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## Security Issues in the Indo-Pacific Region: India's Strategic 'Plurilateral' Engagement

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### Abstract

Over the past four decades, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been influenced by the games and deals of great powers, including Russia and the United States. Iran's geopolitical position and access to energy resources; Internal and identity-building historical developments, including a long-standing enmity with the United States; The structural pressure of the international system and the developments related to the Islamic Awakening and the Arab Spring and the development of the axis of resistance in West Asian countries. All of the above are fundamental components that give Iran a distinct and prominent role in the Russian-American rivalry. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the key government actors in the West Asian region; Despite forty years of striving for independence and easing international pressures, the conventional interpretation of foreign policy has always been influenced by extra-systemic and intra-systemic currents such as US-Russian interactions. The purpose of the research is the regional role of Iran and the competition between Russia and the United States in West Asia, and the main question is what is the regional role of Iran and the competition of Russia and the United States in West Asia? And the hypothesis is that Iran has played a multiple role in the political, military-security, economic-energy, and geographical spheres in the rivalries and relations between the two great powers, Russia and the United States, over the past two decades from 2000 to 2020 in West Asia. This research will be done using combined methods including descriptive, analytical and statistical methods based on communication and exchange theories. In fact, the author tries to use these theories to formulate a specific model to test the main hypothesis. Then, using the specialized texts available in relation to the three variables "Iran's regional position", "Belt-Road Initiative" and "South Asian convergence" in libraries, scientific and research quarterly; As well as internet texts and data and interviews with several experts in the field of foreign policy and communications and transportation in Iran to analyze the relationship between these variables.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, QUAD, AUKUS, Security interests, Plurilateralism

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## Introduction

When we had started to write down the article, we thought of beginning it from the context of boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics, 2022 by prominent countries as a mark of protest against the human rights violation of the Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in China. The diplomatic boycott was initiated by Lithuania, the first country to declare the boycott. This was followed by the United States (U.S.), Britain, Canada, Australia, Japan, Denmark, Estonia, Sweden, New Zealand, Slovenia and Austria. India also decided to boycott the event as a mark of protest when a Chinese soldier participating in the Galwan clashes was made the torchbearer of the Winter Olympics, 2022. Even the Charge d'Affairs of the Embassy of India in Beijing refrained from attending the opening and closing ceremony.

However, things move very fast in global politics. So, we make a reference to the recent Russian-Ukraine crisis as a starting point. After the fall of Afghanistan into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021, with the withdrawal of the US, the Russia-Ukraine war of February, 2022 took the world by storm. Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History and The Last Man*, written at the end of Cold war, had argued that collapse of the Soviet Union symbolized the victory of liberalism. In his words, "It may constitute the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government and as such constitute the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). He also observed, that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and Communist governments in Eastern Europe, Communism did not offer a viable form of government and had no legitimacy. Citing examples of democratic transitions and adaptation of liberalism by countries of Europe, East Asia and Latin America, he tried to

prove his 'End of History' thesis. He claimed that liberal democracies have peaceful relations with other states as they share similar principles of universal equality and rights. It was seen as an attempt to justify the actions of US in the World Wars and other major conflicting scenarios along with legitimizing the one-dimensional world order. However, by the turn of 2020, the world seems to be more multipolar and the leadership or hegemony of the U.S. now being challenged by China and the erstwhile Super Power, Russia. Though this may not be an ideological battle but more of strategic conflict followed by economic interests, it can be said that the 'New Cold War' has begun (Chellany, March 2022).

On one front Central Asia and Afghanistan are hotspots of global politics and on another front, the Indo-Pacific Region is turning out to be a hotbed of tension for India, Japan, Australia, South East Asian countries and most importantly for the US. As Russia invades Ukraine and the conflict wreaks devastation, the whole world is glued towards evolving situation. Away from the spotlight, China continues to flex its muscles in the Indo-Pacific region. It is pertinent to turn our focus to the Indo-Pacific region and the growing tensions simmering out there.

What constitutes the Indo-Pacific region is to be understood in the contemporary usage referring to the geo-spatiality of regions connected by oceans. Indo-Pacific region seems to be the interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, joined by a main trading route through the straits of Malacca (an important choke point). This makes the Indo-Pacific region sensitive an issue in contemporary global politics. The countries of this region are Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, East

Timor, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Maldives, Nepal, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States of America and Vietnam. While most countries of this region want a connected multipolar region, China is increasing its activities and presence in this region and trying to create a unipolar domination. This is causing tensions and bitterness between China and the littoral states of this region. The US is trying to revamp its alliance system in this region to balance off China. India with its Act East Policy is also wary of its big neighbour with whom it shares land borders and often experience border incursions, skirmishes and stalemate in negotiations.

