

Signalling through implicature: How India signals in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

When signalling in the Indo-Pacific, India must manage several contradictory imperatives. Signals of resolve that explicitly frame China as a threat or order challenger can raise tensions with this more powerful neighbour. Yet, given India's strategic resourcing needs, some indication of resolve is necessary in order to project 'like-mindedness' with strategic partners – especially the United States – who seek to counter-balance China. Meanwhile, signals of reassurance to the United States and its allies may read as signals of resolve towards China in and of themselves, and/or lead to rhetorical entrapment into alliance-like relations that erode India's strategic autonomy. Since signalling is both purposeful and socially contingent, these complexities are reflected in India's discursive signalling strategy. We argue that India often signals via a mode of indirect speech known as *implicature*. When states *implicate*, they convey meaning beyond what is explicitly said, while depriving recipients of the rhetorical material to evidence resolve or reassurance. As a signalling strategy, implicature aims to avoid breaches in India's distinctive social relationships with China and the United States. Signalling through implicature thus manifests as a mode of *social hedging*, intended to widen the choices of secondary states in the polarised signalling arena of the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords

China, implicature, India, Indo-Pacific, rhetoric, signalling

Introduction

Recent scholarship on India's approach to the Indo-Pacific identifies China's growing power and expanding regional influence as New Delhi's central strategic challenge. In these accounts, India faces a core paradox: it must materially balance China even though material balancing can convey resolve and therefore risks provocation. For Rajagopalan

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(2020: 93), India's chief concern is to '[prevent] China from dominating the region by building balancing coalitions, while also persuading Beijing that India is not actually attempting to balance China'. For Tarapore (2023: 244–245), India lacks 'the material capacity or political commitment to undertake more costly internal or external balancing' and one of India's central concerns is the risk of 'triggering a costly or self-defeating security dilemma'.¹ Both authors contend that India has no particularly good options for avoiding the provocation of China. New Delhi must either resort to dissimulation² or employ less threatening – and less effective – balancing measures such as the development of 'regional capacity and resilience' (Rajagopalan, 2020; Tarapore, 2023: 244, 256).

In this article, we concur in broad terms with Rajagopalan's and Tarapore's characterisation of the paradox that India faces in the region when seeking to manage China's growing power and influence. However, we shift our theoretical frame away from a materialist preoccupation with *balancing* and into the conceptually richer but less examined domain of *signalling*, aiming to take seriously the *social context* of India's strategic preoccupations in the Indo-Pacific. Our central argument is that material balancing is of less interest and significance to India's relations with China than India's strategy of signalling simultaneously to both China and the United States in such a way as to avoid a breach in social relations with each of these more powerful states. The end goal of this social strategy is for India to retain as much autonomy over its material choices as possible. India's avoidance of social breaches in these two critical relationships therefore constitutes a hedging behaviour, a behaviour we term *social hedging*.

Our first point of departure is that material signals of and by themselves mean little without the social framing that actors attach to them, discursively and otherwise. Social constructivist approaches to strategic signalling – in particular Goddard's (2018: 11) central observation that signalling is 'not an objective and given, but an intersubjective and contingent process' – drive us to examine how India seeks its preferred strategic outcomes by discursively attaching meaning (or avoiding attaching *explicit* meaning, as we will show) to a range of signals in anticipation of their reception by China.³ We consider this approach necessary because there are good reasons to doubt assumptions⁴ that China always views India's growing material capabilities either as efforts to balance China directly, or as uniformly threatening. Material power asymmetry in China's favour, already significant, has been increasing between the two countries (Pardesi, 2021). In 2022, China's gross domestic product (GDP) was more than five times higher than India's, despite the latter's higher growth rate that year (\$17.96 tn vs \$3.42 tn) (World Bank, 2024). China has been India's largest trading partner since 2008, with a trade deficit running in Beijing's favour, and bilateral trade and investment relations continue to grow, even following the border confrontation in 2020 (Taneja, 2020: 199, 291; Verma, 2023). But these trends aside, China scholars have argued that Chinese elites have not generally perceived India's internal balancing efforts as a threat (Pu, 2017, 2022; Saalman, 2011). Moreover, China has been supportive of some elements of India's regional and great power aspirations, since they can 'reduce the domination of the United States in what is becoming a multipolar world' (Pu, 2017: 148). Certainly, as Sino-US relations have come increasingly under strain, debate in China over India's *external* balancing behaviours has intensified (Li and Tianjiao, 2023). Perceptions among India experts in China that India remains committed to a 'tradition of strategic autonomy and non-alignment' have given way, since 2019, to apprehensions that India is 'willing to act as an important fulcrum of the US's "Indo-Pacific strategic arc"' (Li and Tianjiao, 2023: 122, 126). Yet, opinion in China remains divided, with some predicting that India will not pivot entirely to the United States, that the Quad will not function as a close alliance, and

that India merely seeks to profit from the decline in Sino-US relations (Li and Tianjiao, 2023). In other words, it is not clear that India's internal balancing behaviours are strongly significant for China in and of themselves, and perceptions of India's external balancing efforts are contested and in flux, rather than read by China in specific, fixed ways. Whether material signals are received as balancing is in the eye of the beholder, and the beholder relies on social information to aid their interpretation.

Second, we underscore that India's strategic calculations do not centre solely on the management of China's growing power and influence. India operates within a wider set of relationships and imperatives that pose challenges to its signalling choices. Materially, a central goal of contemporary Indian strategy is for India to emerge as a pole in a multipolar order (Jacob, 2022). For India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (2020: 27), 'creating a stable balance in Asia is India's foremost priority' since 'it is only a multipolar Asia that can lead to a multipolar world'. Since a 'stable balance' for India means materially balancing China, on land and at sea, India has deepened strategic relationships with regional partners – especially the United States, but also France, Australia, and Japan – to build out its national power and address capacity constraints. Normatively, Indian leaders have long fixated on a notion of strategic autonomy that holds as sacred the maximisation of India's freedom of action outside of burdensome alliances or alliance-like commitments (Monsonis, 2010). The imperative to materially balance China has required New Delhi's practice of strategic autonomy to adjust – temporarily⁵ – to incorporate these closer partnerships in the region. These partnerships not only deliver material dividends but also elevate India's regional and global social status, and foster like-mindedness on key US-led international rules and norms that serve (in theory) as guardrails as China works towards regional primacy (Foot, 2020; Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). In other words, India's strategic choices in the Indo-Pacific must respond to a context of considerable material *and* social complexity.

Within the emerging, polarised, and securitised Indo-Pacific region – a symptom of a global order in flux – India must signal bespoke versions of resolve and reassurance to each of the United States and China *simultaneously* in order to preserve strategic autonomy, avoid a security dilemma, and safeguard its potential to emerge as a 'pole' in an imagined future multipolar order. More specifically, India must simultaneously signal: (1) resolve against deep identification with US visions of order in the Indo-Pacific to maximise strategic autonomy and the chance of remaining an independent pole; *and* reassurance to Washington as a 'like-minded' partner to secure the attendant material and social benefits required to manage its China challenge; as well as (2) resolve against China's growing regional power and influence, without precipitating a security dilemma; *and* reassurance to Beijing that India is not entirely throwing its lot in with a US-led Indo-Pacific-sized strategy to counter China. Unsurprisingly, no existing signalling theory adequately captures this concatenation of conflicting social and relational imperatives.

