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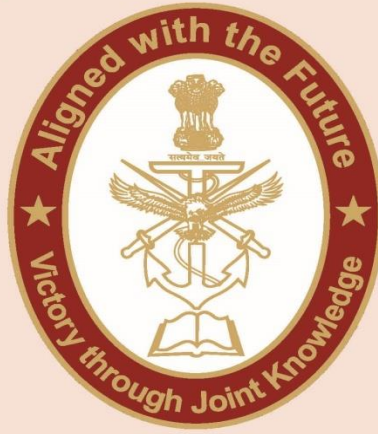
ISSUE BRIEF

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INDIA'S MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT: IS IT ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH ITS PARTNERS IN CONTEXT WITH QUAD, BRICS AND SCO?

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Abstract

India's foreign policy has historically been guided by the principle of non-alignment. However, in pursuit of greater influence on the global stage, New Delhi now seeks to maintain strategic autonomy while engaging in multilateral forums. India has increasingly participated in various multilateral organizations, such as the QUAD, BRICS, and SCO, among others, to advance its strategic and economic interest. Through QUAD as a platform, India has been able to collaborate in significant areas like maritime security, technology development, climate resilience, cybersecurity, vaccine diplomacy etc. Despite the instabilities in its relationship with China, BRICS has offered a channel to India to enhance its engagements with some of the emerging economies of the globe. Cooperation in regional security and connectivity projects with Central Asia are being facilitated to New Delhi by SCO. However, the question arises if India is on an equal footing in these platforms with the other members. This paper examines areas where India does not match the influence of global superpowers like China and the US. It is often noted that when a superpower joins a multilateral or a multilateral organization, their strategic priorities tend to dominate the agenda. The study seeks to identify specific areas where India can strengthen its capabilities and elevate its standing on the global stage.

Introduction

India's foreign policy exhibits an internationalist policy oriented towards increasing cooperation and understanding between nations. The target of such a policy is to expand India's own influence in the global community. As part of this endeavour, India has become part of various platforms such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) summit, G7 meeting, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Commonwealth grouping and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) being the few important ones.

However, despite being part of these alliances, India has always sought to maintain its strategic autonomy by not aligning with any bloc. This was achieved by remaining neutral towards its global partners. A clear example of this approach can be gleaned in the reply of India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar to a question at GLOBESEC 2022 at Bratislava, Slovakia. Jaishankar stated "I don't accept that India has to join either the U.S. axis or China axis. We are one-fifth of the world's population, fifth or sixth-largest economy in the world...we are entitled to weigh our own side."¹

Among all the forums and alliances, the QUAD, BRICS and the SCO are significant. QUAD provides a forum for India to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. This allows the sea routes in the region to remain "free, open, and inclusive". The SCO contributes towards the external security concerns of India. BRICS, on the other hand, presents the opportunity for developing world countries to put their interests before the global society.

QUAD: Strategic partnership with the US, Japan and Australia

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, more commonly known as QUAD, is a strategic forum with India, Japan, the US and Australia being members. Formed in 2007, the QUAD was initiated with the aim of cooperation between the four countries. These countries are also big maritime democracies. However, the forum faced numerous difficulties that led to its decline, till it was revived in 2017. Since then, it has become a key player in ensuring the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific.²

However, New Delhi has clarified that it does not consider the institution as a military alliance, and has no intentions to target anybody. India considers QUAD as cooperative mechanism to address regional challenges. Through the platform, New Delhi aspires to ensure a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. In the meantime, QUAD

also makes an effort to address few concerns such as maritime security, economic cooperation, technological collaboration, infrastructure development and shared commitment to democratic values and rule of law.

As a member of QUAD, India also aspires to improve the digital connectivity and supply chain resilience of the region. This requires providing access to crucial technology and technological advancements as well as modern telecom networks such as 5G. For example, QUAD support was confirmed for Open Radio Access Network (RAN) pilot in Palau in the 2023 Leaders' Summit, to secure and diversify telecommunication networks. This is the first such project in the Pacific.³

BRICS: A Multipolar Economic Bloc

The idea of BRICS emerged in 2001 from a study titled "Building Better Global Economic BRICs" by Chief Economist at Goldman Sachs, Jim O'Neill. Then in 2006, the BRIC was formed between Brazil, Russia, India and China. The policies of the group were incorporated into the foreign policies of the four countries. In 2011, South Africa joined the group, changing the name of the group to BRICS.⁴ On 1 January 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the new members of the organisation. The bloc represents the emerging economies with an initial focus on reforming global financial institutions. This focus has now expanded to include enhancing economic and political cooperation between the member countries.