This paper is an attempt made towards out of box thinking on the rising strategic equations in the Indo-Pacific region. An examination of recent happenings, actions and reactions from India's security perspective has been the focus of analysis based on Ministry of External Affairs' releases and newspaper reports. The time frame is the Corona pandemic years starting from 2020 when Indian forces had a scuffle with the Chinese soldiers in Ladakh and thereafter the heat of Chinese expansionism could be felt beyond land borders and into the Indo-Pacific region. The analysis has been done from the perspective of Indian security and strategic interests in this particular region and India's policy to manage/tackle the ever-increasing threats from her big neighbour, China.

### **Rising China in the Indo-Pacific**

India hosted the 13<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit amid the Corona pandemic on 9 September 2021. It was held virtually due to the onslaught of pandemic around the world. What is striking is President Xi Jinping's remark in this

Summit. In the concluding section of his speech, he quoted an old Chinese saying that "A man of wisdom adapts to change, a man of knowledge acts by circumstances" (Xinhua, 2021). This holds the key to China's gamesmanship in India's neighbourhood, particularly in countries surrounding India like Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This can be extended to include the Indo-Pacific region too and the ensuing game is not only with India but also other regional players.

How has China been able to grasp control of the politics of this region is a topic of interest to everyone interested in global politics. The key lies in the economics of Indo-Pacific region and the economic performance of China also. Chinese economy grew by a robust 8.1% in 2021 but the growth tumbled in the last quarter to 4% over a year earlier. Though the World Bank has predicted that 2022 growth forecasts to be as low as 5% yet, China will still be among the world's strongest economy. This economic might give it the strength to put up a tough game be it in terms of trade war with the US or its aggressive policy towards Hong Kong or even in evading allegations over its treatment of China's Muslim minorities in Uyghur region and not to miss out Chinese policy towards Taiwan.

Hong Kong's wings have been clipped (to put it metaphorically) after its handover from Britain to China in 1997. There have been massive protests against Mainland China's overbearing intention to establish control over the lives of Hong Kongers. In 2003 there was a proposed national security legislation that would most likely prohibit treason, secession, sedition, and subversion against the Chinese government. In 2012, there was another attempt to amend Hong Kong schools' curricula to foster Chinese national identity, which many saw as Chi-

nese propaganda. In 2014, Beijing proposed a framework for universal suffrage, allowing Hong Kongers to vote for the city's chief executive but only from a Beijing-approved short-listed candidates. Umbrella Movement was organized by protesters to ensure a true democracy. However, Mainland China's most conspicuous policy adopted on June 30, 2020 was taken when it bypassed the Hong Kong legislature and imposed a new national security law which criminalizes any dissent, crimes like terrorism, subversion, secession, and collusion with foreign powers. Hong Kongers views these developments as end of their freedom and took to protests and massive demonstrations. Beijing however asserts that it was necessary to restore stability following the massive protests through such legislation.

There has been also a growing concern of the world community over the accusation of violation of international conventions relating to human rights against the Uyghur Muslim population in the Xinjiang region of China. One such allegation is a system of 're-education' of the Uyghur Muslims in the 're-education camps which in reality is nothing but camps where millions have been detained in China's attempt to fight Islamist terrorism. Countries like the US, Canada and the Netherlands, have accused China of committing genocide as per the standards of international conventions with the aim to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group meaning the Uyghurs. Forced labour of the Uyghurs, forcible sterilization of Uyghur women, sexual abuse in the camps and even mass migration of Han Chinese (China's ethnic majority) into Xinjiang have been reported by the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken stated that China is committing "genocide and crimes against humanity" (BBC, 2021).

Coming to Taiwan, it is not only economically vibrant being the dominant producer of computer chips globally but also is strategically important to the U.S. and China. Taiwan is located in the commonly perceived the "first island chain", that includes a list of US-friendly territories which are vital to the US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. For the US the friendly countries include Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Philippines as immediate frontal states in the Indo-Pacific region. If China takes over Taiwan, then it could assertively project its power in the western Pacific region to the utmost uneasiness of the US. This can possibly lead to a threat to the US military bases like Guam and Hawaii. Still the Chinese have continued their intrusions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification System giving a deaf ear to Taiwan's opposition and US warnings (Brown, 2022).