In what follows, we link the significance of discursive social framing for signalling with the complex socio-relational demands made of India's signalling efforts in the Indo-Pacific to identify a strategy that we term *signalling through implicature*. Implicature, a principle of language use in context developed by the philosopher of language H. P. Grice (1975), describes how, in communication, speakers often imply more than they explicitly say, while listeners infer additional meaning based on social and sociolinguistic context. We argue that implicature, a mode of indirect speech, performs crucial social functions in the management of India's Indo-Pacific signalling quandaries: the denial of certainty in the speech acts that comprise discursive signals, and, as a corollary, an ability to manage difficult moments in social relationships of different kinds and preserve their quality by avoiding social breaches.

Implicature is clearly a contemporary feature of diplomatic speech acts in the Indo-Pacific. Pundits and practitioners alike profess to know what was *really* intended between the lines of indirect speech in regional actors' official speeches and statements. Following the Quad Leaders' Summit in May 2023, for example, the UK-based newspaper *The Guardian* (2023) ran the headline 'Australia, India, Japan and US take thinly veiled swipe at China'. The report continued:

The US president, Joe Biden, and his three partners in the group did not mention China by name but the communist superpower was clearly the target of language in a joint statement calling for 'peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain'.

The report took the liberty of decoding what was inexplicit but *implicated* in the joint statement, drawing on the context of both the speech itself and wider 'knowledge' of the four states' discomfort with China's assertive actions in the South China Sea. The report was an act of *interpretation*. The news agencies undertaking the reporting could not prove beyond doubt that their interpretation was what had been intended. The speech did not carry the same impact or expression of resolve as the more explicit G7 statement released on the same day that directly *named* China, clearly stated opposition to its activities, and drew an angry response from Beijing (GT Staff Reporters, 2023; The White House, 2023a).

Without complete certainty as to a speaker's intention within a given indirect speech act, a listener cannot locate the rhetorical material that would permit them to either offer a refutation, or move towards escalation or estrangement (Pinker et al., 2008; Stephen, 2015: 774). This means that implicature's denial of certainty in a discursive signal is quite a different proposition to the attributes of openness and costliness that are traditionally framed as the bedrock of 'rational signals' in the signalling scholarship. More than this, however, the denial of certainty supports the maintenance of social relationships of different kinds, including both relationships of apparent communality, centred on professed shared interests and values (where such relationships may nonetheless be hierarchical), *and* relationships of more straightforward dominance or primacy. In the specific, empirical case of India in the Indo-Pacific, signalling through implicature aims to simultaneously uphold a relationship of deference in a dominance relationship with China, and a relationship with the United States centred on (caveated) consent to a US-led vision for regional order.⁶ Implicature permits the customisation of signals to manage simultaneously both types of relationship in ways that can reduce contradictions, thereby furthering existing social accounts that cast simultaneous signalling to multiple audiences only through the lens of *legitimation* (see, for example, Goddard, 2018). In other words, in signalling through implicature, India is able at key moments to delegitimise China on the basis of values that New Delhi purports to share with Washington where Beijing does not, while at the same time maintaining the dominance relationship with China. Signalling through implicature, we contend, permits a 'multi-performance' across variation in social relations with each side of this contentious dyad with the aim of an overall non-conflictual outcome. In other words, signalling through implicature is an attempt by India to socially hedge.

In theorising signalling as implicature, we recognise, following Yen (2021: 10), that 'there are language norms in diplomacy', that 'to be diplomatic is to be respectful', and that the use of undiplomatic language constitutes a social transgression and can threaten face. It is, therefore, unsurprising that indirect speech is a useful mode of communication for diplomats. Yet, both the United States and China are paying ever closer attention to Indian state behaviour in the Indo-Pacific context (Li and Tianjiao, 2023; Malhotra,

2023). Indian foreign policy actors' diplomatic speech acts therefore become highly scrutinised signals that convey crucial information to multiple simultaneous recipients.

In what follows, we begin by engaging with literatures on costly signalling and hedging, and, in response to their limitations, introduce the concept of signalling through implicature. We examine how implicature works in two cases: India's justification of its non-attendance at China's first Belt and Road Summit in 2017 – seemingly an undeniable, relationship-breaching snub – and India's evolving support for a 2016 ruling that challenged a number of Chinese claims and activities in the South China Sea, following the Philippines' initiation of arbitration under Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS). These cases pose a particular stress test for India because they entail the delegitimisation of China, risking both a breakdown in that relationship *and* potentially socially binding rhetorical commitments to US values and interests. In each case, we unpack the logic and imperatives underlying India's use of this kind of rhetorical signalling.

In the third and final section, we suggest that our theorisation of signalling through implicature can contribute to four bodies of IR scholarship – signalling, hedging, legitimation, and rhetorical coercion – as well as further our understanding of India's foreign policy and the new geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. Looking ahead, however, we observe how the competing logics of India's signalling strategy in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly in tension. The question of how long India's strategy of signalling through implicature can pay material and social dividends remains open, but perhaps open for longer than most signalling theorists – trapped in the logics of openness, costliness, and a resolve-reassurance binary – and most hedging theorists – focused narrowly on material hedging behaviours – would suggest.

Beyond costliness, openness, and the resolve-reassurance binary: The challenges of signalling in the Indo-Pacific context

As the editors make clear in the introduction to this special issue, a signal is usually understood as the act of revealing information purposefully and strategically about intent, resolve, and/or capabilities to alter the decision of another actor and thereby improve the chances of a desired outcome when interests are dissimilar (Gartzke et al., 2017). Our theorisation of signalling, too, fits this description, but with important distinctions in the 'purpose' and 'strategy'. As we will argue, these distinctions allow for the management of simultaneously conflictual and cooperative relations in a context of polarisation and uncertainty, usefully extending the existing signalling literature to meet the complex requirements of secondary states in the Indo-Pacific. These distinctions also position our theorisation of signalling in productive relation to the hedging literature, introducing an important social dimension to debates that, at heart, centre on questions of *proximity*, that is, the quality of social relationships.

Cost, openness, and the resolve-reassurance binary in the signalling literature

During the Cold War, signalling studies initially addressed cases of crisis bargaining and deterrence within the field of bargaining theory, which viewed war as a bargaining failure and modelled conflict resolution between states (Gartzke et al., 2017). Key works explored

the security dilemma, where one state's actions to enhance its security cause other states to respond similarly out of fear for their own security (Altman, 2018; Fearon, 1994b, 1997; Gurantz, 2021; Schelling, 1960). Since the motivations of states remain uncertain, miscalculations can lead to war. But signalling offers a solution: signals can decrease risk when they effectively convey credible information about states' relative capabilities and resolve (Fearon, 1995). The credibility of a signal depends on how much cost the signaller incurs in sending it, or could incur if she or he did not uphold her or his threat, and on the extent of its openness (Fearon, 1994a, 1997). Threats, in these accounts, must be costly to be credible, in contradistinction to costless, 'cheap talk', since the cost of a threat is what allows the signaller to demonstrate resolve. This insight spurred a rich literature on signalling and audience costs, with recent studies identifying additional mechanisms of costly signalling (Quek, 2021).

The early consensus that signals are relevant primarily to cases of crisis bargaining; that they are credible when costly and open; that they intend to demonstrate resolve; and that they are primarily material in character underwent gradual challenge. Key works have emphasised that signals can be used by security-seeking states not only to signal resolve during crises but also to reassure other states about their motivations in peacetime (Kydd, 1997: 117–118, 2000; see also Haynes, 2019; Wheeler, 2018). These characterisations have similarly assumed that 'costly (and public)' signals will foster trust (Kydd, 2000: 326; see Yarhi-Milo, 2013: 411). Other works have empirically challenged the assumption that costly signals are effective (Fuhrmann and Sechser, 2014; Quek, 2016, 2021; Yarhi-Milo et al., 2018) as well as the notion that costless signals are inconsequential, questioning the clear distinction between costly and costless signalling (Jervis, 2017; Sartori, 2002; Schultz, 1998; Tingley and Walter, 2011). Others argue that employing costless signals or 'cheap talk' can be useful in certain cases, including coordinating actions, conveying information, serving deterrent purposes, and showing variations in resolve over time and across different challenges (Farrell and Gibbons, 1989; Farrell and Rabin, 1996: 105; Morrow, 1999: 89; Sukin, 2022; Tingley and Walter, 2011).

