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Incorporating Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral into India's strategic outlook

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ABSTRACT

China's unprecedented economic rise and its growing military profile have transformed the threat matrix for India. China is challenging India's interests in its immediate neighbourhood in multiple ways. Managing strategic challenge from China, therefore, has become a topmost foreign policy priority for India. The article argues that given the structural constraints of New Delhi-Beijing rapprochement, there is an urgent need for India to step up quadrilateral security cooperation with the U.S., Japan and Australia. The revival of the Quad reflects this growing consensus. However, India's hedging approach – simultaneously balancing and engaging with China – may be politically expedient in the short run, but not without long-term adverse consequences.

KEYWORDS

India; U.S.; Japan; Australia;
China; Quadrilateral; Indo-
Pacific

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, India has become more pragmatic in its strategic orientation, moving away from its idealistic past as manifested in its acquisition of nuclear capability in 1998.¹ It has expanded the geographical arena of its foreign policy interests through adopting the vision of an “extended neighbourhood”, moving beyond the confines of South Asia.² With this in backdrop, India's relations with big powers have also been changing in order to accommodate the new geopolitical realities. Nevertheless, there are several challenges to India's engagement with big powers. India's military focus is still very much defined by the traditional threats posed by China and Pakistan. Although, there is nothing wrong with this focus since both China and Pakistan do not have benign intentions toward India, however, it can be argued that India lacks the requisite institutional and bureaucratic architecture to advance its influence across its immediate frontiers. The need to pursue a multifaceted foreign policy and engage all major powers is recognised by all Indian analysts, and this is considered to be the best way to maintain strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy may be defined as a policy aiming at preserving independence in the domain of security and foreign policy-making. At the strategic level, autonomy for a middle-ranking power often runs the risk of getting channelled into specific directions due to being part of an alliance as a junior partner such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Poland and Hungary during the Cold War. In India, strategic autonomy has come to be associated with a set of practices that seek to avoid alliance-like relationship

with superpowers. India's colonial experience is one of the primary intellectual drivers for the search for strategic autonomy.³ Non-alignment was the primary vehicle to exercise independence in foreign policy decision-making during the Cold War years as the Indian leadership consistently insisted in its political and strategic discourse on the need to maintain its sovereignty vis-à-vis the superpowers. Non-alignment continued to remain the organising principle of India's foreign policy until the demise of the Soviet Union. The beginning of economic reforms necessitated a radical reformulation of India's diplomatic orientation. Even after that Indian policy-makers sought to conduct a foreign policy which required engaging all major powers simultaneously without adhering to any alliance-like partnership. However, despite rhetorical commitment to the principles of non-alignment, India gradually began to develop mutually beneficial ties with the U.S. The rapprochement with the U.S. was exceptional, both in its scope and dimension.⁴

Under the first term of Manmohan Singh's premiership, India-U.S. relations improved substantially, as most famously reflected in the civil-nuclear deal of 2008. However, the momentum could not be maintained in his second term, resulting in stagnation in bilateral ties.⁵ Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown his political will for India's global engagements through frequent and sustained interactions with all global powers. The topmost priority has been given to Indo-U.S. ties in terms of great power diplomacy. As two largest democracies, India's and America's core security interests show far more points of overlap than of divergence. Although India seeks to check Pakistani belligerence by leveraging the U.S. in South Asia, and balance China's growing influence by strengthening strategic cooperation with the U.S., New Delhi has so far avoided being drawn into an alliance-like relationship with Washington, preserving its strategic autonomy. Despite being "a virtual American ally", India's reluctance to become "a formal American ally" stems from a long tradition in Indian foreign policy to maintain the independence of its strategic decision-making. As argued by Aparna Pandey, India's preferred policy of non-commitment was conducted in the guise of "nonalignment" during the Cold War and as "strategic autonomy" in the post-Cold War era.⁶

India's strategic response to China's unprecedented rise has reflected in the balancing strategy as seen in its main strategic partnerships with the U.S., Japan and Russia.⁷ Though the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership tops the list, India has also cultivated a "special and privileged partnership" with Russia and a "strategic and global partnership" with Japan. The Indian leadership recognises that Japan has much to offer as India's ally because of the mutual need to counter China's growing regional dominance.

With the growing recognition of the Indian Ocean replacing the Atlantic as the most strategically significant trade corridor, the "Indo-Pacific" has emerged as the global strategic centre of gravity.⁸ American President Donald Trump's repeated use of the term "Indo-Pacific" instead of "Asia-Pacific" region is a reminder that the Trump administration is keen to block China's bid to dominate Asian geopolitics with India's help. The renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command coupled with the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in December 2018 underlines Washington's serious engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. On the eve of the 2019 Shangri-La dialogue, the U.S. Department of Defense released its first Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, which has reiterated American commitments to the region while claiming to expand Washington's partnerships with friends and allies including New Delhi. The report begins with the ambitious assertion that

the Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America's future. Spanning a vast stretch of the globe from the west coast of the United States to the western shores of India, the region is home to the world's most populous state, most populous democracy, and largest Muslim-majority state, and includes over half of the earth's population. Among the 10 largest standing armies in the world, 7 reside in the Indo-Pacific; and 6 countries in the region possess nuclear weapons.⁹

The reports further asserts that "the United States and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific", which would pave the way for a "free and open Indo-Pacific". Similarly, a report released by the U.S. Department of State in November 2019, to coincide with the annual ASEAN and East Asia Summits in Bangkok, proclaims that "U.S. vision and approach in the Indo-Pacific region aligns closely with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, India's Act East Policy, Australia's Indo-Pacific concept, the Republic of Korea's New Southern Policy, and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy".¹⁰ Though some experts believe the new report to be less of a strategy document than "a factsheet" on the Trump administration's recent engagements with Indo-Pacific states, it, however, lays down major aims of the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision which includes respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; peaceful resolution of disputes; open trade and transparent agreements, connectivity; and respect for international law.¹¹ On the other hand, the setting up of an Indo-Pacific wing in India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in April 2019 signals India's willingness to play a more coherent role in the region.¹²

