

# Policy

## WATCH

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# India's Place in the World

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Summit



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**Reinvigorating India's 'Act East' Policy in an age of renewed power politics**

*by Chietigj Bajpae*

**Zone balancing: India and the Quad's new strategic logic**

*by Arzan Tarapore*

**Brookings Foreign Policy briefing : China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe**

*by Célia Belin, James Goldgeier, Tanvi Madan, and Angela Stent*



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RAJIV GANDHI  
INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

## Editorial

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The Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS) works on five themes:

1. Constitutional Values and Democratic Institutions
2. Growth with Employment
3. Governance and Development
4. Environment, Natural Resources and Sustainability
5. India's Place in the World.

This issue of Policy Watch is on the theme India's Place in the World. This issue is a thematic digest of articles, all published elsewhere, and has been put together by **RGICS Senior Visiting Fellow, Prof Somnath Ghosh**, who did his doctoral work at the Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of international Studies.

This issue revisits some of the topics we dealt with in the May 2022 issue exactly a year ago in the context of multilateral groupings such as the G-20 and the QUAD. This perspective is important in the time of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the tensions on the India-China border and the ongoing Presidency of India in the G-20.

The first article is titled Reinvigorating India's 'Act East' Policy in an age of renewed power politics by [Chietigj Bajpaae](#). The year 2022 marked three decades of India's 'Look East' Policy (renamed the 'Act East' Policy in 2014). The policy emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War amid efforts by New Delhi to revive the importance of Southeast Asia (and later East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region) in India's foreign policy agenda. While the policy has proven to be resilient as a core component of India's foreign policy agenda, looking ahead it faces three key challenges: domestically, India's reform agenda failing to match the country's foreign policy aspirations; regionally, the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' coming under growing scrutiny; and globally, an international order in flux amid a more pronounced rivalry between the United States and China (which has been exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Addressing these issues will be key to maintaining the relevance of India's 'Act East' Policy as it enters its next phase.

The Prime Minister's recent visit to Australia was originally to attend the QUAD meeting which got cancelled. Still the QUAD is an important foreign policy initiative and the second article Zone balancing: India and the Quad's new strategic logic by [Arzan Tarapore](#). This article advances that concept and uses it to explain India's post-2020 strategic adjustment, and especially its warmer embrace of the Quad—the minilateral grouping comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Zone balancing effectively explains the Quad's recently-clarified strategic logic, and predicts some of its limitations. Tarapore writes that when a state faces a rising great power rival, it has a range of balancing options from which to choose. But a balancing state may consider many of the most common options to be either too costly or unduly provocative. Thus India, for example, considered 2020 to be a strategic watershed—with a clearly more aggressive China on the border, and a clearly more disorderly international system after the COVID pandemic—but has undertaken only modest military balancing. What alternative options do such erstwhile balancers have?

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This article addresses both those theoretical and empirical puzzles, by introducing the novel concept of 'zone balancing' as another option in a balancing state's repertoire. Zone balancing seeks to shape the international field of competition in which the balancer and rival operate—specifically, to build the capacity and resilience of third-party states, to shrink the rival's ability to coerce them.

The Russia-Ukraine war has generated or accelerated negative trends in China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe. India, as the President of the G-20 has had to play a mediating role in such a situation. The third article, which is a Brookings Foreign Policy Briefing by Célia Belin, James Goldgeier, Tanvi Madan, and Angela Stent on China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe, throws some light on what the context is. It asserts that by Fall 2022, the growing limitations in China's relationships with all three - Russia, India, and Europe were evident.

Russia is now a less reliable partner given the uncertainties over the longevity of President Vladimir Putin's regime; China's rhetorical support of Moscow's justifications for its brutal invasion of Ukraine has heightened European concerns about Chinese influence on the continent; and India's attempts to balance its ties with Russia and the West have not created new openings for Beijing. What options are open for India under such a complex scenario?

We hope the readers find this digest of articles useful and interesting. We welcome your feedback.

**Vijay Mahajan**  
**Director, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies**



Source: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/quad-plus.jpg>

# 1 Reinvigorating India's 'Act East' Policy in an age of renewed power politics

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*Chietigj Bajpae*<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Abstract

The year 2022 marks three decades of India's 'Look East' Policy (renamed the 'Act East' Policy in 2014). The policy emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War amid efforts by New Delhi to revive the importance of Southeast Asia (and later East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region) in India's foreign policy agenda. While the policy has proven to be resilient as a core component of India's foreign policy agenda, looking ahead it faces three key challenges: domestically, India's reform agenda failing to match the country's foreign policy aspirations; regionally, the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' coming under growing scrutiny; and globally, an international order in flux amid a more pronounced rivalry between the United States and China (which has been exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Addressing these issues will be key to maintaining the relevance of India's 'Act East' Policy as it enters its next phase.

## 1.2 Introduction

The year 2022 marks three decades of India's 'Look East' Policy (renamed the 'Act East' Policy in 2014). The policy emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War amid New Delhi's efforts to revive the importance of Southeast Asia (and later East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific) in India's foreign policy agenda. This entailed more institutionalised and regular regional interactions aimed at strengthening economic integration, strategic cooperation, and people-to-people/ cultural engagement.

A key component of the policy is the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and both sides commemorated 2022 as the 'ASEAN India Year of Friendship'. Officially, the 'Act East' Policy (AEP) remains robust and 'ASEAN centrality' remains a core pillar of the policy with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi noting that, 'ASEAN's central role is synced to India's Act East Policy' (India Blooms, 2021).

However, the reality is more nuanced than official statements suggest. First, there are signs that India is gradually transcending ASEAN in its eastward engagement. This comes as the regional architecture is undergoing transition as established, open and inclusive regional initiatives (most notably those embedded within the ASEAN framework) are being challenged by newer, exclusive, and functionally driven initiatives. These range from the Quad to the Supply-Chain Resilience Initiative and AUKUS (Australia-UK-USA) security pact.

At the same time, India's AEP is being crowded out by initiatives by the region's other major powers (most notably China). On a more fundamental level, the strategic rationale undergirding the origins of the 'Look East' Policy (LEP) is being called into question.

The LEP was very much a product of its time, reflecting a quest for newfound interlinkages in the international system following the removal of structural constraints imposed by the Cold War divide. But the renewed polarisation of the international system following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and emergence of a long term strategic rivalry between the United States and China will put growing pressure on the LEP/AEP. As the international system underpinning the origins of the LEP is in flux, a new organising principle must be found to justify India's eastward engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Chietigj Bajpae (2023) Reinvigorating India's 'Act East' Policy in an age of renewed power politics, *The Pacific Review*, 36:3, 631-661, DOI: [10.1080/09512748.2022.2110609](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2110609)

After providing a brief overview on the origins and evolution of India's LEP/AEP, this paper will establish that there has been substance undergirding the rhetoric of the policy. Illustrating with the example of India's maritime diplomacy, the paper will demonstrate that New Delhi's eastward engagement has evolved, matured, and deepened during the post-Cold War period.

While India may not be the most significant power in the region, when judged on its own merits, India's regional engagement has gained substance and momentum over the course of the LEP/AEP. The paper will then assess how the policy can remain relevant as it enters its fourth decade (or 'phase') while navigating three key challenges (Bajpae, 2017):

India's domestic reform momentum failing to match the country's global aspirations; the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' coming under growing pressure; and an international order that is in flux underpinned by the rise of China and a more pronounced rivalry between the world's major powers.

### 1.3 Tracing the origins and evolution of the LEP



Source: [https://resize.indiatvnews.com/en/resize/oldbucket/1200\\_-/mainnational/India-s-Look-E40100.jpg](https://resize.indiatvnews.com/en/resize/oldbucket/1200_-/mainnational/India-s-Look-E40100.jpg)

India launched its 'Look East' Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s as part of a concerted effort to revive the importance of Southeast Asia in the country's foreign policy agenda. The policy sought to complement the country's longstanding historical, cultural and ideological linkages with the region with engagement in more tangible areas of economic interdependence, and political and security cooperation. This was reflected in a speech by then Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha in 2003:

*In the past, India's engagement with much of Asia, including Southeast and East Asia, was built on an idealistic conception of Asian brotherhood, based on shared experiences of colonialism and of cultural ties. The rhythm of the region today is determined, however, as much by trade, investment and production as by history and culture. This is what motivates our decade old 'Look East' policy. (Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), 2003)*

The conclusion of India's sectoral dialogue status with ASEAN in 1992 is often cited as the origin point of the policy (although there is evidence that the groundwork for the LEP was laid a decade earlier under the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1984–89) (Bajpae, 2022a, p. 19)). New Delhi's relations with Southeast Asia became further institutionalised when India became a full dialogue partner in 1996 with participation in the ASEAN ministerial meeting and Post- Ministerial Conference (MEA, 1996, pp. 18, 119; 1997, pp. 19, 98).

India then became a summit-level dialogue partner (on par with China, Japan, and South Korea) in 2002. The 'ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity', signed at the third ASEAN-India Summit in 2004, created a formal blueprint for India's engagement with the region (MEA, 2005, p. 125).

This was operationalized during the annual Delhi Dialogue and the '2020 ASEAN-India Vision Document' that outlined a roadmap for cooperation. India-ASEAN ties were upgraded to a 'strategic partnership' in 2012 (MEA, 2013, p. 116). A separate Indian Mission to ASEAN with a dedicated ambassador was established in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2015 (MEA, 2015a). The growing breadth and depth of India's interactions with Southeast Asia prompted India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to declare that 'India is as much a Southeast Asian nation as a South Asian nation' (MEA, 2012, p. ii).

The LEP itself was first enunciated in a speech by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao during a visit to Singapore in 1994 when he called for 'forging a new relationship' with the region (Bajpae, 2022a, p. 19; Rao, 1994). This came amid a broader reorientation of India's foreign policy with a greater emphasis on its economic dimensions, which came in the aftermath of the country suffering a foreign exchange crisis in July 1991 (MEA, 1992, pp. 65–67; 1995, pp. 115–17).<sup>2</sup> As well as compelling New Delhi to accelerate the country's economic liberalisation, there was also recognition that India needed to reorient its external economic interactions as the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the loss of key markets and preferential barter arrangements (Gupta, 1995, pp. 73, 210, 211). While rapprochement with the United States was key to this reorientation, East Asia's dynamic 'tiger' and 'tiger cub' economies were also important to its externally oriented economic diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

This also came amid the growing regionalization of global trade fuelled by the proliferation of preferential trade agreements (e.g. NAFTA, European Common Market) that discriminated against outsiders through tariff and non-tariff barriers. In this context, India sought to join initiatives in East Asia in order to ensure that it was not being excluded from the wave of regional economic integration sweeping the globe while transcending the stagnant growth of South Asia (Chanda & Gopalan, 2008, p. 9). The culmination of these efforts was the conclusion of the ASEAN-India Regional Trade and Investment Area in 2015 (that covered trade in goods, services and cross-border investments) (Chanda & Gopalan, 2008, pp. 16–20).



Source: [https://img.freepik.com/free-vector/asean-map-infographic\\_23-2148713786.jpg](https://img.freepik.com/free-vector/asean-map-infographic_23-2148713786.jpg)

<sup>2</sup> India's economic crisis was triggered by short-term loans that became due for repayment and oil price shocks prompted by the first Gulf War, which undermined the country's balance of payments position and compelled India to seek an emergency bailout package from the International Monetary Fund.

<sup>3</sup> The 'tiger' economies refer to Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, which was followed by the 'tiger cub' economies of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Despite being launched by Rao's government, the LEP became institutionalized in the country's foreign policy agenda, which ensured a degree of policy continuity across various administrations.<sup>4</sup> Externally, India's LEP was accompanied by a concomitant 'Look West' Policy by several countries in Southeast Asia (Rao, 1996, p. 27). Notably, Singapore played a prominent role in facilitating India's renewed engagement with Southeast Asia. Indian leaders have acknowledged this, with Prime Minister Rao referring to Singapore as India's 'gateway' to ASEAN and Prime Minister Modi referring to Singapore as India's 'springboard to ASEAN' (Datta-Ray, 1994; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2018). Given Singapore's prominent role in ushering India into the ASEAN-plus framework, it is fitting that the city-state reassumed the rotating ASEAN country coordinator role for India as New Delhi marked three decades of its LEP.

Moreover, the expansion of ASEAN over the 1995–99 period, with the inclusion of the CMLV states (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam) deepened India's interaction with ASEAN by bringing the entire Southeast Asian region within ASEAN's membership (with the exception of Timor Leste that holds observer status within ASEAN). India's geographic proximity to Indochina and historically close relations with several states within the sub-region was a further catalyst for cementing the India-ASEAN relationship.

As Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee noted in 2001: 'even as we looked east, ASEAN moved west. The admission of new countries brought ASEAN literally to India's doors' (Vajpayee, 2001). Notably, Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1995 turned India's longstanding relationship with the country from a source of mistrust in the India-ASEAN relationship—following Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea (Cambodia) in 1978 and New Delhi's recognition the Hanoi-installed Heng Samrin regime in 1980—to a source of strength and means to bridge the gap with ASEAN (Yahya, 2003, p. 91). Additionally, Myanmar's admission to ASEAN in 1997 gave India a contiguous land border with the regional

#### 1.4 Is the 'Look East'/'Act East' Policy real?



Source: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-east-asia-finance-officials-look-for-easier-access-240-bln-liquidity-fund-2023-03-30/>

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<sup>4</sup> At a bureaucratic level, Southeast Asia's increased importance in India's foreign policy priorities was reflected in relations with ASEAN being elevated from the Secretary (East) to Foreign Secretary level in 1992 and the Economic Cell of the Ministry of External Affairs identifying ASEAN as one of its 'thrust regions' (Sridharan, 1993, p. 141).



Despite these achievements, there have been frequent allegations that the rhetoric of the LEP does not match the reality of India's eastward engagement. This includes claims that the 'Look East' Policy is a 'sound byte' (Tripathi, 2012, p. 141); with 'scepticism about Delhi's ability to convert words into deeds' in its approach towards East Asia (Mohan, 2014); that the 'Look East policy had been less pronounced than its rhetorical position suggests' (Gordon, pp. 144, 148); and that the renamed 'Act East' Policy is 'a mere effort at rebranding' amid claims that 'the switch from "Look East" to "Act East" has "largely been rhetorical" rather than marking a qualitative improvement in India's regional engagement' (Jacob, 2016, p. 87; Yadav, 2016, p. 52).

To be sure, when benchmarked against other major powers in the region, such as China, Japan and South Korea, India is still regarded as a relatively peripheral player. In terms of economic engagement, India-ASEAN trade stood at approximately \$64 billion in 2020, which was dwarfed by ASEAN's trade with China, Japan and South Korea at approximately \$503 billion, \$195 billion and \$153 billion, respectively (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021, p. 58). While this can be partially attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic with India's trade with ASEAN dropping from \$77 billion in 2019, this does not negate the fact that other major Asian powers have a significant lead over India on the economic front (Ibid.).

This is reaffirmed by the results of the annual 'State of Southeast Asia' survey report, which shows that India ranks behind other major powers (including the United States, China, Japan and the EU) on both hard and soft power indicators in the perception of Southeast Asian states (Seah, 2022). Moreover, strains in India's relations with some countries in the Middle East over alleged anti-Muslim rhetoric emanating from the ruling Hindu-nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) demonstrates the potential for India's domestic politics to spill over into the foreign policy domain (Ganguly & Blarel, 2022). Given that Southeast Asia is home to several countries with large Muslim populations (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei), similar strains may arise in India's eastward engagement (although ASEAN's commitment to non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states deters against this unless there is a major outbreak of religious unrest in India).<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, despite these deficiencies when judged on its own merits, New Delhi's regional engagement has gained substance and momentum over the course of the LEP. In a speech in 2018, Modi noted that Southeast Asia stands out as a priority area of India's external engagement, stating that, 'for India, no region now receives as much attention as this [Southeast Asia]' (IISS, 2018). While India's trade with Southeast Asia remains low relative to other major powers, in absolute terms India-ASEAN trade has undergone significant growth from \$2.9 billion in 1993 to \$80 billion in 2018 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020; Koty, 2021).

More significantly, from being viewed as a distant and disconnected power in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, India has come to be seen as an integral participant in the regional architecture during the post-Cold War period. Following a short-lived effort to build an Asian community of nations in the 1950s, benign neglect took over in India's eastward engagement in the 1960s and 1970s as New Delhi became preoccupied with developments in its own neighbourhood (particularly after the 1962 war with China).

The India-ASEAN relationship underwent rapid deterioration in the late 1970s and 1980s as they were on opposite sides of the Cold War divide. This was exacerbated by New Delhi's support for Vietnam, and concerns over an alleged India-Soviet-Vietnam axis and India's naval modernisation efforts (see below). However, following the launch of the LEP in the early 1990s, the erstwhile perception of India as a threat to regional stability not only dissipated but was instead replaced by a view of the country as a benign and stabilising force in the region.

In this context, while other major powers have acquired a more institutionalised and economically integrated relationship with Southeast Asia, India has acquired greater political and strategic alignment with Southeast Asia. This comes as the country has been perceived in more benign terms by ASEAN member states when compared to other regional powers (most notably China).

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<sup>5</sup> The spill-over of India's domestic politics into the country's eastward engagement is not a new phenomenon as noted by New Delhi's defence of its Diaspora populations in Malaysia and Fiji (Singh, 2014; Thakur, 1985).



Source: [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/styles/immersive\\_image\\_3\\_2\\_desktop\\_2x/public/image/2017/03/ASEAN-Flags-1280.jpg.webp](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/styles/immersive_image_3_2_desktop_2x/public/image/2017/03/ASEAN-Flags-1280.jpg.webp)

While India has been successful at socialising into regional norms of interaction and regional confidence-building mechanisms, a latent suspicion remains about China's role the regional architecture (Thayer, 2011, p. 328).

A key example of this perceptual shift is India's maritime engagement with the region. In the decade preceding the launch of the LEP, ASEAN member states voiced concerns about India's military modernisation efforts, with New Delhi's attempts to enhance its long-range naval, air and ballistic missile capabilities raising anxiety among some countries in the region, particularly when seen in the context of India's close links with the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Naidu, 1991; Tellis, 1987).<sup>6</sup>

Several countries expressed concerns about Indian ambitions to build-up its naval capability on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which fuelled rhetoric of India maintaining a 'super and unsinkable aircraft carrier, only 80 miles west of the Straits of Malacca' that was 'a springboard to project Indian naval power into the Malacca Straits and even into the South China Sea' (Munro, 1991).<sup>7</sup>

These concerns would be alleviated over the course of the LEP as India demonstrated its status as a responsible power, which included promoting greater transparency about its military modernisation efforts and reaffirming the absence of any territorial ambitions in the region (Bajpae, 2019). India's admission to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 was a significant milestone as this was the first time India joined a multilateral security forum given its longstanding inclination for nonalignment and aversion to security alliances (Naidu, 2000).

India's accession to ASEAN norms of interaction, including the 'Treaty of Amity and Cooperation' in 2003, also reaffirmed the country's peaceful ambitions, as well as being a precondition for India's subsequent admission as a founding member of the East Asia Summit in 2005.

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of some of the alarmist reporting of India's naval ambitions, see: Michael Richardson, 'East Asia and Western Pacific Basin Fear an Ascendant India', *International Herald Tribune*, October 4, 1989; 'Southeast Asian Countries Should Watch Indian Military Development', *Indonesia Times*, August 16, 1989; Ross H. Munro, 'Super Power Rising: Propelled by an Arms Buildup, India Asserts its Place on the World Stage', *Time*, April 3, 1989, pp. 9, 28.

<sup>7</sup> The growing apprehension about India's expanding naval capabilities was fuelled by the establishment of the FORTAN (Fortress Andaman and Nicobar) joint-services base at Port Blair in 1985.

India's interaction with the ASEAN-centric regional architecture also had a 'socializing effect' on the country in terms of reconstituting its interests, identity and foreign policy behaviour (Acharya, 2013). Reflecting this, then Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar noted in a 2017 speech the 'critical role' that ASEAN 'played in shaping the thought processes of Indian decision-makers' during the early stages of the LEP, with ASEAN serving as 'a forum for India to engage the world more expansively, test ideas, exchange views and seek feedback' (MEA, 2017c). He added that:

At its most basic level, the relationship with ASEAN has contributed to changing the Indian mindset... Exposures and interactions have through osmosis raised new expectations and ambitions. Some of these are today very apparent in our policy activities and debates. (Ibid.)

In the maritime domain, this was accompanied by a shared interest in maintaining the free flow of maritime trade and transport, the need for a joint approach in addressing humanitarian disasters, and mutual concerns in combatting the scourge of maritime piracy, illicit trafficking, and the latent threat of maritime terrorism. India's stepped up maritime diplomacy also manifested in the form of joint military training, exercises and coordinated patrols. In 2000, the Indian Navy conducted its first naval exercises in the South China Sea. Eight ASEAN member states also participate in the biennial Milan naval meetings that India has hosted since in 1995 while India was also a founding member of the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Security Forum in 2012 (MEA, 2018a, p. iii; Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR) operations emerged as a catalyst for India to expand its maritime presence in Southeast Asia, as noted by its assistance following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 when over 30 Indian Navy vessels were deployed in five operations, including in Indonesia and Thailand (2019, pp. 7, 71; MEA, 2009, pp. 10–11; Sakhuja, 2005). Joint naval cooperation with non-littoral states also served to reaffirm the Indian Navy's presence in the region. For instance, the Indian Navy escorted US naval vessels transiting the Strait of Malacca as part of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in 2002 (Asia-Pacific Defence Forum, 2002–3).



Source: <https://images.livemint.com/rf/Image-621x414/LiveMint/Period2/2017/06/14/Photos/Opinion/ins-ka5D-621x414@LiveMint.JPG>

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Amid these developments, the Indian government and strategic community became more vocal in acknowledging India's expanded maritime role in the region (Singh, 2018). As early as 2000, then Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes declared that, as India had 'high stakes in the uninterrupted flow of commercial shipping, the Indian Navy has an interest in the ocean space extending from the north of the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea' (Aneja, 2000).

This was accompanied by claims that the LEP had 'acquired a distinct naval dimension' (Mohan, 2011); that the South China Sea is 'now an integral part of India's security perimeter' (Mohan, 2012); 'crucial to our [India's] foreign trade, energy and national security interests' (MEA, 2011); and that while 'in geographical terms India is located outside the South China Sea, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms India now increasingly operates inside the South China Sea' (Scott, 2013, p. 51). This also became evident at the doctrinal level when India's maritime strategy proclaimed the 'arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest' for the Indian Navy (Ministry of Defence & Government of India, 2004, p. 56). The South China Sea also acquired significance as a 'maritime gateway' between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific (Chaturvedy, 2015, p. 373).

Emphasis on the maritime domain gained newfound importance under the Modi government when it unveiled the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative in 2015 as a means of strengthening maritime connectivity and developing the 'Blue Economy' (MEA, 2018b, 2019, p. 88; Parliamentary Question, 2019).<sup>8</sup>

This initiative was subsequently expanded eastwards to include the Western Pacific, with ASEAN 'at the centre of this maritime space' (MEA, 2021, p. 148). Prime Minister Modi also announced the establishment of the India Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) during the East Asia Summit meeting in 2019, which aims to 'create a safe, secure, stable, prosperous and sustainable maritime domain' (MEA, 2020a, pp. 17, 217).

Contrasting China and India's relations with ASEAN in the maritime domain, India maintains a more cooperative partnership with ASEAN while there is greater acrimony in the ASEAN-China relationship. This is reflected in China's expansive 'nine-dash line' maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea and tensions over water diversion projects in the Mekong River Delta. This contrasts with the absence of any such disputes between India and Southeast Asian states.

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<sup>8</sup> The 'Blue economy' refers to the development of fishing, seabed mining, offshore oil and gas exploration, environmental protection, maritime trade and tourism and the development of port infrastructure.

Moreover, despite not being a party to the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, New Delhi has become more vocal in calls for maintaining the freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in accordance with the principles of international law; provided moral and material support for specific claimant states; and forged growing alignment and coordination with the United States and other major powers in challenging China's assertive regional behavior (MEA, [2014b](#), [2014c](#), [2015b](#); Miglani, [2014](#); Pant, [2018](#)).

Illustrating this, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 Modi noted the need for 'a common rules-based order for the region' that 'must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons' and 'believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength' (IISS, [2018](#)). Without mentioning China by name, Modi implicitly called out Beijing's aggressive behaviour:

These rules and norms should be based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few. This must be based on faith in dialogue, and not dependence on force. It also means that when nations make international commitments, they must uphold them. (Ibid.)

New Delhi has also sought to offer an example to the region of how to peacefully resolve such disputes: In 2015, during the East Asia Summit meeting, Modi noted that: 'India and Bangladesh recently settled their maritime boundary using the mechanism of UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea]. India hopes that all parties to the disputes in the South China Sea will abide by the Declaration on the Conduct on South China Sea and the guideline on the implementation' (Parliamentary Question, 2015).

This statement came in the aftermath of the Philippines' decision to refer its maritime territorial dispute with China to the arbitration tribunal of UNCLOS in 2013. By demonstrating the ability to resolve disputes with neighbouring states peacefully and on mutually acceptable terms, India sought to contrast its actions with that of China by projecting an image of itself as a responsible maritime power.



Source: [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/elementor/thumbs/ASEANEastAsiaSummitweb\\_c516d4ab0d9253128b592336ea48e68e-pb9u2zm5ujqp22fw5qw66l2mf3ywaddzjbi2zhu04o.jpg](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/elementor/thumbs/ASEANEastAsiaSummitweb_c516d4ab0d9253128b592336ea48e68e-pb9u2zm5ujqp22fw5qw66l2mf3ywaddzjbi2zhu04o.jpg)

As such, there is substance undergirding the rhetoric of the LEP. As illustrated by the example of India's maritime diplomacy, New Delhi's eastward engagement has evolved, matured, and deepened over the course of the policy. While it may not be the most significant major power in the region, when judged on its own merits, India's regional engagement has gained substance and momentum over the course of the LEP. Moreover, while India may not be a principal power in the region, it is firmly positioned in the region with its presence and participation granting credibility and legitimacy to the regional architecture.

