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India's Network-Building Strategy and the Constrainment of China: A Re-examination of the Accommodation Thesis

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Abstract

This article examines how India has constructed a foreign-policy network across Asia to constrain the rise of China while preserving substantial autonomy from the United States. Drawing on documentary analysis of Indian official sources, multilateral agreements, and secondary literature on India's grand strategy from 2014 to 2024, the article advances three claims. First, India's strategy is best characterised not as containment but as 'constrainment': raising the costs and complicating the trajectory of Chinese regional power without seeking to roll it back. Second, the network approach explains how India operationalises this strategy through bilateral partnerships, minilateral arrangements (QUAD, I2U2, IPEF), and connectivity projects (Diamond Necklace, INSTC, Act East), without formal alliance. Third, the strategy is comprehensive accommodation rather than bandwagoning, hard balancing, or strategic autonomy. The 2020 Galwan clash is the inflection point consolidating this strategy, and the article shows why accommodation better explains the record than rival accounts.

1. Introduction

India's rise as a great power in the twenty-first century has been accompanied by a sustained effort to construct a network of partnerships, minilateral arrangements, and connectivity projects across Asia. Since 2014, and with particular intensity following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash with China, New Delhi has accelerated bilateral defence and economic agreements with Japan, Vietnam, Australia, the United States, France, and Iran; deepened its engagement in the QUAD, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and the I2U2 grouping; and operationalised long-running connectivity strategies including the Diamond Necklace, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Act East policy. The pattern is consistent enough to constitute a strategy. The question is how that strategy is best characterised.

The dominant accounts diverge. One body of literature reads India's recent moves as the operationalisation of strategic autonomy or multi-alignment — the maintenance of relations with multiple powers without binding alliances, in pursuit of independent national interest (Mohan 2006; Hall 2016). A second reads the same record as hedging — a calculated insurance strategy in which India simultaneously engages and constrains China to manage uncertainty (Pardesi 2021; Wilkins and Kim 2022). A third reads it as accommodation — alignment with the existing order (and with US-led arrangements) in exchange for recognised great-power status (Chandra 2018; Ollapally 2018). The container term 'containment of China', used in earlier scholarship and in the original abstract of this study, is rejected here as both analytically imprecise and historically loaded; the term 'constrainment' is preferred.

This article advances the accommodation thesis but in a more demanding form than has previously been articulated. Drawing on the network approach to foreign-policy analysis (Maoz et al. 2003; Slaughter 2004; Kacziba 2021), it argues that India's strategy is best characterised as comprehensive accommodation operationalised through network-building. 'Comprehensive' captures the breadth of the

strategy across political, economic, defence, and connectivity domains. ‘Network-building’ captures the institutional form of the strategy: a deliberate weaving of bilateral, minilateral, and connectivity arrangements that delivers the strategic effects of alignment without the formal obligations of alliance.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 sets out the methodology. Section 4 maps the characteristics of India’s accommodation strategy across its principal domains. Section 5 examines India’s network-building empirically. Section 6 engages the rival explanations of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and hedging. Section 7 examines Chinese agency and the Galwan inflection. Section 8 concludes by articulating contributions, limitations, and lines for future research.

India’s post-independence foreign policy was built around the doctrine of non-alignment, formulated by Jawaharlal Nehru as a principled refusal to join either Cold War bloc while retaining the right to judge each international question on its merits (Bandyopadhyaya 2003). That legacy still shapes the vocabulary in which Indian policymakers describe their choices, and it explains why ‘alliance’ and ‘containment’ remain politically unusable terms in New Delhi even as India’s practical alignment with the United States has deepened. Understanding contemporary Indian strategy therefore requires attention to both the historical inheritance of non-alignment and the structural transformation of India’s international position since 1991. The article treats this inheritance not as a constraint that prevents accommodation but as a rhetorical resource that makes comprehensive accommodation politically sustainable at home.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Network Approach to Foreign Policy

Network theory has become a substantial subfield within International Relations over the past two decades (Maoz et al. 2003; Slaughter 2004; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009; Kacziba 2021; Kim 2020). Its core analytical claim is that the structure of international politics cannot be reduced to dyadic state interactions; it must be understood as the configuration of nodes (states, organisations, regimes), hubs (high-centrality actors), and linkages (relationships of varying density and direction) that together produce systemic effects (Ghasemi 2009). For foreign-policy analysis, the network approach offers three analytical purchase points. First, it allows the identification of structural positions — brokerage, centrality, structural holes — that yield strategic advantages independent of material capabilities (Granovetter 1985; Maoz et al. 2003). Second, it captures how multiple partial alignments can substitute for full alliance commitments, allowing states to obtain strategic effects without exclusive bindings. Third, it makes legible the way connectivity projects (transport corridors, digital infrastructure, supply chains) function as foreign-policy instruments alongside traditional diplomatic and military tools.

This article applies the network approach in its analytical sense, not merely as a metaphor. India’s foreign-policy network is examined in terms of (a) the identity of major nodes and their relative centrality; (b) the density and direction of linkages, particularly in defence and connectivity domains; (c) the

brokerage positions India occupies between the United States and other regional powers, including Iran and Russia; and (d) the structural effects produced by overlapping minilateral and bilateral arrangements. The framework yields hypotheses that can be tested against the empirical record: if India is pursuing accommodation through network-building, we should observe the proliferation of partial, overlapping arrangements rather than commitment to a single binding structure; the cultivation of brokerage positions between rivalrous powers; and the deployment of connectivity projects as instruments of strategic positioning.