In early February, 2022, the US Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken met with the Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and also the South Korean (ROK) Foreign Affairs Minister Chung Eui-yong. In this trilateral meeting, he emphasized the importance of ensuring peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait as this is becoming an impending 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge in global politics. In a joint statement they emphasized their faith in a shared common view of a free, inclusive and open Indo-Pacific based on shared respect for the rules-based international order. This obviously shows the rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region in global politics (Bartlett, 2022).

Now turning towards our discussion point, we find that the Indo-Pacific Region is gradually becoming an arena of competing influence, more so with the significant presence of the United States, China and India. The net result is a geographical distribution of bases



like the Chinese ‘pearls’, the U.S. ‘diamonds’ and the Indian ‘necklace of diamonds’, principally reflecting concerns over energy security and secure access to SLOCs. The Chinese ‘pearls’ comprise Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The US ‘diamonds’ consists Australia, Bahrain, Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Singapore, and UAE. The Indian ‘necklace of diamonds’ though lesser in number, yet are important footholds for India. They include Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Mauritius, and Maldives (Sengupta, 2018). There is also a growing competition to acquire bases by China in the Indo-Pacific region which has led to territorial disputes with the countries of this region.

Chinese current claims on the ocean frontier comprise three main elements like claim to territorial sovereignty over Taiwan, claim to territorial sovereignty over a large number of other small islands in the South China Sea (Paracel and Spratly islands) or the East China Sea (Senkaku Islands), and claim to maritime resource jurisdictions that might pass on to China if its claims to the land territories were recognized by adjacent states. On these territorial claims, China is up in ante against Japan, Philippines, Vietnam and others.

As far as China’s immediate neighbour to the South is concerned that is India, it has left no stones unturned to bully India and make intrusions into Leh and Ladakh in 2020 where there has been reported scuffle between armed forces of both the countries. Indian forces resisted and pushed back the Chinese forces but disengagement in the Leh and Ladakh region seem to be far. There have been 15 rounds of failed talks between China and India on the issue of disengagement but without any breakthrough. It is also well-known that China wants to expand westward

through its OBOR/BRI (One Belt and One Road /Belt and Road Initiative) and southward contain India by engaging with India’s neighbour through the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy. Coupled with these now is the added dimension of China’s aggression into the Indo-Pacific region.

At another level, China is engaged into a trade war with the US. The Sino-American trade war has commenced from the days of former U.S. President Donald Trump. Both have initiated the decoupling of both the countries technology sectors. This US federal government has been pushing some of its multinational corporations to move supply chains away from China or banning their exports of key components and products to China. (Godement, 2020). The Chinese government has prepared an ‘unreliable entity list’ of foreign companies targeted for increased scrutiny or penalties, which has yet to be activated. The list could be used to designate companies for special scrutiny under regulations such as the Anti-Monopoly Law and the Cybersecurity Review Measures. The U.S. government in a May 2019 executive order on supply chain security gave the Commerce Department sweeping authority to prohibit purchases deemed a risk to national security and linked to a ‘foreign adversary’—widely regarded as targeting Chinese suppliers. Likewise orders and counter orders continue as trade war also lingers.

The question that arises is that why is the Indo-Pacific region so vital to the stakeholders in this region. The Indo-Pacific commands the vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) for trade and energy supplies as well as connectivity with the rest of the world to the West. Major players in this region like the U.S., China, India and Japan, Australia as well as Taiwan, South Korea and South-east Asian countries all have their stakes in this

region. Ensuring the security of the Indo-Pacific, therefore, has become a prerequisite for the prosperity of world trade and regional trade. The two most important maritime choke points, namely, Bab al Mandeb and the Malacca Strait are located on either side of the region which if throttled can disrupt trade and energy supplies. The fear in the Indo-Pacific, thus arises from this choke point dilemma and the concern that if China projects its power aggressively in this region while coercing smaller players and competing/warring with major players, the two major choke points can be sealed by China. The game therefore is on to contain Chinese expansion. Countries in this region and beyond have a stake in keeping an open, free and peaceful Indo-pacific based on a rules-based order.

Now let's get back to the main issue that how has China made its presence so thumping in the Indo-Pacific region. This needs an examination in order to understand China's rise in this region. China has been slowly and gradually engaging with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region economically. As of March 2022, China has lowered its GDP growth target to 5.5 percent for 2022 compared to 2021 which was 6.1 percent. When the world economy was in rollercoaster, China's economy grew by 8.1 percent in 2021 to about \$18 trillion which seemed to be a striking performance considered to be the best in a decade. If you follow the GDP growth rate of China from 2011 to 2021, we will observe that apart from the year 2020, China had a steady GDP performance with the highest in 2021 (8.1%).