## 1.5 Pressures on 'Looking East'

Notwithstanding these achievements, India's eastward engagement faces several pressure points. These emanate from three sources: domestically, as India's reform agenda fails to match the country's global aspirations; regionally, as the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' comes under growing pressure; and globally, as the international order is in flux.

### 1.5.1 Sustaining India's reform momentum

The LEP is contingent on India's domestic reform agenda, which will dictate the pace of its regional integration. While this is recognised by the Indian establishment—the MEA has noted that 'domestic transformation has been made integral to India's foreign policy strategy'—economic reform has always been the weakest link of New Delhi's external engagement (MEA, [2019](#), p. 7). This has been a recurring challenge over the course of the LEP as regional powers have questioned India's ability to sustain its growth and reform momentum. As former Indian Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit notes in his memoirs, during the early years of the policy ASEAN chose to engage India 'gradually and on an experimental basis' in order to assess India's commitment to economic liberalisation (Dixit, [1996](#), p. 266). This prompted the decision by ASEAN to grant India sectoral rather than full dialogue partner status in 1992.

Undergirding this was a perception that while India had implemented first generation reforms—that reduced import duties, removed export restrictions and permitted currency convertibility—the second wave of economic liberalisation—focussed on addressing structural issues, including infrastructure deficiencies and a difficult regulatory climate with respect to such issues as land acquisition, labour market deregulation, and the disinvestment (privatisation) of public-sector undertakings (state-owned enterprises)—remained slow-moving (Debroy, [2008](#), p. 6). A related concern was if India's economic liberalisation was losing momentum following a string of short-lived and unstable governments in New Delhi in the mid-1990s.

India's status in the region suffered a further blow during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997–99, which slowed the country's economic engagement with the region. This came as the devaluation of several regional currencies plagued by the contagion effect of foreign capital outflows undermined the competitiveness of Indian exports to Southeast Asia (MEA, [2000](#), p. 15; [2001](#), p. 14). The fact that India had been largely shielded from the crisis due to restrictions on capital account convertibility also demonstrated that its economy remained relatively detached from regional supply chains and transnational production networks.



Source: [https://cdn.slidesharecdn.com/ss\\_thumbnails/afc-ppt-160330050124-thumbnail.jpg?width=640&height=640&fit=bounds](https://cdn.slidesharecdn.com/ss_thumbnails/afc-ppt-160330050124-thumbnail.jpg?width=640&height=640&fit=bounds)

The Asian financial crisis had a lasting impact on the LEP (Meenakshi, [2009](#), p. 33). In its aftermath there was a growing emphasis on strengthening regional economic integration, which led to the emergence of new initiatives from which India was excluded, such as the ASEAN + 3 in 1997 and Chiang Mai Initiative currency swap agreement in 1999.

In this context, the regional architecture came to be regarded as a set of concentric circles with ASEAN at the centre; China, Japan and South Korea forming part of the inner circle or primary regional partners of ASEAN, while India was seen as part of the outer circle or a second tier country in the regional architecture.

Despite the government projecting a more investor-friendly image since India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s, the country's historically protectionist and conservative economic policies remain well entrenched.

While India has escaped the shackles of the infamous 'Hindu rate of growth', it continues to face an equally cumbersome 'Indian rate of policymaking' rooted in problems of bureaucratic inertia and poor inter-ministerial coordination (Virmani, [2004](#)).

With respect to the LEP, this has created barriers in accelerating infrastructure connectivity, which has prevented India from leveraging geographic proximity and historical linkages with Southeast Asia while relegating it to the status of a second tier country in its engagement with the region.

This is illustrated by the contrast between the rhetoric of India's northeast as 'India's Gateway to Asia in the 21st century', and the reality of delays in completing key infrastructure projects connecting India and Southeast Asia, such as the Trilateral Highway Project and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (MEA, [2014a](#)).

This has also been reflected in the slow pace of trade negotiations between India and ASEAN. The prolonged period of negotiations began with a framework agreement in 2003 before a trade in goods agreement came into force in 2010 and a trade in services agreement and investment agreement was finally concluded in 2014, leading to the operationalization of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area.

India-ASEAN trade targets of \$100 billion in 2015 and \$200 billion in 2022 have also been missed (ASEAN Secretariat, [2020](#)). New Delhi's decision to exit the Regional Comprehensive Economic Agreement (RCEP) regional free-trade agreement in 2019 reaffirmed the link between India's domestic reform momentum and its eastward engagement as the decision was fuelled by concerns that Indian industries could not compete with their Asian (and particularly Chinese) counterparts (Jacob, [2019](#)).

It was also accompanied by Modi's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (self-reliant India) campaign, which is ostensibly about strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of Indian industries but can also be seen as a shift towards a more insular and potentially protectionist economic policy (Business Today, [2021](#)).

That being said, New Delhi's decision to join the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in June 2022, which followed the conclusion of trade agreements with Australia in April and the United Arab Emirates in February, allude to a possible softening of India's well-entrenched protectionist sentiment (although New Delhi retains a limited appetite for re-joining the RCEP) (Mattoo, [2022](#); Singh, [2022](#); The Economic Times, [2022](#)).

As such, relative to other regional powers, India's level of economic integration with ASEAN remains modest, particularly in the areas of strengthening trade and connectivity (Lee, [2015](#), p. 78). India will need to overcome these impediments if it is to upgrade its status from a secondary to primary player in the regional architecture.

One potentially positive development is the growing prominence of digital trade where Indian companies hold a comparative advantage (Singh, [2016](#)). This in turn offers New Delhi leverage to play a prominent role in such areas as setting rules and standards (although even on digital trade India will need to begin by making reforms at home through implementing the necessary legal frameworks such as a personal data protection law (Yasir & Singh, [2022](#)).

### 1.5.2 Whither 'ASEAN centrality'?

The LEP has never been a purely ASEAN-centric initiative. Bilateral and multilateral engagements outside the ASEAN framework have always been an important component of the policy. At the sub-regional level, these have included the establishment of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)—comprising Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand—in 1997 and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC)—comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, India, Thailand and Vietnam—launched in 2000. At the inter-regional level, India was also an architect of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (originally known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)) that was established in 1997 and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), established in 2008, which held its first leaders' summit in Indonesia in 2017.<sup>9</sup>



Source: [https://th-i.thgim.com/public/news/international/v1ely1/article53239157.ece/alternates/FREE\\_1200/Indian-Ocean-Rim-Association.jpg](https://th-i.thgim.com/public/news/international/v1ely1/article53239157.ece/alternates/FREE_1200/Indian-Ocean-Rim-Association.jpg)

Nevertheless, 'ASEAN centrality' has always formed a core pillar of the LEP, even as the geographic scope of the policy has expanded over time from Southeast Asia to East Asia and now the Indo-Pacific. Reflecting this, in a speech in 2018 Prime Minister Modi noted that 'ASEAN centrality and unity' is 'at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific' and 'will be central to its future' (IISS, 2018). For India, its support for the ASEAN-led process of regionalism is rooted in efforts to dilute an alternative regional architecture dominated by major powers (most notably China). Then Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj noted this in a speech in 2017: the 'centrality of ASEAN serves as a counter balance to the various great power concerts and rivalries that get played out in the region' (MEA, 2017a).

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<sup>9</sup> The IORA membership includes Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand while the IONS also includes Myanmar and Timor Leste.



However, 'ASEAN centrality' is increasingly being called into question. Some of this is attributed to growing fissures within ASEAN, most notably between pro-Beijing member states and others that have sought to maintain a more balanced foreign policy with an equidistant position from major regional and global powers. This became evident in 2012 when during Cambodia's chairmanship of the organisation ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué citing China's actions in the South China Sea (BBC, [2012](#)).

Another challenge is the regional body's rules of interaction, which remain embedded in principles of non-confrontation, non-intervention, and consensus (the so-called 'ASEAN way') (Goh, [2003](#)). These norms of interaction, while granting ASEAN longevity, have relegated it to irrelevance in times of crisis, including the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the suspension of democracy in Myanmar and Thailand, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bland, [2021](#); Darmawan, [2021](#); Kashyap & Bhattacharya, [2021](#)). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further fuelled these concerns amid ASEAN'S lukewarm response to Moscow's actions (Hayton, [2022](#)).

In this context, India's regional engagement has increasingly transcended ASEAN through bilateral, trilateral and plurilateral initiatives that fall outside the ASEAN framework.

The most notable example of this is the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, which was revived in 2017 after its short-lived inception in 2007. Such initiatives are often functionally driven and focussed on specific issues. For instance, India, Japan, and Australia launched the 'Supply-Chain Resilience Initiative' in 2020 with the aim of 'diversifying supply-chains in the Indo-Pacific region to ensure resiliency', which alludes to efforts to reduce dependence on China in strategically important sectors (MEA, [2021](#), p. 64. Also see: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, [2021](#); Tan, [2020](#)).



[Source: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/quad\\_tokyo001.jpg?w=1200&h=630&crop=1](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/quad_tokyo001.jpg?w=1200&h=630&crop=1)

Moreover, as these initiatives have matured with more senior level participation they have moved beyond a single-issue focus. For instance, the Quad, which has its origins in issues of maritime security following the humanitarian response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami by the Regional Core Group of countries, has expanded its mandate to address such issues as pandemic response, climate change, and supply-chain resilience (The White House, [2021](#)).

Outside the ASEAN framework, India is also increasing cooperation with several states through trilateral or mini-lateral initiatives. This includes the US-Japan-India trilateral framework, which began at the joint secretary (director-general/assistant secretary) level in 2011 before being upgraded to the ministerial (secretary of state/foreign minister) level in 2015 and the summit (presidential/prime ministerial) level in 2018.

A Joint Secretary-level trilateral dialogue with Australia and Indonesia has also been held since 2017, which has focused on maritime security and HADR operations (MEA, [2018a](#), p. 28). The security dimension of BIMSTEC has also gained prominence with the first meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs in 2017 followed by the first joint military exercise in 2018 (BIMSTEC Milex-2018) with a focus on counter-terrorism (MEA, [2019](#), pp. 22, 245–7).

In the context of these new or newly defined regional initiatives, ASEAN's relevance in India's eastward engagement will continue to be called into question. As noted, the LEP has never been a purely ASEAN-centric initiative. But the degree to which 'ASEAN centrality' is now being challenged by growing institutional inertia within the organisation and the emergence of new regional initiatives will make this a potentially even less relevant pillar of the LEP.

There are two reasons why this matters for India's eastward engagement. First, from a rhetorical perspective these developments make New Delhi's commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' increasingly tenuous and as such, it may need to consider whether this principle should remain a core tenet of the AEP. Second and more significantly, New Delhi will need to consider the implications of an alternative (non-ASEAN-centric) regional architecture for India's engagement with the region. This is particularly important in the context of a reversion to a regional and global order dominated by Great Power competition (see next section).

The utility of maintaining 'ASEAN centrality' as a core pillar of the AEP may be declining amid growing fissures within ASEAN, particularly on the question of China and the role of the regional body in tempering or restraining Beijing's regional assertiveness. However, what replaces the ASEAN-centric regional architecture remains unclear and New Delhi will need to reflect on this as it considers the future of the AEP. For instance, should New Delhi decide to double down on its commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' it will need to work more closely with member states that are falling under China's 'sphere of influence' (e.g. Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) to shore up their independence and autonomy.

Doing so will help to reinforce ASEAN's credentials and reaffirm the status of ASEAN-led groupings as the region's premier forums. Alternatively, should New Delhi conclude that 'ASEAN centrality' has outlived its usefulness, it may seek to strengthen its commitment to new (non-ASEAN-centric) regional initiatives, such as the Quad. New Delhi may also want to consider if India should join other regional initiatives such as the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—the successor to the erstwhile TPP free trade agreement), or even the Five Eyes or AUKUS, which would more firmly embed it within the US-led regional architecture.

### 1.5.3 Regional/ global architecture in flux

The preceding section alludes to a more fundamental issue facing the AEP regarding the strategic rationale underlying the origins of the policy. The LEP emerged in the early post-Cold War period at a time when globalisation was the key narrative driving the international system. But as the neoliberal international order comes under growing strain, the organising principle that formed the basis for the LEP needs to be renewed or revisited. New Delhi has acknowledged this shift in the global geo-economic and geo-political environment. As Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar noted in a speech in 2020:

The contemporary relationship between India and ASEAN was founded very much in our shared interest in globalisation. In Asia at least, the ASEAN were pioneers of that process and helped bring India into it. But as it comes under stress today, we need to go beyond its economic and even social definitions. (MEA, [2020b](#))

At the heart of this shift is the emergence of an increasingly pronounced US-China strategic rivalry, which is redefining the regional and global architecture in zero-sum terms. This has been exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The renewed bifurcation or polarisation of the international system threatens to undermine India's longstanding commitment to an open and inclusive regional architecture embedded in the principle of 'ASEAN centrality'.

For instance, the fact that United States, Russia, and China are all members of several ASEAN-led initiatives (including the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus) will place growing strain on these forums to operate effectively given the bad blood between these countries. India will face an early test of the institutional impact of these geopolitical fault-lines when it hosts the G20 Summit in 2023, as evidenced by the challenges faced by Indonesia as the host nation in 2022 (Nangoy & Sulaiman, [2022](#)).