2.2 The Concept of Accommodation

The accommodation literature in IR distinguishes accommodation from balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and strategic autonomy (Paul 2016; He 2012; Kovac 2017; Wilkins and Kim 2022). Accommodation is the strategy by which an established power adjusts to the rise of an emerging power — or, conversely, the strategy by which an emerging power obtains a recognised role within an existing order. Paul's influential formulation distinguishes symbolic accommodation (formal recognition of rising status), region-specific accommodation (delineated spheres of influence), and comprehensive accommodation (broad-spectrum alignment across multiple domains).

Comprehensive accommodation differs from bandwagoning in that the accommodating state retains agency and substantial autonomy; it differs from hard balancing in that it does not seek to roll back or defeat the rising power; and it differs from hedging in that the strategic direction is settled rather than provisional. The empirical signature of comprehensive accommodation is sustained, multi-domain alignment with a particular partner (or set of partners) accompanied by the deliberate construction of institutional architecture that locks in the accommodation without the formal constraints of alliance.

This article argues that India's post-2014 strategy is best characterised as comprehensive accommodation with the United States and US-aligned partners, operationalised through network-building, with the strategic purpose of constraining China. Each element of this characterisation — comprehensive (not partial), accommodation (not balancing or hedging), with the US (not strategic autonomy), through network-building (not alliance), to constrain (not contain) China — is doing analytical work.

2.3 Why 'Constrainment', Not 'Containment'

This article deliberately replaces the term 'containment', used in earlier scholarship and in the original framing of this study, with 'constrainment'. The change is more than terminological. Containment is a Cold War concept with a specific historical lineage (Kennan 1947) and a specific operational meaning: the systematic, geographically extensive effort to prevent the expansion of a hostile power through alliance encirclement, economic isolation, and credible threats of military response. India has explicitly and repeatedly rejected the language of containment in describing its China policy; Indian official discourse, including statements by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, rejects framings that would commit India to a US-led containment architecture. Analytically, containment also overstates what India is actually doing: India has not sought to roll back Chinese influence in Pakistan, in Central Asia, in Africa,

or in the Belt and Road generally. What India has done is raise the costs and complicate the trajectory of Chinese regional power in specific theatres — the Indo-Pacific maritime domain, ASEAN, the Indian Ocean littoral, and the technology and supply-chain space — while preserving relationships (with Russia, with Iran) that would be incompatible with formal containment.

'Constrainment' captures this more limited objective: the deliberate raising of costs and the complication of trajectory, rather than the prevention of expansion. The term is preferred here both for its analytical precision and its fidelity to Indian self-description.

2.4 Scope Conditions

The framework developed here has defined scope conditions. Comprehensive accommodation through network-building is most likely to emerge where three conditions jointly obtain: a rising or assertive regional power that the accommodating state cannot plausibly balance alone; the availability of a great power willing to underwrite partial, non-exclusive arrangements rather than demand formal alliance; and a domestic political environment able to sustain sustained alignment without triggering the legitimacy costs that come from abandoning a state's declared foreign-policy identity. Where any of these conditions is absent, the theory predicts a different outcome. Gaddis's (2005) account of Cold War containment illustrates the contrast: containment presupposed a bipolar structure in which the underwriting power (the United States) sought formal, exclusive commitments precisely because the accommodated states had no credible alternative alignment. India's position differs on all three counts, which is a further reason the containment vocabulary misdescribes the Indian case. The scope conditions also generate a testable comparative prediction, developed further in Section 8, that other middle and rising powers facing an assertive regional rival without a credible alliance option — Vietnam, or the states of Southeast Asia more broadly — should exhibit the same network-building signature (He and Li 2020).

The scope-conditions argument also clarifies why network-building, rather than alliance, is the predicted institutional form under these conditions. Formal alliance requires the underwriting power to extend a costly and often domestically contested security guarantee, and requires the accommodating state to accept constraints on its own freedom of action that a state with a strong non-alignment tradition is unlikely to accept even when its underlying strategic interests have shifted. Network-building solves this joint commitment problem: it allows the underwriting power to extend selective, issue-specific support (defence-technology transfer, intelligence-sharing arrangements, market access) without a blanket guarantee, and allows the accommodating state to accept deepening structural alignment without abandoning the sovereigntist language that domestic audiences expect. The theoretical payoff of the network approach, in other words, is that it identifies an institutional equilibrium — dense, overlapping, partial linkage rather than sparse, exclusive, formal alliance — that neither the balance-of-power tradition nor the alliance literature is well equipped to explain, because both traditions treat formal alliance as the primary unit of analysis rather than as one point on a continuum of institutional density.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a single-case qualitative research design, examining Indian foreign-policy strategy from 2014 to 2024. The case-study format is appropriate because the research question is interpretive: it asks how India's strategy is best characterised, given a complex and contested empirical record. The 2014–2024 window captures the post-2014 acceleration of India's strategic engagement under the Modi government, the 2020 Galwan inflection, and the post-pandemic consolidation of minilateral architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it derives observable implications from each of four candidate strategic frameworks — comprehensive accommodation, strategic autonomy/multi-alignment, hedging, and balancing. Second, it maps India's major foreign-policy moves across the period against these implications. Third, it examines whether the comprehensive-accommodation framework, operationalised through network-building, accounts for the record better than the alternatives. Fourth, it examines a particular inflection point — the Galwan clash of June 2020 — to test whether the framework correctly predicts subsequent shifts.

3.2 Sources and Operationalisation

The article draws on three categories of source material. First, official Indian government sources: Ministry of External Affairs statements and press releases, official joint statements with bilateral partners, parliamentary speeches by the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and key strategic-doctrine publications including Jaishankar (2020), The India Way. Second, US, Japanese, and Australian official sources documenting the institutionalisation of minilateral arrangements (QUAD joint statements, IPEF framework documents, AUKUS announcements, US Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022). Third, the secondary scholarly literature on Indian grand strategy, Indo-Pacific security architecture, and the network approach in IR.

