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BALANCE OF POWER IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: China's ambition for global dominance has been fueled by combining an aggressive foreign economic policy along with the huge influx of state-directed domestic investments in innovation. Chinese expansionist measures through BRI and the silk maritime route have led to influence the domestic politics and 'debt trap' of the countries they invest in. The Chinese ambition for global dominance is viewed as a threat by the USA which is looking up to forming multiple alliances to counter China. Indo-Pacific has largely been a dormant construct in the past; however, it has become a ground for threats and power plays among major global powers. Thus, it has put Beijing in a challenging position in fulfilling its great-power ambitions. India's asymmetric partnership with the USA opens varied facets of a multi-aligned position meanwhile keeping its national interest as its foremost priority. India's foreign policy has experienced a paradigm shift towards having its realist discourse in policy which is influenced by numerous factors. This study ought to shed light upon the challenges and perceptions formed in the geopolitical construct in the Indo-Pacific among various major and middle powers.

Index Terms - India's Foreign Policy, US-China Relations, US-India Relations, India-Australia Relations, Balance of Power

I. INTRODUCTION

Morgenthau has defined Balance of power as "stability in a system composed of several autonomous forces. Whenever the equilibrium is disturbed either by an outside force or by a change in one or the other elements composing the system, the system shows a tendency to re-establish either the original or a new equilibrium."¹ With rising of China, the equilibrium in the Indo-pacific is disturbed. China is a security threat to major powers like the USA, India, Japan, and Australia. These Autonomous forces act as a balancing mechanism against the establishment of a new equilibrium. New Delhi's risk of becoming undependable, rise through strategic multiple alignments. It Limits the effectiveness of countering China. Though India's proactive and pragmatic approach to global affairs may be conducive to the current global dynamic, its "strategic autonomy" based upon "National interest" might have to be evaluated in case of escalation of Chinese hostility against India in near future. QUAD's inherent security alliance might be one measure; However, India's foreign policy has always been opposed to the formation of any military alliance. Thus, QUAD's agenda is likely to expand its capability as the democracies of the Indo-Pacific to balance China's growing power. Post COVID-19 pandemic era has given rise to an anti-China outlook internationally which has been growing gradually due to the continued aggressive Chinese expansion on land and maritime territories. After the Galwan clash, New Delhi has been reviewing its "China Connect", and it moved to look for other sustainable and non-Chinese alliance frameworks. US has emerged as a major role player in leading the QUAD as one such framework. This marks the beginning of a new geostrategic as well as an "economic alliance" for free and Open Indo-Pacific. This paves the way for an alternative global security framework and realizing its "global supply network" and "quality infrastructure promotion" in the Indo-Pacific. Recent QUAD Summit held in

¹ Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006.

Japan, in May 2022 resulted in a “joint statement after the meeting highlighting the importance of the Quad as a “force for good,” with a positive agenda to make the Indo-Pacific region more resilient in the face of myriad challenges”.² US-India has signed an “Investment incentive Agreement” to continue to extend investment support in India. Moreover, India expressed its commitment to the ‘Indo-Pacific economic framework’.

In the present-day context, there is a risk of either a border conflict or war in the future with China. Aggressive Chinese foreign policy may result in India bandwagon with more like-minded countries to balance China. QUAD has emerged as one of the major security alliances that directly challenge Chinese expansion. US-China conflict in trade war and dominance in the south China sea has created a new cold war-like situation. India's foreign policy aims to promote multilateralism through restructuring of economic order for equitable sustainable development. Since its independence, India has never been subordinated to foreign hegemony, however, its proximity to the US will only be as far that it doesn't affect the national interest.

India's Geostrategic Autonomy: Issues and Challenges

The concept of strategic autonomy is the realist mutation of the traditional non-aligned movement which aims at strategic balance and independence in foreign policy and the decision-making process. “For decades after gaining independence in 1947, Indian foreign policy was guided by one overarching principle: non-alignment. Considered a “central component of Indian identity in global politics,” the doctrine counselled India against entanglement in the Cold War and alignment with either the United States or the Soviet Union, while seeking to position India as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.”³ India has always secured its strategic autonomy by balancing great power equations with diplomacy. However, the present Russia-Ukraine war has put India under criticism from the west to support Russia, a narrative built by the west. Recently External Affairs minister Dr S Jaishankar at GLOBSEC (2022) stated in his interview that “Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problem. He asserted that India is not under the obligation to accept the west's construct of it to join either the US axis or the China/Russia axis. This statement by India's external affairs minister on the global stage has exposed the hypocrisy of the West in imposing its narrative over the world. Though India may choose to endorse its adherence to its strategic autonomy, in past, we have experienced flexibility in policy as per changing geopolitical situations. During the India-China war (1962), India sought emergency military aid from the US. Later, in the India-Pakistan war (1971), India had to enter into a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with the USSR to ward off both the US and China in Kargil War (1999), India welcomed US intervention to back down Pakistan.

