

THE CHALLENGES OF WALKING THE INDO-PACIFIC TALK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

The recently concluded third annual [United States-India 2+2 ministerial dialogue](#) has amplified the ongoing conversation in India on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the Indo-Pacific, the threat from China, and, the United States as a potential 'alliance' partner. No strategic vision has captivated India's foreign policy mandarins and strategic community in recent times as have the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.

The international community has once again decided to court New Delhi to play a decisive role in shaping the region's strategic future. While during the mid-2000s the world expected India to be an economic powerhouse, a decade later, those expectations remain modest, at best. The expectation this time is more strategic and military, to lead the charge against China from within the region. Will India, and can India, fulfil these expectations?

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The Indo-Pacific is a grand politico-economic vision while the Quad is a forum for strategic and military consultations among India, the U.S., Australia and Japan. Depending on how one wishes to view it, they could be seen as conceptually interlinked or as separate visions. Their similarity comes from the fact that the Quad members are also major States in the Indo-Pacific region, and both the Quad and the Indo-Pacific constructs are focused on China. More so, they are also in some ways centred around India's geographic location and its policies. Put differently, if you take China out of the equation, they would have little rationale for existence. And if you take India out of the picture, their ability to sustain as geopolitical constructs would drastically diminish.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad are also quite different from each other. The first is a politico-economic vision and the last is a military-strategic vision — the last does not form the military or strategic nucleus of the first. While the Indo-Pacific provides a complex political and economic picture with a hesitant, but growing, articulation of China as a strategic challenge, the Quad is inherently more anti-China in character and intent. The Indo-Pacific, despite the subtle anti-China undertones, will find it impossible to avoid engaging China. Even the Quad, still in its institutional infancy, is mostly focused on diplomatic signalling and with little common intent let alone joint action. At the moment it so seems, paradoxically however, that the Quad's ability to succeed would entirely depend on China — the more aggressive China gets, the more resolute the Quad countries would be in strengthening it.

It is too early to say whether the Indo-Pacific as an economic construct will be able to pose an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is far more advanced, much more thought-out, and has the economic might of the Chinese state behind it. Several Indo-Pacific countries are already members of the BRI. On the flip side, the BRI is a 'Chinese' project and is already under immense stress from its inherent weaknesses, such as China's unilateral pursuit of the BRI and the associated economic burdens on the States that sign up to it.

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Notwithstanding the current excitement in New Delhi about the Indo-Pacific, the question we must ponder over is how successful New Delhi's Indo-Pacific strategy would be going forward.

For a politico-economic construct such as the Indo-Pacific to survive, there must be strong economic partnerships and linkages among its members. Merely focusing on strategic talk and possible military cooperation will not work because at some point, the unavoidable economic logic will kick in.

With that in mind, let us examine India's economic engagement of the Indo-Pacific. For one, New Delhi's recent decision not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the region's flagship free trade arrangement, could potentially complicate the country's future engagements in the region.

But that is not the complete story. The RCEP decision, a direct result of domestic political compulsions in India, comes in the backdrop of the already huge gap between India and China on trade with almost every Indo-Pacific country. The *table* shows the gap that exists between Indian and Chinese trade with the major Indo-Pacific and Quad States. This growing trade gap that India and China have with these countries will be a major determining factor in shaping the region's strategic realities.

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New Delhi's decision not to sign on to the RCEP also needs to be viewed in the broader context of the Chinese institutional engagement of the region. Of the main countries of the Indo-Pacific, the bilateral free trade agreements are as follows.

In the case of India, it does not have FTAs with Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., Bangladesh and the Maldives. It has FTAs with South Korea, the Association of South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN, Japan and Sri Lanka. In the case of China, it has FTAs with all these countries barring the U.S. It does not have an FTA with Bangladesh, while negotiations are on with Sri Lanka. Trilateral FTA negotiations are also going on between China, Japan and South Korea.

Once again, economic compulsions will go a long way in shaping strategic realities for a variety of reasons including that trade with China is crucial for the economies of these States. Even if they attempt economic decoupling from China, it would be a long process, if pursued with adequate alternatives and political determination. The lesson is straightforward: strategic talk alone cannot trump economic realities.

If our economic engagements with the region were insufficient, which are at least partly due to domestic political considerations, our strategic and military engagements in the region also fall short.

Beijing, for instance, is a major defence supplier to several of the region's States including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, dwarfing India's minimal sales, defence dialogues and occasional joint military exercises in the region.

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Put differently, India's role in the Indo-Pacific will remain limited if it does not prove to be a major economic partner to these States. But given the economic slowdown in India today in the wake of COVID-19 (compared to the much better place that China is in) and the lack of political consensus in the country about regional economic agreements such as the RCEP, India's ability to economically engage with the region remains limited. On the military-strategic side too, India's performance in the region is less than desirable. The only choice, it appears then, is for some sort of a loosely structured regional strategic alliance with the U.S. and its allies in the broader Indo-Pacific region. But let us be clear. There is a fundamental difference between sustainably

engaging the Indo-Pacific region using economic, strategic and military tools, and choosing to take the easier and quicker path of a military 'alliance' with the U.S. and its allies.

Moreover, is there sufficient political consensus within the country's strategic elite to pursue such a path? Having been socialised in the Cold War crucible of non-alignment, and later strategic autonomy, is the Indian strategic elite ready to embrace a new set of beliefs and ideas about a balancing act in international politics?

For sure, there is an unapologetic 'realist' turn in India's foreign policy today, perhaps an unavoidable one, and the Indian debates on balancing and alliance formation are undergoing major changes as well. New Delhi, however, remains caught between a deeply constrained, but unavoidable, need to rethink its strategic posture, and the recognition of its material inability to do so, at least for now.

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