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## India's Act East Policy vs. China's Belt and Road Initiative: Contrasting Strategies in the Indo-Pacific

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### Introduction:

As part of a determined attempt to increase Southeast Asia's strategic significance in the nation's foreign policy agenda, India started its Look East policy in the early 1990s. India was working on several fronts with its post-Cold War re-engagement with Southeast Asia, enhancing its long-standing historical, cultural, and ideological ties with the region with increasing economic interdependence, political engagement, and shared security interests. This set the engagement apart from earlier periods of engagement. The Look East strategy was viewed in this light as an adjustment of India's approach to Southeast Asia, which prioritized meaningful interaction over empty declarations of third world solidarity (Bajpae, 2017).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his opening remarks at the 12th India-ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on November 12, 2014, "On the outside, India's Look East Policy has evolved into an Act East Policy. This policy's geographic scope was intended to span from Bangladesh to the United States' west coast. India celebrated 10 years of annual summits and twenty years of its partnership with ASEAN in 2012. The memorial gathering was attended by leaders from each of the ten ASEAN nations (Ganapathi, 2019).

Launched in 2014, India's AEP is a multilateral strategy meant to improve India's ties with ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and the larger Indo-Pacific area. Japan, Australia, and the United States are among the major regional partners with whom the AEP focuses on economic, political, and security cooperation. Additionally, India is investing in critical infrastructure projects like the Chabahar Port in Iran and the Trilateral Highway (India-Myanmar-Thailand), which offer a different trade route that circumvents Pakistan and competes with China's Gwadar Port. In addition, India actively

participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which aims to balance China's growing influence and advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific with the US, Japan, and Australia (Anwar, 2020).

President Xi Jinping introduced the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative in 2013, a massive infrastructure and connectivity initiative aimed at increasing China's geopolitical and economic might in Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and Eurasia. China swiftly altered the project's English name to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Anwar, 2020). President Xi Jinping specifically said that the ancient Silk Road was "full of new vitality with the rapid development of China's relations with Asian and European countries" in a speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University on September 7, 2013 (Tzogopoulos, 2017).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which gives China direct access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar Port, is a crucial part of the BRI in South Asia. By doing this, Beijing is able to avoid the Malacca Strait, which is a crucial link in its energy supply network. But the BRI is more than just an economic endeavour; it has important geopolitical and security ramifications, especially in South Asia, where it directly contradicts India's strategic objectives (Anwar, 2020). In order to escape the so-called middle-income trap, Chinese policymakers are adamant on restructuring the economy. In this situation, which has affected over 90% of middle-income nations since 1960, as low-skilled manufacturing increases, wages rise and living standards improve, but nations find it difficult to transition to producing higher-value goods and services (James McBride, 2023).

Addressing China's widening regional divide as the nation's economy modernizes is one of the main goals of the initiative. Beijing's program to create international infrastructure is expected to expansion in China's rustbelt and impoverished hinterland. The project will mostly focus on domestic issues. Additionally, the Chinese government hopes to alleviate the nation's ongoing excess capacity through BRI. Moving surplus factories is more important than simply dumping extra goods. Beijing wants to utilize BRI to export China's engineering and technology standards, which is one of the initiative's least recognized features. For Chinese policymakers, it is essential to developing the nation's industry (Cai, 2017).

### **Strategic Geopolitical Positioning:**

According to Lee, India's ambitions to become the dominant force in the Indo-Pacific are the driving force behind the AEP. India is becoming more and more regarded as a nation of consequence, able to counterbalance China's regional assertiveness. The US, Japan, Australia, and India make up the QUAD, which serves as a strategic check on China's growing regional sway (Lee, 2015). However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016, while delivering a speech at the World Cultural Festival, outlined India's vision of becoming a global community, rather than just a

dominant force in the Indo-Pacific(Bajpae, 2017).

The AEP aims to establish diplomatic alliances founded on mutual respect and shared values. India has demonstrated this by strengthening its economic and security ties with nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. To promote regional stability, India, for example, has strengthened its defence cooperation with Indonesia and signed an arms deal with Vietnam. This arms deal happened in June 2022 when Mr. Rajnath Singh, India's defense minister, visited Vietnam. The two parties signed a “Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Logistics Support” and came to an agreement on a new “Joint Vision Statement on India-Viet Nam Defense Partnership towards 2030.” (Grossman, 2023).