Taking the value of discursive signalling yet further, recent research has challenged the predominantly materialist emphasis⁷ of the signalling literature, questioning the assumption that material signals speak for themselves. One position is that 'signals derive their meaning from the costs and risks one incurs by sending them', while another highlights the uncertainties inherent in interpreting signals (Jervis, 2017: 111; Sechser, 2018: 47; see also Kertzer et al., 2020). Considering that communication 'shapes states' perceptions of the threat they pose to each other' (Trager, 2010: 362), these works point to the socially contingent nature of signals. Goddard (2018: 11) takes this idea further, arguing that 'how actors interpret each other's behaviour depends not on something inherent to the signal itself, but on social context, the understandings actors use to interpret the signal in question'. For Goddard (2018: 3), costly signals are 'indeterminate indicators of . . . intentions' and 'behavior does not speak for itself. It is rhetoric that sets the meaning of . . . actions'.

Some of the core framings in the early signalling literature have remained sticky, however. Possibly because of its persisting focus on conflict or peace situations, the signalling literature remains caught in a binary of threat – or resolve – versus reassurance. The signaller must show either resolve or reassurance and the recipient must be convinced that what is signalled is resolute or reassuring. Yet the Indo-Pacific is neither a space of open conflict nor fully of peacetime. The region is marked neither by open crisis whereby antagonistic states seek to signal resolve, nor is it one of cooperative states who aim to reassure one another. Instead, it is a complex intermediate space

marked by uncertainty: of simmering tensions and strategic competition between two great powers, the United States and China, with secondary states – even significant ones such as India – managing simultaneously conflictual and cooperative relationships with polarised, powerful actors, and carefully seeking out whatever security, status, and freedom of action can be gleaned from this complexity. The signalling aims of secondary states are therefore not easily classified according to the simple binary of resolve-reassurance proposed by much of the signalling literature.

Some (not all) of these observations are captured in the scholarship examining India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Rajagopalan (2020: 92), too, argues that open, costly signals of resolve towards China are not rational given India's security concerns vis-à-vis its stronger northern neighbour. Instead, India's solution is one of 'balancing China while also attempting to reassure it'. Balancing equates to showing resolve towards China, and for Rajagopalan, 'reassurance, in this mix, is designed more as a complementary approach to mask balancing efforts than as an alternative to balancing'. He predicts poor outcomes: China would only take reassurance seriously if measures involve significant security sacrifices, like distancing from powers like the United States. However, this is too risky for India. But the measures that India could consider, such as rhetorical commitments and cautious engagement in the Quad, would not convince Beijing that it is not balancing against China.

Certainly, dissimulation is costly in diplomacy (Seymour, 2014), while trustworthiness, credibility, and legitimacy are central to persuasion and cooperation (Grobe, 2010). Yet it is not clear that balancing and reassurance are, as Rajagopalan (2020: 93) contends, 'two incompatible strands', nor that resolve through balancing and reassurance through dialogue and restraint in balancing have fixed meanings for either India or China.

Our introduction of *implicature* as a signalling strategy, as we now move to demonstrate, allows us to identify signals that are neither costly nor open and that bridge the binary of resolve and reassurance. We argue that signalling through implicature is not only a new way of theorising *how* actors signal but also provides important insights into *why* they do so. Like Goddard, we take both social context and the meaning-making of signals via rhetoric seriously. However, we extend this into new terrains of what we understand as India's core signalling purpose: managing its regional relationships with China and the United States according to their respective, distinctive social logics, and doing so in such a way as to leave India with as much freedom of action as possible.

Expanding the logics of hedging

In seeking to maximise autonomy and manage relations with the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific, our framing of India's social signalling strategy links clearly to debates in IR on hedging. The concepts of 'hedging', 'balancing', and 'bandwagoning' describe various state alignment behaviours vis-à-vis two great powers. Lim and Cooper's (2015: 703, 711) definition couches hedging as 'risk management' aimed at 'maximizing policy autonomy and minimizing provocation of either great power while reserving the flexibility to align in the future should either great power come to constitute direct threat', whereby secondary states field a 'trade-off between the fundamental (but conflicting) interests of autonomy and alignment'. 'Hedging' emerged to characterise how secondary states navigated a post-Cold War 'security landscape in which geostrategic fault lines were less clear-cut' compared to the Cold War era; where smaller powers confronted direct threats from ideologically opposed great powers; and to capture new forms of

alignment behaviour that are properly neither balancing nor bandwagoning (Haacke and Ciorciari, 2022: 2, 6). Multiple definitions of hedging coexist alongside debates on whether hedging and balancing represent distinct alternatives (see Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019; Koga, 2018), and whether balancing can be subsumed within a hedging strategy (Goh, 2005; Hiep, 2013; Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2016; Roy, 2005). These disagreements result in divergent conclusions about whether and how states hedge. India is thus perceived as both hedging (Tiang Boon, 2016) *and* balancing (Rajagopalan, 2020).

However, the primary focus of the hedging literature is *material*.⁸ Yet, since the perception of material signalling by great powers depends on the rhetoric secondary states attach to those signals, perceptions of hedging, too, depend similarly on wider social information. Hedging, at root, describes the proximity or quality of social relationships with two competing great powers. A social conceptualisation of hedging would observe the degree to which a state signals a non-polarised position on a spectrum of relations, or, put differently, the degree to which it seeks to uphold cooperative and/or non-conflictual social relations with each side. Below, we argue that signalling through implicature is a strategy of *social hedging*, intended to widen the choices of secondary states in the polarised signalling arena of the Indo-Pacific.

Denying certainty, maintaining social relationships: How signalling works through implicature

In the complex social context of the Indo-Pacific, we require a theorisation of signalling that captures the presence of multiple, polarised audiences, an actor's desire to maintain cooperative or at least non-conflictual relations across these audiences, and the corresponding need for the actor to customise signals – as far as possible simultaneously – to different audience expectations or preferences.

One such existing approach is Goddard's (2018: 30) concept of *multivocality*, which captures how actors deploy legitimisation strategies that 'resonate across diverse and even opposed audiences'. In Goddard's (2018) study, rising powers use multivocal legitimisation strategies to signal benign intentions to incumbent great powers while maintaining relations with potential revisionist allies. Such efforts succeed where they simultaneously convey reassurance to status quo constituencies *and* resolve to revisionist constituencies. These efforts carry value because they are less binding on the rising power's present and future actions, and also avoid 'charges of hypocrisy' (Goddard, 2018: 32).

Goddard's focus on an actor's efforts to convey simultaneous reassurance and resolve to polarised audiences is useful. Our concern, however, is that a strategy of multivocality centred solely on legitimisation offers no solutions as to how an actor might manage instances where its interests are served best by appealing to a very specific set of legitimating principles upheld by one side of a polarised dyad. In such cases, multivocal legitimisation cannot feasibly be sustained. This problem is particularly salient in the Indo-Pacific, a geostrategic construct whose key champions seek to advance specific legitimacy scripts. The United States⁹ has characterised the emerging Indo-Pacific Order as 'free and open' precisely in an attempt to constrain, or at the very least question the legitimacy of, China's regional role and behaviour, and has sought to bring regional partners on board to support these scripts (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). While India (alongside other regional actors, such as ASEAN states) challenges aspects of this framing, the casting of the Indo-Pacific as a site for the projection of specific, counter-China legitimating principles suggests that multivocal legitimisation in this particular regional setting will have its limits.

