



A Multipolar Indo-Pacific: India's Ascendancy and the QUAD

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a significant shift towards a multipolar order, with India's rise as a major player. India's economic and military capabilities are on the rise, bolstering its position as a regional counterweight. However, a rising China with assertive territorial claims disrupts the regional balance.

The QUAD, a strategic grouping comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, emerges as a crucial platform for India's Indo-Pacific vision. India's approach within the QUAD prioritizes a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) built upon a rules-based order. This vision emphasizes freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Through collaborative initiatives in maritime security, infrastructure development, and disaster relief, the QUAD strengthens regional resilience and promotes a multipolar order that benefits all stakeholders.

This evolving landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. This paper examines India's growing influence and its strategic engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in shaping a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical geopolitical and geoeconomics space in recent years, with major powers vying for influence and strategic advantage. India, with its growing economic prowess and strategic significance, has increasingly asserted itself as a key player in the region. One of the key mechanisms through which India engages with other major powers in the Indo-Pacific is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. This paper seeks to explore India's ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific and its role within the QUAD framework.

The Indo-Pacific region has witnessed a paradigm shift in recent decades, propelled by the rise of China, economic globalization, and strategic realignments among major powers. As the world's economic and strategic center of gravity tilts

towards the Indo-Pacific, the region has become a crucible for competition, cooperation, and conflict. At the heart of this dynamic lies India, whose ascendancy is reshaping the regional landscape and recalibrating strategic calculations among major stakeholders. Concurrently, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has emerged as a key mechanism for navigating the complex security challenges of the Indo-Pacific, with India playing a central role in its evolution and implementation.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated his nation's objectives for the Indo-Pacific region during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 1. India advocates for an Indo-Pacific environment characterized by openness, freedom, and inclusivity, underpinned by mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute resolution, and adherence to international law. India advocates for an approach that upholds the freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters for all parties. This vision of the Indo-Pacific is inclusive and emphasizes shared responsibilities and interests.

Amidst a power struggle between the United States and China, which has spilled over into the Indo-Pacific region, both countries are vying for regional dominance through various bilateral, multilateral, and strategic coalition partnerships. The global divide stemming from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to two distinct factions: one led by Russia and China, and the other by the Western liberal democratic bloc, predominantly comprised of the United States and Europe. Consequently, developing nations face the challenging task of aligning with one group over the other. Given India's status as a burgeoning Asian power and its occasional significant role in global affairs, there is renewed anticipation for India to assume a greater role in this critical juncture. However, India finds itself confronted with a complex diplomatic and geopolitical dilemma, particularly regarding its involvement with the Quad in light of the Ukraine issue.



India's Ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific

India's rise as a major power in the Indo-Pacific can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, India's growing economy and demographic dividend have positioned it as a significant player in the region. With a burgeoning middle class and a rapidly expanding economy, India has the potential to drive economic growth and shape regional dynamics. Additionally, India's strategic location at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region gives it a unique vantage point in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, India's longstanding commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific has resonated with other like-minded countries in the region. India's emphasis on upholding international law, freedom of navigation, and respect for sovereignty has garnered support from countries seeking to maintain a rules-based order in the region. India's proactive engagement with regional groupings such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the ASEAN-led mechanisms has further solidified its position as a key stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific.

Given its expanding economic and strategic importance, the vast maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific has gained considerable momentum in recent times. Home to 65% of the global population, it serves as the source of 46% of worldwide trade and contributes to 62% of the global GDP. Its significance extends beyond its sheer economic prowess, as it encompasses lucrative markets and intricate supply networks. Moreover, the region's pivotal chokepoints, spanning both north-south and east-west axes, play a vital role in facilitating seamless commerce and shaping emerging power dynamics.

Additionally, the Indo-Pacific region boasts abundant reserves of various minerals, including those located on the ocean floor, precious metals, offshore hydrocarbons, and fisheries, among others. However, alongside its economic opportunities, the region grapples with a diverse array of non-traditional challenges. These include terrorism, illicit piracy, human trafficking, environmental hazards, and security threats, all of which are exacerbated by its substantial economic and strategic significance.