Conversely, BRI leverages economic investments to foster relationships to expand the use of its currency and create markets for its goods. China puts itself in a position to maintain economic growth and reduce excess industrial capacity by investing in infrastructure(Bush, 2021). China's BRI is a bold plan to change the world economy to its advantage. China uses a state-centric strategy, utilizing economic dependencies to gain strategic benefits, in contrast to India's multilateral approach. Because it traverses through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which India regards as sovereign territory, the CPEC, a flagship BRI project, has heightened tensions between India and China(Anwar, 2020).

Regarding regional influence mechanisms, AEP now includes security and other areas in addition to its primary economic goals. Because of India's expanding capabilities in reaction to China's rise and assertiveness, the AEP now covers areas from Southeast and Northeast Asia to the Indo-Pacific region(Jaishankar, 2019). Beyond economic involvement, India's geopolitical strategy under AEP encompasses defence cooperation, strategic alliances, and marine security. To offset China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, for instance, India has increased defence cooperation with Vietnam and Indonesia(Bajpae, 2017). BRI is an open-ended vision for international infrastructure and industrial development, improved connectivity, and economic integration. However, China's motivations and means for implementation warrant concern, as the BRI may serve as a means to establish an alternative to the existing liberal international order(Lindley, 2022). India uses its ideological, cultural, and historical ties to project soft power to improve ties with Southeast Asian nations and promote respect and goodwill. This strategy supports AEP-related diplomatic initiatives. On the other hand, although primarily economic, BRI also functions to project soft power. China can increase its soft power by investing in infrastructure, which will help create long-term markets for its goods and increase the use of its currency(Bush, 2021).

With an emphasis on regional stability and security, India has strengthened its strategies with ASEAN nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia which is beneficial for its vision of AEP(Horam, 2022). However, BRI has security implications despite its primary economic focus.



Concerns regarding debt-dependency and regional sovereignty would arise if China were to increase its geopolitical influence through investments in key areas.

### **Economic Engagements:**

The AEP and BRI reflect contrasting economic engagement strategies, particularly in infrastructure investments, trade corridor development, economic partnerships, financial incentives, and technology transfer mechanisms. AEP emphasizes sustainable and inclusive development, while BRI showcases aggressive investments to create global economic corridors. AEP's economic involvement places a strong emphasis on partnerships that are transparent, market-driven, and sustainable. India encourages regional economic integration through ASEAN free trade agreements and infrastructural connection projects, in contrast to China's heavily indebted BRI initiatives (Palit, 2016).

India fosters regional infrastructure connectivity, which is evident in projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway linking India, Myanmar, and Thailand. These initiatives are designed to enhance trade, reduce logistical costs, and strengthen economic integration within the Indo-Pacific (Sharma & Basu, 2024). BRI, on the other hand, is fuelled by massive loans, which frequently raise questions about the sustainability of the debt. One of the best examples of China's increasing economic might in South Asia is the 99-year lease of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which was given to China because of financial difficulties. Furthermore, because many recipient nations find it difficult to handle the flood of Chinese investments, China's export of its industrial excess capacity under BRI projects has raised questions about the sustainability of the economy (Cai, 2017).

BRI involves large-scale infrastructure investments, such as the CPEC, and the development of ports like Gwadar in Pakistan. These projects aim to boost trade and integrate markets but have raised concerns about debt sustainability in host nations (Busbarat, 2023). BRI focuses on international trade routes including the Maritime Silk Road, which connects China with Africa, Europe, and South America, whilst India fosters regional commerce under ASEAN frameworks. China's economic domination and India's multilateralism contrast in economic models characterize their opposing approaches in the Indo-Pacific. India promotes regional trade within the ASEAN framework by reducing trade barriers and encouraging cross-border commerce. But the goal of BRI, which includes initiatives like the Maritime Silk Road, is to create vast trade routes that link Asia, Africa, and Europe. Even though trade volumes have increased dramatically as a result of these channels, worries about China's impact on regional sovereignty remain (Ganapathi, 2019).

