

Role of Indian Diaspora in Shaping the Geopolitical Landscape of The Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific has surfaced as a novel geopolitical discourse, serving as a convergence zone with significant strategic, economic, and political ramifications for global powers. The Indian diaspora has significantly influenced the geopolitical shift from the mental map of this discourse space and in shaping this geopolitical landscape. This study aims to explore the role of the Indian diaspora in influencing the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific through economic, cultural and diplomatic engagements. The present study seeks to address fundamental research inquiries, including: in what ways does the Indian diaspora impact India's geopolitical strategies within the Indo-Pacific region, and what methods and approaches do they employ. The study uses a qualitative methodological approach to incorporate data analysis related to diplomatic engagement, trade, and investment flows influenced by the diaspora. The relevance of this study lies in the heightened recognition of diaspora diplomacy as a soft power tool and its potential to strengthen India's geopolitical influence in the region with significant power shifts. The expected outcomes include identifying how the Indian diaspora is a strategic asset for India, how they boost economic ties, and how their contribution to soft power policy makes regional inclusive interconnectedness.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indo-Pacific, geopolitics, diplomatic engagement, soft-power.

Introduction

The mental mapping stretching from the eastern coast of the African continent to the west coast of the United States of America, i.e. the Indo-Pacific, has become a significant region in modern geopolitical discussions (Schoeman & Wu, 2022). The region is drawing the attention of international powers that are vying to assert their economic and *geostrategic dominance in this space*. In this preeminence, the convergence of regional and external powers is prominently shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region. This convergence comprises two dimensions, one is the visible formal and informal entities like the United States, China, Japan, and Australia, and the other aspect is the *perception building* in these countries and by the diaspora communities in these countries. They serve as a strategic and diplomatic bridge between India and its host countries (Kapur, 2019). The economic, cultural, and political influence of these diaspora communities is changing both the *geopolitical flow* and landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Indian diaspora has achieved *new heights* of economic, political, and cultural success in various countries of the Indo-Pacific (Baruah, 2022). These Indian diasporas play a vital role in promoting India's strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific region, thereby strengthening India's geo-economic relations in the Indo-Pacific (Garha, 2018). The activism of Indian diasporas is strengthening cultural diplomacy and foreign policy.

The contribution of the Indian diaspora in the Indo-Pacific region has been multilateral and multidirectional, which also reflects a shift from *diaspora diplomacy* to *public diplomacy*. In diaspora diplomacy, diaspora communities are recognized as informal *representatives* and *strategic resources* for their origin countries (Hundal, 2021). This diplomacy uses the *soft power* of diaspora networks to promote trade, investment, and cultural ties, complementing traditional state diplomacy (Gamlen, 2014). The role of diaspora diplomacy is overriding in India's Act East policy, which aims to promote positive ties with countries in Southeast Asia and beyond (Naupa, 2017). India has sought to involve its diaspora in its soft power strategies to enhance its influence in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in response to the increasing presence of China (Stone & Douglas, 2018).

The concept of diaspora diplomacy adds new dimensions to the discourse at the core of political geography on *state power*, the *nature of sovereignty*, and the *expression of territory and territoriality*. These concepts are combined in the Indo-Pacific. India has recently presented successful examples of the triumphant use of diaspora diplomacy, which includes organizing cultural events and pursuing national interests in the converging forces of the Indo-Pacific. This paper evaluates the diverse roles of diaspora in the Indo-Pacific. The changing role of the Indian state in the international politics of the Indo-Pacific, with the contribution of the Indian diaspora and the drivers of these changes, is mentioned in this paper.

Objectives of the Study

- To highlight the role of the Indian diaspora in shaping India's geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific.
- To study the economic, cultural, and strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region as shaped by the Indian diaspora.
- To explore how the Indian diaspora enhances India's soft power in the Indo-Pacific.

Study Area

Indo-Pacific region represents a strategic pivot that spans the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It interlinks important landmasses including Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. The region comprises a variety of geographical landscapes such as vast ocean basins, coral atolls, archipelagos, and coastal plains (study area in fig 1).