As the Russia-Ukraine war continues, Russia and China aim to use BRICS as a counter to US led alliances, such as the NATO, which has an anti-Russian orientation. India's engagement with non-Western alliances such as BRICS or SCO serve a balancing act to the country's growing participation in Western led QUAD and G-7. For example, the sanctions put by the West on Russia were not supported by India. India continued to import Russian oil to not only to meet the demands of the domestic energy market but a certain percent of the refined oil was sent to Europe as well. Additionally, Indian corporations have also invested over \$16 billion in the oil and gas sector of Russia. Furthermore, over half of India's military equipment has been sourced from Russia. For these reasons, India has faced constant scrutiny from the international community.⁵

Nevertheless, it is clear that BRICS provides a much-needed opportunity to India to strengthen ties with the two major powers, Russia and China, and engage them on a more equal footing. This would also allow India to push for governance reforms in the

global sphere. Furthermore, BRICS also provides a platform to showcase India's economic potential, thereby attracting foreign investments.⁶

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): Regional Security and Cooperation with Central Asia

Founded in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established with a focus on regional security, economic cooperation, and counterterrorism. India, along with Iran and Pakistan, were granted observer status in the organisation in 2005. In 2017, full membership was granted to New Delhi and Islamabad.⁷ The formation of SCO prompted the major non-Western states of Eurasia to come together as a security provider in the region and a counter to the Western States.

Ever since its inception, the SCO has focused on combating terrorism, extremism and separatism in the region. This objective was outlined clearly in Article 1 of the organisation's charter. India's priorities aligned with this objective, as it aimed to eliminate terrorism and terrorist groups that operate in its northwest border. However, contrary to the SCO's objective, there are countries which supported the spread of terrorism in India as well as Eurasia as part of their foreign policy, thereby making the SCO ineffective in curbing state-sponsored terrorism in the region. For example, the divergence in opinions on maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan reflects the failure of SCO as a group in curbing terrorism.⁸

India also aspired to promote socio-economic development and connectivity in Eurasia. The SCO became a forum for India to strengthen its relationships with the Central Asian Republics (CARs), thereby countering the exclusivity of China in connectivity projects in the region. Barring Pakistan and China, all the members of SCO, especially CARs, have entered into bilateral or multilateral agreements with India, for connectivity projects in the region. Some examples of such India-led projects include the Chabahar Port agreement between India and Iran, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, the Ashgabat Agreement, etc.⁹

Is India an equal partner in these engagements?

Being a minilateral alliance, the QUAD offers more cohesion and transparency among its members. It is expected to be more task oriented and conducive to achieving consensus on its goals. India's unique geo-strategic location gives it a significant advantage in QUAD. India's active role in shaping the institution's agenda and ensuring

that its strategic interests are met while fostering cooperative engagements with its partners remain salient.

However, the question of whether India has an equal say in the forum is debatable. In this context, a notable development in the QUAD grouping was the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) on 23 May 2022. This is a US-led initiative that demonstrates a strong QUAD Plus character, and forms a key part of the US's Indo-pacific strategy. With 14 member countries, the IPEF focuses on trade practice issues. Its four pillars cover Trade, Supply Chains, Clean Economy and Fair Economy. The IPEF initiative demonstrates the strong influence that the US has on QUAD members.¹⁰ In this context, New Delhi's position in the framework is still complex. Moreover, it did not join the trade pillar of the framework. It seems that the initiatives of IPEF align more with the strategic interests of the US. Hence, despite being a key participant, New Delhi's presence in the IPEF may not match the expectations of the US.

Within BRICS, India's position is crucial and one of significant influence. The bloc's focus on development, finance and global governance reform aligns with India's own self-interests. As such, India plays an active role in promoting economic development, collaborating on infrastructure projects as well as political and financial cooperation within BRICS. The group's consensus-driven approach allows India to exert influence while engaging with its larger and economically more powerful partners. However, due to its neutrality in dealing with Russia, India's actions are under constant scrutiny by the global society. Therefore, India needs to be more aware of its challenging position.

Additionally, India and China, despite their ongoing strategic rivalry, share some of the common interests in BRICS. This helps to temper bilateral tensions in the bloc. However, China's greater influence in the group cannot be disregarded. China has proactively led innovation, research and development, marketing and vaccine diplomacy agendas in the group. It has also contributed 41 percent of the USD \$100 billion Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA), making it BRICS's biggest donor. In contrast, India has contributed only 18 percent to CRA.¹¹ China has also made huge contributions to the New Development Bank (NDP), formerly known as the BRICS Development Bank, as it is aware of NDP's potential to help it in advancing its political and economic interests. The NDP might appear to be well balanced on paper, with its President being an Indian, a Board of Directors Chair being Brazilian and a Board of Governors Chair being Russian, the reality is different. China is well aware of the fact

that the national interests of the other member countries would outweigh their reluctance to collaborate on certain aspects.