The ramifications of closer interaction between India and the U.S., as well as the widening rift between the U.S. and Russia, are being felt in India-Russia relations. Between India and Russia, there are some specific areas of convergence, and meeting of minds can be witnessed on many issues. There are regular meetings between the top leaders in bilateral summits and other multilateral forums. Since "informal summit" of 2018 in Sochi, both New Delhi and Moscow have increased their efforts to bolster bilateral ties. In April 2019, Russia bestowed the order of St Andrew the Apostle, the highest state decoration, on PM Modi for his "exceptional services in promoting a special and privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India and friendly relations between the Russian and Indian peoples".¹³ The 20th annual India-Russia summit in Vladivostok in early September 2019 took place alongside the fifth edition of the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), where Modi was the chief guest. This is a significant development in the trajectory of Indo-Russian relations with New Delhi announcing a credit line of \$1 billion for the development of Russian Far East and agreeing to set-up a sea link between Vladivostok and Chennai.¹⁴ However, areas of disagreement and the lack of robust civil society engagement are worrying signals. The consequences of Russia's outreach to Pakistan have been both symbolic and substantive, particularly since 2016.¹⁵ Therefore, the slow but steady drift of Moscow towards the strategic embrace of Beijing are challenging for India. Moreover, Russia playing second fiddle to China in those multilateral institutions that promote China's interests is likely to pose additional challenges for India. Russia's accommodation of Chinese interests has consequences for India's security interests, including freedom of sailing in the South China Sea, which is India's gateway to Russia, Japan, Korea and the Pacific Ocean.¹⁶

The closer India-U.S. relationship, and increasingly India-Japan relationship, is being watched with some disquiet in Beijing while New Delhi remains uneasy about perceived

growing Chinese encroachment into its traditional geopolitical spaces of South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Trade is the most important adhesive that binds the two neighbours, but frictions are developing over India's burgeoning trade deficit with China.¹⁷ This strategic complexity has informed India's strategy towards China. Under the Modi government since 2014, India has not deviated much from its traditionally cautious foreign policy approach towards China. Though India has shown willingness to counterbalance China's not-so-peaceful rise through the revival of the Quadrilateral between India the U.S., Japan and Australia, the effort is characterised by growing ambiguity as manifest in the adoption of hedging approach.

The article has three parts: First, the origins of Quadrilateral and the background of its revival are outlined. Then, article carves out the recent strategic discourses of the U.S., Japan and Australia in which India represented. The dominant perception sees the rise of China as a challenge and an opportunity for them to step up cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific region. Thereafter, India's hedging strategy and the reasons behind are illustrated. In a third and final step, the article advocates India's enhanced participation in the Quad to ensure free and open Indo-Pacific region. The central argument of the article is that if the Indo-Pacific construct is embraced as an important foreign policy principle of the four maritime countries involved, the Quad should be one of its logical outcomes.

Origins of Quadrilateral

The idea of the Quadrilateral took birth during the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean when the navies of India, the U.S., Japan and Australia participated in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, following which a framework was set up among the foreign secretaries of the four countries.¹⁸ Initially conceptualised by Shinzo Abe in his 2006 book, 'Toward a Beautiful Country', and subsequently in a speech to the Indian parliament in 2007, when he pointed out that a "broader Asia" was emerging through the "dynamic coupling" of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, calling for a partnership between India, the U.S., Japan and Australia to build an "arc of freedom and prosperity".¹⁹ In essence, what Abe was calling for was a sort of alliance of maritime democracies.²⁰ Therefore, despite the fact that the Quad was born as an HADR coordination requirement, there are problems in over-emphasising the low-end or softer aspects of the Quad cooperation as it could be perceived by China as a signal for its entry into the group, defeating the very purpose of the initiative.

The Quad had its first informal meeting on the margins of the ASEAN summit in Manila in August 2007 between the delegates of India, the U.S., Japan and Australia. They discussed security collaboration between the Quad members with a particular focus on issues such as transnational security, tackling terrorism and sea piracy. But China protested strongly, lodging diplomatic protests to each of the four main participants. This was based on Beijing's "fear that the four countries were ganging up against China in a security alliance".²¹

The Indian navy conducted naval exercises with American, Japanese, Australian and Singaporean navies in September 2007. Before the five nations naval exercise, India did attempt to assuage Beijing that it had no intention to work against Chinese interests. When Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh met with Chinese president Hu Jintao

at the G-8 summit in 2007, he “explained that there was no question of ganging up” against China and there was “no security implication in the quadripartite group”.²² India was surely seen as the weakest link in the Quad but it was Chinese pressure on Australia that proved its undoing. In early 2008, Australia’s new government led by Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd opted out of the combined exercises. At a joint press conference in Canberra on 5 February 2008 with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith spoke about China’s concern of strategic dialogue of the Quad countries, declaring that “Australia would not be proposing to have a dialogue of that nature”.²³ Smith subsequently explained that while the trilateral dialogue with Japan and the U.S. would continue, but the “four-way conversation” would cease as the Quad meeting had been a “one-off”. Moving China up in its hierarchy of ties, the Rudd government also reversed the previous Howard government’s decision to sell uranium to India.

As the initiative quickly withered largely due to Australia succumbing to pressure from China and “lack of American fortitude”,²⁴ Abe was also succeeded by Yasuo Fukuda, who was keen to develop friendly ties with China.²⁵ True, the diplomats and strategic pundits of the quartet continued to refer vaguely to continuing the Quad initiative, but no substantial progress was made toward cohesive negotiations along the lines begun by Abe. Almost a decade later, the Quad made a comeback on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Manila in 2017.

Revival of Quad

The Quad idea made a comeback in 2012 when Abe talked about “Asia’s democratic security diamond” strategy underpinned by India, the U.S., Japan and Australia to safeguard the maritime commons from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. The idea was dropped when the concept became controversial.²⁶ India was also reluctant to endorse the proposal, yet Japan continued to push the Quad concept further through Abe’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) advocacy. The liberal international order created and underwritten by the U.S. seems to be fading amid ongoing global economic and strategic transitions. President Xi Jinping has been positioning China to be the world’s new champion of globalisation. Xi’s public pronouncements on globalisation stand in sharp contrast to those of Trump.²⁷

Beijing has launched the most ambitious foreign policy initiative – the One Belt One Road (OBOR) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which represents a major feature of China’s grand strategy since it is aimed at creating a new global geoeconomic and geopolitical map. Besides relieving China of the “Malacca dilemma”, what former president Hu Jintao called China’s over-dependence on the Malacca Strait for trade²⁸, this diplomatic project could be seen as signalling a momentous shift in Chinese diplomacy from keeping a low profile to striving for achievement. According to Yan Xuetong, Xi Jinping’s “striving for achievement” strategy aims to achieve a favourable environment for China’s national rejuvenation, as understood to mean safeguarding sovereignty and security interests. This heralds a fundamental shift from “keeping low profile” strategy, whose aim was to create an international environment conducive to economic development.²⁹ Several motivations have been attributed to the BRI, the most prominent ones include the vehicle of soft balancing to undermine the U.S. containment of China,

promotion of alternative ideas and building its role as a normative power, formation of a bargaining coalition to transform existing global governance, and strategic manoeuvring by moving from a rule-taker to rule-maker.³⁰ China is also advancing an ambitious military modernisation drive aimed at increasing the sophistication and reach of its armed forces.