**Table 1: Economic Performance of China (2011-2022)**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<u>Economic Growth (GDP, annual variation in %)</u>	9.55	7.85	7.77	7.39	7.02	6.85	6.95	6.75	5.95	2.2	8.1	4.8 (predicted)

*Source: Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263616/gross-domestic-product-gdp-growth-rate-in-china/>*

With this economic might China has jumped into increasing its expanse globally, in all directions through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and now in the Indo-Pacific region. This expansion and intrusion into markets are the need of its economy to hold onto its economic performance and GDP growth. The result is evident in the volume of trade with 5 major trading partners. ASEAN, the EU, the U.S., Japan and South Korea were China's top five trading partners in 2021. Trade volume reached markedly high

numbers calculated in Chinese yuan of 5.67 trillion yuan with ASEAN, 5.35 trillion yuan with the EU, 4.88 trillion yuan with the U.S., 2.4 trillion yuan with Japan and 2.34 trillion yuan with South Korea, respectively. Even, China's trade with countries along the routes of the BRI in 2021 expanded by 23.5 percent. It is expected that trade between China and ASEAN countries will hit a new high under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which took effect on 1 January, 2022.

In the year 2021 China's trade with its BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) trade partners also witnessed a steady growth. As reported, trade in goods of Xiamen, east China's coastal city, with the BRICS countries reached 73.78 billion yuan (about \$11.6 billion) in 2021 which was up 20.7%. Overall, the exports with BRICS countries amounted to 51.2 billion yuan and imports 22.58 billion yuan which marked an increase by 16.1% and 32.5% respectively. In April and May 2021, the total trade between China and BRICS countries increased by 69.7 percent and 75.8 percent, respectively (Chunsheng, 2022).

Noticeable is China's trade with ASEAN. Since the conclusion of Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation which formed the legal basis for the creation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) in 2002 (completed on 1 January, 2010), China became the largest trade partner of ASEAN. In the official website of ASEAN, it has been reported that in 2021, ASEAN has become China's largest trade partner for two consecutive years. The China-ASEAN trade in goods has maintained a rapid growth of 5.67 trillion yuan, up 19.7 percent year by year. In 2020, the China-ASEAN trade index was 241.09 points which was up 19.64 percent from 2019 and 141.09 percent from the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone in 2010 (ASEAN, 2020).

Another economic arrangement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), is also quite a new significant development in this region. RCEP includes 15 East Asian and Pacific nations of different economic sizes and stages of development. These include Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the

Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The UNCTAD predicts that the RCEP will become the largest trade agreement in the world as measured by the GDP of its members which is almost of one third of the world's GDP (UNCTAD, 2021).

The goal of RCEP is to achieve zero tariffs on more than 90 percent of the goods trade among member states in the future. Therefore, both the trade creation effect and the economies of scale effect of countries in the region will be gradually realized and might become a new example of multilateralism and economic globalization in the current international political economy. Since China is in this economic arrangement, undeniably China would use its economic might to expand beyond horizons in the Indo-Pacific.

Chinese designs come out to be gradually taking shape by consolidation of relations with countries of Indo-Pacific region like Eritrea, Kenya, Comoros, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. January 2022 witnessed busy schedule of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as he visited these countries. The main focus being a future creation of a forum of island countries of Indo-Pacific region which is a clear indication of its consolidating strategy vis-à-vis competitors of China in the Indo-Pacific region. The direction obviously is towards the Quad countries. China is intensifying its disputes in all directions with a number of countries and creating a restlessness and instability in this entire region. Right from India, Bhutan, Nepal, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines to mention a few. This will intensify in future as Quad and AUKUS countries will try to counter the rise of the Dragon with an ambition for a China-centric world order.

### **Indo-Pacific and India's Strategic Partners**

Given the current scenario as discussed above, it is now pertinent to position India in this Indo-Pacific region. Who can India cultivate as strategic partners in this region? First and foremost, India's target countries need to be identified. India's immediate South Asian neighbours include Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka. India's extended neighbourhood, the South-east Asian countries can act as a bulwark against Chinese expansionism. The other countries with whom bilateral or multilateral engagements can give positive returns to India are Australia, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, Mexico, UAE, France, Chile, Colombia and of course the US.

This is quite a wide network and India's engagement with these countries can be quite challenging. In a report in *The Economic Times*, a study by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) was cited which showed that India had trade surplus with 9 countries of the Indo-Pacific region in 2020. This is a positive outgrowth of India's economic engagement with the countries of this region. Given the expanse of the Indo-Pacific region stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean touching upon the countries in Asia, Africa and the American continent, how much this economic engagement would give dividends has to be watched carefully (Suneja, 2021).