Source: <https://sun9-43.userapi.com/impf/ZvW0e4XbjpRlqUjHvoWFQEFKzAskMCxwwV1JTg/LvMSPidnmyA.jpg?size=807x423&quality=96&sign=d10305d81ed949ea4a14c40b99a1fe7e&type=album>

At the same time, there remain lines that India is unwilling or unable to cross with respect to the US-led regional architecture. An example of this is India's absence from US-led Freedom of Navigation patrols (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, which can be attributed to New Delhi's aversion to Washington's interpretation of the 'innocent passage' principle as enshrined in UNCLOS (Roy-Chaudhury & de Estrada, [2022](#)).

Despite New Delhi's opposition to China's expansive 'nine-dash line' claims in the South China Sea, India's requirement of prior notification from foreign warships to enter its Exclusive Economic Zone has deterred it from participating in US-led FONOPs in the region. This example illustrates the limits of India's willingness and ability to become more enmeshed in US-led regional initiatives (Singh, [2021](#); Zeeshan, [2021](#)).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated these pressure points as India has been labelled a 'shaky' member of the Quad as the odd man out amongst the Quad group of countries in terms of their punitive actions against Russia (Rajghatta, [2022](#); Tobita & Miki, [2022](#)). This divergence is likely to grow as China and Russia's growing assertiveness prompts the United States to step up calls on regional allies and partners to do more (paralleling US pressure on its NATO partners in Europe to do the same) (Takenaka, Brunnstrom, & Martina, [2022](#)).

This includes stepping up support for smaller states facing pressure from Beijing, such as Pacific Island countries and claimant states to the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea (paralleling support for Ukraine and other European states bordering Russia in the face of Moscow's aggression) (Dominguez, [2022](#); Grossman, [2022](#)).

This will also have a spill over effect into other areas of India's eastward engagement, such as defence cooperation (Pant & Singh, [2022](#)).

For instance, the conclusion of a contract with the Philippines in early 2022 for the export of the *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missile was hailed as a sign of India's nascent but growing defence exports to Southeast Asia, particularly as other countries, including Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand also expressed interest in acquiring the Brahmos platform (Bhatt & Pandey, [2022](#); Saha, [2022](#)). However, this achievement threatens to be undermined by the fact that *Brahmos* has been developed as part of a joint venture with Russia (Tiwari, [2022](#)).

Historically, India's overwhelming dependence on Russian military hardware has made countries that use similar Russian/Soviet-era military platforms, such as Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia, key partners for India in the area of defence cooperation. However, future cooperation threatens to be delayed, if not derailed by Russia's growing pariah status.

This places India in the unenviable position of becoming increasingly marginalised in the regional architecture. On the one hand, New Delhi's long-standing commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' is being undermined by the growing irrelevance of the open and inclusive ASEAN-led process of regional interaction in the face of renewed power politics. At the same time, New Delhi remains a lukewarm supporter of more institutionalised and exclusive US-led mini-lateral regional initiatives.

India's eastward engagement has been further complicated by the increasingly bold and assertive foreign policies of other countries in the region, which has 'crowded out' India's LEP/AEP to some extent. The most notable example of this is China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative, which has been viewed by New Delhi as a direct threat to India's regional aspirations, national security and in some cases its territorial sovereignty (with respect to Chinese investment in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) (Baruah, [2018](#); Paul, [2019](#)).



Source: [https://images.hindustantimes.com/rf/image\\_size\\_640x362/HT/p2/2016/09/25/Pictures/joint-patrolling-beijing-chinese-pakistan-troops-in\\_7bb6367a-833e-11e6-aff8-24833d3d422c.jpg](https://images.hindustantimes.com/rf/image_size_640x362/HT/p2/2016/09/25/Pictures/joint-patrolling-beijing-chinese-pakistan-troops-in_7bb6367a-833e-11e6-aff8-24833d3d422c.jpg)

To be sure, the regional initiatives of some countries have complemented and reinforced India's LEP. Notably, rapprochement in the US-India relationship has facilitated an alignment of both countries' strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. The United States' strategic 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' towards Asia under the Obama administration, the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' under the Trump administration, and the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy have all complemented India's eastward engagement to varying degrees (The White House, [2011](#), [2015](#), [2022](#); US Department of State, [2010](#), [2018](#)).



Source: <https://warontherocks.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FIOP.jpg>

Similarly, Japan has played a key role as a facilitator of India's eastward engagement. Prime Minister Modi noted this in a speech in 2018 where he referred to India's relationship with Japan as the 'corner-stone of India's Act East Policy' (IISS, [2018](#)). India's MEA has also noted that, 'Japan and India are committed to leverage the synergy between India's "Act East" policy and Japan's "Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" to develop and strengthen reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructures that augment connectivity within India and between India and other countries in the region' (MEA, [2016](#), p. xi).

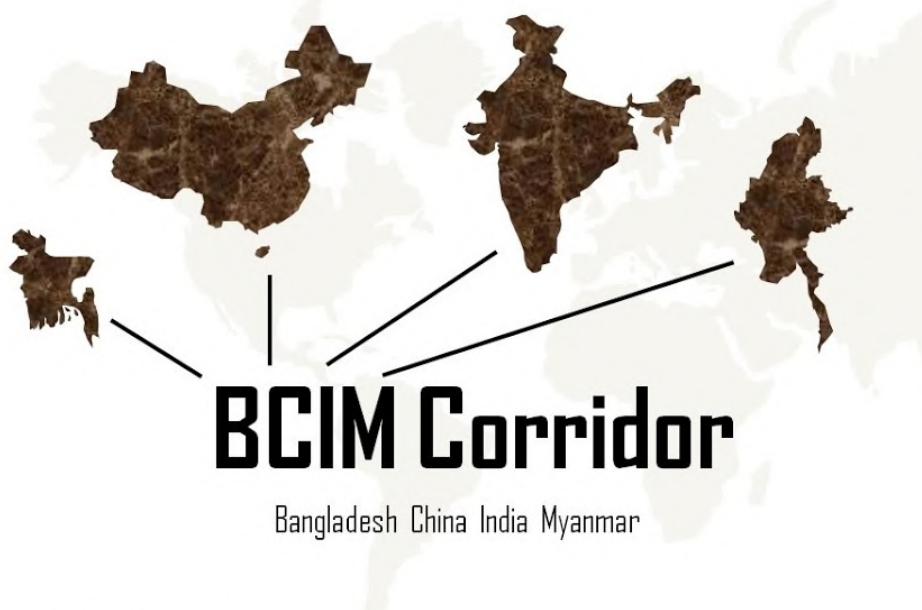
The establishment of the India-Japan Act East Forum in 2017 aims to strengthen regional connectivity through infrastructure investment in India's northeast, which is a key node of connectivity between India and Southeast Asia (MEA, [2017d](#)).

Japan is also a lead partner in the connectivity pillar of Modi's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative that was announced in 2019 (MEA, [2021](#), p. 63). Concomitant concerns about China's growing assertiveness and the credibility of the United States' commitment towards the region has been the catalyst for a wave of 'middle power diplomacy' sweeping the region. This has complemented India's LEP/AEP. For instance, during the state visit of South Korean President Moon Jae-In to India in 2018 India's MEA noted that both sides 'discussed possible synergies between India's Act East Policy and South Korea's New Southern Policy (MEA, [2019](#), p. 95).

As such, while some regional initiatives such as China's BRI and Global Development/Security Initiatives, threaten to undermine India's LEP/AEP, others, including Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy, South Korea's 'New Southern Policy' and Taiwan's 'New Southbound Policy', serve to complement, if not reinforce India's eastward engagement to some extent.

The challenge facing India is that the LEP has yet to fully reflect or sufficiently leverage the changing strategic environment marked by the rise of China and more pronounced US-China strategic rivalry, which has been overlaid by broader fissures between the 'West' and China/Russia. India may struggle to straddle this increasingly polarized and potentially bifurcated international system given the country's long-standing proclivity for non-alignment in its foreign policy and its post-Cold War re-incarnations of strategic autonomy/omni/multi-alignment (Khilnani et al., [2012](#)).

For example, can India simultaneously remain a member of both the US-led regional architecture—such as the Quad—and the China-dominated regional architecture—such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (where India is the second-largest shareholder), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Economic Corridor?



Source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/gXzaylY0i8A/maxresdefault.jpg>

From New Delhi's perspective, strategic autonomy has served India well by allowing it to engage all major poles of influence in the international system and attract investment to support its development-driven diplomacy (Tellis, [2021](#)). The most recent example of this is the Russia/Ukraine conflict where New Delhi has been courted by major powers on both sides (Bajpae, [2022b](#)). However, can India maintain this position in the event of a more divided regional and global order?

So far, Washington has been sympathetic of India's predicament (arising from its overwhelming dependence on Russian military hardware and its energy security needs) while simultaneously being more critical of the 'no-limits' China-Russia relationship (Kremlin, [2022](#)). But how long can this be sustained? For example, at what point will the rapid increase in India's import of discounted Russian crude (which has grown from less than 1 per cent of India's oil imports in 2021 to almost a fifth by June 2022 (Verma, [2022](#))) be seen as a sign that New Delhi is seeking to exploit (or benefit from) the Ukraine conflict by financing Russian aggression (Curtis, [2022](#); Miller, [2022](#); Tharoor, [2022](#))?

The principle of strategic autonomy or omni-alignment has already come under strain amid the deteriorating Sino-Indian relationship following the border standoff and skirmishes between both countries in 2020. This prompted New Delhi to lean further towards the United States and abandon any semblance of neutrality or maintaining an equidistant position on the US-China relationship (Bajpae, [2021](#)). The deterioration of Russia's relations with the West will further test India's commitment to strategic autonomy.

In terms of what this means for the LEP/AEP, India's commitment to an open and inclusive regional architecture (embedded in the principle of 'ASEAN centrality') reflects New Delhi's commitment to omni/multi-alignment in its foreign policy. However, this will be put to the test in the event of a more polarised and bifurcated international system that forces New Delhi to choose between a regional order led by the United States, China and/or a combination of other regional powers.

#### 1.5.4 The 'China factor'



Source: <https://media.s-bol.com/gJL8Zg2kQ98Z/550x834.jpg>

Within the context of this renewed 'Great Power' competition, the 'China factor' presents a specific and growing challenge to India's eastward engagement. For one, China's growing power projection capabilities threaten to erode or weaken India's strategic space to operate. An example of this can be seen in the maritime domain where Indian officials, while emphatically defending the country's interests in the South China Sea, have also acknowledged limits on India's ability to operate in these waters as the balance of naval power increasingly tilts in China's favour. This became evident during India's withdrawal from an oil exploration block with Vietnam in 2012 that came amid Chinese opposition to Indian activities in the South China Sea (Singh, [2012](#)).

Vice Admiral Joshi, then commander of the Western Naval Command and subsequent chief of naval staff, noted at the time that the 'Indian Navy will protect any Indian asset worldwide including [Indian state energy company] ONGC Videsh assets in South China Sea' (Times of India, [2012](#)). However, former Chief of Naval Staff Arun Prakash noted that while 'India's trade and energy interests in the Pacific are as vital as those professed by China in the Indian Ocean', he also warned that in adopting 'an assertive posture vis-à-vis China, a distant location like the South China Sea is hardly the ideal setting to demonstrate India's maritime or other strengths' (Prakash, [2012](#)). He added that it would be 'imprudent to contemplate sustaining a naval presence some 2500 naval miles from home to bolster ONGC Videsh's stake in South China Sea hydrocarbons' (Ibid.).

The linkage between the Sino-Indian relationship and India's LEP/AEP has also manifested in debates about counter-balancing China's encroachments into South Asia by strengthening India's engagement with East Asia (particularly with countries that maintain a history of difficult relations with China). The India-Vietnam relationship is a key example of this narrative with claims that the relationship is an 'anchor' of India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia that 'can most closely be compared with China's relationship with Pakistan' (Yadav, [2016](#), p. 55); that 'in the South China Sea and the Eastern Pacific, India is gradually treating Vietnam just as China views Pakistan in South Asia: as a source of strategic heft' (Pant, [2018](#), pp. 7,8), and:

That is why in some quarters in New Delhi, Vietnam is already seen as a counterweight in much the same way Pakistan has been for China. If China wants to expand its presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, the sentiment in New Delhi is that India can do the same in East Asia. If China can have a strategic partnership with Pakistan ignoring Indian concerns, India can develop robust ties with states on China's periphery such as Vietnam without giving China a chance to veto such relationships. (Ibid.)

Extending this equivalency between India's relations with Vietnam and China's relations with Pakistan, India's strategic community have also challenged Beijing for its double standards by opposing Indian oil exploration activities with Vietnam in disputed waters claimed by China in the South China Sea while at the same time ignoring New Delhi's concerns over Chinese investment in disputed territory in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Panda, [2017](#), p. 86).