The article also draws, in a supporting role, on think-tank and policy-research publications that synthesise official material and elite opinion, including RAND Corporation assessments of India's Southeast Asian engagement (Blank et al. 2015) and Carnegie Endowment analysis of India's great-power trajectory (Tellis 2022). These sources are not treated as primary evidence of government intent but are used to triangulate the interpretation of official statements against informed external readings, reducing the risk that the analysis over-relies on the self-presentation of Indian official discourse.

The four candidate frameworks are operationalised as follows. Comprehensive accommodation predicts sustained, multi-domain alignment with the US and US-aligned partners; the construction of overlapping institutional arrangements; and the cultivation of network position rather than alliance commitment. Strategic autonomy/multi-alignment predicts roughly symmetric engagement with major powers including China and Russia, resistance to lock-in with any single partner, and an explicit rejection of strategic alignment language. Hedging predicts simultaneous engagement and constraint of China, with

provisional rather than settled strategic direction. Balancing predicts targeted military and alliance moves explicitly directed at countering Chinese power.

3.3 Limitations

Three limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the time window (2014–2024) excludes earlier formative periods of Indian foreign policy. Second, the analysis relies on publicly available documentary sources and the published scholarly literature; it does not draw on classified diplomatic records or elite interviews, which would be required to assess the internal deliberative dynamics behind specific decisions. Third, the rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific environment means that several developments — most notably the trajectory of India–China bilateral talks in 2023–2024 — may shift the picture in ways the analysis cannot yet fully incorporate.

4. Characteristics of India's Accommodation Strategy

4.1 The Post-Cold War Reorientation

The collapse of the bipolar world order and the contradictory pressures of economic globalisation, regionalism, and the move toward a multipolar world produced fundamental transformations in Indian foreign policy from the early 1990s onwards. India identified China as its principal strategic competitor and the primary obstacle to its foreign-policy ambitions. To address this competitor, India adopted a composite strategy encompassing multilateral engagement (within ASEAN and other regional bodies); the institutionalisation of bilateral partnerships with Japan, the United States, and other Indo-Pacific actors; the cultivation of regional connectivity projects (BBIN, the Mekong–India Economic Corridor); and the gradual operationalisation of the Diamond Necklace and Indo-Pacific frameworks. This composite was loosely described as 'containment' in earlier literature; this article reframes it as constrainment through network-building.

In pursuing this accommodation strategy, New Delhi has drawn closer to the United States to realise its aspirations for great-power status — in part through external balancing against China. This orientation has been contested by analysts who argue that India is pursuing strategic autonomy or multi-alignment rather than accommodation (Section 6). The argument here is that the post-2014 record, and particularly the post-2020 record, is more consistent with comprehensive accommodation than with the alternatives.

4.2 Diplomatic Principles

Within this strategic framework, India has consistently adhered to the principles of national sovereignty, state equality, territorial integrity, non-use of force, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Murthy 2010). This is a longstanding feature of Indian foreign-policy rhetoric and is sometimes cited as evidence that India retains a Nehruvian non-aligned orientation. The article reads it differently: adherence to these principles is consistent with comprehensive accommodation precisely because accommodation, unlike alliance, does not require the surrender of doctrinal autonomy. India can hold sovereigntist positions while still aligning structurally with the United States.

4.3 Economic Liberalisation and Connectivity

From an economic standpoint, India has followed a path of liberalisation grounded in neoliberal institutionalism since the early 1990s — reducing tariffs, facilitating inward investment, and opening sectors to global supply chains. This has aligned India structurally with the US-led economic order while preserving the space for selective protectionism (the withdrawal from RCEP being a notable case). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), which India joined in 2022, institutionalises this alignment in the supply-chain, clean-economy, and fair-economy pillars while preserving India's position on trade-pillar terms.

4.4 Defence and Strategic Partnerships

In the defence domain, the post-2014 record shows accelerated institutionalisation of strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, France, Australia, and Vietnam. The 2016 designation of India as a Major Defence Partner of the United States; the 2018 COMCASA and 2020 BECA agreements completing the foundational defence framework with the US; the Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services Agreement with Japan (September 2020); the India–France strategic partnership and the Rafale acquisition; the India–Vietnam defence cooperation including the supply of BrahMos missiles; and the 2023 iCET (initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology) with the United States together constitute an architecture of partial alignments that delivers the strategic effects of alliance without the formal obligations.

The pattern of these partnerships is itself instructive. India has chosen partnerships that maximise interoperability and intelligence-sharing with US-aligned partners (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) while preserving non-aligned diplomatic flexibility. The defence interoperability infrastructure built between 2016 and 2020 means that, in any future crisis with China, Indian and US (and Japanese, Australian, French) forces can coordinate operationally to a degree that would have been institutionally impossible in 2014. This operational capacity is the substantive content of comprehensive accommodation in the defence domain; the absence of a formal mutual-defence treaty is the limit that preserves Indian doctrinal autonomy.

Defence procurement has continued to draw on Russian platforms (the S-400 air defence system, additional Su-30MKI aircraft, T-90 tanks, the Krivak-class frigates), and this continued Russian supply relationship is a genuine constraint on full alignment. The post-Ukraine sanctions environment, however, has begun to shift this pattern: Russian defence exports to India have slowed since 2022, and the diversification of Indian procurement toward US, French, and Israeli platforms has accelerated. The defence-procurement dimension therefore shows the same pattern as the broader strategy: continued multi-alignment in the legacy procurement portfolio, accelerating accommodation in the leading edge of capabilities.

4.5 Spheres of Influence

With respect to spheres of influence, India regards South Asia as its vital sphere of interest and seeks to extend its influence from this region into the Indian Ocean and Southwest Asia. Like other regional powers, India is therefore sensitive to the activities of external actors in its sphere of influence — particularly Chinese investment and naval presence in Pakistan (CPEC), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), the Maldives, and Myanmar.

