

Indo Pacific Geoconstruct – Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

India's national development and economic growth is intertwined with developments in the Indo-Pacific region since most of its trade transits through this region. It has established itself as a responsible, engaged and willing actor in the Indo-Pacific region by expanding its capabilities in various spheres. Though India has engaged constructively with various countries, groupings and important stakeholders in the region through bilats, minilaterals or multilaterals, they do have different perceptions of Indo Pacific region. It is also a fact that there are major contestations taking place in the Indo-Pacific region with specific reference to South China Sea and East China Sea. In this context, India needs to clearly spell out it's perspective on Indo Pacific geoconstruct.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Indo Pacific, Quad, Indian Navy, India, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Indo Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD)

INTRODUCTION

The financial crisis in India in 1990-91, coupled with disintegration of Soviet Union, forced India to have a fresh look at its foreign policy. The then Prime Minister PV Narsimha Rao launched a 'Look East Policy' in 1992 to which Prime Minister Modi infused energy and whilst attending 12th ASEAN India Summit and the 9th East Asia Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in November 2014 formally enunciated the 'Act East Policy' (1). The Act East Policy, which calls for enhanced cross-border engagement between the two development poles of a dynamic Asia, has markedly evolved from India's Look East Policy. Even though the Act East Policy is primarily an improvement and expansion of the Look East Policy, the Act East Policy is more based on India's strategic outreach in the area than the economic involvement that was the Look East Policy's primary tenet. Strategically, the "maritime underbelly" of Asia, the Indo-Pacific, should be viewed as a single and integrated geopolitical construct, wherein lie tremendous geoeconomic opportunities as well as daunting security challenges, not only for Asia, but also for the rest of the wider world, according to Gurpreet Singh Khurana. This is because geoeconomics and the ocean realm are inextricably linked. Earlier usage of "Asia" was too broad and continental. "Asia-Pacific" – which

traditionally stood for "the Asian littoral of the Pacific" – was inadequate (2).

Indo Pacific

India's Maritime Neighbourhood

India finds that the seas are the main way to increase her connection and trade links with her neighbours and the rest of the globe because of the rough terrain and steep mountain ranges that dominate her northern borders. Unsurprisingly, her foreign trade is conducted mostly through sea lanes – over 95% by volume and 70% by value (3). India's economic progress is interlinked to peace and stability around India's maritime areas of interest. In order to ensure that India is a net security provider in Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India is guided by the principles of preservation of peace, promotion of stability and maintenance of security (4). Moving on further, President Kovind whilst conducting review of the Indian Navy in 2022 alluded to India's vision of being the 'Preferred Security Partner' and 'First Responder' in the IOR (5). It has been observed that though Indian Navy has firmly changed over to usage of 'preferred security partner', the Indian government has been using both terminology 'net security provider' and 'preferred security partner' interchangeably. To cooperate with nations in the region, India has

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actively participated in various multilateral organisations. India has been one of the member states of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since its formation in 1997. India revitalised IORA during its chairmanship for the period 2011-13 and six Priority and two Focus Areas were identified on the basis to promote sustained growth and balanced development in the IOR (6). Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) was conceptualised by Indian Navy and came into being in 2008. It seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the IOR by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues (7). Indian Navy has also been participating as Observer in Western Pacific Naval Symposium since 1998 (8). Recently, India was also accorded Observer status in 2020 at Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) which is the intergovernmental body of island nations in Africa/Western Indian Ocean (9). However, over last one decade, India has observed changes in its immediate neighbourhood which have an impact on its security situation. The majority of these changes are related to China's emergence as aggressive India's northern neighbour and its ever-growing maritime footprints in regions of maritime relevance to India. When China's grandiose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first unveiled in 2013, it offered significant incentives to nations in India's immediate neighbourhood to develop their own infrastructure while receiving financial support from Beijing. The progressive implementation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects has effectively brought debt ridden Pakistan in its strategic ambit and usage of phrases to describe friendship between China and Pakistan as "higher than the mountains" or "sweeter than honey" (10) are being increasingly seen in interactions. With the building of a network of dual use facilities in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Mauritius, as well as its overseas military station in Djibouti, it would be easy for China to sustain and support its maritime forces throughout the Indian Ocean region. By the use of these assets, China's maritime forces have access to important choke points and extensive maritime domains in IOR. India had firmly opposed the BRI during its inception because of its strategic implications and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through India's territory (presently being held with Pakistan). Notwithstanding, BRI has increased China's engagement and its presence in