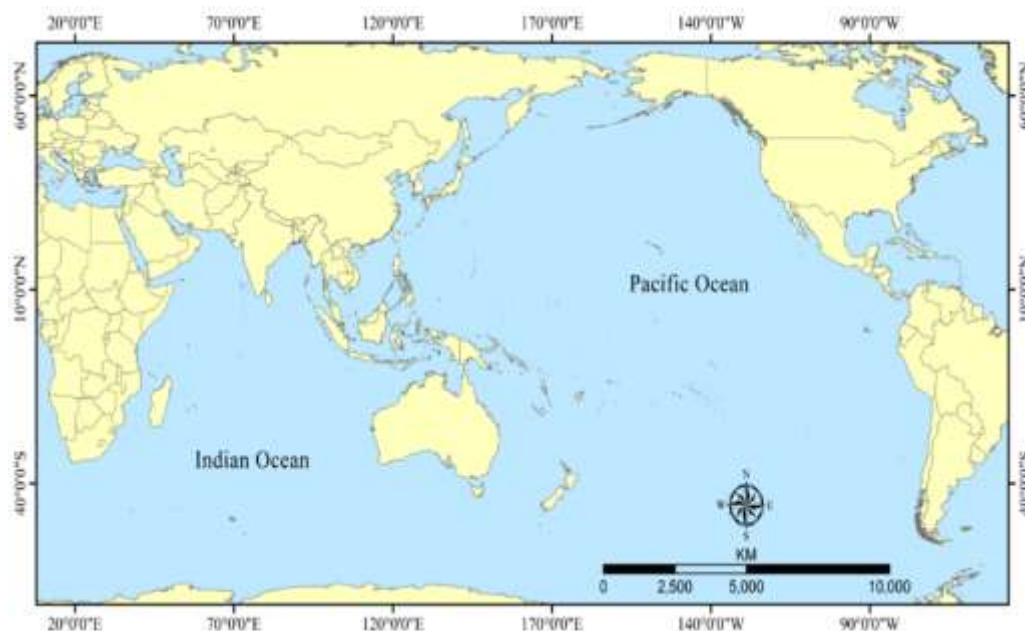


Fig. 01: Study Area: Indo-Pacific Region

The region is home to the largest diaspora community in the world, spread across countries such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, etc. These diaspora communities play a vital role in the local economies in the Indo-Pacific through trade, business ventures and cultural integration. These communities foster inter-regional linkages and significantly influence the geopolitical and socio-economic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative methodology, using primary and secondary sources to examine the impact of the Indian diaspora in the Indo-Pacific region. The study draws on data from a variety of sources, including policy documents, government reports, trade and investment statistics, and case studies, to shape the analytical approach. The study highlights diaspora-led initiatives within the Indo-Pacific. The analysis of the data involved thematic coding to identify key areas where diaspora influences India's geopolitical aims.

Inauguration of the Discussion's Curtain

Geopolitical Landscape of the Indo-Pacific: India's Strategic Interests

Indo-Pacific is a *battlefield* of geopolitical competition, which has geopolitical and strategic implications that extend beyond its geographical boundaries (Kaushiva & Singh, 2014). The region is vital to maritime trade routes, global economic hubs, and security interests. Major global powers are actively working to achieve their national interests by influencing the economic and political landscape in the region (Narbone & Widdershoven, 2021). The region is not only a site of military activity but has also become a hub of diplomatic and economic competition between the US and China. Both countries are seeking to expand their influence through regional cooperation and multilateral security frameworks (Menzel & Otto, 2020).

The Indo-Pacific region is a strategic hotspot for India, offering both opportunities and challenges. Realizing the geopolitical importance of the region, India has moved towards making its foreign policy more active and assertive, such as the 'Act East' policy (Rodrigue, 2022). This policy is based on a clear strategy that aims to strengthen India's diplomatic, economic and security relations in East and Southeast Asia. The *sphere of influence* of the Act East policy serves to optimize Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific (Sundararaman, 2017)

China's growing activities in the region, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, are a strategic challenge for India (Khurana, 2019). To counter this challenge, India has participated in multilateral alliances such as the 'Quad', which includes the US, Japan and Australia. This alliance is a collective effort to promote the concept of a '*free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific*' initiative (Iuppa, 2021). This reflects India's strategic aspirations to contribute to regional security, security of sea lanes, and economic integration.

