage with Russia. This limits Russia's ability to project power in the IPR and press a narrative that would be supportive of its cause. The economic condition of Russia was also affected due to this. Without economic might, it would be tough for a country like Russia to project its regional strategy.[\[12\]](#)

Figure 3: Russian Troops in Ukraine, Source: Business Insider

The Quad alliance also complicates things for Russia. The Quad's main aim is to contain the Chinese aggression in the IPR, but it also works as a counter to Russian interests in the region. Russia has strained its relations with Australia due to the ongoing war, with Australia emerging as a vocal critic of Russia's 'Special Operations' in Ukraine. Russia's long-standing disputes with Japan over the Kuril Islands further complicate the matter, leaving next to no room for diplomacy and talks over the issue. India is also a part of the alliance and has been a longstanding ally of Russia, but the Russian shift towards China due to the war could further push India towards the Western side.[\[13\]](#)

Figure 4: Quad Leadership, Source: PTI

## Conclusion

The future of Russia is very unpredictable right now. Russia is already bogged down in Ukraine and its reserves are dwindling very rapidly. Due to the tumultuous time Russia is going through, it would be tough for the Russian policymakers to focus on the IPR. It can be expected that it is not going to stabilise anytime soon, as the war keeps ongoing, with no major change in the stance of both sides. The Weakened military and economic capabilities of Russia have limited its influence all over the world, and this can be seen in the IPR as well. Although Russia offers an alternative to the currently existing major powers in the IPR, its dwindling resources and weakened global standing could prove to be a major hurdle in the process. Amidst all the things that are happening all over the world, it can be expected that Russia would continue to be a marginal player in the IPR, while dominant powers such as the US and China would continue to exert their influence.

## Endnotes

[1] Udayan Das, “What Is the Indo-Pacific?”, The Diplomat, 13 Jul 2019.

[What Is the Indo-Pacific? – The Diplomat](#)

[2] Bonny Lin, Michael S. Chase, Jonah Blank, Cortez A. Cooper III, Derek Grossman, Scott W. Harold, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Lyle J. Morris, Logan Ma, Paul Orner, et al, “Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific”, RAND, 12 Nov 2020.

[U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific | RAND](#)

[3] Mercy A. Kuo, “Russia’s Asia-Pacific Interests”, The Diplomat, 30 May 2023.

[Russia’s Asia-Pacific Interests – The Diplomat](#)

[4] Robert E. Hamilton, “The Post-Soviet Wars: Part I”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 Dec 2017.

[The Post-Soviet Wars: Part I - Foreign Policy Research Institute \(fpri.org\)](#)

[5] Olesya Astakhova, “Russia's Rosneft signs deal to boost oil supplies to India”, Reuters, 29 Mar 2023.

[Russia's Rosneft signs deal to boost oil supplies to India | Reuters](#)

[6] The Associated Press, “Putin signs numerous deals with Vietnam in a bid to shore up Russia’s ties in Asia”, OPB, 21 Jun 2024. [Putin signs numerous deals with Vietnam in a bid to shore up Russia’s ties in Asia - OPB](#)

[7] Lazaro Gamio and Ana Swanson, “How Russia Pays for War”, The New York Times, 30 Oct 2022.

[Russian Trade Boomed After Invading Ukraine, Providing Ample War Funds - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

[8] Susan Solomon, “To the Ends of the Earth: The Heroic Age of Polar Exploration”, Scientific American, 17 Jan 2013.

[To the Ends of the Earth: The Heroic Age of Polar Exploration | Scientific American](#)

[9] Bradley Intelligence Report, “Melting Arctic to Open Up New Trade Routes and Geopolitical Flashpoints”, Bradley, 15 Aug 2023. [Melting Arctic to Open Up New Trade Routes and Geopolitical Flashpoints | Insights & Events | Bradley](#)

[10] Stavros Karamperidis and Nikolaos Valantasis-Kanellos, “Northern Sea route as an emerging option for global transport networks: a policy perspective”, WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs, 30 May 2022.

[Northern sea route as an emerging option for global transport networks: a policy perspective | WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs \(springer.com\)](#)

[11] Pooja Bhatt, “The Indian Ocean Is Witnessing a Surge in Russian Military Exercises”, 13 Dec 2023.

[The Indian Ocean Is Witnessing a Surge in Russian Military Exercises – The Diplomat](#)

[12] Steve Rosenberg, “Russia's economy is growing, but can it last?”, BBC, 6 Jun 2024.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4nn7pej9jyo>

[13] Sheila Smith, “The Quad Is Getting More Ambitious in the Indo-Pacific”, Council on Foreign Relations, 27 May 2022.

[The Quad Is Getting More Ambitious in the Indo-Pacific | Council on Foreign Relations \(cfr.org\)](#)

**Satyansh Tomar**, currently working in USI Editorial Section, has completed his MA in Diplomacy, Law and Business from OP Jindal University with a specialization in National Security and Defence. He also has a BA in Political Science, Economics and Mass Communications from Bhavan’s Vivekananda College, Secunderabad. He has previously worked at the Centre for Security Studies and Usanas Foundation. He has a keen interest in PSYOP, Subversion and War Studies.

**Article uploaded on 30-07-2024**

**Disclaimer :** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.