IOR and ASEAN countries. China has made progress in modernising and reorganising its armed forces and militia. Although oceans have always been regarded as "global commons," restrictive control and militarisation of the South China Sea islands may put significant limitations on Indian marine traffic passing through these areas. Its disregard to a binding award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of Philippines and disregard of various United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) provisions in developing islands in Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of other nations is a concern. Its ability to control the South China Sea would undermine the current free, open, inclusive, and law-based order over the oceans. In its interaction with countries that do not support its objectives, China has used strong and coercive tactics. Its use of the "united front strategy" to exert influence abroad has been a particularly effective method. India has actively resisted China's efforts to mould the narrative through influence operations by adopting various strategic measures. The prohibitions on Chinese apps, the suspension of Huawei's 5G experiments, the increased inspection of incoming Chinese investments, and the introduction of stricter visa requirements for Chinese journalists and academics are notable among them. Following the 2020 Galwan riots, 67% of Indian survey participants told Pew Research that they had a negative opinion of China (11). These changes have presented India with a fresh set of geopolitical challenges. In terms of Indo-Pacific ties, New Delhi was worried about being caught between Beijing and Washington; yet, its neighbours, most of them island countries, were in a similar situation due to a deteriorating Sino-Indian rivalry. Even though India had historically recognised the significance of these island countries, its strategic interaction with them had reached a point of inertia. New Delhi didn't turn to its neighbouring island governments until China started to change the security boundaries in the Indian Ocean. India started to adapt to its new security environment as the Indo-Pacific concept increasingly became a strategic asset, but New Delhi has struggled to articulate a coherent future vision. In both the Indian Ocean Region and Southeast Asia, smaller nations and littorals wanted to avoid choosing sides in the Sino-Indian or China-U.S. competitions that were brewing. Many of these nations and India's long-term partners viewed the

Indo-Pacific construct as a challenge to China's rise (12). As India examined its options in the wake of a dramatically altered neighbourhood led by an increasing Chinese presence, the potential of maritime partnerships became clear in India's choices. By 2018, the Indo-Pacific had provided excellent opportunities for New Delhi to reemerge as a key security player aimed at securing its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. At this point the government finally took steps to provide a vision statement for the Indo-Pacific, as presented in Modi's keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018. As India announced its Indo-Pacific vision, partnerships became the central pillar of New Delhi's strategy in realising this vision (12).

Evolution of India's Indo Pacific Construct

The origin of the term 'Indo-Pacific' is traced to German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer who used it in the 1920s in his work, 'Indopazifischen Raum,' and Indian historian Kalidas Nag referenced it in the 1940s (Pulipaka and Musaddi 2021). In contemporary times, Gurpreet Khurana explained the Indo-Pacific concept in a paper titled "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation" in IDSA's *Strategic Analyses* January 2007 journal (2). Further, Shinzo Abe in his speech to Indian Parliament in 2007 emphasised "the confluence of the two seas" and used the geographical term "broader Asia". It is apparent that Abe's 'confluence of two seas' and 'broader Asia' led to germination of 'Indo Pacific' concept among policy makers and wider strategic community. India's Maritime Security Strategy, published in 2015, has similar core maritime areas as depicted by Panikkar and enlists the entire Indian Ocean Region as its primary area of maritime interests and its secondary areas of maritime interest include the following: -

- South-East Indian Ocean, including sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and littoral regions in vicinity.
- South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean, and their littoral regions.
- Southern Indian Ocean Region, including Antarctica.
- Mediterranean Sea, West Coast of Africa, and their littoral regions.
- Other areas of national interest based on considerations of Indian diaspora, overseas