As a forum, the SCO offers India greater access to Central Asia and engagement in regional security dynamics. India contributes to SCO's security and economic initiatives, particularly in areas like counterterrorism and regional connectivity. However, the presence of China and Russia as dominant members adds a layer of complexity to India's role.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has provided an opportunity for China to assert dominance over the group. China plans to transform the SCO into a China-led forum and help its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gain prominence. BRI is a strategic tool employed by China, whereby it offers substantial funds for developing mega connectivity and infrastructure projects. In return, if the recipient countries fail to repay the loan, China would gain greater control over their assets. Thus, BRI can be deemed to be an initiative aimed at pursuing China's hegemonic interests instead of a genuine effort to provide benefits to CARs. However, despite these efforts by China, CARs still remain as one of the world's least connected regions. This provides a good opportunity for India to enhance its presence in the region. On the other hand, Russia considers India an important part of its vision of "Greater Eurasia". Infact, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2023 names India as its "great neighbour".¹²

In terms of its partnership with CARs, India has made headway by having the support of these countries for various bilateral and multilateral agreements. For example, the trilateral Chabahar agreement between India, Iran and Uzbekistan seeking to connect the INSTC with the Chabahar Port, thereby enhancing connectivity in Eurasia. Nevertheless, India also faces many challenges in the SCO. It remains as the only member of SCO that is not a part of BRI, as a result of sovereignty concerns especially due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The inconsistent attendance of Indian leaders at SCO Heads of State Summits further adds to the difficulties faced by India in the forum. It may thus be assumed that SCO as an organisation has become less important for India's strategic interests.¹³

Key Areas for Enhanced Contribution for India

- **Strengthening financial mechanisms**
 - As per the 'Fact Sheet: 2024 QUAD Leader's Summit', Australia provided AUD 50 million to promote projects that develop and diversify the supply chains for

solar panels, hydrogen electrolyzers, and batteries. Japan too has pledged to provide \$122 million to renewable energy projects in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴ The US has offered \$250 million loan to build a solar cell manufacturing facility to Tata Power Solar of India. Comparatively India's contribution to this sector is merely \$2 million in new solar projects in Fiji, Comoros, Madagascar, and Seychelles which is quite less than the contributions made by the other QUAD members.¹⁵ If India is to have a greater voice in such minilateral or multilateral institutions, it needs to further strengthen its financial mechanisms.

- Be it the IPEF or NDP, major powers like the US and China still have a greater ability to manipulate other member states and influence their decision making. This can be attributed to not only their technological or military advancements, but more importantly, to their economic might. It cannot be denied that a country that has made greater economic contributions to such institutions and alliances has a greater voice in their policies. Therefore, if India wants to improve its standing in such forums, it needs to focus on enhancing its economic abilities and make more monetary contributions. Otherwise, it would remain a mere spectator.
 - **Strengthening India's role in climate resilience, renewable energy and disaster management:** As a QUAD member India could focus on the Pacific Islands in terms of enhancing a significant role in climate resilience and early warning systems. Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) could provide those nations with satellite based weather forecasting while working in collaboration with the other QUAD members.
 - The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) of India can be extremely important in responding to disasters and assisting with efforts aimed at increasing capacity.
 - India could also expand its investments in renewable energy projects in Pacific Island nations, focusing on solar and wind¹ energy deployment, while sharing best practices in sustainable development. By actively participating in these initiatives, India can help strengthen the Quad's collective efforts to mitigate climate risks and support the resilience of vulnerable Pacific Island communities.
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- **Bolstering the technological sector:** In an era of technology, having a strong technological sector can enhance the status of a country. India is well recognized for its scientific potential and rigour. Be it the Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan missions, Gaganyaan programme, Aryabhata satellite, AGNI strategic missiles, COVAXIN (India's indigenous COVID-19 vaccine), and many other achievements, India has attained many milestones in the field of scientific discovery and technological advancements. However, despite being a global leader in fields like information technology (IT) services and software development, India still faces challenges in becoming a front-runner in advanced technology sectors such as hardware manufacturing, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and high-end research. This stems from issues such as infrastructure deficit, low investment in research and development (R&D), "brain drain" to foreign countries, and a gap between academia and industry needs, among others. If India can use its highly innovative and technology oriented workforce to its full potential, it may become one of the leading players in the sector. For this, a strong political will is needed to strengthen the technological sector. India can remove many of the bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles that plague entrepreneurship and technological development in the country. Steps can also be taken to create policies that would attract more foreign investment in the sector. More initiatives such as the 'Startup India' program (2016), "Digital India" and "Make in India" campaign, should be undertaken to encourage the development of the technological sector. India should also encourage investment in semiconductor manufacturing, as this would reduce dependence on foreign imports. India can become a major player in the global chip supply chain.
- **Expanding the Supply Chain Market:** Supply chain markets offer many benefits to a country. Strong supply chain markets enhance not only the economic might of a nation but also improve its geopolitical as well as technological stature. China holds a dominant position in the global supply chain market. This empowers it to have a big influence in global decision making. The risks of over-dependence on a few countries for critical supplies was further highlighted by the COVID-19. As such, many countries are seeking an alternative player to diversify their sourcing, especially in regard to manufacturing. If India can expand and strengthen its supply chains, it can

