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India in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Autonomy and Opportunities for the European Union and Spain

Abstract

This article analyses India's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific and its implications for the European Union and Spain. Building on the legacy of non-alignment and the evolution towards strategic autonomy, it examines the main doctrines guiding Indian foreign policy, such as the Act East Policy, the SAGAR initiative and The India Way. The paper addresses the pillars of India's strategic projection: economic growth, military modernisation and connectivity projects, in particular the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor. It also examines India's rivalry with China, its cooperation with the United States within the framework of the Quad, and opportunities for partnership with the EU in trade, technology and maritime security. Special attention is paid to the implications for Spain, highlighting the signing of the 2024 Joint Declaration and industrial and logistical cooperation. The article concludes that India is emerging as an indispensable partner for European strategic diversification and as an opportunity for Spain to strengthen its international presence in defence, energy and connectivity.

Keywords

India, Indo-Pacific, Strategic autonomy, European Union, Spain.

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I Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become the main axis of global strategic competition. The term refers to a geopolitical and economic space connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Americas, and integrating South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania. More than a mere geographical delimitation, the concept expresses the growing interdependence between trade, energy and security flows in both basins and today constitutes the frame of reference for the main regional strategies of both the United States and the European Union.

Views of the geography of a strategic concept

Where is the Indo-Pacific?

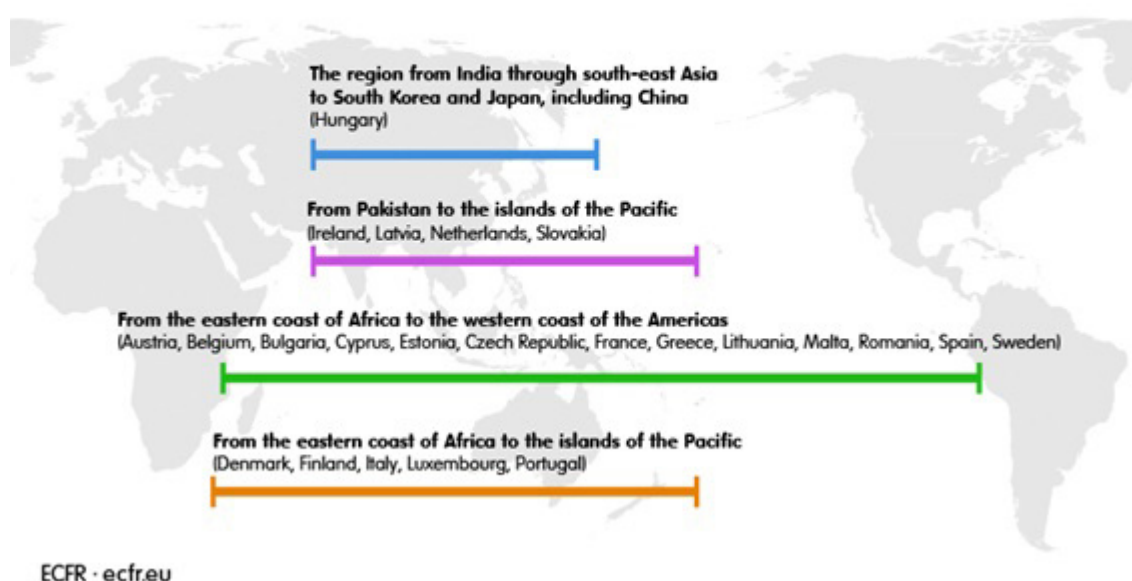


Figure 1. European interpretations of the Indo-Pacific concept. *Source:* European Council on Foreign Relations (2021). All rights belong to the ECFR

The rivalry between the United States and China has placed this vast region at the centre of economic, political and security tensions, with direct repercussions on global trade, supply chains and maritime stability. For the European Union (EU), traditionally focused on its eastern and southern neighbourhood, the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity. As the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific emphasises, ‘the EU will strengthen its strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, one of the most dynamic and important regions in the world’ (European Commission, 2021).

India, the world’s fifth largest economy and most populous democracy, has gone from being considered an emerging power to establishing itself as a strategic pivot in the Indo-Pacific. Its economic and demographic weight, its maritime projection and its doctrines of strategic autonomy enable it to play a central role in regional governance. As Ian Hall points out, ‘the Modi government has sought to combine India’s traditional strategic autonomy with a new willingness to align selectively with like-minded partners’ (Hall, 2019).

India's foreign policy vision, built on the tradition of non-alignment and now reinterpreted as strategic autonomy, is reflected in doctrines such as the Act East Policy, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. These policies confirm New Delhi's willingness to act as a guarantor of maritime security and a promoter of regional connectivity, without relinquishing its independence in decision-making. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar puts it explicitly: 'India's path is to be more ambitious abroad, to seek multiple options and to leverage relationships without becoming dependent' (Jaishankar, 2020).

From a European perspective, India is an increasingly important partner. The 2021 *Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative* emphasises that "India's rise and growing role in the region offer an opportunity to forge closer cooperation on trade, connectivity and maritime security" (European Commission, 2021). Similarly, Bruce Vaughn, in his report for the *Congressional Research Service*, states that the Indo-Pacific is already 'the main theatre of strategic competition for the United States, where India is emerging as a key partner' (Vaughn, 2017). As Amitav Acharya warns, 'the American world order is not ending, but it is transforming into a multiplex order' (Acharya, 2014). This change opens up opportunities for India to strengthen its profile as an autonomous actor and for the EU to diversify its alliances beyond Washington and Beijing.

The central question guiding this work is the following: can India become a strategic partner of the European Union—and of Spain in particular—in the Indo-Pacific, in a context marked by Sino-American rivalry? The analysis is based on the premise that EU-India cooperation is at a turning point: the creation of the Trade and Technology Council, progress in trade negotiations and the strengthening of maritime security with operations such as ASPIDES offer tangible opportunities for a stronger strategic partnership.

This article is divided into eight sections. Following the introduction, it examines the doctrinal framework of Indian foreign policy (2) and its strategic projection (3), followed by an analysis of its rivalry with China (4) and its relations with the United States and the Quad (5). Next, it explores the relationship between India and the EU (6), with a special focus on technological and maritime cooperation, and assesses the specific implications for Spain (7). The article concludes with a forward-looking exercise on future scenarios (8) and some final reflections (9).

2 Indian foreign policy framework

2.1 From non-alignment to strategic autonomy

Since its independence in 1947, India has sought to maintain an autonomous position in the international system. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, it became one of the driving forces behind the Non-Aligned Movement, advocating active neutrality during the Cold War. The objective was twofold: to avoid subordination to either of the two blocs and, at the same time, to consolidate its room for manoeuvre on the international stage.

This policy reflected Nehru's conviction that India, as a young independent state, should project itself as a leader of the Global South, defending self-determination and cooperation among developing countries. During the 1950s and 1960s, the doctrine of non-alignment allowed India to maintain relations with both the United States and the USSR, although growing military and technological dependence on Moscow eventually tipped the balance.

Defeat in the war against China in 1962, followed by conflicts with Pakistan, reinforced the perception of vulnerability and the need to maintain multiple strategic options. In the 1970s and 1980s, under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, Indian foreign policy combined the rhetoric of non-alignment with a practice closer to the USSR, especially in the military sphere. However, the economic crisis of 1991 and the Soviet collapse forced New Delhi to redefine its global position.