An important aspect of India's regional engagement is the active participation of the Indian diaspora in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in influential countries such as the United States, Singapore, and Australia (Limaye, 2017). This diaspora community serves as a strategic asset for India, enhancing both India's influence and reach in the Indo-Pacific (Singh & Sarwal, 2017). diaspora not only promotes economic and cultural ties but also contributes to strengthening bilateral relations and advocating for India's political interests.

India's economic interests are deeply intertwined with the security of the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific region, as nearly 95% of its trade and 70% of trade value passes through these routes, including critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca (Vijay, 2017). This dependence has required India to prioritize the security of these routes, which requires it to increase cooperation with countries such as Japan, Australia, and ASEAN. Through this partnership, India seeks to prevent the dominance of any single country, especially China, over the sea lanes and ensure freedom of navigation (Casarini, 2016).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy includes diplomatic cooperation, economic relations, and security partnerships, and the Indian diaspora serves as '*economic and cultural ambassadors*' and is considered a strategic asset (Sudan, 2022). The contribution of the Indian diaspora in the Indo-Pacific enhances India's strategic initiatives. This contribution also presents India's influence as a non-state actor in this geopolitically complex region.

Diaspora Diplomacy: Theoretical Framework and India's Soft Power

Diaspora diplomacy, as an important aspect of international relations, presents diaspora communities as informal representatives who influence the political and economic relations between their countries of origin and host countries (Shain & Barth, 2003). This approach views diasporas as influential non-state entities that help achieve the foreign policy goals of their home countries through their cultural, economic, and political activities. In the context of India, diaspora diplomacy promotes India's soft power, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, where the Indian diaspora strengthens India's influential position through cultural and diplomatic efforts (Byrne, 2017). Through the promotion of Indian festivals and traditions, diaspora communities cultivate favorable views of India, consequently enhancing the nation's soft power and its standing in the region (Booth, 2013). The presence of the Indian diaspora in key nations in the Indo-Pacific, such as the United States,

Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, New Zealand, Fiji, etc., reflects a new dimension to India's international diplomatic relations, particularly the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region, by energizing diverse diplomatic initiatives.

Diaspora diplomacy is closely linked to *public diplomacy* (Brinkerhoff, 2019). It is a metaphor for the '*democratization of diplomacy*', with multiple stakeholders playing targeted roles. Indian diaspora groups, especially in democratic countries such as the United States and Australia, are active in promoting policies in line with India's interests. For instance, Indian Americans have influenced US policy and have made successful efforts to build a strong foundation for strong defense and economic ties with India (Tellis, 2006). This shows that diaspora communities act as informal diplomatic agents, enhancing India's influence in host countries and supporting foreign policy goals. Diaspora diplomacy has become an important part of India's soft power strategy, strengthening India's geopolitical position through cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and political advocacy and helping to build strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific region.

Economic Contribution: Diaspora-led Trade and Investment

The economic influence of the Indian diaspora in the Indo-Pacific region is significant in enhancing India's geopolitical stature (Sarangi, 2019). Trade and investment initiatives initiated by the diaspora have strengthened India's regional economic ties with countries such as Singapore, Australia, and the United States. This has led to increased bilateral economic cooperation and connectivity, thereby aligning the contributions of diaspora with India's strategic goals (Singh & Koiri, 2018). Indian diaspora has increased economic participation, especially in priority sectors such as technology, finance, and education, thereby strengthening India's important role and geo-economic position in the Indo-Pacific region.

Indian diaspora in Singapore has set new benchmarks by promoting cross-border investments in sectors such as technology, finance, and education (Saxenian, 2005). The large Indian-origin population in Singapore, which includes professionals and business leaders, has facilitated the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) between the countries. Indian diaspora represents 9 percent of the overall population in Singapore, but, now days, Singapore emerged as the foremost source of foreign direct investment (FDI) into India, contributing \$11.77 billion, although this figure reflects a 32% decrease (Ye, 2014). At the time, Singapore's FDI in India totaled \$159.94 billion, accounting for 24% of India's total FDI inflows during this period (Mohapatra, A., & Tripathi, 2021).

As a global financial hub, Singapore provides Indian entrepreneurs access to global markets, enabling them to invest in India's sectors such as fintech and digital infrastructure. Indian migrants have created a dynamic startup ecosystem, with Indian investors supporting Indian startups in Singapore and expanding their reach across Southeast Asia (Ghosh, 2022). This cooperation has strengthened ASEAN market entry opportunities for Indian enterprises, thereby promoting economic integration in the Indo-Pacific region.