investments and political relations. Though the geostrategic construct of Indo Pacific was well in the making and increasingly gaining traction, India's Maritime Security Strategy did not include whole of the Pacific Ocean and its region, even in its secondary areas of maritime interests in 2015. It is also noticed that Southern Indian Ocean region, including Antarctica, is an area of maritime interest which is also referred as Antarctic or Southern Ocean. It is evident that despite the continuum of two oceans and Indian merchant marine and Navy traversing these oceans frequently, India's primary concern has been to define and spell out its firm perspective on the Indo Pacific region in the early phases of its Indo Pacific discourse. Finding the ideal balance between the United States and its allies on the one side and China on the other was at the time a major challenge for New Delhi. India was worried that it shouldn't be seen as taking part in a containment policy being driven by the West. India had to come up with a fresh plan of action in response to a rising China in its region at the same time (12). Indian policymakers, especially Prime Minister Modi, have consistently emphasised India's long-standing idea of a human community that transcends political boundaries. For India, security and prosperity have always been shared goals of the entire human race, with no possibility of isolated security or prosperity. When Prime Minister Modi eventually presented India's vision of the Indo-Pacific during the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, this served as both the theme and the core of India's Indo-Pacific architecture. On 01 June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region in his speech delivered at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore. He listed its geographical bounds, which included all nations in the area, including China and Russia, from the coasts of Africa to those of the Americas. In the Indo-Pacific, he called for a free, open, and inclusive order based on respect for the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of all nations, the peaceful settlement of conflicts via negotiation, and adherence to international laws and regulations. India supports an approach that respects everyone's right to freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters, and its conception of the Indo-Pacific region is inclusive in nature. India's Indo-Pacific vision is premised upon the principle of 'ASEAN-Centrality'. Given the requirement for common responses to shared

difficulties in the region, India's strategy is built on cooperation and collaboration (1). In response to the Indo-Pacific concept's rising importance in global discourse, a new Division for the Indo-Pacific was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2019. The purpose for doing so was two-fold: to help consolidate India's vision of the Indo-Pacific across Government of India, in line with the elements set out by the Prime Minister of India in June 2018, and to provide substantive policy elements and programmes to that vision (1). The concept of the Indo Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) was first suggested by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, at the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) at Bangkok in November 2019, as a continuation of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region) mission, enunciated by him in 2015. The main objective of the IPOI is to ensure the safety, security and stability of the maritime domain, and to achieve this, seven pillars have been enunciated, which include (13):

- Maritime Security (India and UK in lead);
- Marine Ecology (Australia in lead);
- Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation (Singapore in lead);
- Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (India in lead);
- Capacity-building and Resource Sharing.
- Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport (Japan, US and India in lead);
- Maritime Resources (France and Indonesia in lead).

The actualisation of each of the seven spokes or pillars of the IPOI is highly important to the Indian Navy because it is the government's principal maritime security agency. In order to achieve this, Indian Navy organised the maiden Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD) in 2022. The deliberations of the dialogue were centered on operationalisation of all tenets of IPOI, with an emphasis on the pillar of 'Maritime Security' (14). India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, whilst addressing IPRD in 2022, reiterated India's belief in a multi-aligned policy realised through diverse engagements with multiple stakeholders, stressing that addressing the concerns of all is the only way which can lead to shared responsibility and prosperity (15). India has operationalised Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC – IOR) on 22 Dec 18 in order to

strengthen maritime safety and security in the region and build a common coherent maritime situation picture. The Centre has established 67 linkages in 25 countries and proactively shares information with respect to White Shipping and Vessels of Interest (VoI) to combat non-traditional maritime safety and security threats (16).

COVID 19 and Indo Pacific

Besides plunging the world into a difficult health crisis due to COVID 19 pandemic in 2019, it also had an impact on political and economic institutions all across the world. Many nations have entered recession as a result of the severe disruptions brought on by lockdowns and travel restrictions, and the global economic repercussions are still continuing. Polarised connectivity, education and income trajectories would further fragment the global economy, and divergence is likely to be aggravated by slowing and disparate growth. Advanced economies are expected to surpass their pre-pandemic growth path by 0.9% by 2024, but developing economies are likely to trail further (17). Considering all this, it would be in order to presume that the Indo-Pacific region will determine the shape of future international economic architecture. Following COVID, India has established itself as a responsible and engaged player in the Indo-Pacific region by expanding its capabilities in the supply of pharmaceuticals, modernising its manufacturing base to include critical equipment/ medicine needed by the health sector, and supplying medical aid to numerous nations. The constructive role that India played sends a crucial message about its political intention to take part in the region to the best of its ability. In some ways, New Delhi's prompt and proactive attitude is a culmination of the country's closer strategic connections with the US, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN, as well as the parallel expansion of these nations' regional influence. India's position as a direct stakeholder in the region gives New Delhi the edge to initiate dialogues as well as assist in the creation of a balanced security architecture to deal with traditional and non-traditional security issues (18). It is apparent that the pandemic has accelerated the necessity to bring in resilience in economy through partnership between likeminded countries in the region and ensure continuation of rules-based order. A post-COVID world will require countries to find new partnership

through Mini laterals and geopolitical alignments to secure their interests.