attract more investments and partnerships from such nations. 'Memorandum of Cooperation for the Semiconductor Supply Chains Contingency Network' was finalised in the 2024 QUAD Leader's Summit.¹⁶ The MoC is expected to enable cooperation in managing supply chain risks related to semiconductors. In this context, India could take the lead in creating a QUAD semiconductor consortium which would be of utmost significance to provide these four countries with a varied foundation for semiconductor manufacture. Not only would this approach reduce expenses, but geographic diversification will increase the supply chain's resiliency.

- **India's Strategic Role in QUAD's Maritime and Infrastructure Development:**

A Quad Regional Ports and Transportation Conference is planned for 2025, with India serving as the host city in Mumbai.¹⁷ With the help of this new alliance, Quad Partners hopes to mobilise funding for high-quality port infrastructure throughout the Indo-Pacific region by working together, exchanging information, sharing best practices, and leveraging resources.

New Delhi can utilise such opportunities to enhance its role advancing maritime infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. Such events could also enable India to establish itself as key player in regional connectivity. Fostering investment could be another aspect through which New Delhi could influence the regional dynamics and strengthen its position in QUAD. Infrastructure investment projects like Bharatmala, Sagarmala and Dedicated Freight Corridors that enhance transportation efficiency and lower logistics costs need to be supported. This would not only benefit India's domestic economy but also strengthen its role in shaping global trade dynamics and diplomatic relations, thereby enhancing its geopolitical influence.

- **Make in India initiative and SCO:** In the 2024 SCO Summit at Astana, Kazakhstan, India's External Affairs Minister highlighted the potential of the 'Make in India' initiative to become a key driver of global economic growth.¹⁸ This would help to further democratise the global economy. India also expressed its willingness to partner with other countries, especially with those in the Global South, for initiatives aimed at economic development and capacity building. India can use this opportunity to provide the necessary infrastructure, communication technology and financial support to the countries of the Global

South for boosting their development. India can also leverage the “Make in India Initiative’ to export indigenously built, defense equipment, expanding its defense exports to member nations of the SCO. Having already exported the Brahmos Missile to Philippines and Pinaka systems to Armenia, New Delhi is well-positioned to offer similar advanced defense equipment to other countries in the region. The experiences from the robust start-up sector in India can provide much needed knowledge to other SCO nations. As a way to share this knowledge, the SCO Startup Forum and Special Working Group on Startup and Innovation are two institutionalised mechanisms that India has contributed to the SCO grouping that could enhance its economic agenda. Inspired by the WHO's Global Centre for Traditional Medicine in Gujarat, India has also initiated a SCO Working Group on Traditional Medicine. This has the potential for not only preserving the traditional knowledge of the member countries, but also of finding more cost-effective methods of treatment and cures for diseases common to these countries. All these initiatives give a greater voice to the nation for influencing the group’s agendas while also strengthening its ties to the other countries.

Conclusion

India’s participation in each of these institutions offers unique opportunities and challenges at the same time. Although India remains a significant member of each of these institutions but its position remains still complicated. Hence, it has become debatable that whether India is on an equal footing, particularly in relation to China’s membership in BRICS and SCO, and the US’s membership in QUAD. Nonetheless, India has a number of strategies to address this, the most important of which is the strengthening of its financial mechanisms and leveraging its technological capabilities mostly in emerging areas like semiconductor manufacturing, climate resilience, renewable energy etc. It is anticipated that New Delhi will eventually be able to synchronise these platforms with its own strategic objectives, if not immediately.

Endnotes

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