Indian-origin professionals and entrepreneurs in Australia have significantly impacted trade and investment in the technology, education, and healthcare sectors (Ranjan, 2015). Indian migrants have developed a steady economic corridor between the two countries through business partnerships and investments to enhance economic ties. The contribution of these migrants is particularly significant in knowledge-based industries, leading to the growth of research and innovation hubs, and has promoted a cultural-economic exchange between the two countries (Knight, 2011). Indian students, who provide a dynamic social fabric in the education and labor markets, play a vital role in strengthening bilateral relations. This human capital flow forms the basis for long-term trade ties and economic integration, particularly when these alumni return to India and engage in new business initiatives and investment opportunities, thereby fostering geopolitical and economic and cultural diplomacy between the two countries (Kitamura & Brehm, 2020).

The economic influence of the Indian diaspora in the United States plays a vital role in strengthening India-US relations, especially in the technology sector (Kronstadt & Akhtar, 2018). Indian-origin professionals in Silicon Valley, including CEOs and founders of leading technology companies, have contributed significantly to India's IT sector by increasing access to global technology and investment opportunities.

Indian diaspora serves as informal economic diplomats, promoting opportunities for development and cooperation. These are in line with India's broader foreign policy objectives, especially in the Indo-Pacific region (Chandra & Ghoshal, 2018). These non-state actors, represented by diaspora communities, shape the complex geopolitical and economic relations between India and their host countries (Kadhum, 2020). This dynamic is often referred to as '*economic soft power*', which enables India to enhance economic

interdependence and advance its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region through diaspora networks (Naupa, 2017).

Indian diaspora strengthens India's position in the Indo-Pacific region through trade, investment, and knowledge transfer. They contribute particularly in areas such as technology and innovation, such as data science, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology (Bhaskar, 2021). Diaspora experts share skills and technical knowledge developed in their host countries, such as India. This is an important step towards India becoming a *knowledge-based economy* (Godin, 2006). This creates a collaborative environment among various countries in the Indo-Pacific, promoting mutual development and regional integration, which is in line with Indian foreign policy objectives.

Political Influence and Advocacy: Lobbying Efforts and Policy Implications

Political lobbying by diaspora communities serves as an important tool to promote India's geopolitical interests, especially in countries with large populations of people of Indian origin (Chaturvedi, 2005). These diaspora groups can influence foreign policy, especially in democratic countries, where lobbying can effectively shape policy outcomes. The Indian-American community, considered one of the most politically active and influential diaspora groups globally, has influenced diverse dimensions of US policy such as defense cooperation, economic relations, and technology partnerships (Janardhanan, 2013). The lobbying initiatives by this community have led to concrete policy modifications in line with India's geopolitical goals and power balance in the Indo-Pacific region. The political activism of diaspora groups strengthens global strategic positioning and regional integration, thereby boosting India's global geopolitical strategy (Liu, 2022).

A major success of Indian-American lobbying can be seen in the US-India nuclear deal, finalized in 2008, which enabled civil nuclear cooperation (Mistry, 2013). The Indian-American community, particularly those in influential positions in Washington DC, played a key role in promoting the deal. This role ensured enhanced and mutual benefits for US-India relations. Through the lobbying efforts in Congress, engagement with key policymakers, and mobilizing public support, the diaspora created a favorable political environment for the deal, overcoming initial opposition by various political groups in the US (Newland, 2010). The deal not only met India's energy requirements but also established it as a major defense ally and global geopolitical player (White, 2021). Indian-American lobbyists helped promote joint military exercises, defense agreements, and technology transfers. Such initiatives have established India as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific, aligning the security interests of the two countries and helping to challenge the growing influence of China.

In Australia, the Indian diaspora community has used political influence to strengthen bilateral relations in the areas of immigration and education (Cheng, 2016). This has led to efforts by Indian-origin groups to advocate for policies that promote economic cooperation, including trade relations in areas such as education, information technology (IT), and healthcare. Indian students in Australia not only make economic contributions but also act as cultural diplomats, promoting bilateral relations between the two countries (Lee, 2015). Diaspora organizations have influenced immigration policies by advocating for better mobility for skilled Indian professionals to Australia, opening up new avenues of employment and development opportunities for Indian migrants. Thus, the Indian diaspora community has advanced cooperation, economic growth, and cultural exchange between the two countries through their political advocacy in Australia.