India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region hinges on two critical pillars: bolstering its national engagement in the area and fostering closer relationships with like-minded nations. Both endeavours aim to enhance India's capabilities and further its national interests, while also expanding

its influence and impact across the region. The Biden administration's recent Indo-Pacific Strategy acknowledges the United States' inability to single-handedly achieve its objective of fostering a free, open, connected, economically vibrant, safe, and resilient Indo-Pacific. It underscores the imperative for enhanced collaboration with allies who share similar objectives, given the evolving geopolitical landscape and historical challenges. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition of India's potential to shape strategic outcomes in the Indo-Pacific.

As noted by K. M. Panikkar in writings dating back to the 1940s, the Indian Ocean holds immense significance for India, far beyond being just one of several major oceanic regions. For India, it serves as a vital maritime domain crucial for its security, with its lifelines concentrated within its waters. India's objectives in the Indian Ocean region encompass expanding its influence through various means such as trade, diplomacy, investment, and strategic partnerships. Additionally, India seeks to strengthen its ties with regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, which harbour essential energy and mineral resources pivotal for India's economic growth and aspirations of attaining great power status.

India employs various forums and initiatives to advance its strategic, geopolitical, and economic interests in the oceans, including the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative. Furthermore, India actively participates in Indo-Pacific Ocean initiatives and the Asia Africa Growth Corridors, while also fostering connections with ASEAN countries through its Act East Policy. Leveraging its soft power capabilities, India promotes its cultural diplomacy through initiatives like the Ministry of Culture's Project Mausam. Through these endeavours, India advocates for a rule-based, free, inclusive, and open Indo-Pacific region, emphasising the historical significance of maritime connections facilitated by the understanding and manipulation of monsoon winds. These connections have historically facilitated the exchange of knowledge, traditions, technologies, and ideas across maritime channels.

India's rise as a prominent actor in the Indo-Pacific is underpinned by several interrelated factors. Economically, India has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, buoyed by a burgeoning middle class, a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, and a demographic dividend. As a maritime nation with extensive coastlines and exclusive economic zones, India holds significant sway over the Indian Ocean



region, which serves as a critical artery for global trade and energy flows. Strategically, India's geographical location at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea endows it with a pivotal role in shaping maritime security dynamics in the broader Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India's historical and cultural linkages with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific Islands provide a foundation for deeper engagement and influence across the region.

India's foreign policy imperatives have also been instrumental in bolstering its presence in the Indo-Pacific. The "Act East" policy, launched in the early 1990s as a successor to the "Look East" policy, reflects India's commitment to strengthening its ties with East and Southeast Asian countries. Through diplomatic initiatives, economic partnerships, and strategic dialogues, India has sought to enhance its strategic footprint in the region while promoting a rules-based order and inclusive growth.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, represents a strategic alignment among four major Indo-Pacific democracies: the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Initially formed in 2007 in response to shared concerns about China's rising influence and assertiveness, the QUAD was revived in 2017 amid growing apprehensions about the erosion of the rules-based international order and the need for a coordinated response to emerging security challenges.

The QUAD's objectives revolve around promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region based on shared democratic values, respect for international law, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Key areas of focus include maritime security, freedom of navigation, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. Through regular consultations, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building initiatives, the QUAD seeks to enhance regional security and stability while fostering greater resilience against common threats.

India's Role within the QUAD Framework

Within the QUAD framework, India plays a crucial role in advancing shared objectives related to maritime security, connectivity, and strategic stability in the region. As a member of the QUAD, India collaborates closely with the United States, Japan, and Australia to address common challenges such as maritime security threats, infrastructure development, and regional cooperation. India's

participation in joint naval exercises, information sharing mechanisms, and diplomatic dialogues within the QUAD underscores its commitment to upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

India plays a significant role in the Indo-Pacific security landscape, particularly through its involvement in the Quad, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the US. The Quad functions as an informal intergovernmental organization focused on coordinating security activities in the Indo-Pacific region. India's participation in the Quad is considered strategically important for various reasons, such as safeguarding land and maritime territories, promoting economic and security cooperation, addressing non-traditional security threats, and upholding maritime rules and norms in the region. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is characterized by a proactive and influential role aimed at contributing to a safe and secure region. Despite having distinct foreign policy objectives compared to the US and China, India, under Prime Minister Modi, is actively engaging in the Indo-Pacific without formal alignment with the US or adopting confrontational stances against China.