Continued economic growth has given China the means to sustain double digit increases in defence spending for more than two decades, building a sophisticated military machine that, in the words of India's former national security adviser, Shivshankar Menon, "can give pause to the sole superpower in China's immediate vicinity".³¹ According to the Chinese premier Li Keqiang, Beijing seeks to "advance all aspects of military training and war preparedness, and firmly and resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests".³² The re-election of Abe as the prime minister has seen Tokyo intensifying its efforts to promote the Quad. The revived Quad coalition held its first official talks in Manila in November 2017, on the sidelines of the 31st ASEAN and the 12th East Asia summits, to discuss how to promote cooperation in the region encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, the meeting had an air of diffidence. While the initial proposal was to hold the meeting at the leaders' level, it was later decided unanimously among the four partners to have the meeting at the level of senior officials.³³

While no joint statements were issued, the significance of the meeting could be underlined by the unprecedented global geopolitical flux coupled with cooperation at the bilateral and trilateral level between the countries involved. Other than a proverbial goal of maintaining a "free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific", the individual statements from the four countries differed in tone. The U.S. stressed upon connectivity, "freedom of navigation and overflight" as well as "maritime security" in tune with international law and standards. Japan also emphasised on "rule based order", "freedom of navigation" and "maritime security" in the Indo-Pacific. Australia stressed "rule-based order", "freedom of navigation and overflight" and connectivity. However, India's stand was more cautious as it talked about the centrality of the Act East policy in the Indo-Pacific while advocating a "free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific".³⁴ The specific mention of "inclusive" in India's Indo-Pacific vision has been interpreted as India's subtle invitation to China and Russia to become partners in the Indo-Pacific enterprise.³⁵

In November 2018, on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit, the third consultative meeting of the foreign ministry officials at the director-general level was held in Singapore, which was also the venue of the second meeting in June same year. Each country affirmed the importance of the ASEAN-led architecture in the evolving idea of the Indo-Pacific. The fourth meeting took place in Bangkok in May 2019 in which the four Quad partners came out in strong support of an ASEAN-led mechanism in the regional architecture for Indo-Pacific region.³⁶ The fact that the Quad meetings do not bring out a joint statement indicates the struggle within the group to reconcile views.³⁷

Beijing has been critical of the Indo-Pacific; China views it some form of American plot, aimed at exaggerating India's value while excluding China from a rightful place in the Asia-Pacific region. In March 2018, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi derisively termed the Quad and Indo-Pacific as a "headline grabbing" idea which will "dissipate like sea foam".³⁸ But the growing acceptance of the term is a clear reminder that the international sea lanes of the South China Sea are vital to the regional economic and strategic

architecture. As Rory Medcalf reminds, “China already has an Indo-Pacific strategy of distant economic, diplomatic and security engagement ... Think of China’s presence and stakes in the key Indian Ocean ports of Gwadar, Pakistan, Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti”.³⁹ Clearly, New Delhi’s vital interests in the Indian Ocean region and China’s activities in the area make the Quad more compelling as a framework for strengthening India’s security.

The Quad remains controversial because it is viewed as a way of containing China, which makes it unpopular among those who believe that it is not possible to contain China. Other critics argue that it is not a viable platform for cooperation, especially in the area of defence, as the group is very diverse. Some concerns have also arisen among regional actors, particularly ASEAN, where the Quad is seen as bypassing its own centrality in regional security. At the 34th ASEAN summit in Bangkok in June 2019, its member states attempted to articulate a collective vision for the Indo-Pacific region in a document titled “The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”. This is being seen as ASEAN’s attempt to “reclaim the strategic narrative in its favour in order to underscore its centrality in the emerging regional order”.⁴⁰

Though the Quad may promote a multi-polar Asia with multilateral processes, it would, however, be unrealistic for it to become a forum which remains inclusive. As the sheer geographical size of Indo-Pacific region prevents formation of an inclusive set of security institutions, it would need the establishment of an exclusive grouping to effectively solve some pressing security problems. In other words, “inclusive multilateralism” is not a realistic solution to the security challenges facing the Indo-Pacific; instead “minilateral arrangements” may be most “feasible security cooperation among a small number of key players”.⁴¹

Debating India’s approach

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used the term Indo-Pacific while addressing the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in New Delhi in December 2012, noting that “a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”.⁴² He again used the term during his visit to Japan in May 2013. However, when he visited China a few months later in October 2013, he preferred to avoid using the term, sticking to the “Asia-Pacific” formulation.⁴³ India’s long-held ideological adherence to strategic autonomy made New Delhi a bit cautious under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-led government. However, both the U.S. and Japan kept on projecting India as a security provider in the region.

Outlining India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific on 1 June 2018, at the Shangri La Dialogue at Singapore, Modi echoed American demands for “freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the international law”, while attacking regimes that put other nations under “impossible burdens of debt”.⁴⁴ Both were unmistakable references to China’s rising assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea and its controversial BRI projects. But Modi also remarked that India does not regard the Indo-Pacific “as a strategy or as a club of limited members ... Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country”. He studiously avoided any mention of the Quad, highlighting India’s ties to countries in and outside the Indo-Pacific.