The study by CII shows that India had a trade surplus with eight countries of this region, namely, Kenya, Mauritius, France, Fiji, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and the US for the period from 2016 to 2020. The report also highlighted the primary source countries for India in 2020 as the US, Singapore, South Korea, the UAE, Indonesia and Japan. On the exports front, the primary markets for India had been the US, Singapore, the UAE, Ban-

gladesh and Malaysia while the decline in trade deficits with some of the Indo-Pacific countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Australia and Chile, were highlighted in the CII study (Suneja, 2021).

Specifically, now focusing on India's Act East policy would give us a better picture of economic diplomacy of India vis-à-vis China. The 25<sup>th</sup> Year of ASEAN India economic cooperation, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) came out with the data of India-ASEAN trade cooperation. India-ASEAN trade and investment relations grew steadily and ASEAN became India's fourth largest trading partner. In 2018, India's trade with ASEAN stood at US\$ 81.33 billion, which was approximately 10.6% of India's overall trade. India's export to ASEAN stood at 11.28% of India's total exports.

FDI inflows into India from ASEAN between April 2000 to March 2018 was about US\$68.91 billion, while FDI outflows from India to ASEAN countries was about US\$38.672 billion, from April 2007 to March 2015, according to the data maintained by Department of Economic Affairs (DEA). The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area has been completed with the entering into force of the ASEAN-India Agreements on Trade in Service and Investments on 1 July 2015.

ASEAN and India have been also working on enhancing private sector engagement. ASEAN India-Business Council (AIBC) was set up in March 2003 in Kuala Lumpur in order to become a forum to bring key private sector players from India and the ASEAN countries on a single platform for business networking and sharing of ideas (MEA, 2018).

In the fiscal year 2021, the value of trade between India and the ASEAN region amounted to over 78 billion US dollars. The



largest portion of this trade came from Singapore, valued at over 21 billion dollars that year. Of the trade between India and

Singapore, imports into India had a higher value than its exports. The following table will make it clear.

**Table 2: Value of Indian Trade with ASEAN Countries in the Financial Year 2021**  
(In million US dollars)

Country	Value in million US dollars
Singapore	21,980.41
Indonesia	17,496.38
Malaysia	14,430.73
Vietnam	11,120.3
Thailand	9,919.86
Philippines	2,029.77
Myanmar	1,299.35
Brunei	392.16
Cambodia	208.21
Laos	29.03

**Source: Statista**, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/650795/trade-value-asean-countries-with-india/>

India is trying hard to make an inroad into the South-East Asian countries through trade connectivity as a part of its Act East Policy and centrality of its Indo-Pacific policy. However, India's economic performance in the region can hardly counter the growing Chinese influence even in the economic sector as we have seen in the previous section.

India underscores ASEAN and Act East Policy, as a core element in its Indo-Pacific strategy through which as discussed above, it tries to forge closer economic and strategic partnership with the ASEAN member states. The point of concern is that in the economic front, India's volume of trade with ASEAN is far behind that of China.

The ASEAN official website (ASEAN, 2020) carries the following information.

- China has retained its position as ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009.
- Trade between ASEAN and China has more than doubled since 2010, from USD 235.5 billion to USD 507.9 billion in 2019 (18% of

ASEAN's total) and almost quadrupled since the entry into force of the ASEAN-China Trade in Goods Agreement in 2005.

- ASEAN's exports to China grew at an average annual rate of 10.4% from 2010 to 2019 as compared to 12.5% for ASEAN's import from China during the same period. ASEAN's trade deficit with China increased from USD 10.4 billion in 2010 to USD 102.9 billion in 2019.

As far as FDI flows from China to ASEAN are concerned, FDI reached USD 9.1 billion in 2019, accounting for 5.7% of total FDI flows to the region. This placed China as the fourth largest source of FDI among ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. According to Chinese sources, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the trade volume between ASEAN and China during first half of 2020 increased by 2.2% against the down-trend where ASEAN leapt to become China's largest trading partner for the first time, making ASEAN and China each

other's top trading partner. In 2020, China became ASEAN's largest trading partner (as discussed above), and this position China has retained for the 12th consecutive year.

The other way India has opened up avenues of engagement with the South-East Asian countries is by initiating security deals with Philippines as a starter. This might get broadened if India can make pathbreaking arms deals with the other ASEAN countries. Philippines military buildup sans Chinese security armaments definitely shows its diversification policies in order to balance China and Chinese threats especially in the South China Sea. The arms deal involve purchase of three BrahMos missile batteries worth \$374.9 million.