In view of these constraints, we turn our interest to implicature, at once a more specified and capacious strategy – as we will show – by which secondary states seek to manage both conflictual and cooperative relationships simultaneously when signalling to more powerful, polarised actors.¹⁰ To be sure, India does often signal in a manner that is multi-vocal, by appealing to diverse and opposed audiences. In a major statement at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore, for example, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2018) first set out his vision for the Indo-Pacific before an international audience, arguing that ‘India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members’, but rather ‘stands for a free, open, inclusive region’. This counter-branding of the Indo-Pacific as ‘inclusive’ in addition to ‘free and open’ was taken up in subsequent official Indian speeches (Gaens and Sinkkonen, 2023). It signalled both a reassuring appeal to the US-led Indo-Pacific construct and its principles of freedom and openness *and* resolve against a logic of exclusion towards China (and other regional actors, such as ASEAN). What requires greater elucidation, however, is what exactly it is in language use that is able to appeal to diverse and opposed audiences, and whether legitimation really is the correct way to label what India is doing through this kind of ‘multi-performance’ to the United States and China.

There is something unique about communicating indirectly, and to understand exactly what this is, we must turn to language pragmatics, ‘the study of the use of context to make inferences about meaning’ (Fasold, 1990: 119). Drawing on contextual information is necessary when a speaker implicates,¹¹ or seeks to convey what she or he wants to say without saying it explicitly (Fasold, 1990; Stephen, 2015: 772). Pinker et al. (2008: 833) theorise how the lack of overtness in indirect speech serves the crucial function of plausible deniability on the part of the speaker, denying the hearer the certainty that what she or he understands really was intended by the speaker. This works to avoid social breaches:

implicatures from indirect speech are perceived as being some measure short of certainty . . . [and] with the lack of a focal point to trigger a change of relationship, the speaker is given ‘the benefit of the doubt’, and the relationship can remain unchanged.

To offer an example, a junior colleague may believe that a senior colleague should be the one to write a difficult email to resolve a shared issue they are facing but may feel inhibited from saying so directly, owing to a perception that the relationship between them is hierarchical. As the two converse on the need for such an email, the junior colleague might resort to an implicature such as, ‘You always write such powerful emails in situations like this’. From the preceding conversation about the email, as well as the context of a presumably shared past of ‘situations like these’, the senior colleague should be able to parse the junior colleague’s implicature that the senior colleague should write the email, even though this meaning is not expressed directly in the language used. The junior colleague’s indirect formulation disguises an imperative as praise, creates uncertainty around the statement’s status as a demand, and avoids a social breach in the hierarchical relationship with the senior colleague.¹²

At root, then, implicature is a form of indirect speech that comprises two core elements: *the denial of certainty* and the *customised management of social relationships*. On the first – the denial of certainty – the contrast between an implicature’s intention to deny certainty with the emphasis of the traditional signalling literature on openness and costliness could not be starker. Signalling through implicature, it follows, can convey a *suggestion* of simultaneous resolve and reassurance *to each side*, avoiding stark, binary commitments to resolve or reassurance. It thereby averts rhetorical entrapment (Finnemore, 2009: 72–76;

Krebs and Jackson, 2007), that is, where an actor discursively binds himself or herself into specific future courses of action that carry social costs when not enacted. It also avoids – following Goddard (2018: 32) – charges of hypocrisy.

To demonstrate how this is so, we can return to Modi's (2018) SLD statement and note how it successfully signals simultaneous reassurance and resolve towards *each of* China and the United States less because of what the Indian prime minister explicitly says, and more because of what he says indirectly, or *implicates*. The phrase 'India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members' seems to carry an unspoken reference to some actor, most likely the United States, who *does* see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy. What Modi might be saying (although we cannot be certain) is that India compares favourably to the United States because it does *not* see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy and, moreover, India does not accept the imposition of the US-led definition on the region. Similarly, the statement's subsequent endorsement of the Indo-Pacific space nonetheless as free and open (with the deliberate caveat of also inclusive) appears to convey that India agrees with the United States and its partners that the principles of freedom and openness are indeed under threat in the region in some ways, probably from China, and to this extent, these principles require defending (albeit not in a strategic or exclusive way). These inferences rely on both the context of what is said and the interpretation of the recipient (in this case, we, the authors) and cannot be confirmed as either certain, or the only possible interpretation, unless additional, overt speech or action is provided. It is the denial of certainty about what Modi really means that does the important work in avoiding rhetorical entrapment into any particular future course of action, such as *never* using the Indo-Pacific as a strategy, *never* accepting US visions of regional order, or *always* working in concert with the United States to challenge instances where China threatens values such as 'freedom and openness' in the Indo-Pacific.¹³ As Stephen (2015: 774) – one of the few scholars to discuss the role and purpose of indirect speech in International Relations – frames it: 'indirect speech preserves the possibility for the speaker to deny to hostile audiences their true intentions. Without the definitive proof of an explicit and direct claim, hostile listeners are deprived of the opportunity to refute the claim directly'. But equally, we argue, indirect speech can preserve the possibility for the speaker to deny to 'friendly' audiences evidence that the speaker is fully aligned with that audience's interests and values and therefore committed to the costly defence of those interests and values in the future.

The denial of certainty inherent to implicature as a speech act also permits the management of relationships. Crucially, more than one type of relationship strategy is, in theory, manageable through implicature. The first, in line with Goddard's (2018) emphasis on legitimation strategies, centres on the performance of what Pinker et al. (2008: 835) identify as a *communality or communal sharing relationship*, arising among actors 'who are bound by shared interests' and marked by 'coordinated movements and experiences'. This relationship type presupposes shared values and interests, although we admit that such relationships are often in some way hierarchical and that shared values and interests can at times be strategically performed rather than deeply internalised.¹⁴ The second type of relationship is a *dominance relationship* which is 'communicated by . . . strength and resolve' (by the more powerful party) and permits a deviation away from an emphasis on shared values and interests.

Our assumption is that India's relationship with the United States currently most closely resembles the communality type (in performance at least). This is because, as we noted earlier, India considers key US-led international rules and norms as valuable in

curtailing China's growing regional influence and enjoys the status recognition that derives from India's conformity to these (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). This is less a relationship of equality, however, and more one of consent to US hegemony, albeit performed/selective consent. India's relationship with China, by contrast, most closely resembles the dominance-authority type. China does not demand consent to its hegemonic regional vision: as Chen Weiss (2019) argues, China is 'not engaged in a determined effort to spread autocracy', and in 2017, Xi Jinping himself asserted that his leadership would not 'export' a 'China model' (Xi, 2017, cited in Chen Weiss, 2019). Foot (2020: 163), too, surmises that, as China has risen materially in its region, 'Beijing so far has erred on the side of working towards primacy rather than establishing more securely a hegemony based on generating a negotiated acceptance of its leading role and normative vision'. China's moves towards primacy place it in a dominance/authority position vis-a-vis India, we argue. These relationship types are, however, not hard and fast categories in each wider bilateral relationship and can shift according to policy context and over time.