Some scholars in India have defined strategic autonomy as the “dependency control strategy” aimed at safeguarding and protecting its foreign policy and decision-making against American pressure. Many analysts have asserted that a closer partnership with the US will open a channel to pressure India on its core National interest. Doctor Wang Shida of the China Institute of Contemporary International relations has argued that India's Defence pacts with the US run “counter to India's long-standing tradition of strategic autonomy”. He further argues that these facts have eroded India's geostrategic autonomy and increased India's first vulnerability to the US in fields of Defence and national interest. Therefore, it can be asserted how significant India's geostrategic autonomy is for China. As long as India maintains its distance from the US it's good for China. However, Chinese conflict at borders tends to push India closer to the US. Thus, India has been distancing itself from the tug of war game between US and Russia/China. India tends to keep its policy of NAM alive in the form of geostrategic autonomy which can act as a guiding principle toward a fixed foreign policy in coming years.

Recently India got a waiver against CAATSA, from US Senate for purchasing the S-400 missile from Russia. Further, India has been purchasing discounted oil from Russia as well. However, US sanctions over Russia pushed her towards a closer embrace of China. The Russia-China tandem could significantly muddy India's geostrategic calculus. To maintain a balance of power and to undermine aggressors US legislation has exempted India and thereby sending a political signal to Beijing. China views QUAD as an eastward expansion of NATO and asserted that the current Russia Ukraine war is the result of this expansion. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has also stated that the creation of the QUAD grouping is a keen to Asian NATO. As India joins QUAD, China has got this preconceived notion that directly challenges India's geostrategic

² Rajagopalan, Rajeswari Pillai. Quad Summit Indicates Growing Strength. 26 May 2022. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/quad-summit-indicates-growing-strength/>

³ Smith, J. Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations. Texas National Security Review.2020. Retrieved from <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/strategic-autonomy-and-u-s-indian-relations/>

autonomy. However, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar has stated in his speech at the Munich security conference in May 2022 that “there are “interested parties” who advance such analogies and one should not slip into it, underlining that the four-nation grouping is a kind of 21st century way of responding to a more diversified and dispersed world.” In post COVID era it has become an essential aspect of India's foreign policy to maintain issue-based synergies with the US, Russia as well as China. Moreover, maintaining clarity and not succumbing to any sort of pressure or compromise which might affect its national interest in an international framework. It has become very critical for India to move towards self-Reliance in all fields of the economy and be prepared for any Legacy border issues with its neighbours without depending on other Nations. That is geostrategic autonomy in the true sense where it can form multinational bonding which can be beneficial to its partners equally. QUAD can be a potential forum to enhance its diplomatic policy framework where its strategic and tactical initiatives show its assertiveness globally.

Balance of Power in Indo-Pacific

Chinese expansion and projection of capabilities have a great impact on the Indian security circle. Recent Sino- Australian relations hit the Rock bottom after Canberra experienced a bullying element in Chinese foreign policy. China has been evolving its trade with Australia for the last two decades becoming the largest two-way trading partner. The reason for the collapse of Sino-Australian relations can be traced back to the free trade agreement signed between the two Nations. The huge influx of non-competing goods led to the imposition of anti-dumping duty by Australia. Besides this China's involvement in 5G Technology also led to fear of security vulnerabilities. As far as Japan is considered the two have been rival countries for ages where relations have never been normalized. The current Senkaku Island dispute in the East China Sea made it difficult to establish any kind of friendly relations with China. Therefore, the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific is centred around the Chinese rise and its security implication with the major power. The establishment of QUAD under these circumstances can act as a Structural Framework for the balance of power in Indo-Pacific.

The emergence of the great power equation in the Indo-Pacific has led to competition among the major powers to enhance their both internal and external capabilities. Internal capabilities are viewed in terms of a strong foreign policy framework whereas external refers to the relative enhancement of relative power through military capabilities, economic growth and forging of new alliances. With the anarchic nature of the international system where an Alliance is forged, a dynamic realist approach is necessary to safeguard Security. Great power politics in the Indo-Pacific has led India to adopt a realist approach to enhance its internal capabilities. There has been a shift in foreign policy since the new external affairs minister of India. There is gradual evolution towards a pragmatic foreign policy. New Delhi is showing its assertiveness and forging new alliances on a global level. The act of balancing the geopolitical narrative has never been more challenging than ever before. The recent Russia-Ukraine war and US sanctions on Russia made it pretty challenging to counter the Global narrative. The recent Sino- India border clash has been one impactful event in bilateral relations. The recent speech of Dr S Jaishankar at GLOBESEC 2022 cleared that India is equipped to manage China single-handedly and the West need not lecture India on how to handle its issues. New Delhi is aware of the Beijing stronghold on the Himalayan border where there is a strategic advantage from the perspective of logistics and air bases from both sides. However, India's modernization drive is reducing the gap of tactical advantage at Higher altitudes. Recently planned infrastructure finished before the expected dates which include rail network, Road, bridges, tunnels and air basis at Higher altitudes. India is prepared to handle China at Higher altitudes as much as in the Maritime domain.