In the 21st century, that legacy has evolved into the concept of strategic autonomy. Ian Hall notes that 'the Modi government has sought to combine India's traditional strategic autonomy with a new willingness to align selectively with like-minded partners' (Hall, 2019). This autonomy does not imply absolute neutrality, but rather pragmatic flexibility: New Delhi cooperates closely with Washington in areas such as defence and technology, maintains historical relations with Russia and manages its rivalry with China, all without fully committing to any of these poles.

As Tellis warns, 'India will find it difficult to emerge as a first-rate power if it fails to effectively manage the balance between strategic autonomy and cooperation with major powers' (Tellis, 2016). The challenge for Indian foreign policy therefore lies in keeping as many options open as possible, avoiding excessive dependence on a single partner without giving up the advantages of international cooperation. In this vein, Borreguero summarises that the priorities of Narendra Modi's government are to 'position the country as a world power in line with its economic and demographic weight, respond to China's rise and preserve strategic autonomy' (Borreguero, 2025). These goals encapsulate the evolution of Indian foreign policy towards a balance between selective cooperation and the assertion of independence.

2.2 Current doctrines: Act East Policy, SAGAR and The India Way

In recent decades, Indian foreign policy has crystallised into a series of doctrines that reflect both the continuity of its tradition of strategic autonomy and its desire to project itself as a major power.

The first of these is the Act East Policy, launched under the name Look East Policy under Narasimha Rao in 1991 and reinforced from 2014 under Modi, now under its current name. This framework constitutes India's approach to Southeast and East Asia, with the aim of diversifying alliances, increasing trade and participating more actively in Indo-Pacific multilateral forums. As Hall points out, 'the Act East Policy pursues both economic development and India's strategic projection towards East Asia' (Hall, 2019), underlining its dual economic and political-strategic nature.

Alongside this, the SAGAR (*Security and Growth for All in the Region*) concept, presented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, places the Indian Ocean at the centre of India's vision. SAGAR combines maritime security with development cooperation, projecting India as a provider of regional public goods. In the words of Pant and Lidarev, 'maritime governance has become the most critical dimension of India's foreign policy, especially in the Indian Ocean' (Pant and Lidarev, 2022). This emphasis responds to the perception that the Indian Ocean is not only India's vital space for projection, but also the main arena for strategic competition with China.

Finally, the third doctrine, set out in the book *The India Way* by the current Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, expresses the most contemporary view of this tradition. The author argues that Indian foreign policy should be characterised by greater international ambition, the pursuit of multiple options for cooperation, and the ability to leverage alliances without compromising its strategic independence (Jaishankar, 2020). This approach emphasises diplomatic flexibility and adaptability as guiding principles, insisting that India must maintain its autonomy in an international order marked by uncertainty and competition between major powers.

D'Ambrogio points out that this adaptability is also a challenge for the EU, as 'India has proven to be a pragmatic and selective partner, willing to cooperate on issues of mutual interest but reluctant to accept compromises that limit its sovereignty' (D'Ambrogio, 2025). This observation places Indian strategic autonomy as a key factor that conditions not only its foreign policy, but also the way it relates to other international actors.

2.3 *The relevance of the Indian Ocean in Indian foreign policy*

The Indian Ocean is India's natural sphere of influence and the core of its strategic ambitions. It is where its vital interests converge: energy supply routes, maritime trade and regional security. As Pant and Lidarev summarise, 'India's naval expansion is designed not only to counter China, but also to project itself as a provider of security in the Indo-Pacific' (Pant and Lidarev, 2022).

The CRS agrees, noting that 'China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean has intensified India's desire to expand its naval capabilities and consolidate regional alliances' (Vaughn, 2017). The perceived threat posed by China's growing presence in ports and bases in the region has reinforced India's conviction that its security and prosperity depend on effective control of key maritime routes.

For New Delhi, maritime security in the Indian Ocean is an essential component of its national security. As Pant and Lidarev point out, 'India has become more active in maritime governance, expanded its maritime space to include the Pacific, and sought closer cooperation in maritime governance with the United States and Japan' (Pant and Lidarev, 2022). Ninety per cent of its foreign trade and more than eighty per cent of its energy imports pass through these waters, making the surveillance of sea lines of communication (SLOC) a strategic priority. Hence, the strengthening of its naval presence and cooperation with regional partners not only seeks to balance

Chinese influence, but also to ensure the protection of its vital interests. In this sense, the SAGAR doctrine is not only a development initiative, but also a comprehensive security strategy that combines the defence of maritime routes with assistance to Indian Ocean island states.

This orientation has been consolidated through successive Indian naval doctrines. As Mboya and Arun recall, 'India published its first naval doctrine in 2004, subsequently revised in 2009 and 2015, under the title *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*'. The 2015 document stated that 'sea control is the central concept around which the Indian Navy is structured, and included surveillance of the main maritime passages in the Indian Ocean, from the Mozambique Channel to the Strait of Malacca' (Mboya & Arun, 2025). These doctrines reflect New Delhi's growing ambition to secure control of strategic access to the ocean and project power beyond its immediate coastline, including the development of nuclear-powered submarines as part of its deterrent triad.

This strategy was complemented in 2017 by the launch of Mission-Based Deployment, an initiative that maintains a permanent presence of naval units in seven areas of interest beyond its exclusive economic zone, providing continuous surveillance at key entry and exit points in the Indian Ocean. According to Mboya and Arun, this measure 'reflects India's willingness to ensure the security of maritime routes and strengthen its response capacity to any regional contingency' (Mboya and Arun, 2025), thus consolidating its role as a guarantor of stability in the Indo-Pacific space.

The Indian Ocean is therefore more than just a geographical space: it is the point where India's doctrines of strategic autonomy, development and maritime security converge. From this space, India aspires to consolidate itself as a central player in Indo-Pacific governance, with the capacity to articulate its own initiatives and reinforce its role in the regional balance of power.

Campos and Sengupta emphasise that 'the Indian Ocean has become the natural platform for India to project both its hard power, through its navy, and its soft power, through cooperation with small island states' (Campos and Sengupta, 2017). This dual vector—military and diplomatic—sums up India's ambition to combine the defence of its vital interests with the provision of regional public goods.

3 India's strategic projection

India's weight in the Indo-Pacific is largely based on its economic dynamism. According to the International Monetary Fund, 'India is projected to grow by 6.8% in 2025, remaining the fastest-growing economy among the major powers' (IMF, 2025). This performance contrasts with the slowdown in other emerging economies and gives New Delhi considerable room for manoeuvre in terms of regional influence.

India's ability to sustain high growth has direct implications for its international standing. A country with a population of over 1.4 billion, an expanding middle class and a dynamic domestic market, India is an attractive partner for investors

and strategic partners. Unlike China, whose economy is showing signs of structural slowdown, India projects an image of stability and dynamism, reinforcing its position as the engine of the Indo-Pacific. However, this image contrasts with a complex internal reality: the country continues to face insurgencies in several states, border tensions with Pakistan and China, and deep socio-economic inequalities. These fragilities limit its ability to translate its growth into institutional and social stability, making its rise a combination of remarkable strengths and persistent vulnerabilities.

3.1 Economy and technology as vectors of power

In addition to its growth, India has consolidated a thriving technological ecosystem in digitalisation, telecommunications and renewable energy. These developments not only strengthen its global competitiveness, but also make it a priority partner for the European Union, which is interested in diversifying supply chains and moving towards a sustainable energy transition. The creation of the EU–India Trade and Technology Council confirms that India's technological dynamism is now a central vector in the bilateral relationship.

Tellis warns, however, that 'economic growth alone does not guarantee global power status if it does not translate into effective strategic influence' (Tellis, 2016). This observation underscores that India must transform its economic achievements into instruments of political and diplomatic power in order to consolidate its role in international governance.