AEP's economic partnerships prioritize bilateral and multilateral interactions based on respect for one another and reciprocal advantages. India's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, notwithstanding its eventual withdrawal, demonstrated its

intention to promote economic cooperation. Strategic geopolitical goals are frequently in line with China's relationships, which are made possible by the BRI. For instance, the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, leased to China for 99 years due to debt repayment challenges, exemplifies the geopolitical leverage gained through such partnerships. A distinct strategy is used by China's Belt and Road Initiative, which consists of massive infrastructure projects and state-backed financing. But the accusation of debttrap diplomacy still exists, as demonstrated by Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which was leased to China for 99 years because of financial difficulties (Mobley, 2019).

India's financial incentive programs steer clear of debt reliance in partner nations by emphasizing grants and development assistance. For instance, without sacrificing financial sovereignty, India's Line of Credit to countries like Bangladesh and Nepal has financed several infrastructure projects (Sharma & Basu, 2024). On the other hand, China's strategy entails providing loans for infrastructure projects, frequently referred to as debttrap diplomacy. One well-known project that experienced financial issues due to unsustainable loan terms is Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (Flanagan, 2024).

### **Connectivity Frameworks and Upcoming Projects:**

The AEP and BRI represent two divergent approaches to developing connectivity frameworks, encompassing maritime, land-based, digital, transportation, and energy infrastructure projects. These programs reflect the larger geopolitical goals of both nations and are essential in determining the economic development and integration of the Indo-Pacific. AEP prioritizes land, maritime, and digital connectivity, such as the Trilateral Highway between Thailand, Myanmar, and India (improving ASEAN connectivity), the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project aims to improve trade with Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) (encouraging economic growth and marine security) (Chatterjee, 2014).

AEP's maritime connectivity efforts place a strong emphasis on regional cooperation through programs like the IPOI and the Sagarmala Project. The IPOI, launched in 2019, focuses on fostering maritime security, sustainable fisheries, and disaster risk management in partnership with nations such as Japan and Australia (Sharma & Basu, 2024).

In contrast, China's BRI focuses mostly on infrastructure, with initiatives including China's economic corridor into ASEAN via the China-Laos Railway, Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link, which supports China's regional connectivity plan, and the ports of Gwadar and Hambantota (both have military and commercial purposes) (Mobley, 2019).

China's Maritime Silk Road, a key component of the BRI, emphasizes building port infrastructure, such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. While these projects enhance trade routes, they have raised concerns over debt dependency and China's increasing geopolitical clout in these regions.

The AEP is closely connected with its long-term vision of developing its North eastern region which is considered as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Modi has shown a strong commitment to developing the infrastructure of the region in transport, highways, communication, power and waterways. Since Japan's interests in the North eastern region are deeply rooted in history, there is a broad bilateral consensus to cooperate for the development of the region. Several recent developments in India-Japan relations have underscored the increasing convergence of interests between the two, who will both stand to benefit by collaborating in the region.(Kesavan, 2020).

Regarding land-based infrastructure, India invests in projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to boost connectivity with Southeast Asia. These projects prioritize inclusivity and address local developmental needs. BRI land corridors, such as the CPEC, have faced criticism for prioritizing Chinese strategic interests, which have limited benefits for host nations(Busbarat, 2023).

Through programs like the India-ASEAN Digital Connectivity partnership, India strongly emphasizes cooperation and capacity building in technology transfer. This meets local requirements while promoting technological innovation. In the meantime, China's Digital Silk Road which includes investments in 5G infrastructure and digital connection projects promotes Chinese technology standards worldwide. However, concerns about cyber security and strategic dependence persist. BRI driven trade expansion is continuing at an unprecedented scale, establishing Beijing as the dominant economic force in multiple Indo-Pacific economies, while India's trade growth with ASEAN stays steady(Gong, 2020).

India's transportation network development is underscored by cross-border railway projects and improved regional air connectivity. For instance, the Agartala-Akhaura rail link between India and Bangladesh aims to facilitate trade and cultural exchanges (Sharma & Basu, 2024). Meanwhile, China focuses on large-scale, high-speed railway networks, such as the Laos-China Railway, which enhances trade routes between China and Southeast Asia. Critics argue that these projects often neglect environmental concerns and burden host nations with unsustainable debt(Busbarat, 2023).