Since the cold war, the US has never faced a more significant challenge such as rising of China. Trump administration's decisive step toward a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy was formed only a while ago. Trump's administration clearly understood the Chinese threat and has been expanding its security in the region to enhance its ability to ensure a balance of power in Washington's favour.

Kenneth Waltz developed the theory of structural realism, which sees anarchy as the key driver of conflict since, with no higher power, states must rely on self-help. He developed a theory of balance of power, arguing that states will automatically form balances of power against more-powerful states and that the main variation that will occur will be between bipolar (power concentrated in two great powers) or multipolar systems (power concentrated in three or more great powers), with the former more stable. Both Waltz and Morgenthau agree on the assumption that human nature is selfish and the international system is anarchic. Currently, it is witnessed that states are departing from the idea of rule-based order. Due to a lack of central governing authority states are competing for power and security. The US has dominated the world order for a long time; however, the absence of a central governing authority has given rise to China as a giant economic and military power. In Post COVID era, many regional powers have become global power like China and India. Thus, multipolarity in the world order has given the prospect of becoming major power among various nations.

Great power ambition has given rise to conflict and assertion of dominance in various fields. The competition among various states is a zero-sum game where states seek to take advantage of any possible means to achieve relative gains. Since states fail to cooperate in the realist self-help system, survival depends on the struggle for power. In the Indo-Pacific, we are witnessing a struggle for power among nations to assert dominance. This dominance is centred around China. China is creating artificial islands for its military bases and acquiring ports throughout Indo-Pacific to secure its trade route. However, the strategy of securing its trade route is accompanied by strategic dominance in the Indo-Pacific. It has established military build-ups centred around India as part of the “String of Pearls” policy and giving impetus to its ambitious “Belt and Road” initiative. “China’s growing assertiveness is pushing more nations to be willing to be part of this initiative. While some have speculated that the Quad initiative will eventually evolve into a NATO- esque treaty organization, such speculation is premature. The end state of the grouping remains very much open to conjecture.”⁴ The implication of Balance of Power is that the interpretation of China’s rise cannot be attributed to a single theory but rather require other paradigms to capture its analytics for future discourse. China’s unique culture, civilization, and historical backdrop make it susceptible to a diverse range of literature that has to be explored that must include Chinese sources.

Sino-Russian factor in the geostrategic calculus of India and QUAD

“India’s approach is linked with its perception of strengthening Asian security, building comprehensive national power (CNP), and promoting an architecture of maritime resilience. A Trans-Himalayan Quad led by China could be securitized or militarized with much less ideological constraint compared to the conflicting take of the Quad powers themselves.”⁵ India’s geopolitical dynamics with Russia, China and the US have witnessed a paradigm shift from how it was during the larger part of the 20th century. The Sino-Russian partnership has taken a significant turn, one which would be difficult to reverse. Russian-Ukraine war and the sanctions by the US have brought China-Russia relations to close proximity. This has endangered the traditionally friendly views about Russia and also put India under a set of deep assumptions about its engagement with great powers. Current geopolitics after covid and the Russia-Ukraine war is on the cusp of the New Era, and India is deeply impacted by it. India’s safety and security will heavily depend on the type of choice it will make in this new era. After the end of the cold war, the formation of the Russian Federation led to “the emergence of “ numerous confidence-building measures”, especially on the borders, as well as the revival of economic political technological and military operations.”⁶ Both Moscow and Beijing on the shared sphere of influence in Central Eurasia through SCO are lowering their dependencies on the Western economy by cooperating from energy transport corridor and pipelines to outer space. Russia has a sparsely populated area with a vast wealth of natural resources, and China has the largest population on earth, with huge demand for resources. Xi and Putin are on a convergent course, where the factor binding the two is a shared objective to undermine American global dominance. At the regional level, both powers are asserting themselves to oust the NATO influence out of Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Both countries’ isolated events of reinforcing a territorial grab in Ukraine and the South China Sea, growing the aspiration for regional hegemony and at the same time hastening the decline of the unipolar global order. Pakistan has been largely turned into a Chinese client state and Russia's new defence equipment customer. Moreover, the US sanctions have pushed Iran into laps of Chinese economic and political support. Afghanistan seems to be headed in the same direction after the Taliban Regime took over. Nepal’s political instability and Myanmar’s democratic backslide have been impacted by the prevailing geopolitical tectonics created by China. The recent Sri Lankan economic crisis has led to complete political chaos. Sri Lanka’s obsession with the Chinese fund has led to its being held under the Chinese debt trap. India’s relations with China follow a distinct path as compared to Russia. Friendly relations with Russia date back to the Soviet Union times. However, its relations with China have been a rollercoaster ride. Initially, both nations’ relations were propelled by an anti-imperialistic outlook and civilizational synergy. However, China’s fought a war with India in 1965 and occupied Indian territories, later extending its territorial claims into Indian territories resulting in many border clashes. This resulted in the deterioration of India-China relations. China’s rise and its economic growth coupled with its expansionist outlook have led India to take a stringent stance by forming groupings to counter China’s expansionist design. In current geopolitical dynamics, there is little or no scope for India to align with China. China has always