3.2 Military modernisation and naval ambition

The second pillar of India's projection is the modernisation of its military capabilities, particularly its naval capabilities. The SAGAR strategy, linked to maritime security in the Indian Ocean, has resulted in a significant expansion of the fleet and investments in port infrastructure. As Pant and Lidarev point out, 'India's naval expansion is designed not only to counter China, but also to project itself as a provider of security in the Indo-Pacific' (Pant and Lidarev, 2022).

Along the same lines, the CRS notes that India 'is steadily expanding its naval capabilities to project power in the Indian Ocean and beyond' (Vaughn, 2017). This modernisation responds both to the need to balance China's growing naval presence and to India's ambition to become a guarantor of regional security.

The commissioning of the INS Vikrant aircraft carrier in 2022 is a symbol of this ambition. Although it does not guarantee parity with the Chinese Navy, it does represent a decisive step towards consolidating India as a regional naval power, capable of operating in a maritime space that concentrates the planet's most critical energy supply routes.

India's military procurement policy reflects this trend: in addition to its close cooperation with Russia, New Delhi has diversified its suppliers, including agreements with France, the United States and, more recently, Spain in the framework of the

Airbus C295 contract. This pluralism in its sources of armament is consistent with the doctrine of strategic autonomy, avoiding excessive dependence on a single partner.

3.3 *Connectivity as a strategic instrument*

The third pillar of India's projection is connectivity. In 2023, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced, an initiative backed by India, the European Union, the United States and partners in the Middle East. The corridor seeks to link Indian ports with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and, ultimately, Europe, combining rail and sea transport.

Recent analyses highlight the transformative potential of IMEC for Eurasian connectivity, conditional on stability in the Middle East (Hussain and Shafer, 2025). The corridor seeks to link Indian ports with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and, ultimately, Europe, combining rail and maritime transport. For India, the project represents a strategic alternative to China's New Silk Roads, as well as a means of strengthening its ties with Brussels and Washington.

The success of IMEC is, however, contingent on stability in the Middle East and the willingness of European partners to invest in long-term infrastructure. In this regard, Spain's participation, through its Mediterranean and Atlantic ports, opens up the possibility of positioning itself as a logistics hub in the global connectivity network. This dimension directly connects the Indian strategy with Spanish and European interests, reinforcing the interdependence between both sides.

3.4 *India as a leading power*

Beyond these pillars, India's strategic projection responds to a broader ambition: to consolidate itself as a 'leading power', a concept explicitly promoted by the Modi government and reflected in the work of its Foreign Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, *The India Way* (2020). With this notion, New Delhi aims to leave behind the label of 'developing power' and assert itself as an actor with its own voice in shaping the international order. This is an official narrative that combines the aspiration for greater global responsibility with the defence of strategic autonomy. This idea is shared by Ashley J. Tellis, who states that 'India aspires to move beyond being perceived as a developing power and become a leading power with its own voice in shaping the international order' (Tellis, 2016). This transition involves taking on greater responsibilities in providing regional security, combating climate change and global economic governance.

The Indian narrative insists that its rise is not intended to replicate hegemonic models, but rather to offer an approach based on inclusion and respect for diversity. In this sense, India seeks to project itself as a defender of a rules-based international order that is compatible with the autonomy of states. The convergence of values and objectives—multilateralism, maritime security, energy transition—creates fertile ground for strengthening cooperation.

4 Rivalry with China

Tensions between India and China have historical roots dating back to Indian independence and the consolidation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The 1962 border war, triggered by disputes in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, was a humiliating defeat for India and profoundly marked India's perception of its northern neighbour. Since then, the territorial dispute has remained unresolved, with a border—the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—that continues to be a constant source of friction.

Subsequent episodes, such as the Doklam crisis in 2017, where Indian and Chinese troops faced off for seventy-three days over the construction of a road in an area disputed with Bhutan, confirmed that the Himalayan border is a powder keg. The clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, which left at least twenty Indian soldiers dead and an unknown number of Chinese casualties, was the most serious clash in decades and profoundly damaged mutual trust. Since then, both sides have reinforced their military deployment on the LAC, increasing the risk of further incidents.

The CRS summarises this dynamic by pointing out that border disputes have systematically undermined bilateral stability and fuelled strategic mistrust between India and China (Vaughn, 2017). In this sense, territorial disputes are not merely a border issue, but a structural factor that conditions the entire bilateral relationship.

4.1 *Maritime competition in the Indian Ocean*

Beyond the Himalayan mountains, the rivalry is particularly intense in the maritime domain. India considers the Indian Ocean to be its natural sphere of influence and security, while China perceives it as a vital corridor for securing energy access from the Middle East and Africa.

In this context, China's strategy of establishing a network of ports and infrastructure in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives has often been described as a 'string of pearls' intended to encircle India in its own vital space (Pant and Lidarev, 2022). This perception reinforces the idea that China's maritime presence is not only commercial but also strategic.

According to the CRS, 'China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean is manifested through port and infrastructure projects—and its first military base in the region—which New Delhi perceives as a challenge to its maritime position' (Vaughn, 2017). Furthermore, it warns that the rivalry between China and India could drive faster development and deployment of naval assets on both sides (Vaughn, 2017), illustrating that maritime competition translates not only into infrastructure, but also into a naval race that threatens to intensify in the coming years.

India's response has been to strengthen its naval projection through the SAGAR doctrine and through maritime surveillance cooperation agreements with island states such as the Seychelles, Mauritius and the Maldives. Furthermore, the commissioning

of the INS Vikrant aircraft carrier in 2022 reflects New Delhi's desire to consolidate a projection capability that deters China and, at the same time, projects India as a provider of regional security.