In contrast to former U.S. Defense Secretary, James Mattis, warning China over maritime “intimidation”, Modi sought closer ties with China and termed “stable relations” between the two countries as “an important factor for global peace and progress”. He asserted that “Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other’s interests”.⁴⁵ There was no mention of India’s concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, where Beijing stands accused of expanding its military power and presence at an unprecedented pace. Most importantly, Modi’s failure to mention the Quad suggested that while India and the U.S. might agree on the need for a rules-based international order, but had different views on how to defend it.⁴⁶

Modi also said that New Delhi accords priority to regional inclusiveness and stressed the centrality of ASEAN to any strategic decision-making in the Indo-Pacific. It needs to be understood that ASEAN is an important element of India’s overall approach towards Indo-Pacific. By emphasising ASEAN-centrality, India has been attempting to accord credence to ASEAN’s conception of free and open Indo-Pacific. Pronouncement of ASEAN-centrality helps India to project an image of a regional partner rather than regional hegemon. Indonesia has been vocal about the idea of Indo-Pacific with ASEAN-centrality.⁴⁷ The recent strategic partnership between India and Indonesia testifies to the attraction of Indo-Pacific, and India’s push for ASEAN-centrality can be seen as a subtle way to shape a more cohesive ASEAN.⁴⁸ While welcoming ASEAN’s outlook on the Indo-Pacific, India has highlighted “important elements of convergence” with its own approach towards the region.⁴⁹ The fact that the ASEAN has articulated its Indo-Pacific vision may be viewed as a challenge in Beijing which has continued to invalidate the concept. However, the manner in which ASEAN has adopted its approach seems to be directed at pacifying China by not allowing itself to align with America’s Indo-Pacific vision. This offers India an important lever to deal with China.

Though India would like to secure its interests in the Indian Ocean, it has so far relied upon building bilateral and multilateral partnerships of non-military nature, broadly adhering to the non-aligned ideology during the Cold War period. India’s decision not to become involved in the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral in the Indo-Pacific Business Forum that is intended to act as a counter to Chinese infrastructure initiative may also be seen as a reflection of this stance.

As argued by an observer “India’s rendezvous with the Quad is to strengthen its foreign policy outreach against China’s strategic non-equilibrium stance that poses multiple challenges to India’s strategic ambitions”.⁵⁰ But India’s current stand on the Quad is characterised by reluctance. Although New Delhi has rhetorically thrown its weight behind the Quad in its quest to reshape the Indo-Pacific balance of power, it has come back to pursuing a hedging approach by both engaging directly with China and seeking to contain disruptive Chinese behaviour. New Delhi is playing a delicate geopolitical game, in which it is taking Beijing’s sensitivities into consideration. India’s refusal to create a Quad framework for naval exercises with the U.S., Japan and Australia can be interpreted as its reluctance to join a multilateral front that China perceives as hostile.

Before we proceed further, it would be imperative to discuss the hazards of India’s hedging approach. The realist school postulates that when faced with a rising power, a second-tier or middle ranking or a relatively weaker power will either balance the rising power by aligning with another big power or bandwagoning with the rising power.

India has been trying to maintain its autonomy as it has hesitated in adopting a policy of either balancing or bandwagoning in the face of a rising China. It has rather adopted hedging⁵¹ which is seen as less aggressive than balancing. There are reasons for India not being very keen about the first two options. Given the asymmetry of power between India and China, if New Delhi were to embrace wholeheartedly a policy of balancing it would involve direct opposition, i.e. either an unbridled arms race or an alliance to balance China. There are limitations to the first option, and the second option would involve a military alliance with the U.S. as it is the only big power that can credibly balance China. Such an outright military alliance with the U.S. is likely to invite Chinese hostility and diminish the chances of India benefitting economically in terms of trade and investment from cooperation with China. On the other hand, bandwagoning will involve allying with China. But such bandwagoning will not be appreciated by the majority of Indian people who may not be enthusiastic about close ties with China at the expense of the U.S. That is why India seems to have adopted hedging.

According to this logic, hedging approach involves on one hand that of reassuring China that India is not a party to any attempt to contain it while also taking a pragmatic approach to resolve boundary dispute. On the other hand, India guards against future Chinese domination by keeping open the option of accelerating the pace of its alignment with the U.S. So far, India seems to have American acquiescence in its present policy of engagement with China as India has been supporting greater U.S. involvement in the region without becoming a formal American ally. But this is not easily done. India as a hedger has neither treaty alliances nor ideological allegiances, but its basic strategic posture has been based on balancing against the potential Chinese threat. Hence, India's cautious involvement in the Quad may be serving only as a diplomatic means of balancing China; it still falls short of full-fledged military alliance to play a concrete security role. In the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum, conceptualisation of hedging's advantages is risky since hedging is always beneficial to the hedgee than the hedger. It has been discussed in the subsequent section as to why India's shift towards hedging will be precarious.

The most consequential challenge for the Modi government is the constantly growing power, wealth and influence of China. Beijing's assertiveness, as reflected in China's rising influence in India's immediate neighbourhood, inflexible stance over the boundary dispute, opposition to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), execution of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) despite India's sovereignty concerns, is primarily driven by Chinese desire to exercise unchallenged supremacy over Asia and beyond.

Besides concerns over transparency, unanswered questions about the terms of financing, and rising uncertainty about local benefits such as employment,⁵² India's primary objection to the CPEC – a flagship project of the BRI – relates to its passage from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). As Jeremy Garlick has demonstrated that the CPEC's ostensible goal of connecting Pakistan with China's northwestern Xinjiang region, particularly through the Karakoram Highway, is beset with challenges due to geographical, economic and security difficulties, and that Beijing's long-term motivations for sustaining a presence in Pakistan are mainly geopolitical. In fact, China's principal aim with CPEC is to hedge against India by establishing and maintaining presence in the Indian Ocean, a strategy which Garlick has referred to as "geo-positional balancing".⁵³

The narrative that the Modi government has taken many surprising and bold initiatives vis-à-vis China somewhat endured till the public announcement of PM Modi's "informal

summit” with Xi Jinping at Wuhan in China in April 2018.⁵⁴ It needs to be noted that India had maintained a steadfast resolve in the Doklam crisis in mid-2017, which lasted for two and a half months. The confrontation took place when China extended a road into a tri-junction area of India, China and Bhutan which is claimed by both Bhutan and India to be the Bhutanese territory. At Bhutan’s request, a treaty bound India decided to mobilise its troops to prevent further encroachment by the Chinese. Unwilling to appear weaker, India’s tough posture allowed it to have won both diplomatic and military leverage vis-à-vis China. By preventing the Chinese army in undertaking construction activities in the disputed region, the Indian Army was able to stop China’s “creeping annexation” of strategically significant territory in India’s vicinity.⁵⁵