India places a high priority on regional partnerships in energy infrastructure to promote the use of renewable energy. India's emphasis on sustainable energy solutions is demonstrated by initiatives like the South Asia Regional Energy Partnership and the International Solar Alliance (ISA). On the other hand, China makes significant investments in coal and hydropower projects under the BRI, which raises concerns about environmental sustainability even while they increase access to energy. BRI is China's means of enhancing its strategic influence, whereas AEP concentrates on inclusive regional growth (Willem Oosterveld, 2018). China's BRI places a strong emphasis on massive investments with important strategic and geopolitical ramifications, whereas



India's AEP aims to promote inclusive and sustainable connectivity. The contrasting approaches reflect their broader visions for shaping the Indo-Pacific's connectivity landscape.

### **Multilateral Dynamics:**

BRI and AEP approach international participation in the Indo-Pacific in different ways. Although their underlying ideologies and effects are very different, both strategies use economic integration, security cooperation, and regional forums to increase their influence. The AEP, which prioritizes inclusive regional ties, is in line with multilateralism pioneered by ASEAN. India's strategic engagement has been welcomed by ASEAN, which acknowledges its contribution to regional stability (Palit, 2016).

An analysis of India's ties with South Korea, Japan, ASEAN, and now Australia would demonstrate how a wide range of institutional frameworks have supported growing bilateral interactions. It currently participates actively in the East Asian Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In addition to yearly summit-level meetings, there are currently seven ministerial-level exchanges and thirty sectoral discussion platforms. India develops stronger ties with ASEAN nations through initiatives like the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership and the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA). These initiatives demonstrate India's commitment to regional sovereignty, inclusion, and multilateralism. Furthermore, India's focus on capacity building, skill development, and cultural exchanges improves its standing in Southeast Asia and advances ASEAN's objective of balanced and long-term regional prosperity (Kesavan, 2020).

Despite its considerable engagement with ASEAN nations, the BRI frequently relies on bilateral agreements. China can quickly achieve trade agreements and infrastructure thanks to this strategy, but there are worries that it may weaken ASEAN's collective bargaining position. Prominent examples of China's influence include the China-Laos Railway and the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia, which are occasionally criticized for putting China's strategic interests ahead of regional cooperation (Horam, 2022).

Maritime security cooperation is another key area of divergence. India collaborates with ASEAN and QUAD partners on initiatives like the IPOI, which focuses on maritime domain awareness, counter-piracy operations, and sustainable fisheries management. India's dedication to an open and free Indo-Pacific is demonstrated by the IPOI. On the other hand, ASEAN members and outside parties have criticized China's actions in the South China Sea, such as the construction of artificial islands and militarization, because they jeopardize maritime norms and regional stability. India actively participates in regional economic integration through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and EAS. But because of worries about how it would affect home industries, it pulled out of the latter. India's trade and investment partnerships with ASEAN countries

demonstrate the country's emphasis on equitable growth and reciprocal advantages. BRI, on the other hand, places a higher priority on significant infrastructure investments to improve regional economic connectivity. These initiatives increase trade and development, but they frequently raise questions about the sustainability of the debt and political reliance on China.

Multilateral diplomatic platforms serve as critical arenas for both nations to project influence. India leverages platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to promote its vision of a rules-based regional order. China frequently asserts its dominance on these platforms by using its economic clout, which leads to a dichotomy in the two countries' perceptions in multilateral settings.

### **Strategic Implications:**

The geopolitical rivalry between the BRI and the AEP dramatically influences the Indo-Pacific power dynamics. Both countries use distinct tactics to establish their dominance in the region, which has significant ramifications for alliance building, economic competition, and security architecture. Regional defence alliances and marine security are closely linked to India's security strategy under AEP. India's participation in the Malabar naval drills with the QUAD demonstrates its dedication to an open and free Indo-Pacific (Lee, 2015).

The AEP, which aims to offset China's expanding influence, is closely linked to its vision of a multipolar world and a rules-based regional order. India hopes to establish a coalition of democracies dedicated to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific through programs like the Quad, which consists of the US, Japan, Australia, and India. This aligns with India's long-standing interest in countering China's assertiveness in the region, particularly in the South China Sea and other maritime territories. India's multilateralism-driven approach contrasts with China's more unilateral and strategic investments under the BRI, including military and infrastructure projects, enabling China to exert more significant influence over regional security dynamics.