Politics Dictate Geographical Boundaries

Though it would ideally be a confluence of both oceans (Indian and Pacific) as Shinzo Abe had enunciated in Indian Parliament in 2007, countries that play major role in the region have defined the geographical limits of the region differently based on their national core interests. Notwithstanding minor

divergences, the new geopolitical construct, Indo Pacific, has become truly embedded in polity of most of the major nations and groupings in the region. A scan of various publications and speech by policy makers reveal that countries have made dynamic adjustment to geographical limits to the Indo Pacific region and they have been varying as they continually aligned their strategic outlook towards the region. The last defined limits of the Indo Pacific region are tabulated below (19) :-

Country	Geographical Definition Extract	Relevant Publications	Remarks
United States	“Spanning a vast stretch of the globe from the west coast of the US to the western shores of India”	National Security Strategy (2017) Indo Pacific Strategy Report (2019)	- Enunciated ‘Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy’ in 2017. - USPACOM renamed as USINDOPACOM in 2018.
Australia	“ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States”	Foreign Policy Paper (2017)	
Japan	“two continents – Asia and Africa and the two oceans – the Pacific and Indian Oceans are an integrated region”	Diplomatic Bluebook (2017)	Enunciated ‘Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy’ in 2016.
India	“from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas and all countries in the region including China and Russia”	Ministry of External Affairs brief on Shangri La Dialogue (2018)	Ministry of External Affairs has established a new Division for the Indo-Pacific in April 2019.
United Kingdom	“China, India and Southeast Asia and the Five Power Defence Arrangements between UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore as well as Asia Europe Meeting initiative”	National Security Capability Review (2018)	
ASEAN	“aggregation of Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region”	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (2019)	
France	“shores of Africa to Pacific Islands through Indian and Western Pacific Oceans”	Indo Pacific Strategy (2022)	Deduced from map in the strategy document

In majority of cases, the Indo Pacific region has converged eastwards to the western shores of the Americas except that of France and United Kingdom who have limited it to the Western Pacific Ocean. On the western side, India, France, Japan and ASEAN have extended their geographical limit to the African shores and United States, Australia and United Kingdom have limited it to the western shores of India. Though China is included in the Indo Pacific region by most of the countries, but China itself sees the coinage of this concept as containment of its rising

power. As it can be noted, India is the only country which includes Russia in the Indo Pacific region. This divergence in perception of the region, based on respective core concerns, does pose a limitation to common understanding of the region and hence lead to varying perceptions of ideation and solutions. Both China and Russia continue to use the old term ‘Asia Pacific’ and considers ‘Asia-Pacific’ as a natural region encompassing the Asian land mass and the Pacific region. Both countries consider the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as being aimed at the containment of China

and finds no strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Whilst speaking in March 2018 about how China views the Indo-Pacific strategy, Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi said in 2018: "It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they may get some attention, but soon will dissipate." (20) There is also a notable difference in ASEAN approach to the Indo Pacific region, as can be seen from the aforesaid table. Whilst most of the major countries recognise the two oceans as a single maritime integrated domain, ASEAN considers it as an aggregation of Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean along with its respective regional or sub-regional mechanisms. The ASEAN Outlook on Indo Pacific also puts the Asia Pacific region first and the Indian Ocean region second, notwithstanding the order of Indo Pacific (19). It could be easily observed that ASEAN has some concerns about the necessity of this new construct, grouping losing its centrality in the region and undermining the existing ASEAN-led regional architecture. To allay these concerns, India, Australia, Japan and United States have publicly emphasised the centrality of ASEAN in the Indo Pacific construct. The parallels between the geographical borders of the Indo-Pacific region are encouraging with both oceans being recognised as a single maritime domain in a variety of concepts. They all emphasise the criticality of the maritime security in order to maintain safety and accessibility of the international SLOC that connects the two oceans through the Straits of Malacca. There are legitimate worries that Beijing may restrict the South China Sea's freedom of navigation. The idea of an emerging India and its inclusion in all conceptions of the Indo Pacific region in determining the geographical borders of the region is firmly evident. Behind the shaping of the various conceptions of Indo Pacific, the idea is to ensure the integration of India into the Indo Pacific, in light of increasing influence of China. Another significant point is that Southeast Asian nations cannot disengage from the Indo-Pacific due to their geographic location and are compelled to participate in any Indo-Pacific initiative that seeks to interact with them (19). In essence, the trinity of maritime security of oceans, India's emerging power and location of Southeast Asian countries are the inherent pillars of the Indo Pacific geopolitical construct. Major democratic