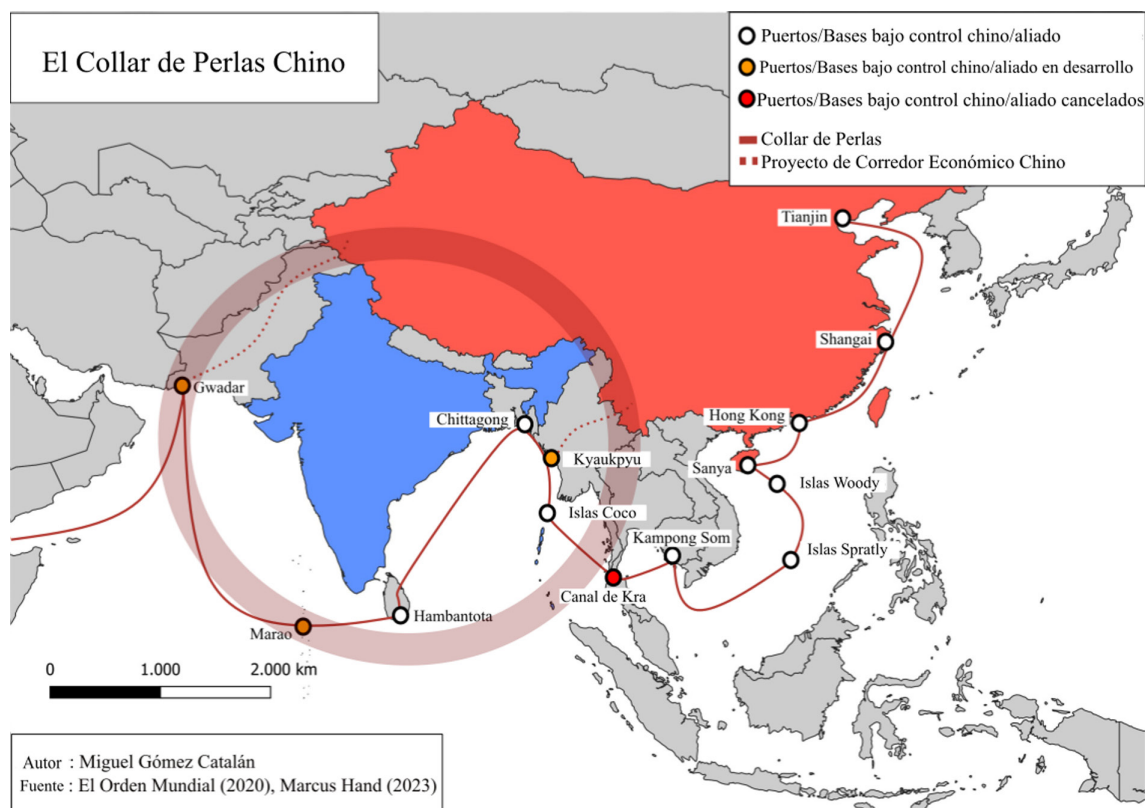


Figure2 . India-China strategic competition in the Indian Ocean: the so-called 'Double Hook Strategy'. Source: Gómez, 2024. Reproduced for academic purposes, in accordance with the use permitted by the Ministry of Defence

China's presence in the Indian Ocean is the main strategic challenge for India. Traditionally, the United States has assumed the role of guarantor of security on the high seas, but both India and China are increasingly competing for influence in the region, increasing friction and the risk of conflict (Mboya and Arun, 2025). This rivalry is reflected in the expansion of the so-called string of pearls, a network of ports and infrastructure developed by Beijing to secure energy supplies and consolidate its trade routes.

According to Mboya and Arun:

'China emphasises the commercial importance of these ports, but also uses them as a contingency measure against possible obstruction by India, Japan or the United States; these states consider them part of the 'string of pearls' strategy, through which China seeks to protect its trade routes and ultimately dominate the Indian Ocean' (Mboya and Arun, 2025).

This dynamic explains the strengthening of India's naval presence and its cooperation with like-minded powers such as the United States, Japan and Australia within the framework of the Quad, with the aim of counteracting Beijing's influence and maintaining regional balance. As Borreguero points out, in recent years a dynamic cycle of rivalry and strategic readjustments has taken shape in the Indo-Pacific: while

Washington has strengthened its alliances with Asian partners, Beijing has sought to unilaterally change the status quo through its naval expansion and infrastructure construction in the Indian Ocean. This process has prompted middle powers such as India to intensify their defence cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia, thereby strengthening the regional security framework (Borreguero, 2025).

4.2 *Scenarios for diplomatic thaw*

Despite this rivalry, New Delhi is not giving up on maintaining channels of dialogue with Beijing. As Jaishankar states, ‘our policy towards China must be one of simultaneous engagement and competition’ (Jaishankar, 2020). This duality reflects the need to manage tensions without ruling out areas of selective cooperation, especially in multilateral forums such as the BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Furthermore, analysts such as C. Raja Mohan have pointed out that India cannot base its strategy solely on confrontation: ‘India’s strategy towards China relies not only on US support, but increasingly on cooperation with Europe and other Indo-Pacific partners’ (Mohan, 2023). This approach suggests that the EU can play a significant role in New Delhi’s strategic balance vis-à-vis Beijing.

4.3 *The Pakistan factor and the Belt and Road Initiative*

China, in alliance with Pakistan, is one of the main strategic challenges for New Delhi. The construction of the *China–Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC), part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connects western China with the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, crossing territories in Kashmir that India claims as its own. From India’s perspective, this corridor not only constitutes a violation of its sovereignty, but also strengthens the strategic alliance between Beijing and Islamabad.

Campos and Sengupta agree on this assessment, highlighting that the convergence between China and Pakistan on infrastructure and defence projects limits India’s strategic room for manoeuvre and accentuates its need to diversify alliances (Campos and Sengupta, 2017). This triangular partnership between Beijing and Islamabad therefore poses a structural challenge for New Delhi, forcing it to intensify its ties with external actors—including the United States, the European Union, and regional powers such as Japan and Australia—to balance the growing pressure in its immediate neighbourhood.

The CRS reinforces this view by noting that:

‘Analysts believe that the rivalry between China and India could accelerate the development and deployment of naval capabilities on both sides, and in the region as a whole. This geographical expansion of strategic competition between China and India may increase strategic ties between the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean regions, creating a broader and more interactive Indo-Pacific, which would include greater competition for energy and other resources across the Indian Ocean’ (Vaughn, 2017).

This statement shows that the rivalry with Pakistan and the BRI not only affects bilateral security, but also has regional implications, shaping an increasingly integrated and competitive Indo-Pacific.

5 India-United States and the Quad

Donald Trump's recent election victory opens a new chapter in US policy towards the Indo-Pacific. According to Borreguero, there is a bipartisan consensus that guarantees the continuity of the strategy of containment against China, albeit with a more confrontational tone that favours India (Borreguero, 2025). The relationship between the two countries has undergone a profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, New Delhi remained the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, maintaining an ambiguous stance between the blocs, but with a practical inclination towards Moscow, on which it depended for arms supplies and diplomatic support. Washington, for its part, perceived India as an uncomfortable partner, too independent in its foreign policy and often critical of US strategy in Asia. As Borreguero points out, the composition of the presidential cabinet confirms this trend, with figures such as Marco Rubio and Mike Waltz—'all of them recognised "hawks" on issues related to China and staunch defenders of India—heralding a hardening of the rivalry with Beijing in favour of India' (Borreguero, 2025).

The end of the Cold War opened a window of opportunity for reconciliation. Under the Bill Clinton administration, the first attempts at rapprochement took place, although India's nuclear tests in 1998 led to strong international tensions and sanctions. However, in the early 2000s, the Bush administration recognised India as a key strategic partner in Asia. The 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement symbolised this shift, recognising India as a *de facto* nuclear power and laying the foundations for closer cooperation on energy, trade and security.

Subsequently, the Obama administration reinforced this trend, declaring India a 'global strategic partner' in 2015. Trump continued the line of bilateral strengthening, albeit with a more transactional approach, emphasising the importance of balancing the trade balance. Under Biden, cooperation has been institutionalised within the framework of the Quad and expanded to areas such as climate change, global health and, above all, technology. This assessment reflects the growing strategic convergence between the two democracies, but also the tensions arising from India's insistence on preserving its strategic autonomy.

5.1 *Cooperation in defence and security*

One of the most dynamic areas of the bilateral relationship has been defence. Since 2016, India has been considered a Major Defence Partner of the United States, which facilitates access to advanced military technology and promotes interoperability between the two armed forces. The Malabar joint exercises, which also include Japan and Australia, have intensified, symbolising India's willingness to integrate into security mechanisms with democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, Indo-US

cooperation in the maritime domain is particularly relevant, as it helps to strengthen India's capacity in the face of China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

Likewise, nuclear and space cooperation has advanced significantly since the 2005 agreement. Collaboration on satellites, missile defence and maritime surveillance is part of a shared strategy to preserve freedom of navigation and prevent Beijing's hegemony over trade routes.

5.2 The Quad as a security forum

The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), comprising India, the United States, Japan and Australia, is one of the most important forums for understanding Indo-US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Reactivated in 2017, the Quad is presented as a flexible mechanism for consultation between maritime democracies with the aim of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Tourangbam and Vijayakumar emphasise that the litmus test for India in the Quad is the extent to which it can maintain its strategic autonomy while cooperating with like-minded powers on maritime security and technology (Tourangbam and Vijayakumar, 2021). For New Delhi, the Quad is both an opportunity to strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean and a challenge, as it implies greater alignment with the United States vis-à-vis China, which could limit its room for manoeuvre.

