

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The Indo-Pacific without the Indo: Strategic Consequences for India

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S*ummary*

Can the Indo-Pacific remain strategically coherent if India is no longer central to it, and does the shift point to something deeper than a bureaucratic housekeeping exercise?

Introduction

On 16 June 2026, the Pentagon retired a name it had carried for eight years. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command reverted to its older title, U.S. Pacific Command, and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth marked the occasion tersely on social media: "U.S. Pacific Command is back." The 'Indo' in Indo-Pacific had been, more than anything, an American acknowledgement of India's centrality to its Asia strategy. Dropping it raises a question New Delhi cannot afford to dismiss: can the Indo-Pacific remain strategically coherent if India is no longer central to it, and does the shift point to something deeper than a bureaucratic housekeeping exercise?

The Making of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific was an Indian idea before it became an American strategy. The concept's modern geopolitical usage is widely attributed to Indian naval strategist Gurpreet Khurana, whose 2007 paper described the arc linking Indian Ocean energy routes to East Asian manufacturing centres as a distinct strategic theatre.¹ Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave it political momentum in his address to the Indian Parliament the same year, describing the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a "Confluence of the Two Seas".²

The first Trump administration elevated this from geography to doctrine. The 2017 National Security Strategy defined the region as stretching "from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States" and placed it at the top of US regional priorities.³ In May 2018, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis renamed Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command. The Department of Defense announcement stated the change reflected "the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific oceans".⁴ The name was not neutral cartography. It was a signal that the United States considered the Indian Ocean as relevant to the China competition as the Western Pacific.

¹ Gurpreet S. Khurana, "[Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation](#)", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, January 2007, pp. 139–153.

² Shinzo Abe, "[Confluence of the Two Seas](#)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 22 August 2007.

³ "[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)", The White House, December 2017.

⁴ Jim Garamone, "[Pacific Command Change Highlights Growing Importance of Indian Ocean Area](#)", U.S. Department of Defense, 30 May 2018.

Why India Became Central

India mattered to this construct because of its landmass and position. It anchored the western end of the map, commanded sea lanes through which a large share of global energy and trade passes, and offered the only large democratic power in Asia capable of independently complicating Chinese ambitions over the long term. The Biden administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy made the investment explicit: it pledged to "support India's continued rise and regional leadership". It named it first among the leading regional partners Washington would cultivate beyond its five treaty alliances (Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand). The strategy defined the region as stretching "from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean", pushing the western boundary further than the 2017 document.⁵

The Quad became the flagship expression of this alignment. At the Wilmington Summit of September 2024, the four leaders declared themselves "more strategically aligned than ever before", representing "nearly two billion people and over one-third of global GDP".⁶ Yet the partnership always rested on a concealed tension. Washington wanted India to be part of a deterrence architecture aimed at China; New Delhi wanted technological and geopolitical gains without any obligation to fight alongside the United States. The Indo-Pacific worked partly because it left this ambiguity intact.

Is the Indo Disappearing?

The signals from Washington since January 2025 suggest a genuine, if still uneven, recalibration. The second Trump administration's approach to Asia is organised around the Western Hemisphere first and Pacific deterrence second. The National Security Strategy of November 2025 primarily references India in the South Asian context, urging New Delhi to "contribute to Indo-Pacific security, including through continued quadrilateral cooperation". Still, the weight given to the relationship is measurably lighter than in the 2017 document, which placed India at the heart of its Asia framework.⁷

⁵ ["Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States"](#), The White House, February 2022.

⁶ ["The Wilmington Declaration: Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States"](#), The White House, 21 September 2024.

⁷ ["National Security Strategy"](#), The White House, November 2025.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy, authored under Under Secretary Elbridge Colby, organises Asia policy around "a strong denial defence along the First Island Chain", a geographic spine running from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines. The Indian Ocean sits outside it. The strategy does not mention the Quad.⁸ Hegseth's remarks at the 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue referred consistently to "the Pacific". They described India as "a critical anchor in South Asia", a useful but unmistakably regional rather than oceanic in scope.⁹

The harder question is whether this constitutes a clean break or merely a clarification of what the Indo-Pacific always was. Was the construct ever a genuinely inclusive regional order, or primarily an anti-China coalition? The 'Indo' carried operational weight so long as Washington judged that balancing China required a maritime arc extending towards Africa's eastern shores. Once American strategy narrowed to denying China a swift military fait accompli near Taiwan, India's geographic position became peripheral to the core operational problem. The construct's coherence depended on a particular theory of competition. Change the theory, and the map contracts.

Strategic Consequences for India

India's salience to American strategy may prove more contingent than intrinsic. If Washington now prioritises allies capable of fighting a Taiwan contingency, India, which is neither a treaty ally nor intends to become one, sits outside the priority circle. That problem is compounded by capacity: India's naval budget receives the smallest allocation among its three services, even as land-border pressures with China and Pakistan absorb resources and limit the maritime power projection that would give India's Indian Ocean claims real operational weight.