The perceived equivalency between Chinese actions in South Asia and Indian actions in Southeast Asia has also manifested in calls for expanding India's strategic presence in the maritime domain near the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea to counter-balance China's assertive posture along the Sino-Indian land border. For instance, former Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Operations) Raja Menon has referred to China's sea lines of communication as 'the Chinese jugular' that India can seek to exploit with China's actions along the Himalayan border being 'held hostage by our strength in the Indian Ocean' (Menon, [2013](#)).

Admiral Arun Prakash has similarly stated that 'given China's immense logistical and overall superiority on the Himalayan borders, there is a view that India needs to look seawards for a countervailing maritime strategy, using its peninsular configuration, island territories and growing maritime power to dominate Indian Ocean sea lanes and exploit China's putative "Malacca Dilemma"' (Prakash, [2016](#), p. 178). Following the stand-off between China and India near the China-Bhutan-India tri-border region in 2017 one scholar also called on India to implement its own strategy of 'active defence' or coercive diplomacy by thinking 'more boldly about credibly deterring China by focussing on the latter's greatest vulnerability: the sea lanes south of the Andaman islands' (Mukherjee, [2017](#)).

This proclivity for 'horizontal escalation' (that draws linkages between Chinese actions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region and Indian actions in East Asia and the South China Sea) means that a further deterioration of the Sino-Indian relationship (due to escalating border tensions for example) could prompt India to engage in greater security activism along China's periphery (in the South China Sea for example). Conversely, an improvement in the Sino-Indian relationship would make New Delhi more apprehensive about getting involved in a US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific (by joining US-led regional initiatives for example).

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<sup>10</sup> Such debates gained momentum in the aftermath of a string of tensions along the Sino-Indian border, which prompted calls for India to improve its border infrastructure. This led some to argue that strengthening India's naval capabilities to interdict Chinese commercial shipping would be a better allocation of India's military resources and a means to exploit China's weakness in the maritime domain to compensate for China's strength along the land border. Unsurprisingly, this has been a prominent narrative amongst Indian Navy officials that have sought to correct the Indian military's longstanding bias in favour of the army.

## 1.6 Looking back to look forward

The early post-colonial period saw India's offer of leadership to Asia, as evidenced by New Delhi's call for an 'Eastern Federation' of nations and sponsorship of several regional initiatives. These included India hosting the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 (and leading the short-lived Asian Relations Organisation), as well as participation in the Eighteen Nations Conference convened in 1949 to voice opposition to Dutch 'Police Action' in Indonesia; providing military aid to the Burmese government in its campaign against Karen rebels the same year; helping the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission at the end of the Korean War in 1953; chairmanship of the International Control Commission on Indochina following the end of the French-Indochina War in 1954, and sponsorship of the Bandung Conference in 1955 (Acharya, [2017](#); Asian Relations Organization (ARO), [1948](#), pp. 302–10; Banka, [2021](#)).



Asian Relations Conference 23 March- 2 April 1947

Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/asian-relations-conference-new-delhi/6QWhAz7tIQ8A8A>

However, in the post-Cold War period India has faced recurring calls to 'do more' in the region (The Economic Times, [2011](#)). This was one of the factors that prompted New Delhi to rename the 'Look East' Policy to the 'Act East' Policy in 2014 in order to demonstrate renewed vigour and momentum in India's eastward engagement by making the policy 'more pragmatic, action-driven and result-oriented' (according to India's external affairs minister) (MEA, [2017b](#)).

However, India continues to face allegations of being a mere participant rather than a pro-active shaper of Asian regionalism. While India has got a seat at the table, it has yet to shape the rules of the regional architecture of which it is a member. Academic Amitav Acharya has noted this: 'New Delhi appears to be still hamstrung by a vision deficit. At a time when many of the original ideas of [India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal] Nehru, such as an Eastern federation, seem realizable at least on the economic front, India seems to be still plagued by self-doubt and the burden of inherited ideologies' (Acharya, [2017](#), p. 165).

A renewed articulation of the strategic drivers of the AEP would offer a means to alleviate these concerns. One way to operationalize this would be through the formulation of a strategy document that outlines the key objectives of the policy.



This would also facilitate greater coherence across the various ministries and disciplines that have been involved in implementing the policy. Such a document would acknowledge that India's post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia has been driven by more than the economic and commercial considerations of expanding trade, attracting investment, and improving connectivity, and also rooted in a need to ensure a balanced regional architecture that is not dominated by any one power (most notably China).

In doing so, New Delhi would also need to clarify or more clearly articulate the norms, values and principles driving its regional engagement. From a policy perspective, this would facilitate India's stepped up strategic engagement with regional powers as a possible 'secondary balancer' for example (Lee, [2015](#), p. 89).

## 1.7 Conclusions

Addressing the three challenges identified in this paper—India's domestic reform momentum failing to match the country's global aspirations; the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' coming under growing pressure; and adapting to an international order in flux—will be key to maintaining the relevance of the 'Act East' Policy as it enters its fourth decade.

The reinvigorated US-China strategic rivalry has fuelled the emergence of new regional initiatives (AUKUS) or given existing initiatives newfound importance (Five Eyes) (Marlow, [2021](#)). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated these pressure points, leading to a renewed polarisation of the international system. These developments threaten to put pressure on India's role in the regional architecture.

Within the context of these three challenges, the Sino-Indian relationship will be a key variable in determining India's role in the region. In other words, India's willingness to take a more emphatic position in supporting US-led regional initiatives in confronting concerns about China or maintaining its commitment to an open and inclusive regional architecture embedded in the principle of 'ASEAN centrality' will in large part be dictated by the trajectory of the Sino-Indian relationship and the status of their unresolved border dispute.

For instance, renewed hostilities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) demarcating the disputed Sino-Indian border will propel New Delhi to take a more proactive security posture in the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, a de-escalation of Sino-Indian tensions along the LAC would make New Delhi a more reluctant participant in US-led regional efforts to confront China.

In terms of actions, some of this will be about strengthening capabilities, including addressing deficiencies in India's external economic diplomacy (which is correlated with the pace of its reform momentum at home), as well as strengthening the substance of India's military and diplomatic engagement.

As recently as 2014 less than 15 per cent of officers in India's Ministry of External Affairs reportedly covered the East Asia region (Gordon, [2014](#), p. 144). However, on a more fundamental level New Delhi needs to revisit and clarify the ambitions or strategic objectives driving the country's eastward engagement.

India marks the 75th anniversary of its independence in 2022 and will convene the G20 Leaders' Summit in 2023 as part of holding the G20 presidency for the first time. This is an opportune time for New Delhi to reflect on its role in the global order and reconsider the principles undergirding its foreign policy.

As a key component of its external engagement, the 'Act East' Policy is an appropriate vehicle to test some of these ideas as India moves into the next 'phase' of its eastward engagement.

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<sup>11</sup> Various institutions exist that conduct analysis and compile data on India's eastward engagement. For example, the India-ASEAN Centre at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) and Indian Council of World Affairs think-tanks are key nodal institutions on India's 'Look East'/'Act East' Policy. Such bodies would be well suited for developing a proposed strategy document.

### 1.7.1 Notes on contributors

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Source:

[https://pbs.twimg.com/profile\\_images/655543475857924096/bZ\\_BuLas\\_400x400.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/655543475857924096/bZ_BuLas_400x400.jpg)

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## 2 Zone balancing: India and the Quad's new strategic logic

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Source: <https://diplomatist.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/quad.png>

### 2.1 Abstract

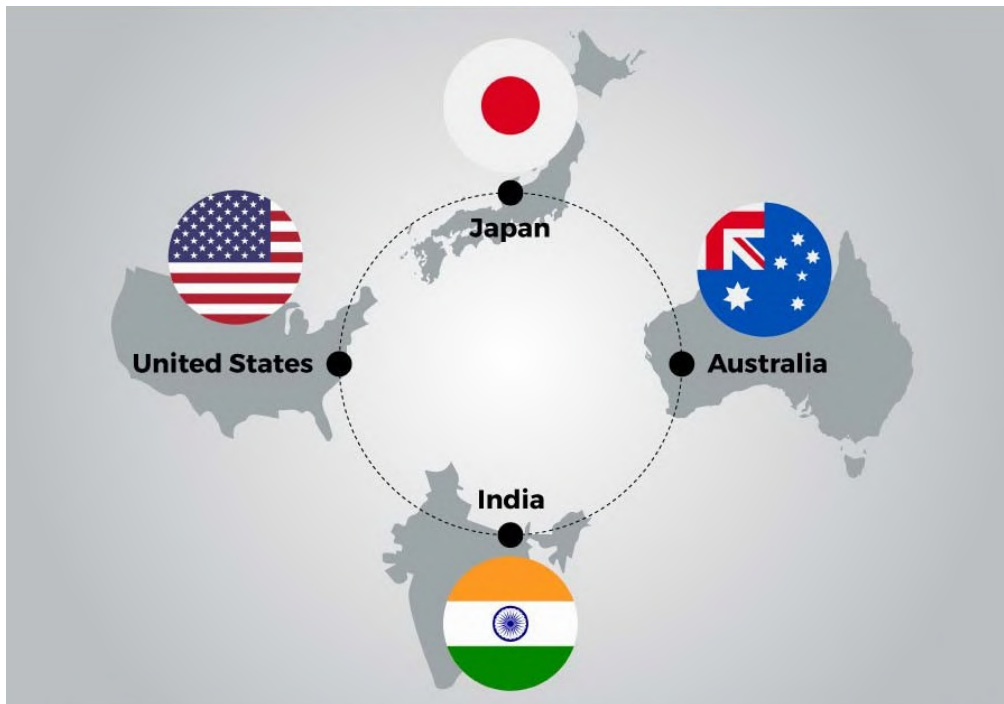
When a state faces a rising great power rival, it has a range of balancing options from which to choose. But a balancing state may consider many of the most common options to be either too costly or unduly provocative. Thus India, for example, considered 2020 to be a strategic watershed—with a clearly more aggressive China on the border, and a clearly more disorderly international system after the COVID pandemic—but has undertaken only modest military balancing. What alternative options do such erstwhile balancers have?

This article addresses both those theoretical and empirical puzzles, by introducing the novel concept of 'zone balancing' as another option in a balancing state's repertoire. Zone balancing seeks to shape the international field of competition in which the balancer and rival operate—specifically, to build the capacity and resilience of third-party states, to shrink the rival's ability to coerce them. This article advances that concept and uses it to explain India's post-2020 strategic adjustment, and especially its warmer embrace of the Quad—the minilateral grouping comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Zone balancing effectively explains the Quad's recently-clarified strategic logic, and predicts some of its limitations.

Military balancing is a costly and risky business. When a state faces a rival great power that is rapidly growing more powerful and aggressive, it could pursue 'internal' or 'external' balancing—that is, investing additional resources in national defence, or making security commitments with other states, respectively.<sup>1</sup> But those options are less viable when the balancing state is markedly less wealthy or powerful than the rising great power. Hard military balancing could place a prohibitively heavy burden on national capacity, or further provoke the already stronger rising power, or fail to address other strategic challenges posed by the adversary. States have a range of other balancing mechanisms; but, as I show below, most of these are closely associated with internal or external balancing, and therefore suffer the same shortcomings as policy options. India faces this situation with China.

As China's military has modernized and reformed with historic alacrity, Beijing has also pressed its territorial claims, including in a deadly border confrontation with India since 2020. What options do states such as India have to balance rising powers such as China if they consider both internal and external balancing too costly, unduly provocative or ill-suited to pressing strategic problems?

This article introduces the theoretically novel concept of 'zone balancing' as another option in a balancing state's repertoire. The term denotes efforts that are designed not to match the rival state's power symmetrically, as in internal and external balancing, but instead to bolster the capacity and resilience of other regional states. In zone balancing, the balancer seeks to harden other states against the adversary's coercion or inducements, thereby limiting the adversary's opportunities to build strategic influence. The balancing is still designed to gain an advantage over the adversary, but indirectly, by shaping the 'zone'—or geographic region—of strategic competition, rather than directly, as a dyadic race for power between rivals.<sup>2</sup>



Source: <https://southasiajournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/quad.jpg>

In the Indo-Pacific region, India has conspicuously embraced zone balancing since 2020. For years, India had cautiously sought to soften its balancing against China by persisting with diplomatic reassurance—an approach Rajesh Rajagopalan labelled in this journal as 'evasive balancing'.<sup>3</sup> That policy managed to regulate the India–China rivalry for some time but, just as Rajagopalan warned, it failed to deter China from aggression against India. Starting in May 2020, Chinese forces launched major incursions into the Indian territory of Ladakh, which prompted a deadly skirmish, a militarization of border areas that continues to this day, and a rupture in the broader bilateral relationship.



Source: <https://www.theweek.in/content/dam/week/magazine/the-week/cover/images/2020/6/18/38-india-china.jpg.transform/schema-16x9/image.jpg>

As a result of the border crisis, and of the economically devastating COVID-19 pandemic, India's balancing behaviour became less evasive. India has continued its patchy approach to hard military balancing; but, most remarkably, it dropped its earlier hesitations about deepening cooperation in the Quad, the 'minilateral' grouping comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

This engagement with the Quad—short of security commitments that would represent external balancing—is driven primarily by a strategy of zone balancing. India's strategic adjustment helps to explain the Quad's suddenly more ambitious agenda, whereby it offers material and institutional benefits to strengthen regional states. But it also explains why, under current conditions, the Quad will not evolve into a military compact, and cannot deter some forms of aggression.