The security architecture of the Indo-Pacific is evolving in response to these contrasting strategies. Through alliances like its membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and bilateral defence pacts with nations like Vietnam and Indonesia, India strongly emphasizes regional stability and security. India's defence strategy is centered on preserving regional power balance, mainly through maritime security programs and naval cooperation. On the other hand, significant changes in regional security dynamics have resulted from China's enlargement of its military presence in the South China Sea and its construction of port infrastructure in nations like Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Due to these actions, western powers and ASEAN countries are now concerned about China's expanding military presence in the Indo-Pacific. Concerns over dual-use infrastructure are raised by China's military involvement under the BRI. Commercial and military purposes could be served by ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, supporting the String of Pearls theory –



China's strategic encirclement of India(Mobley, 2019).

The emergence of counterstrategies and diplomatic tensions has been a defining feature of India's and China's engagements in the region. For India, the response to China's growing influence has involved strengthening its strategic partnerships with countries like Japan, Australia, and the United States through the Quad and strengthening its ties with ASEAN members through trade and security dialogues. On the other hand, China's diplomatic approach has centered on utilizing its BRI investments to gain political and economic clout in order to increase its economic presence in Southeast Asia and beyond. However, diplomatic tensions with nations like the Philippines and Vietnam have resulted from China's oppressive tactics, especially the South China Sea disputes. Concerns over regional security have increased as a result of China's militarization of the South China Sea and the construction of dual-use ports under the BRI. There are concerns about a growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean because Beijing may use the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka as strategic assets(Anwar, 2020).

One important aspect of this geopolitical competition is the emergence of alliances. Under the "Japan-India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" framework, India has partnered with Japan and engaged with Australia, demonstrating a shared commitment to regional security, economic development, and advancing democratic values. These alliances counterbalance China's influence in the region. On the other hand, China is using the BRI as a means of extending its influence while fortifying its ties with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia. Thanks to these partnerships, China can assert a more dominant role in the region, but neighboring countries are worried about strategic sovereignty and debt dependency. In a similar vein, South Korea and India have established a number of bilateral structures to improve their cooperation. Since 1996, there have been regular meetings of a Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue at the secretary level and a joint commission for bilateral cooperation at the level of foreign ministers. Additionally, to advance their strategic collaboration, the national security advisers and defence ministers of both nations have been meeting on a regular basis. Rajnath Singh, India's defence minister, travelled to Seoul in early September 2019 to take part in the bilateral defence discussion(Kesavan, 2020).

China-India economic cooperation and competition also significantly impact the Indo-Pacific region's future. While India prioritizes a balanced, sustainable approach to regional economic integration, the BRI is focused on massive infrastructure projects and trade corridors that solidify China's economic dominance. Due to their divergent economic approaches, both nations are fighting for trade agreements, investments, and alliances in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. Notwithstanding these distinctions, there are also areas of collaboration, such as trade in industries like technology and energy between China and India, which support the region's economic expansion.

## Technology and Innovations:

Both the BRI and the AEP acknowledge the vital role that technological advancements play as a strategic tool for extending influence and promoting economic growth in the quickly changing Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape. Despite having different frameworks and goals, both nations have made technology transfer policies, investments in digital infrastructure, R&D partnerships, and the growth of innovation ecosystems a priority. These tactics have an impact on international technological norms and practices in addition to determining the Indo-Pacific region's future.

India's dedication to developing an inclusive, sustainable development model forms the basis of its technology transfer strategy. The nation has concentrated on promoting innovation through partnerships with the US, Japan, and other ASEAN countries. This cooperation is demonstrated by programs such as the 2019 launch of the India-Japan Digital Partnership. Japan shares its expertise in digital technologies with India, particularly in 5G, AI, and big data. India also actively participates in the Digital Silk Road under China's BRI, which includes technology transfer agreements and infrastructure investments in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. These collaborations advance technology and digital literacy, which benefits all stakeholders. However, as it tries to strike a balance between concerns about data sovereignty and cyber security and economic growth, India's approach to technology transfer is still more cautious than China's. Under AEP, India's tech diplomacy fosters cyber security collaboration, digital connection, and sustainable innovation. While preserving digital sovereignty, initiatives like the India-ASEAN Digital Partnership aim to strengthen regional technical cooperation (Studies, 2020).