The CRS adds that 'although the Quad is not a formal alliance, its growing institutionalisation reflects a clear effort to counter Chinese assertiveness in the region' (Vaughn, 2017). This characterisation illustrates India's dilemma: to benefit from the forum without becoming caught up in a logic of bipolar confrontation.

5.3 Technological cooperation and the iCET agreement

Although security is central, the economic dimension of the Indo-US relationship has also grown. Bilateral trade reached USD 191 billion in 2023, making the United States India's largest trading partner. US investments in sectors such as technology, renewable energy and digital services reinforce this interdependence, while the Indian diaspora in the United States—more than 4.5 million people—acts as a cultural and economic bridge between the two countries.

This convergence reflects what Jaishankar calls 'the Indian way': cooperating closely with the United States without losing autonomy. As he himself states, India must strengthen its ties with Washington, but always while preserving its margin of autonomy (Jaishankar, 2020).

In 2023, both governments announced the Critical and Emerging Technologies Initiative (iCET), aimed at deepening collaboration in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, 5G and 6G networks, as well as space and quantum defence. According to the joint statement from the White House, India and the United States launched the Critical and Emerging Technologies Initiative (iCET) with the aim of strengthening technological cooperation and supply chains (White House, 2023).

This effort responds both to Washington's interest in diversifying technological production away from dependence on China and to India's goal of establishing itself as a global innovation hub. For the European Union, the iCET poses both a challenge and an opportunity: on the one hand, the risk of falling behind in the face of closer Indo-US cooperation; on the other, the possibility of linking up to these value chains through triangular partnerships.

5.4 *Strategic autonomy and limits of alignment*

Despite the strengthening of the relationship, India remains reluctant to fully commit to the US strategy of containing China. Jaishankar insists that strategic autonomy is non-negotiable; it is in the DNA of Indian foreign policy (Jaishankar, 2020). Hence, even within the framework of the Quad, New Delhi stresses that its participation does not imply a formal military alliance, but rather a flexible mechanism for cooperation. Tourangbam and Vijayakumar (2021) interpret this ambivalence as the essence of Indian foreign policy: to take advantage of the opportunities offered by partial alignment with Washington, without giving up its room for manoeuvre or its historical tradition of independence.

The Indo-US relationship is shaping up to be one of the pillars of the Indo-Pacific architecture in the coming years. Convergence on maritime security, defence technology and connectivity offers fertile ground for cooperation. However, differences over Russia, energy and the degree of confrontation with China will continue to set structural limits.

In this context, the EU and Spain can play a complementary role. By strengthening cooperation with India, Brussels and Madrid can prevent the Indo-American relationship from becoming an exclusive axis, contributing to the diversification of New Delhi's alliances and reinforcing European strategic autonomy.

6 India and the European Union

Relations between India and the European Union (EU) have progressed unevenly since the two sides established a strategic partnership in 2004. For years, cooperation was marked by unfulfilled expectations: political dialogue lacked tangible results and trade negotiations were bogged down by regulatory differences. However, the last decade has seen a significant shift, driven by Brussels' desire to diversify its partners in Asia and India's interest in consolidating its global reach. This rapprochement is based on shared values and objectives. As highlighted in the *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a new EU-India Strategic Agenda*, 'the EU and India are pluralistic democracies committed to strategic autonomy, economic resilience and international stability' (European Commission and High Representative, 2025).

From India's perspective, cooperation with the EU in the Indo-Pacific revolves around maritime security, connectivity and the strengthening of a rules-based international order, areas in which New Delhi sees Europe as a complementary rather

than a competitive partner. The Indian Council of World Affairs has already pointed out that this convergence of interests should be directed towards specific projects in maritime governance, sustainable infrastructure and multilateral diplomacy, thus anticipating the new strategic impetus after 2021 (Pandey, 2020).

Enrico D'Ambrogio, a member of the European Parliament's Research Service, notes that EU-India relations have been below their potential and now need a new impetus (D'Ambrogio, 2025). This observation explains the willingness of both sides to relaunch the strategic dialogue, which had been interrupted for years by trade disagreements and divergences on climate change and human rights.

Beyond these dynamics, the European approach to the Indo-Pacific responds to a structural pattern characteristic of the Union's external action. As Jean-Loup Samaan points out, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy 'in many ways reflects the broader European strategy: it projects the free trade-based model of governance abroad, while avoiding involvement in power politics' (Samaan, 2024). This approach, focused on promoting economic interdependence and multilateral regulation, conditions Brussels' ability to act as a fully competitive geopolitical actor in an environment marked by strategic rivalries. For India, this characteristic is a fundamental element in assessing both the potential and the limitations of the European Union as a strategic partner in Asia.

This European approach, characterised by an external projection based on rules and free trade, has been described by Samaan as an extension of the EU's internal logic, which is more inclined to avoid power politics than to take on roles of strategic competition. From this perspective, the EU even refrains from explicitly designating China as a threat, preferring to maintain a cooperative rhetoric befitting a 'normative power' (Samaan, 2024). This approach explains part of the gap between Indian expectations and the EU's actual capacity to play a security role comparable to that of the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

The EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific is a milestone in this rapprochement. The document places the region as a strategic priority for Brussels and highlights India as one of its key partners, both for its demographic and economic weight and for its role in regional stability (European Commission, 2021). In this way, Brussels recognised the need to look beyond its immediate neighbourhood and project itself towards the most economically and geopolitically dynamic region of the 21st century. The *Joint Communication* confirms this role by stating that 'the EU's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region is closely aligned with India's role as a key pillar of stability' (European Commission and High Representative, 2025).

In Indian literature, the Indo-Pacific is seen as the main arena for contemporary geo-economic and geo-strategic competition, driven largely by China's rise as a major power and its growing maritime presence. As Barrech and Mukhtar point out, 'the Indo-Pacific region has become a new chessboard of constantly changing geo-economic, geopolitical and geomilitary dynamics' (Barrech and Mukhtar, 2021). This interpretation reinforces India's perception that European involvement in the Indo-Pacific is driven both by economic interests and by strategic considerations linked to its rivalry with Beijing.

6.1 The trade challenge: the BTIA and economic cooperation

One of the main obstacles in EU-India relations has been the negotiation of a Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA), which began in 2007 and was suspended in 2013 due to disagreements on tariffs, services and intellectual property. The EU was pushing for greater openness of the Indian market in sectors such as automobiles and alcoholic beverages, while India was demanding broader access to the European market for services and labour mobility.

For almost a decade, negotiations remained frozen, fuelling the perception that the strategic partnership lacked substance. However, in 2022, both sides agreed to relaunch the process, integrating trade negotiations into a broader framework that includes cooperation on supply chains, energy transition and digitalisation.

The CRS emphasises that these differences reflect India's strategic autonomy: New Delhi is reluctant to commit to agreements that it perceives as restrictive to its economic sovereignty (Vaughn, 2017). Even so, the relaunch of negotiations reflects a mutual recognition that economic cooperation is indispensable if the political and security partnership is to be consolidated.

6.2 The Trade and Technology Council (TTC)

The creation of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in 2022 has marked a qualitative leap in bilateral relations. This mechanism, inspired by the one that already exists with the United States, allows for policy coordination in three key areas: trade, supply chains and digitalisation; emerging technologies, including telecommunications; and security, with a particular focus on cyber risks. Dr Himani Pant, in an article in the ICWA (Indian Council of World Affairs), emphasises that the TTC marks a 'milestone' in EU-India relations and that its objective is to coordinate common responses in trade, trusted technologies and security, with three working groups on strategic technologies and digital connectivity, clean energy and value chain resilience (Pant, 2023).