This article makes three main contributions. To begin with, it advances for the first time the theoretical concept of zone balancing, which explains certain state behaviours that traditional concepts of balancing cannot explain. Second, it shows the conditions under which states may resort to zone balancing rather than other forms of balancing—using the case of India to show how changed structural conditions prompted it to shift emphasis from evasive balancing to zone balancing. Third, it offers a novel framework to explain the Quad's strategic logic—how the grouping hopes to use zone balancing to advance a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', even without officially committing its members to combined military action.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, I establish the theoretical context of different approaches to balancing, and how India has applied such strategies against a rising China. Second, I introduce the novel concept of zone balancing, explaining its causal theory and its application in the past. Third, I sketch India's post-2020 strategic adjustment, showing how concurrent crises have changed New Delhi's strategic assessment. Fourth, I show how zone balancing has been applied by the Quad in its new work agenda. And finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the limits of zone balancing as a policy option.

## 2.2 Balancing in theory and Indian strategy

The balance of power and individual states' balancing behaviour are among the most intuitive and foundational concepts in International Relations (IR) theory. The concept predicts that states in an anarchic international system will seek to accumulate power, individually or collectively, when confronted by superior powers.<sup>4</sup> States that engage in balancing are, more precisely, balancing against rising threats—which are a function of both power and intent.<sup>5</sup> IR scholarship offers many variants of balancing behaviour.



Source:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/BalanceOfPower\\_%28cropped%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/BalanceOfPower_%28cropped%29.jpg)

The two best-established concepts are internal balancing, which denotes efforts by a state to improve its own economic and military power, and external balancing, which denotes moves to aggregate multiple states' power against a rival, or to split the rival's alliances.<sup>6</sup> Those concepts can be defined and applied strictly—to mean an aggregate increase in defence resources, and the formation of binding treaty alliances, respectively.

But in reality, balancing behaviour can be subtle and highly contextual. Internal balancing, for example, could be measured by the acquisition of particular military capabilities specific to the balancing state's strategic context, or changes in force posture against a particular adversary, regardless of whether aggregate defence spending or military size increases. External balancing could be measured by combined operational planning, or greater tactical interoperability, rather than the coarse measure of establishing formal alliances.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of my argument, and for the terms to have conceptual purchase, internal balancing must involve some net increase in military capability, and external balancing must involve some reasonable expectation of a security commitment.

Balancing, however, is bigger and more complex than these two terms imply. Some scholars have developed another concept, known as soft balancing, to denote non-military efforts—for example, in diplomacy, international institutions and economic statecraft—to balance against a dominant power.<sup>8</sup> Critics, however, suggest that this concept is so capacious that it essentially refers to a state's foreign policy rather than specific efforts to balance a security rival.<sup>9</sup> More pointedly, some states may seek to undermine an adversary or an adversary coalition directly, using negative balancing or wedge strategies.<sup>10</sup>

A range of scholarship has also sought to parse the precise mechanics of aggregating international power against a common adversary. For example, the concept of *indirect balancing* describes a phenomenon whereby smaller states seek to harness the military of a relatively benign great power to deter another more threatening great power.<sup>11</sup> Also, some smaller states may seek to aggregate power in international organizations, through *institutional balancing*.<sup>12</sup> The concept of *covert balancing* denotes attempts by a great power to build security relationships with smaller states under the cover of more palatable or less provocative military cooperation. This allows the smaller states to maintain a veneer of policy independence, although, as its proponents concede, it remains fundamentally a way to build external balancing capacity.<sup>13</sup>

Balancing states may at times also seek to hedge their bets, matching any hard balancing measures with conciliation and concessions to the adversary, to ensure the rivalry remains manageable. India offers a theoretically significant case in point. For years, India crafted a policy that Rajagopalan termed *evasive balancing*, in which balancing behaviour was offset by continued diplomatic concessions to reassure China that India's intentions were not hostile. Rajagopalan listed five such concessions: a declaratory policy that India was not seeking to contain China; continued participation in multilateral forums such as the BRICS; unilateral concessions, such as avoiding official support of events run by Tibetan exiles; pursuit of high-level dialogues such as the informal summits in Wuhan and Chennai; and—'the most critical element'—hesitation in deepening Quad cooperation.<sup>14</sup>



Source: <https://img.etimg.com/thumb/msid-90386813,width-300,height-225,imgsize-342592,,resizemode-75/untitled-6.jpg>

Rajagopalan warned that this mixed policy was 'unviable', and indeed it did not deter China from aggression in Ladakh in 2020. Notably, since the border crisis began, India has apparently abandoned at least four of these five concessions, including the most important one: as I discuss at length below, it has wholeheartedly embraced deeper Quad cooperation.

India has always sought to balance China in some fashion, and since the Ladakh crisis began has marginally accelerated both internal and external balancing efforts. In internal balancing, most visibly, India has sustained a large and indefinite deployment of troops to the border with China, accelerated permanent military infrastructure building there, and reassigned one of its three army strike corps facing Pakistan to a China mission.<sup>15</sup>

But there are also definite limits to India's internal balancing. Its economy continues to grow only modestly, and its defence spending is basically flat—so while a handful of specific China-related capabilities may expand incrementally, India has not contemplated the kind of wholesale military expansion that some other countries, such as Australia, have announced.

Defence spending as a share of government spending, and as a share of GDP, has been consistently declining over the past decade, a trend unperturbed by the shocks of 2020.<sup>16</sup> Resource scarcity has forced India to move in the opposite direction in some cases, with every military service consistently being granted fewer resources than it annually requests.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the new national policy of *atmanirbharta*, or self-reliance, is designed to promote defence self-reliance over the longer term, but may also force the military to make compromises on the quality of equipment that it procures. Although the government is laying the institutional foundations for greater indigenous innovation and private-sector involvement in defence procurement, that remains an uncertain and, at best, long-term bet.

Internationally, India has continued to deepen strategic cooperation with a select group of highly capable like-minded partners—especially the United States, Japan, Australia and France. Whereas it previously approached such close defence partnerships with suspicion, or even used the threat of closer partnerships as leverage against China, it has recently shed much of its earlier apparent apprehension, signing reciprocal logistics-sharing agreements with the US, Japan, Australia and France. Even at the lowest tactical level, it has for example practised cross-deck helicopter operations with ships from the US, Australia and Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, India is careful to avoid any hint of foreign military commitments—even its naval patrols through the South China Sea do not signify an intent to engage in a military conflict there. Therefore, most of India's international defence cooperation should more accurately be considered a form of internal balancing. New arms acquisitions, or exercises with capable partners, for example, are designed chiefly to build Indian military capabilities, not to aggregate international power against China. New Delhi remains unwilling to enter into any formal alliances or offer any political commitments abroad—not that such agreements are even on offer.

### 2.3 Zone balancing: concept and precedents

In most forms of military balancing—internal or external, hard or soft, indirect or covert or evasive—the balancer seeks to shape the balance of power between itself and its adversary. Ideally, the balancer seeks to gain security by deterring aggression against it or, failing that, to accumulate enough power to prevail in conflict. When the balancer enlists other states into its strategy, it typically regards them as partners aligned in that same strategic project—adding power to one pole of a dyad, with varying levels of political commitment. But balancing need not always be dyadic.



Source: <https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5ed289aaa0e166123ee786cc/1601473698447-CRE2FNJH9GQR93RSTF45/India-China-Troops-Himalayas-Standoff.jpg?format=1000w>

Zone balancing, by contrast, seeks instead to shape the international field of competition in which the balancer and the rival operate. The balancer seeks to build the capacity and resilience of third-party states, to reduce the rival's ability to coerce them. This is still a balancing strategy because it is still designed to limit the rival's potential to build international power and influence.

But it is different from traditional dyadic forms of balancing because the object of the balancing state's policies is not the balancer's own power, or the rival's power, but the power of third-party regional states; the balancing effect must be mediated through those third parties. Zone balancing thereby affords the balancer less direct control over the dyadic balance of power, for the strategy's success depends also on the power and actions of the regional states involved.

The objective of zone balancing is to support the target state in inhibiting coercion; any political influence that the balancing state may accrue in the target state may be welcomed but would be purely incidental. Influence—and, even less, a political commitment or formal alignment—is not the purpose of zone balancing, and not the mechanism by which it seeks to achieve the balancing mission. In that way, it is conceptually distinct from external balancing.

The theory of successful zone balancing—how it would seek to build security in the target—centres on addressing the target state's greatest strategic needs, and thereby to reduce its vulnerability to potential predatory influence. Any increase in that target state's sovereign capacity decreases the rival state's scope to coerce it. In that way zone balancing is conceptually analogous to deterrence by denial, which seeks to dissuade aggression by strengthening the deterrer's capacity to resist that aggression.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore suited primarily to reducing the risk of coercion or subversion of the third-party state; it is less apt in the event of overt military threats to the target's territory. Not every form of international assistance qualifies as zone balancing—some may be designed simply to build influence with the target, or to fulfil humanitarian purposes. A state is only engaging in zone balancing if its support to the target state is a purposeful response to a rival, especially a rival that it assesses is expansionary or intent on coercing the target state.

Zone balancing can be executed using non-military tools of power, including diplomacy and economic statecraft, as long as those tools are used as part of the balancer's security strategy.<sup>19</sup> This point is especially pertinent in the post-pandemic Indo-Pacific, where national security strategies have routinely centred on economic self-reliance, supply-chain resilience, public health and other non-traditional forms of security. The most distinctive conceptual feature of zone balancing is that, unlike internal or external balancing—or even newer concepts such as 'soft' balancing—zone balancing does not seek to shape the rival's behaviour; the target, instead, is the third-party state.



Source: <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/0001.jpg>

Generalizing from the Indian case, states may choose to engage in zone balancing for at least three reasons. Most basically, they may lack the material capacity or political commitment to undertake more costly internal or external balancing.

Alternatively, they may be concerned about triggering a costly or self-defeating security dilemma, so they take measures that are less directly threatening to the rival. Or they may be seeking ways to counter more diffuse strategic risks, such as subversive political or economic influence and coercion, rather than direct military threats to their territory. All of these reasons apply in India's case; but states may prefer zone balancing for any one of these reasons. And, as in India's case, they are likely to consider zone balancing as a supplement to internal and external balancing, rather than as an alternative.

In history, states have engaged in zone balancing even if officials or scholars have not applied that term.

The most prominent example may be the Marshall Plan—the suite of US economic assistance projects delivered to European target states, beginning in 1947, to balance the Soviet Union's expanding political influence. At the time, Washington judged the most urgent threat to regional stability in Europe—then the geopolitical fulcrum of the world—to be not a Soviet military threat, but economic weakness following the devastation of the Second World War, and the potential for Soviet-aligned political partisans to exploit that weakness to gain political dominance.

The United States faced a dynamic and urgent situation—it considered several west European governments to be on the brink of collapse, with communists poised to snatch power, especially after the coup in Czechoslovakia. In response, Washington initiated a massive programme of economic aid to alleviate European suffering, shore up incumbent democratic governments against their communist opponents, and thereby limit Moscow's ability to build international power.<sup>20</sup>



From left to right, President Harry S Truman, General George Marshall, Paul Hoffman and Averell Harriman in the Oval Office discussing the Marshall Plan, Nov. 29, 1948.

[Source: https://afsa.org/helping-europe-help-itself-marshall-plan](https://afsa.org/helping-europe-help-itself-marshall-plan)

The Marshall Plan's features neatly fit the concept of zone balancing. At its core, the Plan's theory of victory rested on the provision of material support to European target states, to build their capacity and resilience against Soviet-supported communist takeovers. It also orchestrated institutional support to lay the foundations for greater international cooperation among the European target states. In sum, it was created to shape the international environment, rather than to take any direct action against the Soviet Union. It was a package of economic aid—not military action—that was nevertheless designed to achieve security goals. And, critically, it was extended to target states with no expectation of reciprocity.



The United States demanded no political commitments in exchange for the aid; it simply calculated that beneficiaries would better weather the postwar economic emergency and thereby be better able to fend off political instability. Granted, the majority of aid recipients would soon thereafter become security partners in the NATO alliance; but several Marshall Plan beneficiaries—Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland—remained neutral, not strategically aligned with the United States. Indeed, in a gesture of inclusivity, the Marshall Plan was even offered to Soviet bloc states, albeit with the expectation that those rival states would reject it, as they did.

On another occasion, India was itself the beneficiary—the target state—of another programme of American zone balancing. In the mid- to late 1950s, the US sought to deliver economic and military aid to India to balance communist China.