In both cases, indirect speech functions by 'better acknowledging the expected relationship' and 'making it easier for the participants to resume their normal relationship' following interactions that may present a social breach (Pinker et al., 2008: 835). In a *communality relationship*, actors strategically leverage the use of context-specific legitimacy vocabulary to denote their support of shared principles with friends (in our case, 'like-minded' states), but the cost of doing so, of course, is the implicit criticism or delegitimation of any other actor who flouts these, on the one hand, and the risk of rhetorical entrapment into relations of unyielding proximity, on the other hand. This is the key mechanism at work: implicature denies the listener rhetorical material¹⁵ that serves as evidence of delegitimation or face threat to targeted or hostile audiences, as well as rhetorical material that serves as evidence to 'friendly' audiences with aspirations of greater proximity to the speaker that this aspiration is mutual. In a *dominance-authority relationship*, implicature aims at 'maintaining the equilibrium of interpersonal relationships within the social group' since it selects a mode of 'politeness' or 'politic verbal behaviour' commensurate with the degree of face threat posed by a given speech act (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Watts, 1989, 1992). By not overtly criticising or delegitimising a listener with whom a speaker is bound in a dominance-authority relationship, a speaker performs facework, that is, she or he seeks to 'keep a balance between multiple persons' faces in social encounters' (Kiyama et al., 2012; Pinker et al., 2008). Implicature in a dominance-authority relationship therefore enables the removal of rhetorical material to save face, avoid provocation, and maintain a hierarchy. For both types of relationships, we see *customised relationship management* operating through implicature.

Consider the costs to each of India's relationships with the United States and with China had Modi, at the 2018 SLD, instead said:

India does not agree with the United States that the Indo-Pacific Region is a strategy and will not accept this imposition, but India agrees that the principles of freedom and openness are indeed under threat from China in the region and require defending.

This formulation would have demonstrated a significant gap between India's interests and values and those of the United States, throwing into doubt their proximity as strategic partners and risking the material and social benefits India accrues from the relationship. The formulation would have been face threatening to China, casting China as immorally dangerous, and positioning India in the superordinate social position of an arbiter of the

appropriateness of China's behaviour. The version Modi actually spoke, by contrast, utilised implicature to allow for a complex mix of caveated, communality-upholding signalling to the United States, and authority-preserving signalling to China. It was neither open nor costly and did not exhibit binary signals of reassurance and resolve.

Implicature, as a mode of indirect speech, therefore holds distinctive value as a means for states to *suggest* the meaning of signals via rhetoric while *denying certainty* to recipients around questions of resolve and reassurance, thereby permitting complex ways to seek to *manage customised relationships* in the context of an uncertain, polarised Indo-Pacific. However, the utility of implicature as a concept in comparison to Goddard's legitimacy-centred notion of multivocality centres on how far implicature permits a signaller to manage diverse relationships at moments of high tension, such as when appealing to a specific set of legitimating principles that are shared with and endorse the values of one actor, while delegitimising the other. Can implicature permit such a 'multi-performance'?

How India signals implicature in the Indo-Pacific

Conversational implicature is one of the best-theorised and most-debated types of indirect speech. It is founded on Grice's (1975) *cooperative principle*, which holds that 'people in conversations assume that others in the conversation are trying to say something meaningful' (Fasold, 1990: 123). Gricean implicature assumes speakers interact cooperatively when using language according to a set of conversational maxims, namely: *quantity* (contributing as much information as required for the purposes of the exchange); *quality* (truthfulness); *relation* (relevance); and *manner* (using language that is unambiguous, clear, brief, and ordered) (Grice, 1975: 45–47). Following these maxims, speakers usually aim to 'speak the truth, while giving just enough relevant information in a clear, unambiguous, succinct and orderly manner' (Fasold, 1990: 130). The *flouting* of these maxims permits 'conversational implicature', the purpose of which is to 'allow a speaker to convey meaning beyond what is literally expressed' (Fasold, 1990: 130). For example, when Modi said at the SLD that 'India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members', he was flouting the maxim of relevance by not providing the explicit context that some actor or actors *did* see the Indo-Pacific as a strategy or limited club, and he was flouting the maxim of quantity by not stating who this actor or actors were.

Flouting one of these maxims does not undermine the cooperative principle, which remains foremost for both speakers and listeners. Instead, the speaker believes that the listener can fathom what additional information was indirectly conveyed, and the listener believes that the speaker intended the listener to work out the additional information (and so on, recursively), such that a speech act that flouts one or more maxims actually does adhere to the cooperative principle. Since Gricean implicature assumes a bias towards the efficient exchange of information, where efficiency is sacrificed, it must be for some other social purpose, such as – in the case above – masking criticism (Pinker et al., 2008). Nonetheless, implicature places the cooperative principle under some degree of stress because the flouting of maxims 'may be relievable by more than one implicature', depending on 'assumptions shared by the participants in a particular speech event' (Fasold, 1990: 131–132). In other words, there is some degree of ambiguity in what implicature seeks to convey, which precisely permits both its multivocality and its denial of certainty.

Gricean implicature has been critiqued because, as Davis (1998: 3) argues, it is based on general psycho-social principles, and ‘any principle-based theory understates both the intentionality of what a speaker implicates and the conventionality of what a sentence implicates’. In other words, what counts as a flout is socially contingent. However, in our two cases below, we examine closely India’s purpose and strategy in signalling through implicature, such that our reading takes both ‘intentionality’ (purpose) and ‘conventionality’ (social strategic context) seriously. We leverage two of Grice’s maxims – quantity and relevance – as useful analytical tools for unpacking the precise mechanics of signalling through implicature, rather than seeing them as deterministic principles. The flouting of these two maxims – as we will show – not only presents a strategy via which India can signal but also allows us to locate the information that India wishes to communicate indirectly (and therefore exclude from overt speech).

In the previous section, we explored how Gricean implicature allows speakers or signalers to appeal to diverse and opposed audiences. We also asked how an actor might manage instances where his or her interests are served best by appealing to a very specific set of legitimating principles such that Goddard’s (2018) emphasis on multivocal *legitimation* – appealing to more than one audience’s understandings of legitimate behaviour – cannot feasibly be sustained. For this reason, we examine two such instances in which India’s options are limited and it chooses to signal exactly what norms and values it appeals to, even where these quite clearly target China: New Delhi’s justification for its non-attendance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in 2017, and its stance on the outcome of the 2016 arbitral tribunal under Annex VII of UNCLOS that favoured the Philippines’ claims over those of China in the South China Sea. These two ‘hard cases’ pose a particular stress test for India, since India explicitly appeals to US visions of regional order that oppose China and yet we would predict that India will not undo the careful relationship management with China that characterises its use of rhetoric more widely in the region.

Indian signalling at the first BRI summit

China launched its flagship global connectivity and infrastructure investment project, the BRI, in 2013 and organised its first BRI Forum in Beijing in May 2017. The forum was attended by official delegations representing 60 countries and several international organisations (Tiezzi, 2017). Attendance was significant, but uneven, since no head of state from the Western powers or Japan joined, although the United States sent last-minute senior officials (Taneja, 2017).

India did not attend the BRI Forum. For India, the BRI posed a core sovereignty challenge due to its incorporation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses Pakistan-administered Kashmir and which India claims as part of its territory. The BRI, China’s main foreign policy initiative in the region,¹⁶ was also a symbol and vehicle of China’s growing economic influence and strategic presence. India’s officials and strategic community perceived the BRI as a unilateral initiative presenting a larger challenge to Indian (and US) influence in the region (Jaishankar, 2015; Taneja, 2017). Since Beijing was using the Forum to galvanise legitimacy for the BRI, including CPEC, a prevalent view in India was that New Delhi’s participation would support these legitimisation efforts. For example, Indian news reports highlighted that India’s ‘seal of approval’ as a large Asian country ‘would be key for the success of the project’ (Arun, 2018).