The Indian Ocean constitutes another vital sphere of influence. India has drawn two critical lessons from history: that neglect of naval power leads to severe sovereign vulnerability; and that maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean is the precondition for regional pre-eminence (Scott 2006). The Diamond Necklace strategy, the Andaman and Nicobar Command, the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, and the bilateral logistics agreements with the US (LEMOA), France, Japan, Australia, and Singapore together institutionalise this maritime constrainment posture.

India does not conceal its willingness — in response to American encouragement — to engage in the Indo-Pacific region with the explicit objective of constraining China. Washington, regarding Beijing's rise as a strategic challenge to American interests, has acted as the central node around which the broader constrainment architecture has been organised. India's position within this architecture is not subordinate but coordinate: New Delhi accepts the basic strategic premise of constrainment while reserving the right to shape its terms.

4.6 Domestic Determinants

Indian foreign policy under the Modi government cannot be fully understood without attention to domestic political determinants. Three are particularly important. First, the consolidation of BJP electoral dominance has reduced the domestic political costs of overt alignment with the United States — a posture that earlier Congress-led governments would have found more constrained. Second, the Hindu-nationalist strategic worldview articulated by RSS-aligned intellectuals and operationalised through institutions such as the Vivekananda International Foundation has supplied an ideological infrastructure for an assertive, civilisationally framed foreign policy. Third, the Indian diaspora in the United States — estimated at over four million and disproportionately represented in the technology, financial, and academic sectors — has become a significant constituency shaping the bilateral relationship from both sides. These domestic determinants do not by themselves account for India's strategy but they explain its trajectory and intensity in ways that purely external frameworks cannot.

4.7 Technology and the Digital Domain

A further domain of India's accommodation strategy, not fully captured by the traditional diplomatic-defence-economic triad, is technology and digital infrastructure. The 2023 iCET framework with the United States institutionalises cooperation on semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, space, and defence-industrial co-production, and has been accompanied by parallel bilateral technology dialogues with Japan (Basrur and Kutty 2021; Mukherjee 2018) that echo the logic of the defence-logistics architecture described above. India's participation in the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence and its alignment with US and allied positions on semiconductor export controls toward

China further extend the network into a domain where formal alliance is neither expected nor sought, but where structural alignment is nonetheless unmistakable. The technology domain is analytically important because it shows that comprehensive accommodation is not confined to the security sector: it is reproducing itself in exactly the new domains — critical minerals, artificial intelligence, telecommunications standards — that are becoming central to great-power competition in the 2020s. Rajagopalan (2020) has argued that India's Indo-Pacific strategy remains under-resourced relative to its ambitions; the technology domain is precisely where that resource gap is most visible, since India lacks the semiconductor manufacturing base of its partners and must rely on network access rather than indigenous capability.

5. India's Network-Building: Empirical Analysis

5.1 The Look East / Act East Policy and ASEAN

Since accommodation has been adopted as the overarching strategy of Indian foreign policy in the international arena, network-building is conducted in consonance with it. India's primary sphere of influence within this framework is South Asia, where SAARC has provided a regional institutional architecture (Bishwakarma and Hu 2022). However, SAARC's effectiveness has been undermined by the India–Pakistan rivalry. Consequently, India's priority has shifted to the construction of its envisioned network through the Look East (now Act East) policy, directed toward Southeast Asia and the member states of ASEAN.

The historical trajectory of Look East matters analytically. The policy was launched by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992 as part of India's post-Cold War economic liberalisation, with primarily commercial objectives. Under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the policy was expanded to include security cooperation, and under Prime Minister Modi (from 2014) it was rebranded Act East to signal a more proactive posture. The trajectory shows the gradual transformation of an economic-engagement strategy into a strategic-network strategy, a transformation that the comprehensive-accommodation framework predicts and that earlier interpretations have not fully captured.

The strategic rationale for Act East is the convergence of economic opportunity (access to ASEAN markets and supply chains) with strategic positioning (relationships with maritime states adjacent to China). Through the Mekong–India Economic Corridor, India seeks to integrate Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam into its network, connecting Ho Chi Minh City to Dawei via Bangkok and Phnom Penh. The Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) connectivity initiative similarly extends India's subcontinental network. India's partnership with ASEAN, grounded in free trade and shared security interests, brings Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Singapore into the broader Indian network. The India–ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, the regular India–ASEAN summits, and the institutionalisation of the India–ASEAN strategic partnership in 2022 together constitute the institutional anchor of this engagement.

Within ASEAN, Vietnam occupies a position of particular importance. The India–Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (upgraded in 2016), the supply of BrahMos cruise missiles, defence-industrial cooperation, and joint naval exercises position Vietnam as a key Southeast Asian node in India's constrainment network. The strategic logic is straightforward: Vietnam shares a long history of contested borders with China and has been a frontline state in the South China Sea disputes; cultivating Vietnam serves the same strategic purpose for India that Japan does in Northeast Asia.

ASEAN centrality — the principle that ASEAN itself should be the convening hub of regional security arrangements — has been embraced by India in its Indo-Pacific statements (Ogden 2023). This embrace serves accommodation purposes: by routing engagement through ASEAN, India avoids the appearance of a bilateral US–India bloc and preserves the multilateral cover within which constrainment can proceed. The post-2020 acceleration of QUAD activity has been carefully synchronised with continued affirmation of ASEAN centrality, a balance that reflects the network-building logic the article identifies.