The lobbying initiatives undertaken by the Indian diaspora in both the United States and Australia reflect the significant influence of non-state actors in shaping the domestic political dynamics and international relations. Through their advocacy and lobbying activities, the diaspora community promotes diplomatic dialogue by directly influencing policy decisions that reflect their country's interests. As a result, diaspora organizations not only assist in economic and cultural diplomacy but also play a strategic role in shaping the political landscape. This creates a more favorable international environment for India's global aspirations.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: Improving India's Image Abroad

Cultural diplomacy helps to build a positive image and enhance international relations by using India's cultural heritage and the global influence of its diaspora (Haa, 2022). Particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, the Indian diaspora actively promotes India's traditions, customs, values, and art. This activism not only showcases cultural diversity but also promotes mutual understanding. This promotion strengthens India's geopolitical influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Through this cultural exchange, India presents itself as a peaceful,

democratic, and inclusive nation. Such demonstration of its soft power in a multipolar global scenario has become imperative and useful for India's stability in the Indo-Pacific (Kukreja, 2020).

Festivals such as Diwali, Holi and Chat-Puja are not limited to the Indian community in countries such as Singapore, the US, and Australia but also attract a wider group of societies. This promotes intercultural dialogue and global recognition of Indian traditions. In the Indo-Pacific region, Diwali celebrations in Singapore's "*Little India*" area and the Indian Film Festival (IFFM) held in Melbourne, Australia, are symbols of cultural diffusion and cross-cultural integration. Dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, combined with Indian cinema, also find appreciation in the US and Australia, thanks to the promotion of the diaspora. These efforts enhance India's cultural engagement with host countries and strengthen goodwill towards India, establishing an emotional connect beyond traditional political and economic ties.

The Indian diaspora plays a vital role in expanding *India's cultural landscape* globally (Sahoo, 2006). They reinforce cultural spatiality, intellectual and artistic expression in the Indo-Pacific through the dissemination of Indian literature, music and film. This strengthens India's cultural identity in the *geo-cultural* context. Diaspora communities act as *cultural corridors* to promote *cultural diffusion* and *cross-cultural integration*. In strategic geo-economic and geo-political regions such as the Indo-Pacific region, their cultural diplomacy deepens bilateral and multilateral relations while strengthening India's soft power (Yadav, 2015). This process promotes diplomatic and economic stability while strengthening India's cultural geopolitics.

A key pillar of the effectiveness of India's cultural diplomacy is the cultural interactions by the diaspora, which foster positive geo-perceptions of India. These cultural interactions not only enhance the understanding of India's heritage but also create multi-dimensional spatial ties in business, education and diplomacy. In Singapore, Indian diaspora has strengthened India-Singapore geo-economic ties by contributing to the cultural landscape. Their initiatives have encouraged the development of cultural tourism and bilateral trade routes. Similarly, diaspora in Australia has increased consumer interest and economic cooperation with India through cultural revivalism, thereby expanding economic geo-dialogues. These efforts strengthen India's geo-cultural influence not only locally but also in the global geo-political framework.

The Indo-Pacific framework created by diaspora communities encourages cross-cultural flows and spatial connectivity, which deepens the geo-strategic relationships of the Indo-Pacific region. The role of the diaspora in establishing cultural networks and collaborative geographies in the Indo-Pacific region not only promotes mutual understanding but also articulates India's commitment to diversity and inclusiveness. These efforts strengthen regional integration and geo-economic stability. In this way, the diaspora contributes to India's geopolitical objectives and harmonious cooperation in the Indo-Pacific through cultural diplomacy.

Security and Strategic Partnerships: Role of Diaspora in Regional Stability

Indian diaspora communities in major Indo-Pacific partners such as the United States, Australia, and Japan are playing a vital role in promoting regional security and stability. These diasporas actively participate in the defense, technology, and cybersecurity sectors, thereby generating indirect contributions to India's geostrategic objectives (Doyle & Rumley, 2019). Through their influential roles, these communities serve as informal diplomatic liaisons between India and their host countries, promoting military and security cooperation.