China had earlier conveyed expectations that India would join the BRI, with its foreign minister stating that Beijing expected India to send a representative to the BRI Forum, at least at the ministerial level (Jinsong, 2017; Patranobis, 2017). India's subsequent non-attendance was, therefore, an unambiguous signal of opposition to the BRI and to China's claims of legitimacy as an infrastructure provider in the region. Moreover, the snub of non-attendance also signalled a social breach in the relationship, with India refusing to accept China's regional authority as chief infrastructural benefactor, thereby presenting potential face threat to China. The risk of these actions being perceived as signals of resolve and precipitating a crisis moment in Sino-Indian relations was high.

One strategy to manage these challenges was for India to *implicate* rhetorically its displeasure with China's economic expansion and modes of influence through the BRI, with implication undertaking facework and addressing the social breach in the Sino-Indian relationship posed by India's non-attendance. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, Government of India, 2017) responded to a query on its participation in the BRI Forum immediately before the opening of the Summit, thereby accompanying the signal of non-attendance, and its corollary of delegitimation, with meaning-making rhetoric. The two reasons given for non-attendance in his statement are worth quoting at length. First, the official Indian statement clarified:

We are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities.

Moreover:

Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity. [. . .] No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity (MEA, Government of India, 2017).

Indian criticism of China's policy was implicated, not openly expressed. First, while the statement made explicit reference to China having invited India to the BRI Forum, it expressed no *direct criticism* of China or the BRI, flouting the maxim of quantity, since insufficient information on the target of the statement was provided. The statement simply listed affirmative phrasings about 'connectivity projects' *in general* that flouted the Gricean maxim of relevance, thereby implicating, rather than specifying, a negative evaluation of the BRI as compared to India's own connectivity projects, which were described favourably (by noting that 'strengthening of connectivity is an integral part of India's economic and diplomatic initiatives'). The statement further noted that New Delhi had been 'urging China to engage in a meaningful dialogue on its connectivity initiative', implicating China's lack of responsiveness to such overtures, and thereby its unilateralism and opacity.

Since the Indian statement appealed to norms that challenged China's own claims of legitimation, this discounted the possibility for India to use multivocal legitimation as a balancing act: India could not appeal to Beijing's own normative vision of itself as chief infrastructure provider through the BRI, and, moreover, India implicated its support for the counter-China values promoted by the United States and other opponents to the BRI.

Signalling *implicated* communality towards the US and other like-minded partners (by using the underspecified, quality-flouting term ‘the international community’), India appealed to the normative and ordering logics of a US vision of the Indo-Pacific. The statement also highlighted that ‘India shares international community’s desire for enhancing physical connectivity and believes that it should bring greater economic benefits to all in an equitable and balanced manner’. This phrasing not only implicated that China’s connectivity projects were *not* equitable and balanced but also associated the opposing qualities with both India and ‘the international community’. In relation to connectivity and the region, India used a liberal vocabulary (for instance, ‘openness’ and ‘transparency’) shared with other partner countries from the Indo-Pacific grouping. This choice of vocabulary echoed and reinforced the US and Japanese normative discourses of a liberal ‘free and open’ Indo-Pacific region. As noted above, however, these terms – while invoking solidarity – did not constitute an unqualified and explicit alignment with the United States and its partners but signalled an underspecified communality, again flouting the maxim of quantity. In 2019, India voiced again concerns regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity and did not take part in the second BRI Forum. However, official statements retained the same cautious phrasing and recourse to implicature.¹⁷

The ‘moment’ of India’s non-attendance at the BRI Forum had high stakes centred on the sovereignty and territoriality of the Indian state, requiring signals of resolve against China and an appeal to the legitimating principles of US visions of regional order. The risks of these demands in demonstrating explicit resolve and provoking a hostile Chinese response were high. Yet the denial of certainty in the Indian statement, achieved by flouting the maxims of quantity and relevance, undertook facework that communicated a desire to uphold the overall social relations of authority in the China–India relationship. In other words, it sought to demonstrate both resolve and reassurance to China. India also sought the avoidance of socially binding rhetorical commitments to US values and interests (and their parallel, attendant suggestion of resolve to China) by flouting the maxims of quantity and relevance.

Indian signalling over the 2016 South China Sea ruling under UNCLOS

In July 2016, China rejected an arbitral ruling under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), initiated by the Philippines in 2013 to challenge key Chinese claims and activities in the South China Sea. China neither acknowledged the authority of the arbitral tribunal nor complied with the ruling, despite having ratified the Convention in 1996. In response to the verdict, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the ruling ‘null and void’ with ‘no binding force’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

The 2016 arbitral ruling was and remains consequential for the ability of UNCLOS to manage conflictual dynamics in the maritime domain (Campbell and Salidjanova, 2016). In contrast to China’s rejection of the 2016 ruling, in 2014, India accepted the outcome of arbitration proceedings initiated by Bangladesh under UNCLOS over a five decades-old maritime-boundary dispute. Bangladesh was awarded additional territory under the ruling, but India accepted the decision without qualification. In 2015, India signalled a normative commitment to UNCLOS in the US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region and jointly affirmed ‘the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea’ (MEA, Government of India, 2015).

India's position on UNCLOS is distinctive to that of the United States. First, the two countries disagree over aspects of coastal state authority.¹⁸ India considers that the provisions of UNCLOS 'do not authorize other States to carry out in the exclusive economic zone and on the continental shelf military exercises or manoeuvres . . . without the consent of the coastal State' and therefore India (in ways similar to China) does not support absolute freedom of navigation (MEA, Government of India, 2021; Singh, 2016). By contrast, for the United States, UNCLOS and conventional international law do not place limitations on military exercises or manoeuvres, and the public goods of 'freedom and openness' in the oceans intend to permit the unchallenged projection of US naval and naval air power across regional theatres (Roy-Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada, 2022; Singh, 2016). Moreover, the US refusal to itself ratify UNCLOS conveys a brand of 'exemptionalism' that India finds discomfiting, while the US commitment to Freedom of Navigation patrols in the South China Sea (and their attendant risks) are outside the scope of Indian capabilities, ambitions, and acceptability. At the same time, India has its own concerns regarding China's maritime assertiveness in the Indian Ocean. It seeks to manage these through (faltering) naval modernisation and a rhetorical commitment to a rules-based international order and the concept of the freedom of the seas, which project communality with the United States and its strategic partners (Roy-Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada, 2018; Singh, 2020, 2021).

At the time of the 2016 ruling against China, India sought to balance these competing imperatives. The MEA, Government of India (2016 – emphasis added) released a statement that – in conspicuously neutral language – 'noted the Award of the Arbitral Tribunal constituted under Annex VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) in the matter concerning the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China'. Yet the statement continued with implicated criticism of China's rejection of the ruling, as usual flouting the maxim of quantity by not mentioning China further:

India supports freedom of navigation and over flight, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the UNCLOS. India believes that States should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force and exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that could complicate or escalate disputes affecting peace and stability. Sea lanes of communication passing through the South China Sea are critical for peace, stability, prosperity and development. As a State Party to the UNCLOS, India urges all parties to show utmost respect for the UNCLOS, which establishes the international legal order of the seas and oceans (MEA, Government of India, 2016).