Regarding technology transfer, especially in the digital realm, the BRI has adopted a more assertive posture. Through the construction of high-tech infrastructure, such as fiber-optic networks and digital trade hubs, China has established itself as a major supplier of digital technology throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Digital Silk Road is a crucial part of this strategy, which aims to create a global digital infrastructure that meets China's technological standards. Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE are at the forefront of initiatives like the CPEC, which has increased China's influence in artificial intelligence and telecommunications. Although these programs promote digital innovation and technology transfer, Western countries are concerned about the possibility of heightened monitoring and control over digital infrastructure. As part of the BRI, China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) involves 5G growth through Huawei, which raises cyber security concerns and smart city initiatives powered by AI and growing reliance on China for digital infrastructure (Gong, 2020).

Digital infrastructure investments are another cornerstone of India's and China's strategies. While focused on building robust digital infrastructure domestically, India has also contributed to regional connectivity through initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which

emphasizes digital connectivity and physical infrastructure. Through developing e-commerce partnerships and improving broadband access, this initiative aims to close the digital divide between Southeast Asia and Africa. However, China has significantly invested in building digital infrastructure throughout the Indo-Pacific through the BRI. China's efforts to establish technological dominance are exemplified by establishing smart cities and constructing 5G networks in nations such as Malaysia and Thailand. However, these investments have generated discussion about the long-term political and economic ramifications for recipient nations, especially national security and debt sustainability.

Regarding research and development (R&D) partnerships, India has worked to deepen its connections with international innovation centers, primarily through cooperative R&D projects with the US, Japan, and the EU. Another illustration of promoting innovation through cross-border partnerships is India's involvement with ASEAN nations in biotechnology and green energy. Significant R&D partnerships are also made possible by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially with nations in Central Asia and Africa, where it has invested in tech parks and innovation hubs to support tech startups. These programs align with China's ambition to lead the world in high-tech sectors, such as 5G and artificial intelligence.

Lastly, China and India have made creating innovation ecosystems a priority. Through programs like Startup India, which offers funding and incubation to tech-driven businesses, India has attempted to create a favorable atmosphere for startups and innovation. Furthermore, advancing its technology sector depends on India's role in creating a digital economy through programs like Made in India and Digital India. China's innovation ecosystem, on the other hand, is distinguished by its state-driven methodology, which strongly emphasizes robotics, AI, and manufacturing. The Chinese government plays a crucial role in promoting innovation through a vast network of research institutions, public-private partnerships, and policy support.

### **Environmental and Sustainable Development Considerations:**

Environmental and sustainable development considerations in the Indo-Pacific region are pivotal in shaping AEP and BRI. As India and China advance their regional strategies, they emphasize green infrastructure, climate change adaptation, sustainable development cooperation, environmental impact assessments, and ecological connectivity projects to address the environmental challenges accompanying rapid development and urbanization. Although both nations acknowledge the significance of environmental sustainability, their strategies diverge, reflecting their distinct geopolitical goals and economic priorities.

Green infrastructure is a top priority for AEP since it is essential to its development plan. This entails supporting sustainable transport networks, smart cities, and renewable energy initiatives. India has pledged to meet aggressive renewable energy targets as part of its Nationally Determined



Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement. The country aims to achieve 500 GW of non-fossil fuel energy capacity by 2030, which aligns with the broader goals of a green and sustainable future. One notable initiative is the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which India launched to promote solar energy development across member countries in the Indo-Pacific region. India aims to enhance environmental sustainability through such initiatives while fostering regional cooperation in renewable energy production (Ganapathi, 2019).

On the other hand, green infrastructure is a crucial part of China's BRI. The nation has strongly emphasized constructing sustainable energy projects, especially in developing nations in Asia and Africa, such as wind farms, solar energy farms, and hydropower plants. However, China's strategy has sparked worries about how big infrastructure projects may affect the environment. For example, despite China's substantial investments in green energy, the BRI's projects have drawn criticism for their detrimental effects on biodiversity, deforestation, and community displacement. Nevertheless, China has increasingly incorporated green standards into its BRI framework, with the Chinese government pledging to focus more on ecological sustainability and climate-resilient infrastructure (Anwar, 2020).

Climate change adaptation strategies are central to India's and China's regional policies. With the help of its National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), which lists eight national missions to address the effects of climate change, India has taken a comprehensive approach to climate resilience. Urban planning, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and energy efficiency are the main topics of these missions. Through its partnerships under the AEP, including with Southeast Asian nations to address climate-related issues like flooding, droughts, and sea level rise, India has also participated in efforts to adapt to climate change.