What happened thereafter was less than salutary. It has been argued that the Wuhan summit was the result of China’s successful military coercion as Indian leadership wanted to deescalate matters following the Doklam stand-off when alarming reports were received about Chinese military build-up along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into the Tibet Autonomous Region in violation of agreements between India and China in 1993 and 1996.⁵⁶ General elections in India were also approaching in a year. The early sign of India’s hedging approach after the Doklam chill was Indian foreign secretary’s note to the Cabinet Secretary that senior leaders from government must not attend a public event organised by the Tibetan leaders to show appreciation to India for hosting them for nearly 50 years. Around that time, India informed China that it would not intervene in the Maldives, and expected China to reciprocate this measure by not crossing certain “lines of legitimacy”.⁵⁷ However the Modi government’s public stand over the Tibetan issue and New Delhi’s refrain from intervening to resolve the crisis in the Maldives indicated hugely uneven nature of India–China relationship.

Given India’s seemingly improved relations with China after the Wuhan summit, the Modi government was reluctant to be seen actively promoting the Quad. The second India–China Maritime Affairs Dialogue held in Beijing in July 2018⁵⁸ marked continuation of the Modi government’s efforts to “reset” the tumultuous ties with China. It built upon Modi’s participation in the 18th SCO summit at Qingdao in June 2018. As was the case with Wuhan Summit, the second informal summit at Mamallapuram in South India in October 2019 was almost similar in substance; it was not more than a tactical understanding with both the countries agreeing to avoid taking actions which might be interpreted as threatening by any side. But the underlying structural problems afflicting the bilateral relations due to divergent perspectives and mutual suspicions remain unaddressed.⁵⁹ The fact that Mamallapuram summit took place weeks after the first foreign minister-level meeting of the Quad on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York reflected India’s balancing act.⁶⁰ At a time when China is perceived to be increasingly encroaching upon India’s strategic space – particularly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region – India’s turnaround has raised several questions about its reliability as an American partner in balancing China.⁶¹

India in the strategic framing of other three partners

In the strategic calculations of the U.S., Japan and Australia, it is the participation of India which is the most significant element since the long-standing alliance already binds the

three into a close military partnership.⁶² This section deals with how India is framed into strategic calculations of Japan, the U.S. and Australia.

Japan

The embrace of Indo-Pacific concept in Japan's strategic discourse justifies Japan's urge "to stand up to the China challenge" by enhanced security ties with the U.S. as well as building strong security networks with like-minded countries such as India and Australia.⁶³ The coming together of India and Japan can be seen as linked with China factor. In fact, Japan was the first of the other three to grasp India's potential for pressing forward many of its core diplomatic agendas. Abe's Indo Pacific formulation has gone a long way in facilitating India to consider the Indian and Pacific Oceans in a strategic manner.⁶⁴

India's distinctive geography gives it a major commercial and geostrategic location astride the sea lanes of communication between West Asia and East Asia.⁶⁵ The emergence of China as a regional hegemon in Asia is perceived by both New Delhi and Tokyo as adversely affecting their security interests, making them adopt a broadly convergent outlook of Asia's security architecture. India's relationship with Japan "could be the cornerstone of a larger coalition" of like-minded countries to resist China's growing might.⁶⁶ Japan has used its FOIP strategy as a linchpin to develop deeper trilateral cooperation among the four countries. When the second India-U.S.-Japan trilateral foreign ministers' meeting took place in New York in September 2017, it was "agreed to strengthen their cooperation in the fields of maritime security and regional connectivity in order to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific".⁶⁷ The Malabar naval exercise may also be seen as a part of collaboration under the Indo-Pacific vision.

Japan was the only major power which extended its full support to India in its standoff with China over Doklam tri-junction. Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, had advised all parties concerned not to "resort to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, and resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner".⁶⁸ These comments were seen as direct criticism of China's position and support for India's. Tokyo is highly enthusiastic about building Japan's strategic partnership with India, and the Quad would provide a high-profile forum for extending this relationship.⁶⁹ Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to strengthen the American alliance system further through Indo-Japanese partnership as a hard balancing for encouraging China to play a more responsible regional role. In October 2018, Japan and India agreed to establish a 2 + 2 dialogue mechanism of regular consultations between foreign and defence ministers.⁷⁰ During a meeting between Abe and Modi in October 2018 in Tokyo, both the countries agreed to strengthen maritime domain awareness, and also began to negotiate the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that is aimed at facilitating joint manoeuvres, including three-way exercises involving the U.S. Navy in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Japan hopes to project its rising naval power in the Indian Ocean that would also allow Japanese vessels to secure access to Indian naval facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar islands near the Malacca Straits.⁷¹ Clearly, Japan has been developing strategic cooperation with India as a form of mini-laterals in the Indo-Pacific. The India-U.S.-Japan trilateral partnership along with the India-Japan-Australia trilateral partnership seems functioning as an alternative form of Quadrilateral cooperation.⁷²

India and Japan are already working on the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. India has given its unconditional commitment to work closely with Japan in its vision known as “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” (PQI). India and Japan are keen to explore synergies between Act East Policy and PQI.⁷³ Set up in 2017, the India-Japan Act East Forum has become a driving force in advancing bilateral cooperation to boost connectivity within India’s northeast region and its neighbouring countries.

There are however a few structural limitations to Japan’s security expansion. There are constitutional constraints on the use of force; Japan can only use force in response to existential threat and it must use minimal force to achieve its goals.⁷⁴ Although attempts are being made to reconceptualise these defense limitations with Abe’s realist and incremental approach to changing the interpretation of the Article 9, there is unease in Japanese society regarding overtly nationalist postures, even if we brush aside the Chinese and South Korean criticism of Abe’s nationalist policies. As argued by an observer, “if Abe wants to bring Japan’s defense cooperation with the ‘quad’ countries beyond what it is already doing, he may be met with considerable domestic resistance”.⁷⁵ It seems fair to contend that it would take a while for the Japanese citizens, who have become pacifist after 1945, to internalise the Quad’s rationale. In such circumstances, it is not easy to predict if Japan’s enthusiasm for the Quad outlast Abe’s term in the office? And what if Washington loses its enthusiasm for the Quad? Will Tokyo continue to work with New Delhi and Canberra on a regional architecture?