However, if we now take a stock of Chinese arms sales to the South East Asia, countries over the past years, this would seem to be miniscule. South East Asian states account for 8.1% of the global volume of imports of major arms during the period 1999-2018 (SIPRI, 2019). The major suppliers of arms to these countries are Russia, USA, France, Germany, China, South Korea, the UK, Sweden, Israel, Italy, Ukraine, Turkey and others. India contributes very little in comparison to the major suppliers mentioned here. The table below will briefly give us an idea of arms supply to the South East Asian countries by major suppliers including China.

**Table 3: Suppliers of Arms to South East Asia for the period 2009-2013 and 2014-2018**  
(Values are in SIPRI TIV millions)

Suppliers (Names of Countries)	2009-2013	2014-2018
USA	3495	2030
Russia	4149	3616
UK	66	777
Italy	336	241
Germany	1431	716
China	1060	1035
Israel	325	551
Ukraine	318	364
Turkey	33	116
India	6	42

*Source: Wezman, T., Siemon, Arms Flows to South East Asia, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), December, 2019.*

Yet this might be bolstered if such security engagements can be struck with other ASEAN countries. For Philippines, this has sent a message to China about its 'plurilateral' security engagements sans China. Philippines has obtained defense equipment, combat aircrafts, helicopters, coast-guard ships, frigate, offshore patrol vessels from multiple countries like Brazil, France, Poland, the UK,

the US, Japan, France and others. Now the Brah Mos procured, Philippines has beefed up its shore security. India, on the other hand has intruded into thus the dominated territory of arms sales of China to ASEAN countries who because of Chinese incursions into disputed territories are now wary of China and are diversifying their strategic partners. India has seized the opportunity and has made a pathbreaking startup.

The other way India tried to win over her strategic allies in her immediate neighbourhood and her extended neighbourhood (South East Asia) was through vaccine diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India showcased her willingness and capacity to deliver medical and healthcare products. India provided telemedicine services, vaccines, testing kits, personal protection equipment, respirators, extended credit lines, shared pandemic experiences and other services to address the health concerns of not only its neighbouring countries, but also the world at large, through its contributions to development, healthcare and peacebuilding. India displayed her capacity to be possessing the potential as a 'Pharmacy of the World' (Ghosh & Mehta, 2021) with its proven history of manufacturing and supplying, India has activated its supply lines of generic drugs at very affordable prices. Serum Institute of India, (SII) started developing anti-viral vaccines collaborating with AstraZeneca and Oxford University. Covaxin has also been locally developed and manufactured by Bharat Biotech. India's Vaccine Maitri diplomacy has enhanced its credibility as a leading and reliable vaccine producer in the new world order, where equitable access to vaccines had become a challenge (Singh, 2022).

As part of her 'Neighbourhood First' policy, India made 'vaccine first' its policy and delivered the first consignment of the Covishield vaccine and Covaxin to its immediate neighbourhood, the SAARC countries comprising Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. At a global level, the SII has also signed a US\$150 million contract with Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As a part of this agreement, India has demonstrated its humanitarian approach by agreeing to provide GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance and its COVAX

facility with 100 million vaccine jabs. India made a commitment of helping 95 underdeveloped countries worldwide to strive towards equitable distribution of vaccines. Through 'Vande Bharat' mission, India has portrayed itself as a dependable partner as far as regional partnership is concerned. As it always rushes help during natural calamities and now in the present Covid crisis in its neighbourhood India made 'vaccine first' its guiding principle. Overall, it has received wide global appreciation but it has made India enter into a direct competition with China. China foresaw its vaccine diplomacy as a tool for fulfilling its geopolitical designs of developing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) through vaccine diplomacy or using its soft power strategy.

#### **Indian Approach Towards 'Plurilateralism'**

Before going into India's approach in the emerging global order, we will discuss the U.S. strategy of engagement with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region first. It was the Obama administration which directed its attention on a "Pivot to the Asia-Pacific" strategy around November, 2011. This could be seen as developing engagements with the Asian countries in spheres of military, security and economic interactions in the face of rise of China in the region. The then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi in mid-2010 affirmed the American vital interest in freedom of navigation in this region and in keeping the region open for normal commercial activities. Therefore, there was shift of the U.S.' political attention from Euro-Atlantic region to the Indo-Pacific region, particularly focusing on East Asian states in order to contain the Chinese meteoric rise.