5.2 The Diamond Necklace

Within this initiative, India seeks to expand maritime cooperation, engagement, development assistance, and investment with Indian Ocean littoral states. The initiative encompasses the Changi Naval Base in Singapore; the port of Chabahar in Iran; the Sabang Port in Indonesia; the Duqm Port in Oman; the Assumption Island development in Seychelles; the Agalega Island development in Mauritius; and naval cooperation agreements with several other Indian Ocean littoral states (Khan and Omidi 2023; Bhattacharya et al. 2021). The strategic logic is the cultivation of a chain of access points that counterbalances China's String of Pearls — the network of Chinese-funded ports across the Indian Ocean littoral including Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and others.

India and Japan concluded a Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services Agreement on 9 September 2020, enabling the armed forces of both countries to exchange goods and services on a reciprocal basis. This agreement has facilitated mutual support in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and has become a model for similar agreements with other partners. The 2018 LEMOA with the United States, the 2018 Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement with Australia, and the 2017 logistics arrangement with France constitute a parallel architecture of logistics interoperability that, taken together, gives Indian forces access to a wide arc of Indo-Pacific bases without committing India to any single alliance structure.

The port of Chabahar plays a particular role in the network. As the Indian entry point for the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar connects the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, via Iran, to the Caspian Sea, Russia, and Central Asia. It thereby provides India with a connectivity route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan, and a strategic position within the Iranian-led INSTC architecture that complements rather than competes with the US-led Indo-Pacific arrangements. The Chabahar node also illustrates India's brokerage position between the United States (with which India has comprehensive accommodation) and Iran (which is under US sanctions but with which India maintains a working relationship).

5.3 Minilaterals: QUAD, IPEF, I2U2, iCET, AUKUS

The post-2017 elevation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to a leaders' summit format, the 2020 Galwan clash, and the post-pandemic strategic environment together produced a dense layer of minilateral arrangements in which India is a central node. The QUAD has expanded from a security-focused dialogue to encompass vaccine production, critical and emerging technologies, climate cooperation, and infrastructure financing. The QUAD Plus framework has institutionalised consultations with additional partners including South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched in 2022, brings India into a US-led economic architecture covering supply chains, clean economy, fair economy, and (for other participants) trade. The I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States), launched in 2021–2022, institutionalises cooperation across food security, water, energy, transportation, space, health, and technology. The iCET (initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology), launched in 2023, provides a bilateral US–India framework for cooperation on semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and defence technology.

AUKUS — the Australia–UK–US trilateral announced in September 2021 — is not a structure India has joined, but it is a structure India has supported tacitly. Indian official statements have not opposed AUKUS, a notable departure from earlier Indian wariness of US-led alliance structures in Asia. This tacit support is consistent with the comprehensive accommodation thesis: India welcomes the strengthening of constrainment architecture even when India itself does not join the formal arrangements.

The aggregate effect of these minilaterals is precisely what the network approach would predict from a comprehensive accommodation strategy: overlapping, partial, issue-specific arrangements that produce strategic effects equivalent to alliance commitment without requiring formal alliance. India's position across these arrangements is one of high centrality — it is present in the QUAD, IPEF, I2U2, iCET, ASEAN, BRICS, and SCO, occupying a brokerage position between blocks that few other major powers can match.

5.4 The Iran Relationship and Sanctions Management

India's relationship with Iran illustrates the brokerage function of network-building under conditions of genuine strategic tension. The Chabahar port investment, and India's participation in the INSTC, require a sustained working relationship with Tehran at precisely the moment when Iran is subject to comprehensive US sanctions (Kutty 2019). India has managed this tension by securing a specific US sanctions waiver for Chabahar on the grounds that the port serves Afghan reconstruction and regional connectivity objectives that Washington itself has endorsed. This is a clear illustration of network-building as distinct from alliance: an allied state bound by formal treaty commitments could not sustain an independent relationship with a sanctioned adversary of its ally, but a state pursuing comprehensive accommodation through partial, non-exclusive arrangements can request and obtain carve-outs that preserve its own network position. The Iran case therefore does not undermine the accommodation thesis; it demonstrates the specific institutional flexibility that network-building, rather than alliance, is designed to provide.

5.5 Naval Diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean

India's naval diplomacy supplies a further empirical layer to the network. The Malabar exercise, originally a bilateral India–US naval exercise, has since 2020 included Japan and Australia as permanent participants, formalising in practice what the QUAD leaders' summits formalised diplomatically. Brewster (2016) has characterised the India–China maritime relationship as a contest over status and legitimacy in the Indian Ocean rather than a purely material contest over naval capability, a reading consistent with the network approach's emphasis on structural position rather than dyadic force comparison. India's efforts to expand its own naval presence — through the Andaman and Nicobar Command, expanded submarine and aircraft-carrier procurement, and hydrographic and maritime-domain-awareness cooperation with littoral states from Mauritius to Vietnam — should accordingly be read not simply as a balancing response to Chinese naval expansion but as an attempt to secure the brokerage and hub position within the Indian Ocean network that the comprehensive-accommodation framework predicts.

6. Engaging Rival Explanations

6.1 Strategic Autonomy

The most prominent alternative interpretation of India's recent strategy is strategic autonomy. Articulated most systematically by Mohan (2006), Saran (2017), and others, strategic autonomy holds that India is maintaining substantive independence from all major powers in pursuit of its national interest, refusing alignment with either US-led or China-led blocs. The empirical support for this position points to India's continued purchase of Russian oil and the S-400 missile system despite US pressure; its non-participation in Western sanctions on Russia following the 2022 Ukraine invasion; its membership in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation alongside China and Russia; and its explicit rejection of alliance language by Foreign Minister Jaishankar.