China's approach to climate change adaptation within the BRI framework has been similarly expansive. The country has implemented large-scale adaptation strategies, particularly in vulnerable regions along the BRI corridors. For example, In Central and Southeast Asia, China has invested in climate-resilient infrastructure such as flood control systems, drought-resistant agriculture, and coastal protection measures. While these initiatives contribute to climate resilience, concerns remain over some BRI projects' long-term environmental sustainability, particularly in their alignment with global climate goals.

China and India have also made regional engagement a priority in sustainable development cooperation. With a focus on sustainable development in clean energy, agriculture, and disaster relief, India has worked to promote cooperative agreements with ASEAN nations. India's approach to sustainable development cooperation, which aims to build infrastructure while considering environmental and social impacts, is best demonstrated by its involvement in projects like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). To guarantee that regional initiatives align with the more general

sustainable development objectives, India also promotes an inclusive growth model that combines economic development and environmental preservation.

Although it frequently prioritizes infrastructure development to achieve growth, BRI also encourages cooperation in sustainable development. Calls for stricter environmental regulations have been sparked by the environmental effects of China's infrastructure-driven strategy. However, China has improved the environmental sustainability of its projects by implementing sustainable practices in infrastructure construction and incorporating green financing mechanisms.

BRI and AEP acknowledge the significance of environmental sustainability in their regional engagement plans. BRI aims to incorporate environmental concerns into its infrastructure-driven approach, whereas India prioritizes green infrastructure, climate resilience, and sustainable development through multilateral cooperation. Although both nations' strategies are becoming more in line with international environmental standards, there are still issues striking a balance between environmental protection and development. How well China and India can handle the sustainability and environmental issues raised by their respective regional strategies will determine the future of these projects.

### **Conclusion:**

China's BRI and India's AEP represent two radically divergent strategies for regional involvement in the Indo-Pacific. China expands its regional influence through significant infrastructure investments and bilateral economic ties, whereas India places a higher priority on multilateralism, strategic partnerships, and inclusive economic growth. These divergent approaches have influenced regional stability, diplomatic alliances, and economic interdependencies, so moulding the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical, economic, and security environment.

AEP and BRI in the Indo-Pacific region display distinct diplomatic ideologies, regional influence mechanisms, soft power tactics, and security alliances. China's infrastructure-driven approach to growing its economic and strategic influence contrasts with India's focus on inclusive partnerships and cultural ties.

By promoting collaboration with ASEAN, the Quad partners, and other like-minded countries, the AEP aims to offset China's economic and strategic aggression. Its focus on sustainable development, democratic ideals, and technical cooperation is consistent with its overarching goal of a free, open, and rule-based regional order. BRI is still redefining regional trade and connectivity, but several nations have reevaluated their involvement due to worries about the sustainability of the debt, economic pressure, and security consequences.

BRI frequently uses bilateralism within a multilateral framework to further its strategic interests, whereas India's AEP places an emphasis on inclusive multilateralism and regional partnership. These contrasting approaches underscore the competing visions of India and China for

the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical and economic landscape.

BRI and AEP have wide-ranging and complex strategic ramifications. BRI aims to increase its geopolitical influence through strategic investments and bilateral alliances. At the same time, India advocates for a multipolar, inclusive vision of regional security and economic development. These dynamics are reshaping the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, with significant implications for regional security, economic cooperation, and global alliances.

The technological advancements driven by the AEP and BRI are reshaping the technological landscape of the Indo-Pacific. While India focuses on collaborative, inclusive growth, mainly through strategic partnerships and technology transfer, BRI emphasizes the construction of digital infrastructure and R&D collaborations to establish technological dominance. Both strategies will likely have lasting effects on regional innovation ecosystems and the global technological order.

Both endeavours will be vital in determining the Indo-Pacific's destiny as geopolitical competition heats up. The long-term viability of China's and India's separate agendas will depend on how well they can handle economic vulnerabilities, negotiate diplomatic obstacles, and foster trust among regional allies. The strategic rivalry between China and India as well as how regional parties react to the opportunities and difficulties presented by these two ambitious frameworks will have an impact on the changing power balances in the Indo-Pacific going forward.

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