The statement conveyed support for international law and UNCLOS (notably leaving space for India's own interpretation of the Convention), but implicated criticism by calling on states to resolve disputes 'without threat or use of force and exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that could complicate or escalate disputes', likely in reference to China's increasing efforts since 2009 to bolster its dominance in the South China Sea through tactics that Campbell and Salidjanova (2016: 2) have catalogued as 'using its military, coast guard, and maritime militia to harass foreign ships; exploring and extracting resources in disputed areas; and, starting in 2013, constructing artificial islands and basing military and civilian assets there'. Importantly, however, in encouraging 'all parties' to show respect for UNCLOS, the Indian statement could also be read as leaving space to criticise the United States' own, somewhat indeterminate relationship to UNCLOS, which it regularly invokes but has never ratified. For one New Delhi-based analyst, this statement was consistent with India 'taking a stand on the principle and

application of international law' though 'without taking sides on the dispute' (Baruah, 2016). In September 2016, at the 11th East Asia Summit, Modi again urged all parties present (China, in attendance, included) to 'show utmost respect for the UNCLOS', adding that India's 'own track record in settling its maritime boundary with Bangladesh can serve as an example' (Deccan Chronicle, 2016).

India continued to issue statements of support for freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded commerce, the principles of international law, and UNCLOS, at consecutive international forums. However, following violence at the border with China in mid-2020, India's position towards China appeared to harden. Before a domestic audience in November 2021, the Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh (2021), spoke at the commissioning of the Indian Naval Ship Visakhapatnam and described India 'as a responsible maritime stakeholder . . . a supporter of consensus-based principles and a peaceful, open, rule-based and stable maritime order' and then added that 'some irresponsible nations, for the sake of their narrow partisan interests, keep on giving new and inappropriate interpretations to these international laws from hegemonic tendencies. The arbitrary interpretations create obstacles in the path of a rule-based maritime order'. This was a fascinating implicature. One Indian newspaper interpreted it as a 'veiled jibe at China' and yet the choice of the plural term 'some irresponsible nations' permitted the speech act to appear to refer to one or more states beyond only China, with the qualifier 'hegemonic tendencies' rendering the statement eligible to refer to the United States, too. The denial of certainty that the statement referred only and explicitly to China was achieved by how the implicature flouted the maxims of both quantity and either quality (if the reference to more than one nation was untrue) or relevance (if reference to states beyond China was not intended).

In 2023, a joint statement by India and the Philippines drew wide attention for its explicit reference to the 2016 ruling, though again, without any direct mention of China. The Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, Enrique Manalo, and the External Affairs Minister of India, S. Jaishankar, during a visit of the former to New Delhi at the end of June, underscored in a joint statement that 'both countries have a shared interest in a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region' and 'underlined the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea in this regard' (MEA, Government of India, 2023).

Many commentators read the statement as a shift away from neutrality, since this was the first time India had 'explicitly called on China to heed the arbitral tribunal's 2016 ruling' (Singh, 2023a). A commentator writing in a major Indian newspaper claimed that 'the joint statement is significant as this is the first time India has unambiguously called upon China to adhere to the ruling that Beijing continues to call null and void' (Parashar, 2023). A more sober interpretation was that India was merely seeking improved ties with the Philippines by taking an uncomfortable position on an issue of core interest to its partner, rather than signalling new appetite to explicitly challenge China on its claims in the South China Sea (Singh, 2023a).

The contrast with the G7 statement, released at the Hiroshima summit in May 2023, was conspicuous. The G7 named China and explicitly stated that there was 'no legal basis for China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea', also conveying that 'we [the G7] oppose China's militarization activities in the region' (The White House, 2023a). Beijing responded angrily to the G7 Hiroshima Leaders' statement, stating that:

The international community does not and will not accept the G7-dominated Western rules that seek to divide the world based on ideologies and values. Even less will it succumb to the rules of exclusive small blocs designed to serve ‘America-first’ and the vested interests of the few (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cited in: GT Staff Reporters, 2023).

While some commentators argued that the Quad Leaders’ Summit at the same time issued a similar statement, this was not the case (see, for example, Corrales, 2023). The Quad statement did *not* mention China nor the 2016 arbitral ruling but did link the Leaders’ shared support for UNCLOS to the geographical space of the East and South China Seas, implicating a reference to China by expressing ‘serious concern at the militarisation of disputed features, the dangerous use of coastguard and maritime militia vessels, and efforts to disrupt other countries’ offshore resource exploitation activities’ (The White House, 2023b). Given that the United States and Japan were parties to the G7 statement, and Australia has since 2020 formally and explicitly rejected China’s territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea, India likely influenced the cautious phrasing in the Quad statement (BBC, 2020; Permanent Mission of the Commonwealth of Australia to the United Nations, 2020). As Indian maritime expert Abhijit Singh (2016, 2023b) has argued, ‘Indian decision-makers largely see the South China Sea as a contested space that China dominates and where India has limited equity’, does not support the US practice of ‘conducting maritime operations to score political points’, and limits its own naval manoeuvres to non-disputed regions of the South China Sea ‘as a concession to Chinese vanity’.

Across time, India’s position on the 2016 arbitral ruling has struck a careful balance between projecting implicated communality with the United States and its allies through a shared commitment to international law and UNCLOS, while implicating a degree of resolve against China. As Beijing’s angry response to both the 2016 ruling itself and the G7 statement in 2023 revealed (with no similar response detected to the May 2023 Quad statement¹⁹), the risks of demonstrating explicit resolve and provoking a hostile Chinese response are high. Indian statements have achieved a denial of certainty around India’s position on the South China Sea disputes, accomplished by flouting the maxims of quantity and relevance, and perhaps, on occasion, quality. India thereby undertakes facework that communicates a desire to uphold the overall social relations of authority in the China–India relationship (or, as Singh puts it, ‘concessions to Chinese vanity’). In other words, India has demonstrated both resolve and reassurance to China. The possibility of avoiding socially binding rhetorical commitments to US interpretations of UNCLOS and customary international law, given India’s own divergences from US legal positions and the US appetite for naval activism (and their parallel, attendant signals of resolve to China), were also achieved by flouting the maxims of quantity and relevance.

Wider significance and contributions

Since signalling is both purposeful and socially contingent, we have argued that India’s signalling strategy seeks to meet the contradictory imperatives that India faces in the Indo-Pacific, and that India’s signals at key moments take the form of a mode of indirect speech called implicature. However, our exposition of signalling through implicature holds value beyond an understanding of India’s complex signalling in the Indo-Pacific. We see the potential for our theoretical argument to contribute to the study of signalling, hedging, legitimisation, and rhetorical coercion.

First, existing research on signalling has mostly focused on material signals. We underscore how a wider spectrum of options is available within a state's signalling toolbox than has been acknowledged so far. That spectrum becomes particularly relevant in a non-dyadic situation of overarching polarisation such as the current context of the Indo-Pacific region, where non-costly social signals seek to manage the complex conditions of asymmetric power relations and the demands of multivocality. For less powerful states, signals that indicate a position on the spectrum of Sino-US polarisation carry risk. Since most states in the Indo-Pacific face the dilemma of managing relations with both China and the United States, we expect that the use of implicature is or will be widespread, although it may respond to different logics than India's. The solution to the conflicting social demands made of states who aim for disassociation, even if unevenly, from the two sides of a starkly polarised social constellation, but who wish to maintain non-conflictual relations with the actors on different sides, can be customising their social signals – as far as possible – to different audience expectations or preferences by signalling through implicature. Implicature may also be used *between* great powers, in particular at moments where they seek to dial back tensions, preserve the quality of their relationship following a social break, or suggest a degree of non-binding communality on shared issues of global concern.

Second, the hedging literature has similarly mostly focused on material signals, whether military or economic. Signalling through implicature opens new avenues to understand the *social* dimension of hedging. We identify social signalling as a key component of hedging and argue that signalling through implicature constitutes a mode of social hedging. Signalling through implicature enables caveated forms of both reassurance *and* resolve to be conveyed simultaneously to both sides of a polarised constellation of audiences. It allows a form of indirect speech that can deliver both the *denial of certainty* and the *customised management of relationships*, and thus seeks to avoid social breaches in critical relationships with competing great powers. Signalling through implicature can therefore broaden the scope of what scholars have considered as 'material hedging' and thus expand a state's strategic options.