This article does not deny these empirical observations. It argues that they are compatible with comprehensive accommodation rather than with pure strategic autonomy. Three counter-considerations are decisive. First, the direction of asymmetry is clear: India has institutionalised partnerships with the United States and US-aligned partners far more densely than with Russia or China since 2014. The Russian relationship is being managed rather than developed; the Chinese relationship is being constrained rather than developed. Second, strategic autonomy as a coherent strategy would predict roughly symmetric engagement with major powers, but the post-2014 record shows asymmetric tilt toward the US-led order. Third, the explicit rejection of alliance language is consistent with accommodation precisely because comprehensive accommodation, unlike alliance, does not require formal binding.

The strategic autonomy interpretation captures something real — India's preservation of doctrinal flexibility and its refusal of treaty alliance — but it under-describes the structural alignment that has

emerged. Comprehensive accommodation through network-building accounts for both the alignment and the flexibility.

6.2 Multi-Alignment

A second alternative, closely related to strategic autonomy, is multi-alignment. The multi-alignment interpretation holds that India is simultaneously aligning with multiple powers across different issue areas — with the US on technology and Indo-Pacific security, with Russia on energy and defence platforms, with the EU on trade and climate, with Japan on infrastructure — without privileging any single alignment (Hall 2016; Saran 2017). Multi-alignment shares with strategic autonomy a commitment to refusing exclusive binding, but it emphasises positive engagement with all major powers rather than balancing distance from them.

Multi-alignment captures the breadth of India's diplomatic engagement more accurately than strategic autonomy, but it under-specifies the strategic direction. Multi-alignment is a description of India's diplomatic posture; it is not a strategy in the sense of a coherent direction. Comprehensive accommodation supplies what multi-alignment lacks: an account of why some alignments are being deepened (US, Japan, Australia, France, Vietnam) and others managed (Russia) or constrained (China). The asymmetry across these relationships is itself the analytical puzzle, and accommodation is the better explanation.

This argument can be made more precise by examining the empirical record across issue areas. In defence procurement, the picture is genuinely multi-aligned: Russian S-400s, American P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, French Rafales, Israeli unmanned systems, and Indian indigenous platforms all coexist. But defence procurement diversity is consistent with accommodation; comprehensive accommodation does not require defence-supply monogamy and historically has been compatible with substantial diversification. In strategic-platform terms — the QUAD, IPEF, iCET, I2U2 — the alignment is unmistakably with the United States and its partners. In supply-chain terms, the post-2020 decoupling from Chinese capital and the parallel deepening of US–India semiconductor and critical-minerals cooperation through iCET indicates structural alignment rather than balanced engagement. In voting patterns at the United Nations, India's abstentions on Russia-related resolutions following the 2022 Ukraine invasion are often cited as evidence of multi-alignment, but the abstentions are better read as the preservation of doctrinal autonomy within a strategy of substantive alignment elsewhere.

There is a defensible position that multi-alignment is the official Indian self-description, and that this self-description is itself part of the strategy: it provides domestic legitimacy and external flexibility. This article does not deny the strategic utility of the multi-alignment label; it argues that the structural reality the label describes is comprehensive accommodation through network-building. The label and the reality are distinct, and analytical clarity requires keeping them so.

6.3 Hedging

The third major alternative is hedging. The hedging interpretation — articulated by Pardesi (2021), Wilkins and Kim (2022), and others — holds that India is pursuing a calculated insurance strategy in which it engages China commercially while constraining it strategically, preserving optionality in the face of uncertainty about the future trajectory of US–China relations. Hedging is a more sophisticated rival than strategic autonomy because it acknowledges the directional asymmetry of Indian behaviour while keeping strategic intent provisional.

The hedging interpretation is empirically strong for the 2008–2019 period, during which India's engagement with China remained substantial (the 2018 Wuhan informal summit, the 2019 Chennai informal summit) alongside its deepening engagement with the US and Japan. The hedging interpretation is weaker for the post-2020 period. The Galwan clash decisively reduced the strategic optionality that hedging presupposes: India's political and military relationship with China has been substantially restructured, with troop disengagement processes still incomplete in some sectors as of 2024. The post-2020 record is more consistent with settled comprehensive accommodation than with continued hedging.

The relationship between hedging and accommodation is therefore best understood diachronically: India hedged through approximately 2019, and consolidated comprehensive accommodation from 2020 onwards. Section 7 develops this argument by examining the Galwan inflection in detail.

6.4 Synthesis

The three rival explanations each capture something real about Indian foreign policy. Strategic autonomy captures India's preservation of doctrinal flexibility. Multi-alignment captures the diplomatic breadth. Hedging captures the pre-2020 strategic posture. What none of them captures is the directional asymmetry of post-2014 alignment and the post-2020 consolidation of that alignment. Comprehensive accommodation through network-building captures all three of these features while accounting for the rest. The argument is therefore not that the rival explanations are wrong but that the accommodation framework is the more powerful account.

6.5 Bandwagoning and Hard Balancing as Limiting Cases

Two further alternatives deserve brief treatment because they mark the outer boundaries of the conceptual space within which comprehensive accommodation sits. Bandwagoning would predict that India aligns with the rising or dominant regional power — China — rather than against it, in order to share in the benefits of Chinese regional order. Kumar Singh's (2021) account of the asymmetric India–China rivalry shows why this prediction fails: India's post-2014 behaviour, and especially its post-Galwan behaviour, moves consistently away from Chinese-led institutions (India's non-participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, its withdrawal from RCEP negotiations) rather than toward them. Hard balancing, at the opposite pole, would predict that India seeks to build a counter-coalition explicitly and publicly directed at rolling back Chinese power, on the model of Cold War containment (Gaddis 2005; Paul 2018). This prediction also fails: India has not sought formal alliance, has not endorsed collective-defence language in QUAD or IPEF documents, and continues to manage a working bilateral relationship with

Beijing even after Galwan. Comprehensive accommodation occupies the analytical space between these two limiting cases, and the empirical record of the past decade sits much closer to the accommodation pole than to either bandwagoning or hard balancing.