One important area where diasporas enhance regional security is maritime security. The Indo-Pacific region is home to some of the most heavily trafficked shipping lanes, which are vital to global commerce and economic stability (Senanyake, 2018). Ensuring safety and freedom of navigation in these waters is imperative for India from a geostrategic perspective, and diaspora professionals with expertise in maritime security, naval technology, and international trade law play a key role in promoting cooperation on these matters. For example, Indian experts serving in the US Navy, Australia's Department of Defense, or Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force participate in joint military exercises, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and policy discussions with their Indian counterparts, developing a shared understanding of regional maritime security challenges. These partnerships strengthen maritime security and help establish India as a major military power in regional defense and security dynamics.

The involvement of the Indian diaspora in strategic sectors goes beyond technical proficiency. Indian-origin professionals serve as cultural and political mediators, helping to align the security priorities of their host countries with India's strategic objectives. The specific roles of these professionals give them the ability to participate in diplomatic discussions, shape policy outcomes, and advocate for India's interests in regional security forums. This exercise of soft power enables India to maintain strong defense and security partnerships

with key Indo-Pacific countries, establishing India as a key contributor to the regional security architecture. This is essential to fulfill India's geopolitical ambitions and consolidate its position as a major global power in the 21st century.

Challenges and Limitations of Diaspora Engagement

There are several strategic challenges and limitations to diaspora diplomacy in serving India's geopolitical objectives. The complexity of the political landscape of host countries, internal divisions within the diaspora community, and allegations of dual loyalties all adversely impact the effectiveness of diaspora diplomacy. These problems limit the geostrategic role of the diaspora and make their contribution to influencing India's foreign policy difficult. Political dynamics in host countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, mean support for India's objectives may not match local geopolitical priorities. Due to this political disunity, the diaspora has difficulty effectively representing India's strategic interests, thereby limiting their diplomatic influence.

The lack of political solidarity within the diaspora is a significant strategic challenge, limiting the effectiveness of collective lobbying initiatives. The Indian diaspora is not homogenous; Its members are committed to different political beliefs and geopolitical priorities, which create obstacles to the achievement of specific diplomatic and strategic goals. In particular, Indian-origin groups in countries such as the United States hold different views on issues such as trade agreements, human rights, or foreign military involvement, leading to political disagreements and fragmentation. These internal divisions weaken the geostrategic effectiveness of the diaspora community, reducing the overall impact their diplomatic efforts can have on the political landscape of the host country. This fragmentation is particularly evident in regions where there is a historical background of political and social differences within India, causing diaspora communities to reflect these geopolitical divisions in their host countries as well.

Diaspora organizations also face legal and social barriers that complicate their political advocacy efforts, especially in countries where regional laws restrict political activities by foreign nationals. Such laws that limit lobbying by foreign nationals also restrict the ability of diaspora communities to act in favour of India's geopolitical interests. Some host governments are reluctant to support diaspora-led initiatives if they perceive that they may be overly aligned with a foreign power, thereby reducing the impact for India's strategic objectives.

Diaspora diplomacy requires a more sophisticated and strategic methodology, as relying only on numerical or economic strength is insufficient. India must adopt more effective strategies by building cohesion in the diaspora community, building alliances with supportive political figures in host countries, and aligning diaspora activities with Indian and local interests. At the same time, diplomatic initiatives should focus on building trust with host governments, allaying fears of foreign influence, and enhancing India's reputation. Thus, the diaspora has the potential to advance India's geopolitical goals, but at the same time, a more strategic approach is needed to deal with challenges.

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora has become a key element in shaping India's geopolitical strategies, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. This analysis highlights the diverse roles played by Indian diasporas in influencing India's economic, political, cultural and security priorities. Through means such as trade, investment and advocacy, diaspora communities have boosted India's diplomatic initiatives and facilitated stronger ties with key Indo-Pacific countries, including the United States, Australia and Singapore. The potential of diaspora diplomacy is also associated with certain challenges. The political landscape of host countries, divisions within the diaspora community and concerns about perceived dual loyalties can hinder the effectiveness of diaspora engagement. Addressing these complexities requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach in which India must skillfully navigate the local political environment, alleviate fears about foreign influence and promote greater cohesion among its diaspora communities. By harnessing the skills, contacts and resources of its diaspora community, India can expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

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