America

From having almost negligible defence ties during the Cold War to India becoming a “major defence partner” of the U.S., the two countries have come a long way. During the Cold War, India and the U.S. held differing perceptions and conflicting security objectives, both within South Asia and beyond. Following the 1999 Kargil war, the U.S. came to recognise India’s security concerns when the Clinton administration put pressure on Pakistan to withdraw its forces from Kargil.⁷⁶ A closer Indo-U.S. partnership developed during the second Bush Administration as reflected in the civil-nuclear agreement.⁷⁷ Over subsequent years, the rapprochement has come to be widely seen as the outcome of challenges faced by both countries in the wake of China’s rise. The U.S. supports India’s claim for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and its entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) – moves that are not favoured by China. It is pertinent to mention the U.S. stance on the issue of Security Council’s expansion which remains largely ambiguous. Washington has remained silent as debate has intensified over the years, choosing to express general support for India’s inclusion without committing to specifics.⁷⁸ The U.S. finds it convenient to support India’s candidature as is it sure of Chinese opposition in the final reckoning.

The U.S., which is the main architect of the liberal economic and maritime order in the Indo-Pacific, has been keen to empower India in assuming greater responsibilities. The former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had said in 2017 that “increasing convergence of US and Indian interests and values offers the Indo-Pacific the best opportunity to defend the rules-based global system that has benefited so much of humanity over the past several decades”.⁷⁹ He also remarked that the Malabar Exercise is “a clear example of the combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies”, while referring to “an

evolving process as to how we create the security architecture which keeps this free and open Indo-Pacific region”.⁸⁰

During his November 2017 Asia tour, Trump made frequent reference to the term, with a senior U.S. official terming India as “the western edge of the Indo-Pacific region” whose eastern edge was made up by the U.S.⁸¹ The Trump administration identifies China as a major challenge to America’s economic prosperity and global primacy. The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Trump administration has declared that Beijing seeks to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region”, while projecting China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence in a negative shade.⁸² As mentioned in the NSS, the U.S. pursuit of helping “India’s emergence as a leading global power” and increasing “quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India”, marks convergence of American interests with those of India.

President Trump seems willing to build on the U.S. advances with India over the last two decades, and as argued by C Raja Mohan, “is betting on a larger role for Delhi in stabilising the Indo-Pacific”.⁸³ The renaming of America’s Hawaii-based Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command appears threatening to China.⁸⁴ The Indo-Pacific strategy of the U.S. has involved bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements to give the U.S. military a sharper presence in both the western Pacific and eastern Indian Oceans.⁸⁵ Thus, the U.S. seems to be fully committed to Quad as one of its key security avenues. The ‘Asia Reassurance Initiative Act’ has specific Indo-Pacific underpinnings as it stipulates that the security dialogue between India, the U.S., Japan and Australia is vital to address pressing security challenges in order to promote a rules-based order, respect for international law and a free and open Indo-Pacific.⁸⁶

The U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence, during his speech at ASEAN summit in Singapore in November 2018, delivered a oblique warning to Beijing over its rising strength in the Indo-Pacific, asserting “that empire and aggression has no place in the Indo-Pacific”.⁸⁷ The release of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy report in June 2019, focusing on preserving a “free and open Indo-Pacific” in the face of a more “assertive China” is important; India has been identified as a major partner of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific, and the Quad has also received attention as being an important platform “to discuss the respective Indo-Pacific visions of the four countries, all grounded in an affirmation of ASEAN centrality”.⁸⁸

The U.S. perhaps believes the Quad to be serving the basic purpose of signalling unity among democracies and like-minded partners to counter China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸⁹ It is safe to argue that the Indo-Pacific framework is suited to contemporary geostrategic and geo-economic realities, which is seen as enhancing the U.S. maritime capabilities, its network of alliances coupled with its soft power while also promoting an effective burden-sharing among democratic partners.⁹⁰ There may be certain differences between India and the U.S. about the geographical boundaries of the Indo-Pacific,⁹¹ however, both seem to be reducing their variance on the conceptualisation and engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia

According to some observers, in a sign of Australia’s expanding strategic conception, the term of “Asia-Pacific”, which previously excluded South Asia, has been replaced by the

“Indo-Pacific” which is seen as connecting “India not just to Australia across the Indian Ocean but also to South East and East Asia”.⁹² It is believed that changing regional geopolitics, enhanced economic engagement, increasing people to people contacts and some shared political values have brought India and Australia close together. In similar vein, it is also argued that besides the rise in China’s strategic importance, non-state security challenges, including terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking are helping India and Australia to develop a set of common strategic perceptions, which could lead to deepening their security partnership.⁹³

Australia’s defense white paper of 2016 had remarked that “Australia’s security and prosperity relies on a stable, rules-based global order that supports the resolution of disputes through peaceful means, facilitates free and open trade, and enables unfettered access to the global commons”.⁹⁴ The same document states that “[o]ur shared interests with India in areas such as Indian Ocean maritime security, regional stability and countering terrorism – in addition to our shared democratic values – form a solid basis for engagement”.⁹⁵

Australia’s 2017 foreign policy White Paper did not explicitly say that Australia and other regional countries should combine to balance against China’s growing power but that was the clear implication. It characterised the South China Sea disputes as “a major fault line in the region order”, proclaiming Australia’s intention to “conduct cooperative activities with other countries consistent with international law”. There was no reference to a quadrilateral, however. Derek McDougall points out that the use of the term “Indo-Pacific”, instead of the “Asia-Pacific”, in the White Paper underlines the importance of India in Australia’s perception of this region.⁹⁶ China was understandably critical of this document. Lu Kang from the Chinese Foreign Ministry asserted that “Australia is not a party to the South China Sea issue”, implying that Canberra must refrain from the issue.⁹⁷ The ‘Global Times’ described the white paper as an “immature outburst” from a “distant propaganda outpost”.⁹⁸ One of the major drivers for Australia’s shift to Indo-Pacific was to reiterate its own geographic and geopolitical presence in the two oceans. It may not be correct to assume that India was the only reason for Canberra’s preference to use the term Indo-Pacific. However, India has now become an important element in Australia’s strategic thinking as “a counterweight to China; a desire long-held in some quarters of the strategic community in Australia, and with well-placed advocates in Canberra”.⁹⁹