As Samaan points out, the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy takes a much broader approach than the US strategy, articulated in seven priority areas that combine security, prosperity and digital governance (Samaan, 2024). This breadth explains why the TTC has become the main instrument for advancing technological cooperation between the two parties.

The joint statement following the second TTC meeting in 2025 states that 'the EU and India are committed to deepening their cooperation on artificial intelligence, semiconductors and energy transition' (European Commission, 2025). These priorities reflect a shared interest in reducing technological dependence on China and strengthening the resilience of global value chains.

In this regard, NITI Aayog points out that nearly 70% of international trade is based on global value chains, in which the electronics sector plays a central role. For New Delhi, strengthening this participation is essential to move towards a more

innovative economy that is less dependent on Asian production centres. The agency itself stresses that the development of the electronics sector is ‘a cornerstone of India’s economic strategy’, driven by investment in infrastructure, technical training and reforms aimed at consolidating a competitive and sustainable industrial ecosystem (NITI Aayog, 2023).

The 2025 *Joint Communication* further emphasises that ‘a flagship example of this strategic partnership is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)’, designed to ‘diversify trade routes, reduce strategic dependencies and promote resilient supply chains’ (European Commission and High Representative, 2025). For the EU, the TTC is an opportunity to diversify its alliances beyond Washington. For India, it is recognition of its status as a global technology partner, reinforcing its aspiration to become an innovation hub in the Indo-Pacific.

6.3 *Maritime security: ASPIDES, ATALANTA and India’s role*

Beyond trade and technology, maritime security has become a key area of cooperation. The EU has a consolidated presence in the Indian Ocean through Operation Atalanta, which aims to combat piracy in Somalia. Since 2024, this has been complemented by Operation ASPIDES, whose mandate is to ‘safeguard freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf, in close coordination with international partners’ (Council of the EU, 2024).

These operations provide a basis for intensifying cooperation with India, whose interest in the Indian Ocean is both security-related and strategic prestige-related. Enrico D’Ambrogio notes that ‘the EU and India are beginning to see each other as indispensable partners in the Indo-Pacific’ (D’Ambrogio, 2025). The Joint Communication reinforces this orientation by stating that ‘the EU intends to expand operational cooperation with the Indian Navy, building on the joint exercises conducted in June 2025, with the aim of improving interoperability and maritime security’ (European Commission and High Representative, 2025). This assessment suggests that, although cooperation is still in its infancy, the objective conditions exist for moving towards a deeper partnership in maritime security.

However, as Samaan points out, Europe’s capacity to influence maritime security in the Indo-Pacific remains limited. Although initiatives such as Atalanta, ASPIDES and CRIMARIO contribute to shaping the regional architecture, their budgetary and operational scale is small, which places the EU in a role that is fundamentally oriented towards capacity-building rather than power projection (Samaan, 2024). For India, this difference is a key factor: it appreciates European cooperation, but does not see it as a guarantor of security comparable to the United States or Japan.

From India’s perspective, maritime cooperation with the European Union takes on a more explicit strategic dimension. Barrech and Mukhtar emphasise that the inclusion of specific clauses on the Indian and Pacific Oceans in bilateral roadmaps reflects the convergence of interests in preserving freedom of navigation and

maritime security, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Both authors also highlight that ‘both the European Union and India perceive China’s assertiveness, political influence and economic investments [...] as a serious threat to their geopolitical and geo-economic interests’, which has prompted greater cooperation in areas such as Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) (Barrech and Mukhtar, 2021).

6.4 *Convergence on climate and digitalisation*

Another area of convergence is the fight against climate change. India is the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, but also one of the countries most vulnerable to global warming. The EU, for its part, seeks to extend the impact of its Green Deal beyond Europe. This creates fertile ground for joint projects in renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable mobility.

At the same time, digitalisation is opening up new opportunities. Brussels and New Delhi share concerns about the dominance of large US and Chinese technology companies and are seeking to strengthen digital sovereignty. The EU brings expertise in data regulation and privacy protection, while India offers a dynamic market with one of the fastest digitalisation rates in the world. The TTC thus becomes the ideal vehicle for articulating these synergies.

Despite progress, significant obstacles remain. Trade differences remain deep, and the EU must balance its Asian agenda with the urgencies arising from the war in Ukraine and instability in the Mediterranean. For its part, India is reluctant to accept compromises that limit its autonomy, maintaining a diversification strategy that includes Russia and Iran.

Added to these limitations are internal differences within the Union itself. Samaan stresses that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is the result of a fragile consensus among the twenty-seven Member States, whose perceptions of China and Europe’s role in Asia differ significantly. While figures such as Von der Leyen have adopted a more critical stance towards Beijing, France is promoting a ‘balancing power’ strategy that seeks to partially distance itself from the United States (Samaan, 2023). These tensions, coupled with the classic duality between the EU and NATO, reduce European visibility and credibility in the region, affecting India’s perception of Europe as a strategic actor.

From an Indian perspective, the partnership with the EU offers an opportunity to diversify alliances and reduce excessive dependence on traditional partners. Barrech and Mukhtar point out that strengthening diplomatic ties and maritime cooperation with Europe can broaden India’s strategic room for manoeuvre. However, the authors also warn of European structural limitations, stressing that ‘the European Union appears to be the weakest party in protecting its infrastructure due to the fragility of its maritime security’ (Barrech and Mukhtar, 2021). This ambivalence reinforces the perception of Europe as a complementary, but not substitute, partner in regional security, especially when compared to the United States.

Nevertheless, the potential for cooperation is clear. Convergence on maritime security, a shared commitment to diversifying supply chains and mutual interest in technological development offer fertile ground for consolidating an EU-India strategic partnership. For Spain, this framework represents an opportunity to project its interests in the Indo-Pacific through Brussels, avoiding the need for an individual policy that would be difficult to sustain.

7 Implications for Spain

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Spain in October 2024 marked a turning point in bilateral relations. The Spain-India Joint Declaration, signed in Madrid, elevated relations to the level of a strategic partnership and established a roadmap for the coming years. The text states that 'both countries reaffirm their commitment to strengthening cooperation in defence, renewable energy and digital transformation' (Government of Spain—La Moncloa, 2024). This declaration demonstrates the willingness of both capitals to move beyond *ad hoc* diplomatic exchanges and build a stable framework for cooperation.

The importance of this document lies in the fact that it aligns Spanish interests with the EU's strategic diversification policy and, at the same time, responds to India's priorities in terms of security, energy and technological development. The strengthening of bilateral relations should therefore not be seen as an isolated move, but rather as part of Spain's strategy to integrate into European policy towards the Indo-Pacific.

7.1 Industrial and defence cooperation: the Airbus C295 case

One of the areas where Spain-India cooperation has been most clearly evident is the defence sector. In 2021, India formalised the acquisition of fifty-six Airbus C295 aircraft in a contract worth €2.5 billion. The agreement provides for forty of the aircraft to be manufactured in India through a consortium with Tata Advanced Systems, as part of the Make in India initiative. According to Airbus, 'this contract will boost the Make in India initiative through a partnership with Tata Advanced Systems' (Airbus, 2021).

For Spain, this contract not only reinforces the international profile of its aeronautical industry, but also consolidates a strategic relationship of trust with New Delhi in a particularly sensitive area. The case of the C295 illustrates how bilateral cooperation can generate mutual benefits: India obtains technology transfer and strengthens its defence industry, while Spain positions itself as a reliable partner capable of adding value in a highly competitive sector.