This was motivated not by a premonition that China would pose a direct military threat to India—as was later realized in the 1962 war—but by a growing concern of a potential Indian economic and political failure. Washington feared that a weak Indian democracy, unable to deliver for its citizens, would be vulnerable to communist subversion and present an inviting prospect for the international communist cause. The US accordingly delivered economic aid and encouraged other international donors to do the same—again, with no expectation of a strategic quid pro quo. The US objective was to build India's resilience to communist subversion, and its capacity as an independent Asian democracy.<sup>21</sup>

In India's case today, the policy of zone balancing is directed at regional states that might otherwise fall into Beijing's orbit, through either coercion or inducements. The Belt and Road Initiative of lavish infrastructure development had already won Beijing considerable economic and political influence across the Indo-Pacific. India thus began dabbling in zone balancing through policies such as Act East, Neighbourhood First and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

These policies made scattered attempts to build target state capacity and resilience—for example, with the provision of coastal radar systems for maritime domain awareness. But their overall rationale was primarily to safeguard Indian overseas interests and compete for influence in a multipolar world. In Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar's pre-2020 sweeping characterization of India's international history, he declared that current events demanded 'greater realism in foreign policy' and in the use of military force and economic statecraft, partnering with others, taking greater risks, and clearly assessing relative power in an emerging multipolarity.<sup>22</sup>



Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/INS\\_Viraat\\_front\\_view.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/INS_Viraat_front_view.jpg)

After the concurrent crises of 2020—Ladakh and the pandemic—New Delhi became convinced that a dysfunctional international architecture was enabling and emboldening Chinese aggression. The region desperately needed more effective bulwarks against Chinese coercion, and only concerted collective action could supply them.

## 2.4 India's strategic adjustment

India's strategic policy adjustment, beginning in 2020, was a response to what it perceived as a suddenly more dangerous international environment. Two concurrent crises—China's incursions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, and the COVID-19 pandemic—left India with less confidence in the institutional and political bulwarks of regional stability. New Delhi mounted a broad if patchy response. In this section, I argue that the concurrent crises did shift India's strategic assessment, but resulted in only marginal efforts in traditional military balancing.

Tensions had been mounting on the India–China border for years. Chinese incursions across the LAC had been growing in frequency and severity, resulting in stand-offs at Depsang in 2013, and in Chumar in 2014 and Demchok in 2016. At Doklam in 2017, Indian forces physically intervened to block Chinese construction of a road in territory claimed by Bhutan.

The drumbeat of border incidents, and especially the Doklam stand-off, conveyed a major signal to India of intensifying strategic rivalry with China, and probably contributed to India's willingness to relaunch the Quad later that year. Nevertheless, India judged it could still pursue its approach of evasive balancing. In large part to restore the relationship's equilibrium after Doklam, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a pair of one-on-one summits in 2018 and 2019, and sought to strengthen the bilateral relationship.<sup>23</sup> Critically, India did not consider Doklam as a decisive rupture in the bilateral relationship, or as a harbinger of international systemic disorder—as it did the crises of 2020.



Source: <https://img.onmanorama.com/content/dam/mm/en/news/nation/images/2020/5/21/indian-china-border.jpg.transform/schema-16x9/image.jpg>

In May 2020 India faced an apparent Chinese land-grab in Ladakh. Both sides rushed tens of thousands of troops to the border, tensions rose, and a skirmish killed 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers—the first combat deaths on the LAC in nearly half a century. The two sides later disengaged from most ‘friction points’, although both continue to deploy large forces, sustained by new infrastructure, near the border. Military talks continue, but the increased militarization by both sides appears to be permanent.

From New Delhi's perspective, the crisis on the ground in the Himalayas represented a major strategic change. China's continued forward deployment of troops poses a redoubled and ongoing threat to Indian sovereignty. But the apparent land-grab also demolished the diplomatic framework that governed the border dispute and laid the foundation for bilateral ties between India and China.

Five bilateral agreements, painstakingly negotiated since normalization in 1988, had maintained ‘peace and tranquillity’ on the LAC and ensured the border dispute remained non-violent.<sup>25</sup>

For India, China's aggression in Ladakh had in effect abrogated those agreements and forged a new national security consensus that China was an untrustworthy and hostile actor. More broadly, Beijing's newly unveiled aggressive intent towards India cast other, previously ambiguous Chinese activities—from predatory trade practices to a naval build-up in the Indian Ocean—in a more threatening light, as elements of a comprehensive strategy to constrain Indian power.

Immediately, India responded by in effect suspending the bilateral relationship. In the first instance, it recognized it could exert some leverage in calling the bilateral trade, investment and diplomatic relationship into doubt. Its declaratory policy stipulated that resolving the border crisis would be a precondition to normalizing and deepening relations.

This was not a complete diplomatic freeze—Jaishankar relented sufficiently to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, occasionally; and Modi attended summits of the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation alongside Xi. But Jaishankar routinely clarified that India's core demand was a reduction in the Chinese military presence on the border: '[The India–China relationship] cannot be normal, if the situation in the border areas is abnormal. And surely the presence of a large number of troops there, in contravention of agreements, is abnormal.'<sup>26</sup>



Source: <https://spaces-cdn.clipsafari.com/n8r0ypg10gdlu7wlnw22e7iqf7j2>

Some other elements of the bilateral relationship continued to progress, albeit unevenly. India–China trade, for example, in aggregate numbers continues to rise and in fact break records.<sup>27</sup> But India has sought to mitigate the national security risks posed by that commercial relationship. It ostentatiously banned dozens of Chinese apps from the Indian market, but also, and far more significantly, it in effect banned Chinese telecommunications firms from bidding for India's 5G infrastructure development.<sup>28</sup> It also introduced new regulations that, for example, limited Chinese investments in Indian technology start-ups and the import of Chinese-made finished consumer electronics.<sup>29</sup> For India, then, the Ladakh crisis was an inflection point in relations with China—a strategic disruption that will continue to reverberate even if tensions on the border abate.

However, India's newfound penchant for balancing behaviour cannot be explained without also taking into account the other crisis of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic. For India, the pandemic produced two major policy impulses, domestic and foreign. In domestic policy, it underscored the need for national self-reliance and resilience. The Modi government launched a programme for *atmanirbharta*, or self-reliance, designed to reduce Indian vulnerability to fragile international supply chains, lure international investment away from China and bolster indigenous manufacturing.<sup>30</sup>

For defence procurement, *atmanirbharta* resulted in the phased introduction of 'positive indigenization lists'—that is, import bans—to promote domestic suppliers. The 2022/23 defence budget proposed that 68 per cent of capital expenditure should be earmarked for domestic industry, an increase from 58 per cent the previous year<sup>31</sup>—but the Indian military will remain dependent on external suppliers for its most modern equipment.

In foreign policy, India judged that the pandemic loosened some of the institutional and normative constraints on India's greatest security rival, China.

The post-pandemic system incentivized states, under acute public health and economic strain, to act more competitively, and the most powerful states could compete most ruthlessly.<sup>32</sup> New Delhi feared that China might be a leading beneficiary of this more nakedly self-help system. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar wrote: 'Already, there has been a shift from marketing peaceful rise to declaring the arrival of wolf warriors ... In many ways, the role reversal in world affairs will be even more stunning after the virus.'<sup>33</sup>

New Delhi—and its like-minded partners in the Quad—saw a need to prevent China from capitalizing on the catastrophe. For its part, China launched a campaign of 'vaccine diplomacy' to deliver COVID vaccines to developing states across the region—which India, the United States and several other states matched. These efforts were nakedly competitive, and inevitably resulted in unnecessary inequities and inefficiencies.<sup>34</sup>

For New Delhi the pandemic, like the Ladakh crisis, was a strategic disruption that shook the international order. The Indian government emerged from the concurrent crises convinced of the need for bolder policy action. Despite its clarified political intent to build national power, however, it remained unable or unwilling to commit forcefully to traditional military balancing.

## 2.5 Zone balancing in action: The Quad's new strategic logic

The Quad had been re-established in late 2017, after a decade-long hiatus, as a mechanism for strategic consultations among foreign ministry officials.<sup>35</sup> Its purpose and agenda were opaque, public statements were kept deliberately vague, and every meeting was attended by uncertainty over the grouping's utility and longevity. Critics either dismissed it as a meaningless talk-fest or denounced it as a harbinger of a divisive 'Asian NATO'. Quad foreign ministers met for the first time in late 2019, although at that point there was no commitment to continue the meetings even at that level. And for India at least, there was little to suggest the Quad was qualitatively different from several other minilateral consultative mechanisms.<sup>36</sup>



Source: [https://th-i.thgim.com/public/incoming/m6ky50/article66577600.ece/alternates/FREE\\_1200/20230303076L.jpg](https://th-i.thgim.com/public/incoming/m6ky50/article66577600.ece/alternates/FREE_1200/20230303076L.jpg)

After the catalysts of 2020, the Quad was suddenly and decisively energized. It began meeting at national leader level in March 2021, and for the first time committed itself to tangible policy outcomes, with a headline announcement of delivering a billion COVID vaccine doses.<sup>37</sup> The leaders met again at summits in September 2021, March 2022 and May 2022. The third meeting, in March 2022, was noteworthy because it was an unplanned emergency meeting occasioned by the escalating war in Ukraine—convened at short notice, for the first time in response to a security crisis, and one which, moreover, was occurring far from the Quad's primary area of interest in the Indo-Pacific. With each successive leaders' meeting, the Quad and its proliferating array of working groups have met milestones and made commitments to new tangible policy outcomes.

In no small measure, India's strategic adjustment enabled the Quad to adopt this more ambitious agenda. India began to see the Quad as the logical vehicle to implement zone balancing. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar foreshadowed this soon after the pandemic first rippled through the region, and months before the first Quad summit meeting. He wrote: 'Plurilateralism will be the beneficiary because it has a purpose and commonality now found wanting in multilateralism.'<sup>38</sup> Once the Quad summits began, he explained India's logic clearly:

The fact is that the days of unilateralism are over, bilateralism has its own limits, and as the Covid reminded us, multilateralism is simply not working well enough. The resistance to reforming international organizations [compels] us to look for more practical and immediate solutions. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the case for the Quad.<sup>39</sup>

After the May 2022 Tokyo summit, Jaishankar asserted that the Quad was only succeeding, in contrast to its earlier abortive incarnation, because India was 'overcoming the hesitations of history'.<sup>40</sup> India's partners also recognized the import of its strategic adjustment—US officials judged that the Ladakh crisis had a 'galvanizing impact' on India's approach to the Quad.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, by the start of 2021, India's enthusiasm was matched—and enabled—by political commitment from other members. The new Biden administration in the United States, especially, was intent on energizing America's role in Asia. The US had already begun a programme of internal balancing, with the development of concepts such as integrated deterrence and multi-domain operations to counter China's military capabilities; and it dabbled with external balancing, for example with small changes to its posture. But Washington also saw the value of zone balancing, with a new Indo-Pacific Strategy peppered with pledges to 'build regional resilience', 'build collective capacity' and 'strengthen the Quad as a premier regional grouping and ensure it delivers on issues that matter to the Indo-Pacific'.<sup>42</sup>

This was not, therefore, an automatic or inevitable progression. The Quad's members took a motivated political risk to elevate the grouping to summit level, pursue costly policy outcomes, and commit themselves to keep meeting and keep expanding its agenda.

The Quad today exists in multiple forms, at multiple levels. Its most prominent expression is its periodic national leader summits, which can draw upon the full range of state agencies and instruments of national power. It also continues at the foreign minister level, although that has receded in prominence with the advent of the summits. But the Quad has no central authority, secretariat or charter to define itself; representatives of the four member countries often meet, plan and act together in a decentralized and uncoordinated fashion.

For the purposes of this article, I consider the formal Quad to be limited to the national leader and ministerial activities that promulgate the 'Quad' label.<sup>43</sup> Other activities involving Quad member representatives comprise what I call the *informal Quad*. They fall outside the boundaries of what their members consider to be part of the official Quad agenda; but when they involve all (and only) the Quad members, they maintain a suggestive—but deniable—association with the formal Quad.

The Malabar series of naval exercises, for example, now includes all four Quad countries, but remains outside the agenda of formal Quad summits or foreign ministers' meetings. In my argument, it and other activities like it are a manifestation of the informal Quad.



Source:  
<https://s01.sgp1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/article/149449-fpmudpnjjw-1603206531.jpg>

The Quad is not exclusively dedicated to zone balancing; some of its members' work—especially in the informal Quad—contributes to internal and external balancing, too, as I discuss below. Nor is the Quad the only mechanism for zone balancing; India and others continue with their own policies, for example to stabilize Sri Lanka in the 2022 crisis.<sup>44</sup>

But the Quad is the most ambitious, both in the reach of its agenda and in the scale of its intended outcomes. By the fourth summit meeting in May 2022, the Quad had officially committed itself to programmes of work, complete with promised deliverable outcomes, in nine issue areas: COVID vaccine production and delivery; climate change; critical and emerging technologies; infrastructure development; cybersecurity; space; international education; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and maritime domain awareness.<sup>45</sup>

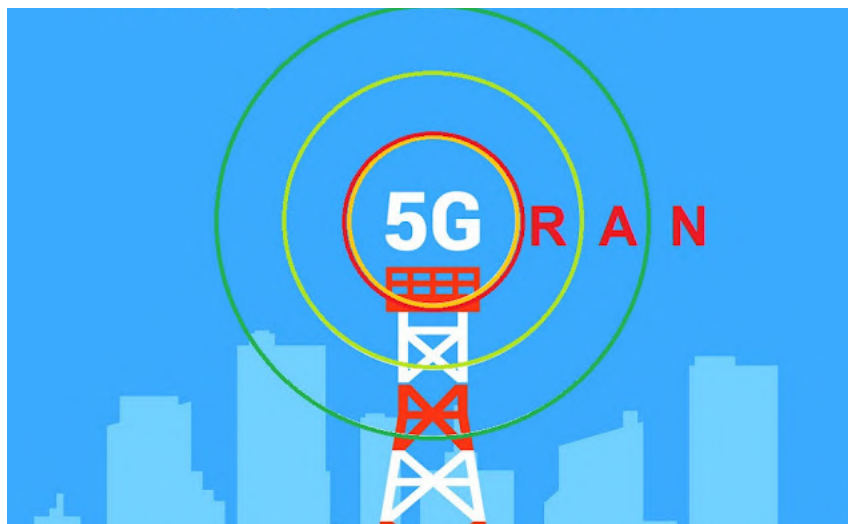
In line with the theory of zone balancing, this agenda is designed with congruent interests in mind: to promote the capacity and resilience of regional states in a way that serves to balance China's ability to coerce them. In the remainder of this section I outline three distinct features that define the Quad's approach to zone balancing.