In mid-2020 for the first time, after a gap of almost three years, three American aircraft carriers were reported to be patrolling the Indo-Pacific waters. This build-up was a symbol of the rising tensions between the U.S. and China in the Indo-Pacific region. The military exercise saw three warships, accompanied by Navy cruisers, destroyers, fighter jets and other aircrafts. This is to be seen in the backdrop of China's strengthening its grip in Hong Kong, militarizing efforts in the human-made islands in the South China Sea and offensive posture towards Taiwan. The USS Theodore Roosevelt and its strike group were operating in the Philippine Sea near Guam. The USS Nimitz strike group was in the Pacific off the U.S. West Coast. The USS Ronald Reagan left the port in Japan and was operating in the Philippine Sea. In the East Asia Summit of October 2021 President Joe Biden made it clear that "*We envision an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure—and we are ready to work together with each of you to achieve it.*" (*White House, Fact Sheet, 2021*)

Long before such announcements, in 1992 the US and India had started the Malabar Naval exercises. Later it was expanded to include Japan, Singapore and Australia. These naval exercises had been conducted in the Philippine Sea, off the coast of Japan, the Persian Gulf, in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. In 2007, the predecessor of Quad 2.0, the Quad 1.0 began as Security Dialogue forum comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia. This led to, for the first time, Indian and U.S. navies being joined in the exercise by navies of Japan, Singapore and Australia. This was also a first-time exercise that was shifted from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Maritime forces from Australia, Japan, India, and the United States

began phase 1 of cooperative maritime exercise MALABAR 2021 in the Philippine Sea, in August 2021. This was the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the Malabar exercise among the navies of the Quad 2.0 comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India. This began on the coast of Guam which is an island territory in the North Pacific Ocean and is located much closer to China with a potential of becoming an ideal US military strategic base in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Quad 1.0 was not that successful and lost its momentum quite fast only to be renewed currently with the emergence of China in a big way in the region. QUAD 2.0 was renewed in 2017. Like before it was a quadrilateral grouping comprising the US, Australia, India and Japan. The main objective which became clear from the first Summit of Quad (March, 2021) was to secure a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The Quad in this summit emphasized the importance of a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific region. Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia in his speech hinted at the Quad Summit as a 'new dawn' and envisioned that Quad would strive to create a different future as the world emerges from the pandemic. With the Mega Malabar Naval exercises in 2020 the rising of the Quad became evident. It was already sending a message to Beijing to be aware of a rising counter balancing alliance.

China is quite negative towards the emergence of Quad. It bristles and was vocal in saying that Quad cooperation should target mutual understanding and should not target a third party and stay out of pursuing exclusive blocs. Russia is also skeptical about the Quad and labelled it as Asian NATO. Yet the Quad took shape and what made the Quad members come together is the growing worry of an emerging China all set to change the world order by keeping its footprints in the



Indo-Pacific region, South China Sea and Indian Ocean region. It is trying to change the status quo of the entire stretch of maritime domain as well as through its BRI and CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) on the land frontiers along India, Pakistan and extending it to Iran and deepening into Central Asia. This prompted the four important powers in the region as well as global players to work for the Quad 2.0 after the failure of Quad 1.0. The renewal of the Quad by the U.S. administration under Donald Trump signified a reiteration of America's Indo-Pacific strategy. This revealed the realization of Trump administration's perception of the Indo-Pacific as a crucial theatre of competition and which would be more maritime-based.

A joint statement was released by the Secretary of State of the United States and the Foreign Ministers of the Governments of Australia and India in Melbourne, on 11 February 2022 as part of the fourth Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting. They reaffirmed the Quad's commitment to support the efforts of the Indo-Pacific countries to establish a free and open Indo-Pacific. They envisioned the Indo-Pacific as a region which will be inclusive and resilient, and in which states will strive to protect the interests of their people, free from coercion. They also reiterated the Quad's positive and ambitious agenda focused on working closely with Indo-Pacific partners to address challenges emerging in this region. What was made clear was an unwavering support to ASEAN unity and centrality along with the ASEAN-led architecture and also the Quad support to ASEAN partners to advance the practical implementation of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

At this point, one must be mindful of the fact that Quad is a non-military grouping. The US is so desperate to contain China, that it entered into a defense alliance with the UK

and Australia, leaving aside India and Japan who refrained from any sort of military engagement in this Indo-Pacific region. This is AUKUS which aims at developing a class of nuclear-propelled submarines and work together in the Indo-Pacific region to balance off the rise of China. This was followed by Australia ending the contract given to France in 2016 to build 12 diesel electric-powered submarines and replace its existing Collins submarine fleet. The deal marks the first time the US has shared nuclear propulsion technology with an ally apart from the UK. China signalled this as resumption of an "obsolete cold war zero sum mentality and narrow-minded geopolitical concepts". Another bilateral arrangement emerged with the newly signed Japan-Australia defense agreement. This can be seen as rise of regional counter-hegemonic balancing efforts in the Indo-Pacific.