This precedent opens the door to future joint projects, both in aeronautics and in other sectors of the military industry, including naval and cyber defence systems. At the political level, it also contributes to positioning Spain as a valid partner within the European strategy of strategic autonomy, reinforcing its credibility in Brussels.

7.2 *Opportunities in energy, digitalisation and green transition*

Beyond defence, the 2024 Joint Declaration also explicitly refers to renewable energy and digital transformation as priority areas for cooperation. Spain has consolidated experience in the development of clean energy—particularly wind and solar energy—and in the management of smart electricity grids, while India faces the challenge of meeting growing energy demand while reducing its dependence on coal.

The green transition therefore offers fertile ground for joint projects in renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable mobility. Added to this is digitalisation, another pillar of the strategic partnership. Spanish technology companies could benefit from the vast Indian market in sectors such as cybersecurity, fintech and smart cities, while India can take advantage of European know-how in digital regulation and data protection.

7.3 *Cultural and educational cooperation*

A less visible but equally important aspect is cultural and academic cooperation. India is home to one of the most dynamic student diasporas in the world, and Spain can position itself as an attractive destination in areas such as the humanities, social sciences and engineering. University mobility programmes, joint research agreements and the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language offer fertile ground for strengthening ties beyond the economy and defence.

This educational and cultural dimension has also been highlighted in Indian literature. Barrech and Mukhtar point out that the EU-India roadmap envisages strengthening cultural diplomacy and increasing academic mobility through programmes such as Erasmus and greater participation by European institutions in academic activities in India. These exchanges help to consolidate a social and cultural basis for the strategic partnership, complementing advances in trade, technology and security (Barrech and Mukhtar, 2021).

Similarly, the rise of Indian culture in Europe—through cinema, literature and gastronomy—can find a space for two-way exchange in Spain. This type of cultural cooperation helps to strengthen mutual perception and consolidate the strategic partnership on a more human and lasting level.

In this context of bilateral rapprochement, both governments have officially declared 2026 as the ‘Dual Year’ of India and Spain, with the aim of promoting cultural exchange, tourism and cooperation in artificial intelligence. This initiative seeks to strengthen ties between the two countries through cultural events, exhibitions and exchange programmes that highlight the heritage and international profile of both societies. It also aims to boost tourism through joint campaigns, the promotion of direct air links and the reciprocal promotion of tourist destinations. At the same time, the Dual Year envisages intensified collaboration in research, development and implementation of artificial intelligence in sectors such as health, education and industry. Within this framework, bilateral economic relations are also gaining

greater visibility, with a trade volume of close to ten billion dollars annually in areas such as clean energy, drones, the railway sector and space exploration (Shukla, 2025). Although this initiative does not fall directly within the scope of defence, it does provide a relevant political and symbolic framework for understanding the current dynamism of Indo-Spanish relations, complementing the strategic cooperation described in other areas.

7.4 Spain and connectivity: IMEC as an opportunity

Spain's international projection also benefits from its geographical position. As a natural gateway between Europe, Africa and America, the country can become an essential node in the *India–Middle East–Europe Corridor* (IMEC).

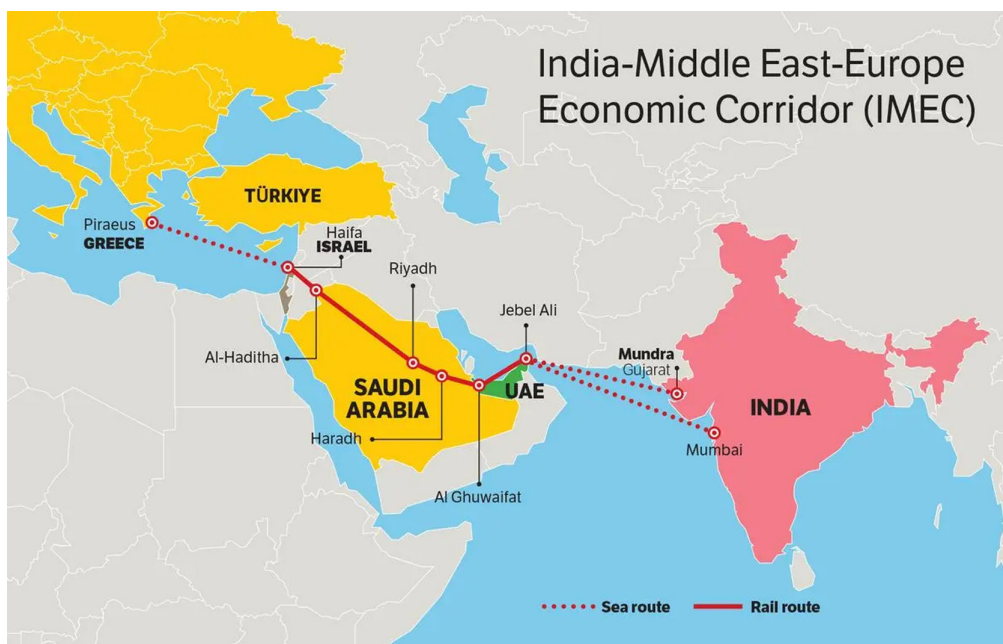


Figure 3. Route of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). *Source:* Kumar and Vivek, (2024). Image reproduced for academic purposes (fair use). All rights belong to The Diplomatist

Hussain and Shafer emphasise that this corridor has ‘the potential to alter regional connectivity dynamics, offering India and its Western partners a strategic alternative to the Belt and Road’ (Hussain and Shafer, 2025).

In this context, the Spanish ports of Valencia, Algeciras and Barcelona could play a key role as connection points for goods and energy from the corridor to Europe. Furthermore, participation in the IMEC would allow Spain to strengthen its position within European policy towards the Indo-Pacific and project its influence in global logistics chains.

Despite these advances, various analyses warn that Spain still lacks a defined strategy towards India and the Indo-Pacific. In 2017, the Elcano Royal Institute noted that Spain has shown growing interest in the Indo-Pacific, but still lacks its own strategy towards India (Campos Palarea and Sengupta, 2017). This shortcoming limits Spain's ability to fully exploit the potential of the bilateral relationship and exposes it to excessive dependence on EU common policy.

The absence of a clear strategy translates into low visibility for Spain in New Delhi and a lack of institutionalised cooperation mechanisms beyond specific projects. Compared to countries such as France and Germany, which have more solid roadmaps in Asia, Spain risks falling behind at a time when the Indo-Pacific has become the most economically and geopolitically dynamic region in the world.

The partnership with India offers Spain an opportunity to strengthen its position within European strategic autonomy. By actively engaging in EU-India cooperation, Madrid can present itself as a player that contributes to diversifying European alliances and strengthening resilience in critical sectors. Furthermore, Spain's geographical position—as a gateway to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean—places it in a privileged position to serve as a logistics hub in the connectivity corridors between Asia, the Middle East and Europe, including the *India–Middle East–Europe Corridor* (IMEC).

In this regard, cooperation with India should not be limited to the bilateral level, but should be articulated as part of a Spanish strategy for integration into the EU's Indo-Pacific policy. This would allow Madrid to gain influence in Brussels, take advantage of complementarities with partners such as France, and strengthen its international profile in the areas of maritime security, trade, and technology.