India's strategic interests lie in maintaining peace and maritime order in the region, with a primary goal of preventing China from dominating the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India's vision for the Indo-Pacific involves leveraging partnerships with countries like France to strengthen its position in the region. India's strategic autonomy is evident in its multi-alignment approach, where it seeks to deepen defense and strategic alignments with like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific to bolster its regional standing.

Additionally, India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific aims to support ASEAN centrality, emphasising the importance of regional linkages and multilateral platforms. In conclusion, India's role in the Indo-Pacific security landscape is multifaceted, encompassing active participation in the Quad, proactive engagement to ensure regional security, strategic partnerships with key nations, and support for ASEAN centrality. India's approach underscores its commitment to promoting a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific region while navigating complex geopolitical dynamics in the area.

India's participation in the QUAD reflects its strategic calculus of balancing competing interests in the Indo-Pacific while safeguarding its core national interests. As a proponent of strategic autonomy and multipolarity, India has embraced the QUAD as a complementary forum for



advancing its security objectives and shaping regional outcomes.

Diplomatically, India's engagement in the QUAD underscores its commitment to upholding the rules-based international order and promoting a multipolar world order. By aligning with like-minded democracies, India seeks to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness and preserve its strategic autonomy in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.

Militarily, India's contributions to the QUAD are manifested through enhanced interoperability, joint exercises, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening maritime security and crisis response capabilities. India's growing naval prowess, including the induction of advanced platforms such as aircraft carriers, submarines, and maritime patrol aircraft, enhances its credibility as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, India's regional partnerships and strategic outreach complement the QUAD's efforts to expand its footprint in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. Through initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India seeks to deepen its engagement with neighbouring countries and promote a cooperative security architecture in the region.

Challenges and Opportunities

Multilateral security collaborations present both challenges and opportunities in the global arena. While multilateralism can be an effective approach to addressing complex security issues, it is not without obstacles. Legitimacy and financial challenges are among the main hurdles faced by global actors engaged in multilateral security efforts. These challenges necessitate adaptations to enhance the measurability of policy advice activities and address other pertinent issues.

Multilateral security cooperation involves the institutional process where multiple states work together to mitigate conflicts arising from various factors such as military, political, economic, environmental, and social aspects. Despite the challenges, multilateralism has proven effective in international cooperation, easing security dilemmas, fostering coordination, and establishing rules-based relations among states. Technical design strategies play a crucial role in ensuring the success of multilateral security initiatives. Implementing multilaterally secure and user-

friendly communication mechanisms is essential to overcome challenges in this domain. Additionally, mechanisms like secure positioning of wireless devices through verifiable multilateralism contribute to enhancing security in wireless networks.

The establishment of multilateral security organizations, akin to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), can further bolster security efforts in regions like Asia. Moreover, the reevaluation and extension of classical security requirements are imperative in enhancing multilateral security through reputation systems in the digital realm. While multilateral security collaborations face legitimacy and financial challenges, they offer a promising avenue for addressing complex security issues globally. By leveraging technical design strategies, fostering secure communication mechanisms, and establishing multilateral security organizations, stakeholders can navigate these challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented by multilateral security initiatives.

Despite its promising trajectory, India's ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific is not without challenges. Economic disparities, developmental gaps, maritime disputes, and historical rivalries continue to pose obstacles to regional integration and cooperation. Moreover, geopolitical competition, great power rivalry, and the spectre of conflict loom large, threatening to destabilise the Indo-Pacific and undermine the prospects for peace and prosperity.

However, amidst these challenges lie opportunities for India to consolidate its position as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific. By leveraging its demographic dividend, technological prowess, and soft power assets, India can foster greater economic connectivity, cultural exchange, and people-to-people ties across the region. Moreover, India's commitment to inclusive growth, sustainable development, and environmental stewardship resonates with the aspirations of Indo-Pacific nations, offering a blueprint for shared prosperity and security.

II. Conclusion

India's ascendancy in the Indo-Pacific and its pivotal role within the QUAD underscore the transformative potential of multipolarity in shaping the regional order. As a proponent of inclusive growth, rules-based governance, and strategic autonomy, India is poised to play a leading role in shaping the contours of the Indo-Pacific in the 21st century. Through constructive engagement,



strategic partnerships, and cooperative security initiatives, India can contribute to a stable, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific that benefits all stakeholders. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve, India's ascendancy will be defined not only by its economic and military prowess but also by its ability to foster a sense of community, cooperation, and shared destiny across the region.

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