7. Chinese Agency and the Galwan Inflection

7.1 Chinese Strategy in South Asia and the Indian Ocean

Any account of Indian strategy that ignores Chinese agency is incomplete. China is not a passive object of constrainment; it is a strategic actor with its own evolving approach to South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the broader Indo-Pacific. From the early 2000s, China has pursued a layered strategy in India's neighbourhood: the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship of the Belt and Road Initiative; the Hambantota port acquisition (Sri Lanka); the Kyaukpyu deep-sea port (Myanmar); investment and naval engagement with the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal; and a growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean justified by anti-piracy operations off Somalia. The String of Pearls characterisation may overstate the coordination of these activities, but the aggregate effect on Indian strategic perception has been substantial.

Chinese strategy has not been static. Three shifts during the period covered by this article are worth noting. First, the BRI was launched in 2013 with substantial economic and political ambition, and its early phase was characterised by relatively rapid deployment and limited political friction. By the late 2010s, however, the BRI had encountered substantial pushback — from debt-distressed recipient governments, from competing infrastructure offerings (the US-led Blue Dot Network, the EU's Global Gateway, the Japan-led Quality Infrastructure Investment), and from increasing Western scrutiny of Chinese investment in critical infrastructure. The pace of new BRI commitments slowed in the early 2020s, even as existing projects continued. Second, Chinese assertiveness on disputed territorial questions — in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea, and on the LAC with India — sharpened from approximately 2017 onwards, producing the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan clash (2020). Third, the Xi Jinping era has seen the increasing securitisation of Chinese foreign policy, with the People's Liberation Army Navy and PLA strategic services receiving substantial investment in capabilities suited to extended operations in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific.

Beyond South Asia, Chinese strategy in the broader Indo-Pacific has rested on the BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the SCO, and the development of the People's Liberation Army Navy as a blue-water force. These instruments have given China a regional position whose constrainment requires a comparable network of counter-instruments — which the Diamond Necklace, INSTC, QUAD, IPEF, I2U2, and iCET together attempt to provide. From a network-analytic perspective, the post-2014 period has seen the construction of two competing but partially overlapping networks across the Indo-Pacific: a Chinese-centred network anchored in the BRI and a US–India-centred network anchored in the Diamond Necklace, QUAD, and IPEF. Several intermediate states — including ASEAN members, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Gulf states — occupy

positions in both networks, and the management of these dual positions is itself a substantial area of strategic competition.

This dual-network analysis has implications for how India's constrainment strategy should be understood. Constrainment does not aim to remove China from the regional network; it aims to ensure that the Chinese-centred network does not become the dominant or exclusive regional architecture. The India-supported network does not seek to defeat the Chinese-centred network; it seeks to constitute a credible alternative. This is what the network approach makes visible that dyadic analyses do not: it is the relative density and reach of the two networks, rather than the bilateral balance of forces, that matters most for regional strategic outcomes.

7.2 The Galwan Clash as Inflection Point

The June 2020 Galwan Valley clash between Indian and Chinese troops in Eastern Ladakh, in which twenty Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese troops were killed, was the deadliest India–China military confrontation since 1975. Its strategic consequences extended well beyond the immediate tactical situation. Within India, the clash decisively shifted public opinion, elite consensus, and government policy toward a harder posture on China: it produced the banning of dozens of Chinese mobile applications, the tightening of foreign direct investment screening for Chinese capital, the acceleration of decoupling in critical supply chains, the deepening of the QUAD, and the consolidation of the iCET framework with the United States.

From a theoretical perspective, the Galwan inflection is critical because it tests the rival frameworks. A pure strategic-autonomy framework would predict balanced restraint and continued engagement with China alongside other powers. A pure multi-alignment framework would predict the maintenance of symmetric engagement across major powers. A hedging framework would predict the preservation of strategic optionality. None of these frameworks predicts the post-Galwan asymmetric deepening of engagement with the US and its partners that the empirical record shows. Comprehensive accommodation does predict this outcome: it predicts that an external shock revealing the limits of engagement with the rival power will accelerate the consolidation of accommodation with the alternative power. Galwan supplied that shock.

7.3 Post-Galwan Strategic Interaction

The years since 2020 have shown both consolidation of constrainment architecture and selective stabilisation of the India–China bilateral relationship. Border disengagement processes have proceeded in some sectors, and 2023–2024 saw a partial diplomatic thaw. This does not falsify the comprehensive-accommodation thesis. Comprehensive accommodation predicts the management of the constrained rivalry rather than its escalation; selective stabilisation of the bilateral relationship is compatible with continued network-building around China.

The strategic interaction between India and China is therefore best understood as the co-construction of two overlapping regional networks, with selective tactical accommodation between them. India's

accommodation strategy is not with China; it is with the United States and US-aligned partners, around China.

7.4 Economic Decoupling as a Network Effect

The post-Galwan period has also seen a distinct economic dimension to constrainment: the selective decoupling of Indian supply chains and capital markets from Chinese sources. The tightening of foreign direct investment screening for investors from countries sharing a land border with India (a rule targeted, without naming China, squarely at Chinese capital), the banning of Chinese mobile applications, and the parallel deepening of semiconductor and critical-minerals cooperation with the United States through iCET together constitute an economic mirror of the defence-logistics architecture described in Section 4. The White House's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly identifies supply-chain resilience and critical-technology cooperation with regional partners, India prominent among them, as a central pillar of US regional strategy (White House 2022), and Indian policy has moved in step with this framing rather than independently of it. Wojczewski's (2016, 2017) work on the domestic construction of India's great-power identity is instructive here: the economic-decoupling measures have been framed domestically not as alignment with the United States but as the assertion of Indian economic sovereignty (through initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat), which is precisely the kind of doctrinally autonomous framing that comprehensive accommodation, as distinct from bandwagoning or alliance, allows a state to sustain while still producing US-aligned structural outcomes.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Theoretical Contribution