⁴ Soumyadeep, Wilson. The Coming of Quad and the Balance of Power in the Indo- Pacific. Journal Of Indo-Pacific Affairs Winter. 2021.

⁵ Jagannath Panda, “The Trans-Himalayan ‘Quad,’ Beijing’s Territorialism, and India,” The Jamestown Foundation, November 12, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-trans-himalayan-quad-beijings-territorialism-and-india/>

⁶ Anand V. Sino Russian axis configures India’s geostrategic calculus. Sunday guardian live. 7 August 2021

been in view of enhancing its dominance through the BRI project, of which China wanted India to be part of it. However, India never accepted to be part of the BRI initiative as this would be devastating for the Indian economy as India is aware that China will begin dumping goods in the Indian market thus destroying many local industries. China's inherent authoritarian political system doesn't symmetrically coincide with the democratic norms. Thus, India has partnered with like-minded countries that share the same democratic and philosophical norms. QUAD is the "Embryonic manifestation" of such a group of nations.

In the 21st century, many decolonized worlds have chartered their own economic success stories, mostly in Asia keeping themselves aloof from the pressure of bipolar struggle during the cold war and focusing on nation-building. India is one of them. As far as China is considered, short-term measures through an authoritarian system proved beneficial in boosting and sustaining their economy and infrastructural base. However, China has crossed and overstretched its regional aspirational boundaries to Indo-Pacific. Thus, it has created a hostile environment against itself. The US is aware of the Chinese situation in the Indo-Pacific. Various nations are becoming victims of China's predatory policy. Thus, the US has banded itself with countries with similar interests. COVID pandemic and its origin have also created discontent worldwide against China. Before Russia attacked Ukraine, there was some room for it in the QUAD to stand against China as per some analysts. Thus, the Russia-Ukraine war has proved to be beneficial for China to assess the consequences if it attacked Taiwan. This major geopolitical event has put Beijing to reevaluate its strategy if it's going to attack Taiwan in the future. In a hypothetical scenario, if China attempts to attack Taiwan, it would be a blow to the US presence in Indo-Pacific and its hegemony worldwide. US direct non-intervention in the Ukraine war has also put questions on its current administration and its superpower ability. This is one of the major reasons why the US is heavily invested in diversifying QUAD to "QUAD plus" to include other countries as members like Vietnam, Indonesia, and other East Asian countries. New Delhi is aware of the fact that if a large-scale war is declared in the Indo-Pacific wherein all major powers are involved then it would be fighting a three-front war with China- one front with Pakistan, one with China on the mainland, and the other in the Indo-Pacific. However, the probability of India engaging itself in multiple front wars is likely to become reality. Though India is militarily capable, still would try to aloof itself from the China-Taiwan issue militarily. QUAD can act as a balancing mechanism to curb Chinese adventurism in Indo-Pacific. The core objectives of the QUAD will be to secure a rules-based global order, a liberal trading system, and freedom of navigation. It will also be an alternative debt financing for nations in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

India's potential has been maximized by multi-alignment rather than being under isolation or alliance. Proactive diplomacy and asserting its idea in multiple forums gained India an outlook of emerging global power. India's foreign policy outlook is currently governed by adjusting to the fast-changing balance of power and its ability to correlate with those around us. A 'compete and cooperate' strategy has enabled us to withstand the dominance of any country in the region while at the same time working alongside all major powers. In recent years, there has been an intensified cooperation with middle power countries like the UK, EU, Japan, and ASEAN countries to achieve common goals. The current challenge in India's foreign policy is maintaining a high degree of strategic relationship with multilateral institutions and multiple partners at the same time. Russia's reasserting bipolar status and aggression of China have to be tactfully balanced through various multilateral forums. Japan, India, and Australia can lead infrastructure initiatives with the help of the USA and focus more on establishing a regional dialogue framework and coordination with ASEAN members on a regional level.

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