From the above discussion, beside Quad with two new security treaties now in the Indo-Pacific region, AUKUS and Japan Australia pact, India has to consider options whether, it should continue skepticism for security cooperation with others or to join security pacts. Given this scenario in the Indo-Pacific region, India's stand in global and regional politics was made clear by the External Affairs Minister. In December 2021 EAM Jaishankar in his address in an Indian Ocean Conference floated a new concept in order to face the emerging crises in global politics. He said, "A world of more decentralized globalization obviously offers greater opportunities to many more nations. These would be accentuated by a strong desire to foster localization and promote regionalism" and help in making plurilateral arrangements for middle powers in world politics.

"Whether it is the Indo-Pacific, Afghanistan or the Gulf, we are seeing more players, great-

er localization and arrangement of pragmatism. We are now entering a world of greater pluralism, one that recognizes the shortcomings of multilateralism, the limits of bilateralism and the untenability of unilateralism” (The Times of India, 2021).

EAM Jaishankar observed that the Quad, AUKUS, the new West Asia Quad, Indian Oceans Initiative and even the Abraham Accords are expressions of greater international cooperation within smaller groupings and within regions. Therefore, more than multilateralism and bilateralism, plurilateralism across region or within regions are a new trend.

### Conclusion

It has been reported as of March 2022, that China has militarized three artificial islands in the South China Sea along the Spratly group of islands in the South China Sea. As Russia bombs Ukraine, China flexes its muscles in the Indo-Pacific region. It has armed these islands with anti-ship, anti-aircraft missile systems as well as laser and jamming equipment and also fighter jets. (The Guardian, 2022). These are creating tremors in the already troubled politics of the Indo-Pacific region. In an emergency Quad meeting in March, 2022 the Quad members, Australia, India, Japan and US expressed their response to the on the ongoing war in Ukraine and its implications for the Indo-Pacific. The leaders agreed that “unilateral changes to the status quo with force like this should not be allowed in the Indo-Pacific region”. PM Narendra Modi reiterated India’s call for dialogue and diplomacy in this meeting in all crisis’s situations.

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, India has been tight-rope walking and striking a balance between the reactions of the West as well as retaining the longstanding

relationship with Russia. India has abstained from voting in the UN Security Council as well as UN General Assembly on a resolution on the Ukrainian situation. India’s External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar as has been discussed above emphasizes on India’s ‘plurilateral engagement’ in the emerging global order. Ukraine crisis is becoming a litmus test for India’s ‘plurilateralism’. India is not practicing non-alignment but ‘pro-active neutrality’ in the Ukrainian crisis as well as engaging with the world at the same time.

In a recent meeting between Australian PM Scott Morrison and Indian PM Narendra Modi in March 2022, Australian PM made it clear that India’s position on the Ukraine crisis can be understood and why India is adopting a balanced position and using dialogue and diplomacy to mitigate the Ukraine crisis is also clear.

In another meeting with Japanese PM Fumio Kishida, in March 2022, PM Narendra Modi, both expressed serious concern over the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and both expressed their opinion that the Ukrainian crisis should also be assessed with its broader implications, particularly referring to the Indo-Pacific region.

If India upgrades its Brah Mos missiles then there can be a strategic market for Brahmos-2K version as India’s defense sales of Brah Mos supersonic cruise missile to Manila is a significant breakthrough in defense partnership with an ASEAN member. India, therefore, should embark on a long-term defense export policy that not only will boost India’s defense exports but also partnership with states facing challenges from China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific region. This will act as a bulwark against Chinese advancement in the waters as well as in the land boundaries with India.

On the whole, authors see India’s strategic ‘Plurilateral’ engagement as a pragmatic and

prudent approach toward addressing the emerging security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. This plurilateral approach has been necessitated owing to shortcomings of other approaches and sometimes the loss of focus on specifics, in the multilateral engagements. India's supreme strategic interests have been the overriding principle of its strategic engagement, which it has beautifully complemented with vaccine diplomacy and deeds sustaining the civilizational values of working towards the welfare of humanity. India's plurilateral engagement is not aimed against any country or a group of countries, but solely at strengthening the forces of peaceful, just and stable world order.

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