powers in the Indo-Pacific region have naturally come together to safeguard the region's rule-based order in conformity with long-standing international norms as a result of the region's growing prominence. In order to cooperate with nations in the region, India has actively participated in various multilateral organisations like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and ASEAN led institutions. Besides conducting bilaterals with countries under different types of Strategic Partnership, India has also been conducting minilaterals between countries. One of the minilaterals which has come to being is Quad and all countries of the region are taking note of it. It would be worthwhile to analyse the evolution of Quad in succeeding paragraphs.

QUAD

Birth of Quad

In the aftermath of the Earthquake off the Coast of Sumatra and Tsunami Disaster in the Indian Ocean in 2004, Japan, Australia, India and the United States formed a Core Group to lead the international community's support to mobilise prompt disaster relief and humanitarian aid delivery (21). Although the partnership was essentially disbanded after providing comprehensive and efficient assistance to the impacted population in the Indian Ocean Region, the Ministry of External/Foreign Affairs briefs of each of these nations identify the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as the origin of the Quad. It is evident that the seeds of such a concept were well sown in the strategic minds in the region. A flurry of diplomatic activity and visits of political leaders among these four countries led to an "informal grouping" meeting in May 2007 as officials gathered for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) summit in Manila (22). When the Quad was first established in 2007, India and Australia were both viewed as reluctant participants. This was because India pursued quite a different policy toward China at that time (23). In 2007, China went ahead and filed official demarches with each of the four countries. The Republic of Korea had also expressed its hesitation about the grouping and was unwilling to be forced to choose between the United

States, its security ally, and China, its growing economic partner. The lack of specificity about the Quad's purpose and objectives gave critics room to seize on the most radical speculation: that the Quad would soon turn into an Asian NATO or otherwise evolve into a security alliance. Mounting Chinese pressure led to reticence among Australia, India, and the United States to formalise the dialogue. Prime Minister Abe's resignation in September 2007 deprived the Quad of its main cheerleader and architect. Following the election of the Rudd Government in late 2007, Australia decided that the Quad did not suit its strategic outlook and announced that it would not seek to participate in the Quad dialogue in January 2008. The failure of Quad 1.0 did not rule out the possibility of an Australia-U.S.-Japan-India discussion in the long run, but at least in that timeframe, it was clear that the four countries could not agree on the key concerns facing the region or the best ways to address them (22).

Intervening Period – Era of Trilaterals

The United States, Japan, and Australia had already established an annual trilateral missile defence forum in 2007, whilst Quad 1.0 took a premature birth and folded up in quick time as well, in order to cooperate to counter global counter-terrorism and facilitate discussion to protect shared strategic interests in promoting peace and stability in the (then) Asia Pacific region, including lessons learned from defence acquisitions (24). Over the years, it is evident that this trilateral has a definitive and tangible security perspective. The scope of the trilateral has also increased in complexity of military, economic and strategic engagements. In 2011, Japan-U.S.-India trilateral dialogues was initiated at the director-general level and were held annually. This was upgraded to Trilateral Ministerial dialogue on 30 September 2015 at New York. The dialogue was attended by Mr. Fumio Kishida, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, Mr. John Kerry, Secretary of State of the United States of America, and Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister of India. The three countries have been discussing since then on issues of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), regional connectivity and economic development as areas for cooperation (25). In 2014, India-Australia-Japan Trilateral Dialogue came to fruition due to the growing convergence of their