Third, the stated or unstated objective of much of the literature on legitimacy and legitimation is to understand how order is maintained via social compliance within a US-led liberal international order (LIO) (Clark, 2011; Finnemore, 2009; Hurd, 1999, 2007; Reus-Smit, 2007). This LIO-centrism leads to assumptions that legitimation is a primary means through which secondary states manage hierarchical relations. Even if recent scholarship argues that multiple orders, existing in parallel, are a feature of our emerging world order (Acharya, 2014, 2017), the bias towards legitimation as a strategy of accommodation persists. As we argue above, Goddard's (2018) ground-breaking account of multivocal social signalling is analytically powerful, but states may not always socially signal with reference to a shared and thickly normative context. Instead, where a more powerful state claims primacy, relationship management may instead centre on the normatively thinner dominance logics of face and standing (see also Lebow, 2008, 2010). Our contribution offers an opportunity for IR scholars to return to the consideration of a wider set of *social* logics in the contemporary signalling context of the Indo-Pacific, where normative orders (that centre, for example, on professed values of openness in the maritime domain or transparency in infrastructure development) are at the heart of contestation and challenge, and where secondary states must navigate different hierarchical orders (some thickly and some thinly normatively elaborated) carefully.

Fourth and finally, our characterisation of signalling through implicature as founded on the *denial of certainty* converses productively with works that emphasise the

possibility for rhetorical entrapment. Whether a public statement invokes a principle of legitimation that commits an actor to a course of action that she or he later finds difficult to escape (Hurd, 2007: 213), or whether failure to conform to social rules would carry the risk of accusations of hypocrisy (Finnemore, 2009: 72), implicature permits the denial of rhetorical material for audiences to hold actors to fixed social expectations. Moreover, in contradistinction to Krebs and Jackson's (2007: 36) theory of rhetorical coercion, whereby actors 'deploy arguments . . . to leave their opponents without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft a socially sustainable rebuttal', signalling through implicature does not seek to 'compel' an opponent 'to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject', but instead seeks to deny an opponent the rhetorical material they would need to prove intent or resolve. This rhetorical flexibility may be ever more in deployment in a changing world order marked by uncertainty and risk.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we theorise an essential feature of India's signalling strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. We call this *signalling through implicature*. This case of India's signalling is a poor fit with mainstream theories of signalling that often assume that signals should be open and costly to be credible. In contrast, it is distinctly characterised by indirect signals that intend *not* to be costly. These signals reflect the complex behaviour demanded by a context in which India must manage simultaneously its asymmetrical relationships with each pole of a polarised dyad (the United States and China).

Indeed, the strategy of signalling through implicature reflects India's intent to maintain social relations with both sides of a competitive great power dyad to achieve an overall non-conflictual outcome. This strategy permits the simultaneous management of social relations of different kinds: India deploys this social tool to manage simultaneously a relationship of (professed) communality with like-minded partners, in particular the United States, and a dominance relationship with China. By conceptualising India's signalling as implicature, we illuminate how India seeks to avoid provoking China, build supportive but caveated relations with the United States and its partners to build out national power, and retain strategic autonomy with the end goal of emerging as an independent 'pole' in a future multipolar order, all at once. With this social strategy, India aims to maintain maximum autonomy over its material choices, avoiding both alignment and the loss of autonomy in relation to the contentious Sino-US dyad. Material balancing is arguably less significant to India's relations with China than its strategy of simultaneously signalling to both China and the United States in an effort to preserve social relations with both powers.

Our core contention is that signalling through implicature can create a wider spectrum within which material signals can be read as hedging rather than balancing. Since signalling through implicature withholds rhetorical material to evidence resolve or reassurance, it conveys an overall message that the purposes of India's external balancing efforts are in flux, rather than fixed. This, in turn, expands India's strategic options, or 'widens the fence'²⁰ on which India actively chooses to 'sit' as a secondary hedging state in the Indo-Pacific. Since hedging behaviour does not have a fixed meaning besides how it is framed, social signalling is a key component of hedging: signalling through implicature, we argue, is a mode of social hedging.

Are the outcomes of India's signalling successful? The competing demands made of India's signalling strategy in the Indo-Pacific appear to be increasingly in tension. The two sides of strategic autonomy – keeping a distance from the United States while

balancing China through closer strategic relations with the United States – may be less and less reconcilable. Being ‘pushed towards the US’ because of the 2020 border invasion, as Hal Brands (2020) puts it, may ultimately undermine India’s overall strategy. Yet for the time being, Beijing will be unable to locate rhetorical evidence that New Delhi explicitly frames China as an aggressor or a participant in US-led efforts to counter China. That is the value of India’s strategy of signalling through implicature.

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Notes

1. For this reason, India pursues ‘measures that are less directly threatening to the rival’, compensating with ‘zone balancing’ through the development of ‘regional capacity and resilience’ (Tarapore, 2023: 244, 256).
2. Rajagopalan (2020: 81) terms this ‘evasive balancing’, a strategy through which ‘states attempt both to balance against the threat and also to reassure the threat that they are not balancing’.
3. While we recognise that the signals India sends and the ones China receives may not be identical, here we place our focus on Indian *expectations* of Chinese reception to account for India’s signalling choices – our primary aim – rather than India’s signalling outcomes (a much more complex picture, which we discuss briefly in our conclusion).
4. For Tarapore (2023: 256), ‘any balancing is part of a strategic competition between adversaries’.
5. Jaishankar (2020: 26) has made clear, referring to New Delhi’s requirement to tilt towards the United States and the USSR during the Cold War, that ‘India made the adjustments required on stressful occasions’ before, but ‘whenever crises receded, India went back to the middle path’.
6. The true picture is complicated: see below and Sullivan de Estrada (2023).
7. Even when the literature discusses non-material signals like leaders’ commitments, those usually have material implications to be credible.
8. With the exception of Goh (2005), who discusses the role of persuasion and socialisation in hedging strategies.
9. Even if Japan, not the United States, is the chief originator of the Indo-Pacific construct, the latter has the most social power, together with an order-preserving imperative, in the region.
10. An additional reason for why this might be necessary in the Indo-Pacific context centres on how China does not appear to be projecting an explicit counter to the free and open order of the United States. Indeed, maintaining hierarchical relations in Asia is a greater preoccupation for China in the region (Roth, 2024).
11. This alternative to the verb ‘imply’ is introduced by Grice (1975) as a means to clarify the distinctiveness of his concept. Where we use the term implicature, it is consciously to invoke a Gricean analysis.
12. As Pinker et al. (2008) further note, implicatures also make ‘refusal’ easy: the senior colleague could simply pretend not to have understood the intended meaning.
13. For example, such as where Beijing makes unilateral maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea. India has so far refused to join the United States in its freedom of navigation patrols there.
14. The reality of the US-Indo relationship in particular may be closer to Pinker et al.’s (2008: 835) more pragmatic characterisation of a ‘reciprocity or equality-matching relationship’, characterised by ‘tit-for-tat exchanges’, but this is an observation deserving of a longer discussion.
15. We thank the editors of BJPIR for this point.
16. At the opening ceremony of the summit, Xi Jinping (2017) called the BRI ‘a project of the century’.
17. See India’s Ambassador to China Vikram Misri’s choice of phrasing in an interview with the Global Times (quoted in The Economic Times, 2019).
18. See Roy-Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada (2022) for a detailed, historicised account of the central issues.
19. We could not locate a negative response from China to the Quad statement.
20. We thank Alexander Yen for this intuitive formulation.

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