A competing reading deserves fair treatment. India has consistently maintained that its strategic autonomy is a considered doctrine rather than its absence. From this vantage, an America less focused on enrolling India in alliance frameworks may actually give New Delhi more room to deepen ties with Japan, France, Australia and Southeast Asian partners on India's own terms.

⁸ [“2026 National Defense Strategy”](#), U.S. Department of Defense, 23 January 2026.

⁹ Pete Hegseth, [“Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore \(As Delivered\)”](#), U.S. Embassy in Singapore, 30 May 2026.

This position is coherent. But it should not be mistaken for indifference to what India gained during the Indo-Pacific decade. Sustained American engagement brought technology-transfer commitments, maritime-domain awareness partnerships, and a seat at consequential minilateral tables. The bilateral relationship has also grown more transactional, with disputes over tariffs and India's continued purchase of Russian energy signalling that Washington's tolerance for Indian hedging is not unconditional. A contracting Indo-Pacific architecture could reduce the leverage India once held to extract concessions in defence technology and trade. The gains were real; treating their erosion as inconsequential would be a strategic error.

Beyond the Indo-Pacific: The Indo-Mediterranean Moment

The most consequential feature of India's current statecraft is not how it responds to eastern marginalisation but how it is constructing a western theatre in which its centrality is structural rather than negotiated.

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), launched through an MoU signed at the G20 New Delhi Summit in September 2023 by India, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Israel, France, Germany and Italy, envisions rail and shipping links from Indian ports to European markets via West Asia.¹⁰ The corridor is explicitly positioned as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Its signatories include the principal democracies of three continents, and its premise is direct: India, positioned at the junction of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf, and the Red Sea approaches, is the indispensable node through which this connectivity must pass.

Surrounding IMEC is a carefully assembled lattice of minilateral arrangements. The I2U2 grouping with Israel, the UAE and the United States, launched in July 2022, opened with a UAE commitment to invest two billion dollars in an Indian food park and clean-energy infrastructure. The India–EU Connectivity Partnership of May 2021 ties together digital, energy and transport links from Brussels to Mumbai, positioning India as the eastern anchor of European connectivity outreach.¹¹ In May 2026, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Italian Prime Minister Meloni jointly described the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean as "regions that cannot be viewed as separate spheres but instead as increasingly interconnected spaces", giving the emerging

¹⁰ [“Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment \(PGII\): India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 9 September 2023.

¹¹ [“EU-India Connectivity Partnership”](#), Council of the European Union, 8 May 2021.

concept of an "Indo-Mediterranean" theatre its most authoritative political expression to date.¹²

The contrast with the Indo-Pacific is instructive. In the Pacific-centric vision now ascendant in Washington, India is a valued but peripheral partner whose contributions are welcome but not load-bearing. Across the Indo-Mediterranean arc, India is the point of origin. The corridor cannot be built without it. The minilaterals cannot function without it. The EU connectivity framework is premised on India as a productive anchor rather than an end-market. That structural centrality is worth more than nominal inclusion in someone else's strategy document.

IMEC remains largely unbuilt. The conflicts reshaping West Asia have stalled its premise of stable transit routes and normalised Arab–Israeli relations. The westward pivot is a bet on a future geography rather than a present reality. But as a hedge against marginalisation in the east, it is the right bet to be making.

Conclusion

The retirement of 'Indo' from a military command is a symbol, not a rupture. But symbols carry information, and this one says something real: American strategy is narrowing towards a Pacific deterrence problem in which India's geography matters less than it did when the Indo-Pacific was first conceived. On the Indo-Pacific itself, India should keep building what already works within the Quad: maritime domain awareness sharing, critical minerals cooperation, and technology partnerships under frameworks like iCET, none of which depend on how Washington names its command structure. But New Delhi must also fix what lies within its own control. A navy that receives the smallest share of India's defence budget cannot carry the maritime responsibility India claims for itself in the Indian Ocean. Closing that gap matters more than any further joint statement.

The real test of India's strategic seriousness is not whether it keeps its place on America's map. It is whether India draws a map of its own, one in which the Indo-Mediterranean is not a fallback but a genuine theatre built outward from Indian ports, supply chains and alliances. That map is already being sketched out through IMEC, I2U2, and a deepening partnership with Europe. Whether New Delhi commits the money, the ships, and the diplomatic attention needed to finish it is the question that will matter more than anything Washington decides to call its commands.

¹² Narendra Modi and Giorgia Meloni, [“Italy and India: A Strategic Partnership for the Indo-Mediterranean”](#), *The Times of India*, 20 May 2026.

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