respective countries' interests in the Indo-Pacific region and shared commitment to peace, democracy, economic growth and a rules-based order in the region. All three countries have underscored their support for ASEAN centrality in the political and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. The three countries have also emphasised on the necessity for greater collaboration on maritime security, domain awareness, regional connectivity, counterterrorism and disaster response capabilities (26). India, Indonesia, and Australia held their first senior officials' trilateral dialogue in November 2017 in Indonesia (27). The series of meeting was later upgraded to the Foreign Ministerial level. India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, Foreign Minister of Indonesia, H.E. Ms. Retno Marsudi and Foreign Minister of Australia, H.E. Ms. Penny Wong held 2nd India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral meeting on 12 July 2023 in Indonesia (28). In order to ensure that the trilateral brings in positive contribution to the Indo Pacific region, the three countries can work in areas like marine governance and maritime diplomacy in the region. Whilst India was engaging countries of the region through various cooperative mechanism and a deeper economic engagement with China, India was confronted by sudden movement of Chinese troops atop the cold, deserted Doklam plateau, claimed both by Bhutan and China. This resulted into a 70-day old eyeball to eyeball confrontation between Indian and Chinese soldiers from 16 June 2017 to 28 August 2017 and came across a wakeup call to the Indian policymakers to the Chinese play of 'salami slicing'. The deadlock was precipitated when Chinese soldiers moved in with bulldozers and earthmoving equipment to construct a road which would have given them access to the tri-junction between India, Bhutan and China. This would have significantly altered the status quo and provided a strategic advantage to China with adverse security implications for India (29).

Reincarnation of Quad

By 2017, the relations of all four countries with the People's Republic of China had worsened. The conflicts in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and on the India-China border had escalated. The South China Sea, through which considerable amount of India's sea borne trade transits, is an area of contestation with China asserting rights on the basis

of 'nine-dash line' at the United Nations in 2009 and recent 'ten-dash line' unveiled in August 2023 (30). Among many economic interests and trade linkages in the region, India has always placed a strong focus on rule-based order with primacy to tenets of UNCLOS in order to ensure free flow of maritime trade. Converging perceptions of China as a security and economic threat as well as the means chosen to fend off China's growing claims to power led to the resumption of Quad meetings in late 2017. After a gap of 10 years, officials from India, Australia, Japan and United States met in Manila in November 2017 on the margins of the East Asia Summit for consultations on connectivity issues; maritime security and counter terrorism; shared principles for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific; and proliferation threats in Asia (21). There could be many reasons for its reincarnation and the Quad has maintained that the grouping is not against any country. Notwithstanding, China's assertiveness in South China Sea and its debt diplomacy resulting from infrastructure projects linked to BRI is resulting into a stance which could be perceived as 'anti-China'. The implications of such a perception could be profound, either in maritime area or the northern border of India. India nevertheless remained somewhat cautious as it approached Quad 2.0. This caution was a result of worries that India's excessive reliance on the US may undermine its strategic autonomy without really assisting it in resolving its border issue with China. After all, the threat that China poses to India is land-based, while the Quad and Indo-Pacific frameworks are maritime in nature. India's participation in these frameworks and any resultant maritime tensions could worsen India's security due to strategic blowback on India as it seeks to manage its land border dispute with China (23). While India's commitment to a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific strategy was formally declared by Prime Minister Modi in June 2018, the Indian government actually started using the term "Indo Pacific" around the end of 2017, which is when the Quad was reborn. India has promoted IPOI as a framework for open cooperation in non-military domains while keeping in mind the need to respond to the challenges posed by China. In India's formulation, the Indo-Pacific is an inclusive rather than an exclusive framework for cooperation. Though many publications refer Quad as 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', there are no official proclamation to such

a term. The Quad is essentially a diplomatic network of four countries committed to supporting an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient. It complements other bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation, including with ASEAN member states and Pacific partners (31). In essence, it is neither an exclusive security nor a military grouping. The Quad partners engage regularly through leaders, foreign ministers, sherpas, senior officials and experts, leading to engagement at all levels. In the last Quad Leaders' Summit held on 21 September 2024, the Leaders of these four nations issued a Joint Statement. The statement emphasised continuity of policies including implementation of "Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI)", launching a Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission in 2025 and health security. Respect for the leadership of regional institutions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was emphasised. They also expressed 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. They emphasised that disputes should be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international law, without threat or use of force (32). It would be important to consider how the region's key nations and groups would react to the reincarnation of Quad, with the exception of China and Russia, who have not even acceded to the Indo Pacific geostrategic construct. South Korea has given the Quad a favourable response and is ready to be a partner. Despite Korea's ambition to formally join the Quad and the desire of the PM Yoon Suk-yeol administration, the United States has not been overly excited about the idea. In fact, Korea did take part in a Quad Plus working group project when it was established along with Vietnam and New Zealand to coordinate responses to mitigate issues arising out of COVID pandemic (33). ASEAN is uncomfortable with big power rivalry and initially saw the Quad as well as Australia-United States-United Kingdom (AUKUS) trilateral as challenges to China, seeking ASEAN to lean to one side. The evolution of the Quad to a non-military and cooperative collaboration as well as the participation of six ASEAN countries in negotiations under the Indo-Pacific Economic