Julie Bishop, Australia’s former minister of foreign affairs, asserted that Australia is seeking to “balance against bad behaviour. The key is a rules-based order. We urge China to defend and strengthen that order”.¹⁰⁰ Presently, Australia has a trilateral strategic dialogue framework with the U.S. and Japan, while India, the U.S. and Japan have their own established formats. As part of Australia’s outreach to Indian Ocean outreach through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), it has formed “a steering Troika” with India and Indonesia.¹⁰¹ Spinning off the IORA format, the three countries held their second Senior Officials’ trilateral strategic dialogue in September 2018, with participants agreeing that it “consolidated the relationship between our countries as three major democracies and maritime powers of the Indo-Pacific”.¹⁰²

For Australia, “the Quad is a natural extension of these mini-lateral relationships”, and “just one of the many ways in which Australia will seek to engage with partners”, according to Julie Bishop who believes that “if the Quad is established at a higher level, it will

allow our four nations to discuss all matters of common interest”.¹⁰³ Australia views the Quad as a means to push against China’s growing influence and to signal that its economic interdependence with China would not affect Canberra’s attempts to safeguard its national interests.¹⁰⁴ While the revival of the Quad may be essential in discussions to develop a shared operational definition of the Indo-Pacific region, Canberra is likely to view regional forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) more consistent for this purpose.¹⁰⁵

Australia’s concerns about China have been coloured by differing national perspectives; if Australia has much to worry about China’s presence in the Pacific Ocean, India is more worried about China’s activities in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁶ However, efforts toward alignment of thinking with India are being made. Now, Australia claims to support India’s role as a strategic anchor in the Indian Ocean region besides supporting resilience among regional countries to withstand coercion. As disclosed by Australian foreign minister, Marise Payne, in New Delhi in January 2019, Australia would consider India as the cornerstone its security policy in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰⁷ The joint naval exercise, AUSINDEX, an acronym for Australia India Exercise, is a reflection of this growing trend towards strategic convergence on maritime security. The third edition was held in April 2019 off the coast of Visakhapatnam, with participation of the highest number of units including four frontline ships with integral helicopters, one submarine and a variety of aircrafts.¹⁰⁸ Since 2015, Canberra has regularly discussed the issue of its participation in the Malabar naval exercise between India, the U.S. and Japan with New Delhi. However, India continues to reject Australia’s request to join the exercise. In the 22nd version of the Malabar exercise held off Guam in June 2018, India decided to go ahead trilaterally without including the Australian Navy.¹⁰⁹ And the 23rd edition of the Malabar exercise, held during 26 September–4 October 2019 off the coast of Japan, was again without Australian participation.¹¹⁰

Australia’s policy on the Quad is likely to depend on the government’s strategic preferences, and policy continuity on this front may not be guaranteed. But it can be reasonably argued that given the Quad’s unmistakable anti-China undertones, Australia seems to share India’s interest in downplaying its importance as they both try to maintain uneasy ties with China.¹¹¹ However, the Australia-U.S.-Japan and the Australia-India-Japan trilateral may be seen as the precursor to the Quad.¹¹²

Reasons for India’s hesitation

Not only India, there is some degree of reluctance among all other Quad countries, perhaps with exception of the U.S., to be perceived as openly trying to contain China. The Quad appears to be divided on how to respond to China’s growing influence, including its continued militarisation of the South China Sea and massive infrastructure projects under the BRI. It is imperative for the four countries to arrive at a broadly convergent perspective on the Indo-Pacific region’s long-term challenges and trends. But why it is not happening?

India continues to be viewed as the Quad’s “weakest link”.¹¹³ One of the primary reasons for India’s hesitation about reviving the Quad is concern about China’s potentially hostile response. New Delhi is often advised to “act with prudence, not provoking a conflict with stronger power”,¹¹⁴ since India’s less nuanced security competition with China is viewed as having the potential to “accelerate the expansion of inimical Chinese

influence in the region, and elevate the risk of open war”.¹¹⁵ The corollary of this argument is that India can balance China’s rise, however, the balancing may be limited to the economic and diplomatic domains since military balancing can have repercussions. After much rhetoric and public posturing over the Doklam crisis, it is claimed that the Modi government realised that “China’s hard power is strides ahead of India and a catch-up is not possible”.¹¹⁶ The realisation of India’s multiple weaknesses – economic, technological and defense – may have forced New Delhi to have developed distaste for another clash or confrontation along the disputed border.

Another important factor is the absence of a shared strategic vision among all the Quad partners. The Quad is not likely to achieve its stated ambition of establishing a rules-based order in the absence of shared perception of Indo-Pacific.¹¹⁷ The lingering doubt about other partners’ approach to China figures in India’s overall calculations on the Quad. This doubt is particularly acute vis-à-vis Australia. Despite Canberra making right noises about the Quad, New Delhi is not certain about Australia’s clarity with regard to China. As the bilateral relationship of three Quad members with the U.S. is their “single most important and that with China the second most critical”, there will always be the chance of each of these three countries facing countervailing pressures to adjust relations with the lesser two partners to China’s sensitivity.¹¹⁸ India’s unwillingness could also be attributed to the uncertainty hanging over regional geopolitical dynamics. Trump’s unpredictable, unilateral and transactional approach to foreign policy and hesitant stance on previous American commitment to its allies leaves very little space for strategic manoeuvrings for India. With Trump’s rigid insistence to the U.S. allies for greater burden sharing in maintaining regional security arrangements, India is unsure of the burden it will be asked to shoulder in the Indo-Pacific at a time when America’s global footprints are likely to be driven less by liberal internationalism and more by “transactional multilateralism”.¹¹⁹ The prospect of America withdrawing from much of its strategic commitments across the globe and “losing interest in balancing China and cutting a deal with it instead” seems to be haunting New Delhi.¹²⁰

There is some anxiety in a section of India’s strategic observers that China’s increasing assertiveness may force India to abandon some of its strategic autonomy from the U.S., particularly in its relationships with Russia and Iran.¹²¹ Desire for freedom from external pressure may have prompted the Modi government to remain cautious about fitting the Quadrilateral into the Indo-Pacific framework. Russia is not happy with India going ahead with the Quad. Not much earlier, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov publicly advised India not to join bloc-type security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.¹²² However, one perceptive analyst also views India’s current rhetoric on strategic autonomy regarding the Indo-Pacific as “a double mission”, whose first aim is to deepen economic and military relations with the ASEAN countries, and the second is to discover the ties with Russia and China to “bargain with the West” led by the U.S.¹²³