8 Future scenarios (2025-2028)

Any analysis of relations between India, the European Union and Spain in the Indo-Pacific context would be incomplete without some forward thinking. The dynamic nature of the region, marked by geopolitical rivalries, economic transitions and security challenges, makes it essential to project possible scenarios for the next three to five years. These scenarios are not definitive predictions, but rather reference frameworks that allow us to identify risks, opportunities and courses of action for Spanish and European foreign policy.

In the most favourable scenario, India and the EU manage to consolidate a comprehensive strategic partnership based on three pillars: maritime security, trade and technological innovation. The effective functioning of the Trade and Technology Council enables progress in areas such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors and energy transition, reducing both parties' dependence on China. At the same time, cooperation on maritime security is intensified through joint naval exercises and interoperability in operations such as ATALANTA and ASPIDES, strengthening Europe's presence in the Indian Ocean.

For Spain, this scenario opens up the possibility of positioning itself as a key partner in the Mediterranean, linking the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC) with its ports and logistics platforms. Likewise, defence cooperation, already inaugurated with the Airbus C295 contract, could be extended to other industrial sectors. The international projection of the Spanish economy would be reinforced, while Madrid would gain influence in the design of European policy towards the Indo-Pacific.

In a more moderate scenario, EU–India cooperation progresses, but unevenly. The TTC yields positive results in some areas, such as digitalisation and cooperation on

cybersecurity, but encounters difficulties on trade and regulatory issues. Coordination on maritime security improves, although without achieving full operational integration.

India remains wary of any commitment that could limit its strategic autonomy, while the EU maintains divergent priorities in its eastern (Ukraine) and southern (Mediterranean and Sahel) neighbourhoods. In this context, Spain makes progress in energy and technological cooperation, but the bilateral relationship with India remains symbolic rather than transformative.

This scenario reflects the inertia of international relations: tangible but limited progress, which consolidates India's relevance to the EU without making it a fully strategic partner. In this context, Samaan's diagnosis of the EU's structural limitations as a security actor in the Indo-Pacific reinforces the idea that the partnership with India can only be fully consolidated if Europe simultaneously advances in strengthening its real strategic autonomy, not just declarative autonomy (Samaan, 2021).

The most negative scenario envisages an escalation of the rivalry between the United States and China, with knock-on effects in the Indo-Pacific. An escalation in the Taiwan Strait or a new border confrontation between India and China would force New Delhi to prioritise military security over economic and technological cooperation with the EU. In this context, India would strengthen its ties with Washington through the Quad and relegate its relationship with Europe to a secondary level.

For the EU, this scenario would represent a setback in its aspiration to become a relevant player in Asia, reinforcing the perception of dependence on the United States. Spain, in this context, would be particularly affected: its incipient strategic partnership with India would be put on hold, limiting opportunities in defence, energy and digitalisation.

This scenario illustrates the risks of the EU-India relationship becoming subordinate to external dynamics, highlighting the importance of building solid and autonomous cooperation before geopolitical tensions reach a point of no return.

The prospective exercise shows that, although the optimistic scenario offers an attractive horizon, the most likely outcome is a combination of the intermediate and critical scenarios. The key for Spain and the EU will be to focus on resilience: strengthening ties with India in strategic sectors, consolidating maritime cooperation and maintaining the diplomatic flexibility necessary to manage Sino-US rivalry.

Ultimately, the future of the EU-India relationship will depend as much on the political will of both parties as on their ability to adapt to a volatile regional environment. For Spain, the challenge will be to transform the opportunities identified in the 2024 Joint Declaration into concrete and sustainable projects, so that the strategic partnership with India does not remain mere declarations of intent.

9 Conclusions

The analysis carried out throughout this paper allows us to draw several conclusions about India's position in the Indo-Pacific and its potential as a strategic partner for the European Union and Spain.

Firstly, India has established itself as a key player in the region's balance of power. Its demographic and economic weight, coupled with a foreign policy characterised by strategic autonomy, make it a central pivot in an increasingly multipolar international order. As demonstrated by the doctrines of the Act East Policy, SAGAR and The India Way, New Delhi has managed to articulate a coherent narrative that combines tradition and pragmatism: preserving its strategic independence while taking advantage of opportunities for cooperation with various players.

Secondly, India's strategic projection is based on three pillars that bring it closer to Europe: sustained economic growth (confirmed by IMF projections), the modernisation of its military capabilities, especially naval capabilities, and the promotion of major connectivity projects such as the *India–Middle East–Europe Corridor*. These elements not only reinforce India's autonomy vis-à-vis China, but also make it an attractive partner for the EU in terms of trade, security and technological development.

Thirdly, rivalry with China will continue to shape India's security environment in the coming years. Border disputes in the Himalayas and maritime competition in the Indian Ocean limit its room for manoeuvre, forcing it to maintain a dual policy of confrontation and cooperation with Beijing. For the EU, this situation reinforces the need to offer New Delhi a stable framework for collaboration that is not subordinate to the dynamics of Sino-American confrontation.

Fourthly, the relationship with the United States and the Quad is both an opportunity and a challenge for India. Cooperation in defence, technology and innovation has intensified—with initiatives such as iCET—but strategic autonomy remains a red line for New Delhi. In this context, the EU has the opportunity to position itself as a complementary partner, capable of strengthening India's resilience without demanding total alignment with China.

Fifthly, the EU-India partnership is at a turning point. Documents such as the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the creation of the *Trade and Technology Council* and cooperation on maritime security through operations such as ASPIDES reflect a shared desire to move towards a deeper relationship. However, significant obstacles remain in the areas of trade, regulation and climate. Overcoming them will require sustained political commitment and greater coordination between Brussels and New Delhi.

Sixthly, the implications for Spain are clear. The 2024 Joint Declaration and the Airbus C295 contract show that there are solid foundations for strengthening bilateral relations. Spain has competitive advantages in sectors such as aeronautics, renewable energy and digitalisation, which fit in with India's priorities of modernisation and green transition. However, the Real Instituto Elcano's diagnosis of Spain's strategic deficit remains valid: Madrid needs a more defined strategy towards India and the Indo-Pacific so as not to lag behind other European partners.

Finally, the prospective exercise shows that the future of the EU-India relationship could evolve towards three scenarios: an optimistic one of comprehensive strategic partnership, an intermediate one of selective cooperation and a critical one marked by Sino-American rivalry. For Spain, the challenge will be to transform opportunities

into concrete and sustainable projects, ensuring that the partnership with India does not remain mere declarations of intent.

Overall, this work confirms that India is not only a regional player but also a global partner with the capacity to influence the configuration of the international order. For the European Union, it represents an opportunity to diversify alliances, strengthen its strategic autonomy and project itself in the Indo-Pacific. For Spain, it constitutes a field of action where national and European interests converge, with the potential to expand its international influence in key sectors. The analysis thus confirms that India's position in the Indo-Pacific combines structural strengths—economic growth, maritime projection and strategic autonomy—with internal vulnerabilities and geopolitical challenges that condition its role as a leading power. Only on the basis of this balance between opportunities and limitations can a coherent agenda for action be defined for the European Union and Spain.

On this basis, the recommendations derived from this analysis point to three lines of action. First, consolidate technological and energy cooperation, taking advantage of the TTC framework and the green transition. Secondly, to strengthen cooperation on maritime security, articulating a greater Spanish presence in European missions in the Indian Ocean. And thirdly, to develop a national strategy towards India that complements European policy and avoids Spanish marginalisation in an expanding geopolitical space.

In short, the partnership with India offers the European Union and Spain a way to project their interests in the Indo-Pacific and to adapt to a changing international order. The key will be to transform strategic rhetoric into tangible commitments, so that cooperation with New Delhi becomes one of the pillars of Europe's presence in Asia over the next decade.

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