Framework (IPEF), which was launched at the Quad summit, indicates that as part of their strategic autonomy, they are ready to engage with their partners which is advantageous (34). In 'The State of Southeast Asia' survey undertaken in 2023 across all ASEAN countries, 50.4% of regional respondents agree or strongly agree that the strengthening of the mini-lateral group Quad will be constructive for the region (Seah, S. et al, 2023). There has been a perceptible shift in favour of Quad is due to reframing of Quad's perceived purpose from exclusively countering China to a broader vision that appears to support ASEAN countries. The Quad may have made much news in last one year due to various global events including Russia Ukraine war, Israel Hamas conflict, elections in India and the United States. However, Foreign Ministers of all constituent countries met in Japan on 29 July 24 as well as on 21 January 25, post inauguration of President Trump, reflects continuity in the policy.

Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS)

Established in 2021, the AUKUS is intended to be a strategic partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States to bolster their allied deterrence and defence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. The trilateral partnership, which builds on their decades-long security cooperation, has two pillars. Pillar I revolves around the acquisition and development of conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy; and Pillar II calls for collaboration on advanced capabilities that will involve technology and information sharing (35). In effect, the pact brings UK closer to the contestations in Indo Pacific region and delivers a security alliance to contain China. The AUKUS helps India without directly involving India since the trilateral pact involves close strategic partners of New Delhi to counter China in the Indo-Pacific, and consequently serves New Delhi's interests for a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, a check on Beijing's bellicosity, all the while allowing India to maintain its strategic autonomy (36).

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that while the Indo-Pacific has cemented its place in Indian strategic circles, the Indian Ocean dominates India's avowed maritime objectives, with the Pacific Ocean receiving less attention. India has been collaborating with most of the countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to be a 'Preferred Security Partner or 'First Responder' to meet eventualities which affect local populace and prosperity. The other three Quad partners are more worried about the major contestations occurring in the Pacific Ocean, particularly in the South China Sea and East China Sea. In order for other partners to have enough spare capacity to deter contestations in the Pacific Ocean, the partnership may evolve to ensure that India has sufficient maritime capabilities to meet all emergent concerns in the Indian Ocean. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia certainly cannot hope to "compete" with China on their own without each other. While paying regular homage to ASEAN Centrality, the Quad countries no longer consider ASEAN institutions as sufficiently agile and capable to respond to the strategic challenges posed by China. Policy makers in Quad countries are undoubtedly aware of how split ASEAN has become recently and how some member states are now publicly aligning themselves with China. It would be essential for Quad to act as a strategic filler and amplifier for current ASEAN programs and institutions in order for Quad and ASEAN to collaborate. Such collaboration offers the best possibility Quad has to convince Southeast Asia as a whole to support its initiative. By strategically positioning the Quad as a strong supporter of ASEAN, the new grouping can certainly challenge the Chinese view that it will be nothing more than "a foam in the ocean." (37) The Quad is not an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization and has no commitment to collective security. Security cooperation between individual Quad countries predates the Quad, is limited, and often works bilaterally through the two-plus-two framework (defence and foreign minister meetings). AUKUS is emphatically a security grouping to contain China (38). AUKUS supplements continuance of broad agenda by Quad partners. This has undoubtedly absolved India of any urgent obligation to take the lead and commit to a security system that is overtly hostile to China. India is now able to influence the global order more through the Quad without being perceived as being blatantly

hostile to China. The Quad also leaves open the possibility of close defence collaboration with India without the need for a security partnership. Without India, a Quad in the Indo-Pacific would lack legitimacy and a critical mass. It occupies a crucial position in the Indo Pacific geostrategic construct because to its geographic location, economic strength, and demographics. It would only be in order to formalise a structure for Quad which is non-existent at present, on lines of ASEAN Secretariat. This would facilitate multifaceted cooperation through a well-structured mechanism.

BIO DATA

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