Quad’s significance for India

Ever since Xi has assumed leadership role, China has demonstrated assertive strategic behaviour towards its neighbours, especially those with whom Beijing has a territorial dispute.¹²⁴ The BRI initiative is part of China’s grand blueprint to establish China’s military superiority in the South China Sea, as well as in the Indian Ocean. Beijing has been

implementing military modernisation plans with great energetic push, and the aim is to make Chinese military more agile and battle-ready.¹²⁵ Beijing's new naval strategy seems to be aimed at developing "a Mahanian blue-water navy" with a "network of overseas bases" in future.¹²⁶ Having built its second aircraft carrier,¹²⁷ China is planning to build 4 nuclear aircraft carriers¹²⁸ in its bid to have a blue-water navy in coming years.¹²⁹ The speed and scale with which Beijing has undertaken both civilian and military infrastructure modernisation in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Tibet undermine the current military balance along the India–China border.¹³⁰ These developments will have serious ramifications in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, India's traditional sphere of influence, where India is increasingly overshadowed economically and encircled militarily.

Therefore, hedging approach has its own limitations. Given huge asymmetry in national power between India and China, it would not be prudent for India to be entirely reliant on internal balancing to cope with China's growing power. Reaching out to the U.S. and its Asian allies has a better chance of success in any Indian strategy of external balancing since it "may be the only resort available to New Delhi".¹³¹ Adherence to notions of strategic autonomy and avoidance of entangling alliances "is unaffordable when an aspiring hegemon can so easily pick off your neighbors one by one".¹³²

It would be difficult to treat the "Wuhan understanding" as more than a tactical adjustment with both India and China making a temporary truce due to the imperatives of their respective internal and external agendas. However, it has also reversed the steps the Modi government took to assert India vis-à-vis China. As argued by Mohan Malik,

Chinese strategic writings constantly remind India of China's overall technological, economic, and military superiority should a combination of disputes – related to Tibet, Pakistan, disputed Himalayan borders, India's energy exploration in the South China Sea, or the elbow-bashing in the Indian Ocean – snowball into an armed confrontation.¹³³

It is important for India not to be seen acquiescing to China's unreasonable demands.

Rajesh Rajagopalan has convincingly argued that India's hedging approach "will satisfy neither China nor the partners that India hopes to balance China with" and is likely to "be seen in Beijing as conference hall sophistry" which will be ignored against the background of India's balancing efforts. Explaining the downside of this hedging strategy, Rajagopalan believes that "India will neither reduce the threat it faces from China nor have the partners it needs to counter this threat".¹³⁴ Moreover, if this pattern of strategic ambiguity continues, it may force the U.S. "to reduce the scope of the relationship – both what it expects of India, but also what it invests in India".¹³⁵ It could also spell the end to any chance of the revival of the Quad. India's strategic reorientation could also mean that the Quad will never materialise in a way it is being conceptualised. A big barrier in crystallising the formation of the Quad is divergent ideas among the countries on how to take on China. But even if there is not much progress on the formal grouping, the four countries must work towards better coordination and cooperation on issues of common concern.

Mere opposition to China's economic hegemony through various multiple plans and initiatives will be futile because of urgent need for infrastructure development in many parts of the world. The challenges emerging from China's growing economic and military footprint in the Indo-Pacific can be tackled if India, the U.S., Japan and Australia "combine forces".¹³⁶ In the longer term, and whatever the political pressures are, India

will be unable to escape the dictates of the new strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation with key regional powers within this conceptual framework should remain the bedrock of India's foreign policy strategy.

Conclusion

India–U.S. relations are at an all-time high, a far cry from a decade and a half ago. On the other hand, India–Russia relationship is nowhere at the level it was a decade earlier. Russia may be India's most dependable defence partner, but nowhere near the status of a strategic ally of America's stature. Still, India has been supportive or at best ambivalent of several Russian moves that have received criticism in the West. But China's tumultuous rise together with its rising economic and military muscle, and its growing strategic congruence with Russia, pose a huge challenge for India in the competition of power and influence in the region. Russia remains India's important strategic partner and it would be harmful to New Delhi's strategic interests if Moscow formed an alliance-type relationship with Beijing. Thus, India must work hard to provide Russia with some strategic manoeuvrability vis-à-vis China.¹³⁷ However, a bilateral strategic relationship of any substance is difficult to sustain without a strong economic pillar which usually helps the partners protect their partnership from being affected by other developments. It remains to be seen how India translates into action the announcements made during the 2019 summit where the Russia's Far East was the primary focus.

Beijing is continuously testing New Delhi's ability to stand up for its interests in the neighbourhood as China keeps on expanding its political and military influence through the BRI. Therefore, there is an urgent need for India to adopt a multi-pronged approach to alleviate its concerns arising out of China's assertive posturing while preventing the emergence of a Sino-centric Asian order. However, India faces tough choices; political tensions with China, when the Indian economy is dependent on imports from China, have its own economic consequences. The informal summits with China also serve no useful purpose for India since it only allows Beijing more breathing space while projecting an image of being constructively engaged with New Delhi. This further weakens India's negotiating position on issues where India is structurally vulnerable. India's participation in the Quad can be a major response to China's mounting pressure on India's borders coupled with growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean region. Willingness to participate proactively in the Quad can demonstrate greater enthusiasm to develop a shared concept of what the regional and global order should look like.

The emerging, albeit incremental, strategic alignment between India, the U.S., Japan and Australia offers a sound basis to reinforce the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. A diplomatic consensus on China, strengthening bilateral ties and converging security interests indicate that India should lean forward to fortify its bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral cooperation with the U.S., Japan and Australia. A coalition of like-minded Indo-Pacific maritime democracies in the Quad would seek to balance against China, further complicate Beijing's strategic calculations aimed against India while encouraging China to engage as a responsible stakeholder in the free and open order. Efforts need to be made to develop more strategic convergence with progressive removal of some institutional and perceptual barriers among the Quad partners. Although Beijing will certainly oppose all those activities that are perceived to be even remotely aimed against it,

China's rising military capabilities and growing assertiveness give ample reason for India to place the Quad at the front and centre of its strategic outlook.

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