This article has made three theoretical contributions. First, it has argued for the analytical superiority of 'constrainment' over 'containment' as a characterisation of Indian China policy. Constrainment captures the more limited objective of raising costs and complicating trajectory, without committing the analysis to a Cold War concept that India explicitly rejects. The distinction is not merely terminological. Containment carries assumptions about geographic encirclement, alliance commitment, and the prevention of expansion that do not fit the empirical record of Indian behaviour, and that misrepresent the actual ambition of Indian China policy. Constrainment, by contrast, is compatible with continued Indian engagement with China (where engagement serves Indian interests), with selective stabilisation of the bilateral relationship, and with the management of areas of cooperation alongside areas of competition. It is therefore both more accurate and more analytically useful.

Second, it has applied the network approach to foreign-policy analysis in its analytical rather than metaphorical sense, identifying nodes, hubs, brokerage positions, and structural effects that account for India's strategic position more powerfully than dyadic frameworks. The network approach has often been invoked in the recent literature on Indian foreign policy without being deployed analytically; this article has shown how the framework can be used to derive testable propositions about institutional architecture, partnership selection, and the management of relationships across multiple major powers.

Third, it has articulated comprehensive accommodation through network-building as a more powerful framework than the leading rivals — strategic autonomy, multi-alignment, and hedging — for the post-2014 and especially the post-2020 record. By engaging each rival framework explicitly and showing both what it captures and what it misses, the article has positioned the comprehensive-accommodation thesis within the contemporary scholarly debate rather than asserting it in isolation. The contribution is one of synthesis as much as of novelty: the article shows how an existing concept (accommodation) becomes substantially more powerful when combined with an existing methodology (network analysis) and applied to a specific empirical configuration (post-Galwan India).

8.2 Empirical Contribution

Empirically, the article has integrated developments that earlier scholarship has treated separately: the Diamond Necklace, Act East, QUAD, IPEF, I2U2, iCET, AUKUS, and the post-Galwan strategic environment. The empirical claim is that these are not separate strands of Indian foreign policy but coordinate elements of a single network-building strategy. The Galwan inflection is identified as the consolidating moment, marking the transition from pre-2020 hedging to post-2020 comprehensive accommodation. The article also integrates engagement with Indian strategic doctrine literature (Jaishankar, Mohan, Pant, Tellis, Rajagopalan) that has been comparatively absent from earlier accommodation-focused scholarship, and brings the analysis up to the 2024 horizon by incorporating minilateral and connectivity developments that earlier work could not include.

The empirical contribution is particularly important because the rapid pace of Indo-Pacific developments has produced a literature in which different studies cover different time slices and different institutional fragments. By examining the full 2014–2024 window and the full institutional architecture (bilateral partnerships, minilaterals, connectivity projects, defence agreements), the article provides a synoptic account that can serve as a baseline for further work tracking the network's evolution beyond 2024.

8.3 Policy Implications

Three policy implications follow. First, for the United States, the article suggests that the cultivation of India through network-building rather than alliance is well-calibrated to Indian strategic preferences and is likely to be more durable than pressure for formal alignment. Second, for China, the article implies that the constrainment architecture is now consolidated and is not likely to be reversed by tactical accommodation in the bilateral India–China relationship. Third, for India, the article implies that the network-building strategy is operating broadly as intended but is dependent on continued US strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific; a major US retrenchment would expose the network to stress.

This reading is consistent with the broader overview of Indian foreign-policy institutions and decision-making offered by Pant (2019), who emphasises the persistent gap between the pluralism of India's domestic foreign-policy debate and the increasing coherence of its external behaviour — a gap the comprehensive-accommodation framework helps to explain, since domestic doctrinal pluralism and external structural alignment are not, on this account, in tension but are two faces of the same strategy.

8.4 Limitations and Future Research

Three lines of future research follow from this analysis. First, the framework developed here for the India case could usefully be tested against other major powers managing a rising rival without entering formal alliance — the European Union vis-à-vis Russia, Japan vis-à-vis China, Vietnam vis-à-vis China. Comparative work would test whether comprehensive accommodation through network-building is a distinctive Indian pattern or a more general phenomenon. Second, longitudinal work tracing the post-2024 development of the network — particularly the evolution of iCET, IPEF, QUAD, and the bilateral India–China relationship — would test the durability of the strategy. Third, the article has relied on documentary sources; future research drawing on elite interviews and (where possible) declassified diplomatic records would clarify the internal deliberative processes through which the strategy has been formed.

A further limitation concerns generalisability. The scope conditions identified in Section 2 suggest that comprehensive accommodation through network-building should appear wherever a state faces an assertive regional rival it cannot balance alone, has access to a great power willing to extend partial rather than exclusive support, and possesses a domestic political environment that rewards sovereigntist framing. These conditions are not unique to India, but nor are they universal: middle powers with a stronger existing alliance commitment (Japan, Australia) or a weaker independent diplomatic tradition may find alliance, rather than network-building, the more available institutional form. The India case is therefore best understood as a demonstration that comprehensive accommodation through network-building is an available and effective strategy under specifiable conditions, not as a claim that it is the default strategy of rising or middle powers generally. Testing the scope conditions directly, across a small-N comparative design incorporating Vietnam and one or two European cases vis-à-vis Russia, is accordingly identified as the most immediate next step for this research programme.

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Author Contribution

The first author created the theoritical framework of the research and rechecked the analysis. the second author worked on the data and wrote the case study. The third author worked on the methodology and linked the theory and methodology with the case, and worked on the submission of the article.

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