### 2.5.1 Provision of international public goods

The Quad, especially since the summits beginning in 2021, has fashioned itself as a provider of international public goods, from vaccines to infrastructure. It has self-consciously deprioritized security in its agenda, at least in public.<sup>46</sup> Instead, it has emphasized support to regional states, demonstrating that the Quad is uniquely placed to address high-priority problems, which those states cannot solve alone, and for which existing institutions are not designed. Undertakings such as distribution of COVID vaccines or managing climate change do not build Quad members' power or target China; they are not artefacts of zero-sum competition, but positive-sum efforts to provide international public goods.

The broad rationale complies with the theory of zone balancing—the Quad seeks to reduce the space available for China to coerce regional states, either directly or through international regimes. In part the Quad seeks to deliver material assistance, such as infrastructure or vaccines, so that regional states have alternatives to predatory Chinese offers of such benefits. In part it seeks to deliver international policy frameworks, especially in the regulation of critical and emerging technologies, or international regimes for space and cybersecurity, so that China is not able to set opaque, hierarchical or self-aggrandizing international standards.

For example, the Quad has championed 'Open radio access network' (Open RAN) technical standards for 5G telecommunications infrastructure. Whereas traditional 5G companies such as Huawei—closely affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party—would supply a complete and completely opaque infrastructure package, Open RAN offers a set of technical standards that allows 5G networks into be disaggregated into multiple interoperable components.<sup>47</sup>



Source: <https://www.technopediasite.com/2022/08/what-is-o-ran-open-radio-access-network.html>

Advocates of Open RAN claim that such standards are a way to increase the diversity and transparency—and therefore resilience and self-reliance—of global 5G infrastructure.<sup>48</sup> The Quad, in turn, has committed itself to facilitating the testing and deployment of these 'secure, open, and transparent' telecommunications standards.<sup>49</sup> Such standards do not deliver immediate material assistance to regional states; but they constitute a form of zone balancing because they present a long-term alternative to Huawei, which would otherwise be a tempting 5G supplier, and a channel for Chinese espionage, political interference or coercion.<sup>50</sup>

In providing such international public goods, an important ancillary objective is building acceptance and legitimacy among regional states. The Quad's members recognize that such acceptance is vital for the grouping's utility and longevity. The Quad does not seek to extract any political commitments from regional states, and it does not demand recognition as the region's primary architecture. This effort to be inclusive and uncontroversial is consistent with the Quad's rhetorical observance of 'ASEAN centrality'—its pledge that it does not seek to displace the primary institutional node of the region, or contravene the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s standing norm of non-alignment in great power rivalries.<sup>51</sup>

### 2.5.2 Security and the informal Quad

Security is not a priority for the Quad's agenda, but nor is it absent. Part of the Quad's agenda—especially at the foreign minister level—remains fixed on regional security issues, especially its firm devotion to the principles of freedom of navigation and maritime security.<sup>52</sup> It has also tentatively explored some quadripartite security activities, such as counterterrorism tabletop exercises.<sup>53</sup> At the summit level, many of the Quad's initiatives—including those pertaining to technology, space and cybersecurity—have an inescapable security dimension. Many of these initiatives serve an internal or external balancing function, helping to strengthen individual members' national security or ability to coordinate with their partners.

The Quad leaders' most directly security-centric initiatives, however, echo the theory of zone balancing. Members pledged to establish a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mechanism and a new collective maritime surveillance initiative known as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).

The latter scheme is designed to collate, process and disseminate a common picture of the region's key maritime areas. It recognizes that fast and accurate situational awareness is the elusive core requirement for regional states seeking to deter or counter illicit activities at sea. By pledging to supply this maritime domain awareness to regional states, the Quad would increase target states' capacity to protect their economic and security interests, and reduce the scope for China to surreptitiously exploit their resources.

Even when the Quad has engaged in security-related activities, however, it has ensured they were largely non-military. For example, IPMDA will harness unclassified data from commercial providers, exploiting the recent availability of remote-sensing capabilities from non-government sources. Some military involvement is inevitable—for example, the Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, run by the Indian navy, will be a key dissemination node. But the Quad downplays the military role in public statements, largely to ensure that its initiatives retain an unprovocative, non-competitive tenor.

Indeed, it is most likely this non-military character that helped secure India's willingness to energize the Quad. On that, the contrast with the AUKUS security pact is instructive. That new minilateral grouping is designed unabashedly to develop and share sensitive technologies for military applications. AUKUS demonstrates clearly the trade-off—wherein unambiguously military activity may come at the cost of alienating regional states—that the Quad seeks to avoid.<sup>54</sup>

In effect, the theory of zone balancing has become the litmus test of the Quad's security activities. To date, most of the Quad's publicly promulgated security initiatives contribute to the capacity or resilience of regional states. Most other military activities involving some or all Quad members—the informal Quad—may contribute to their internal or external balancing efforts, but have been excluded from formal Quad proceedings, especially at summit level.

Quad members are, of course, at the forefront of regional efforts to compete with China—but they often act either individually, or bilaterally or trilaterally, or in combination with non-Quad members such as France and Indonesia.<sup>55</sup> Quad members India and Australia, for example, have radically transformed their bilateral defence relationship.<sup>56</sup>

In a move that would have been unthinkable until very recently, an Indian navy P-8I maritime patrol aircraft landed in Darwin while on operations—not exercise—and an Australian P-8A reciprocated with a deployment to Goa.<sup>57</sup> Quad militaries also train and consult together as a foursome, albeit again without official Quad branding. The annual Malabar naval exercise began to include all Quad navies in late 2020, after India relented to accept Australian participation—not coincidentally, soon after the concurrent crises of Ladakh and the pandemic.<sup>58</sup>

Generally, then, the Quad's members relegate most activities that contribute to their traditional military balancing to the informal Quad. Indeed, it is precisely this new 'lattice-work' of bilateral and trilateral '2+2' ministerial meetings, military exercises and enabling agreements among Quad members that has helped to build the trust and habits of cooperation needed for deeper Quad cooperation.<sup>59</sup>

### 2.5.3 Policy agenda based on common regional interests

When the Quad reconvened in 2017, it represented a signal, especially to China, that powerful like-minded states could and would coordinate. Beijing regarded this as a US-orchestrated effort to contain China; therefore, simply sustaining the Quad and slowly building its momentum posed a threat to China's plans. Whether or not the Quad's architects intended it, this signalling function was the early Quad's greatest strategic significance.

The Quad's strategic significance has shifted since the leaders' summits began in 2021. Its mere existence is no longer enough; it seeks to achieve policy outcomes. Zone balancing depends on policy outcomes: building target states' capacity and resilience depends on the achievement of actual effects, whether material or institutional. These effects are greater when we also consider the informal Quad, with some or all of its members acting in other channels, for example to track submarines across the whole Indo-Pacific,<sup>60</sup> or to build resilient undersea communication cables in the south Pacific.<sup>61</sup> For the formal Quad, achieving policy outcomes is a new undertaking, with few results to date but substantial promise.



Source: <https://lawinactiondotcom.files.wordpress.com/2022/01/undersea-cables-ownership.jpg?w=600>

Policy outcomes are more feasible when a coalition of partners can pool resources or exploit complementary advantages. For example, Quad members sought to identify vulnerabilities in their semiconductor component supply chains, so that they could reconfigure them with greater reliability and resilience among trusted partners.<sup>62</sup> In biotechnology, they may rapidly increase the scale and pace of clinical trials for new pharmaceuticals, or pool data for genetic sequencing. That, in turn, could create network effects, whereby the Quad represents an attractive core group around which other capable and like-minded partners could gather to deepen cooperation on key technologies.



Expansive as the policy agenda is, it remains firmly rooted in common regional interests, with no ambition to expand into some universalist or global value system. This distinction was thrown into sharp relief after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. New Delhi was forced into a very awkward policy juggle, wherein it sought to gingerly distance itself from Russia through almost imperceptibly subtle signals, while not alienating its most vital arms supplier.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, India was also determined to signal that the Ukraine invasion did not shake its commitments in the Indo-Pacific. Despite frenzied scorn among some western observers, India joined the other Quad members in the emergency summit meeting of March 2022, where the leaders met at short notice to reaffirm their common interests in regional stability, and also pressed on with a US–India 2+2 bilateral, and a fourth Quad summit in Tokyo.

The Quad was largely unperturbed by differences over the Ukraine war because its agenda was based on a specific set of interests in Indo-Pacific stability, founded on abiding structural dynamics and a specific strategy of zone balancing to advance them.



Source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/68FB5mDj6aE/maxresdefault.jpg>

## 2.6 Conclusion: An incomplete strategy

Since it began summit meetings with a clear and expanding agenda, the Quad's strategic logic has closely followed the theoretical logic of zone balancing. But it is not enough to safeguard regional stability. Most fundamentally, the Quad's zone balancing does not offer broad-spectrum protection against aggression, either for Quad members or for other regional states.

The Quad does not, for example, seek to deter China from militarily attacking Taiwan. Zone balancing could still serve as a useful enabler for some military preparations—for example, the Quad's IPMDA initiative could help states to respond to 'grey zone' tactics below the threshold of conventional attack. But such enablers will only be effective if they are also accompanied by the commitment of regional states' own military capabilities and political resolve to act swiftly and decisively. Zone balancing, therefore, is no substitute for internal or external balancing; building military power remains the core of national security, and the surest way to deter military aggression.

States, however, do not have to choose between these various types of balancing. As the Indian example illustrates, a strategy of zone balancing would usually be a supplement, rather than an outright replacement, to other forms of balancing.

Even with the Quad itself, now fashioned as a coalition for zone balancing, other forms of balancing coexist in the informal Quad, where members engage in more tangible military cooperation outside the group's formal diplomatic process. Bilaterally and trilaterally—though not under the Quad's auspices—Quad members have signed agreements to share logistics support, conduct combined training or execute specialized operations when deployed.

As the Quad continues to mature, its broadening span of both formal and informal activities is likely to add more and more contact points between the partners, across their respective government agencies and militaries.

This regularity and diversity of Quad interaction will, over time, build the 'habits of cooperation' among its members that would position them to make more robust and effective collective responses to regional security crises. In that way, a group dedicated to zone balancing may also create incidental pathways for more internal and external balancing.

Any balancing is part of a strategic competition between adversaries. India and its Quad partners have calculated that their efforts to build regional capacity and resilience are less provocative than direct military balancing; but still, they cannot expect China to accept them passively. Zone balancing still holds the potential for triggering a security dilemma, even if that potential is lower than in the case of internal or external balancing. And even if China does not feel directly threatened by the Quad's activities, it is likely to launch efforts to neutralize or counter the Quad's initiatives.

The Quad's expanding agenda, and the Indian strategic adjustment that catalysed it, form only one phase in a cycle of action and reaction in strategic competition. India and the Quad's strategy of zone balancing is incomplete without accounting for these second-order effects.

Finally, as with any strategy, no concept or agenda is complete without effective execution. By delegating specified tasks to subordinate working groups, the Quad has begun to mark milestones in its programme of work; and it will be able to claim success as agenda items come to fruition, from vaccine delivery to education fellowships. Those milestones and outcomes are critical in establishing the Quad's credibility as a provider of international public goods.

Equally important, given widespread regional scepticism and misapprehensions about the Quad, are effective communications. On the one hand, the Quad must be able to transmit its messaging, so that target states and potential adversaries alike comprehend the changes in regional capacity and resilience it represents.

Policy outcomes are necessary, but will deter coercion only if their effects are internalized by the adversary. On the other hand, the Quad must also be able to receive messaging with humility—to understand the policy priorities of target states, so that it can best tailor its agenda to achieve the greatest strategic effects. The strategic preoccupations of south Pacific states are emphatically not the same as those of peninsular south-east Asia. The Quad was regenerated in 2017 and has gained momentum since 2020 because its members perceive the region through the prism of strategic competition with China; as a coalition, however, the Quad's strategy of zone balancing can succeed only if it leavens its priorities with a sensitive and nuanced appreciation for regional concerns.



Source: [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-05-24T025736Z\\_390262591\\_RC2EDU9CPZUS\\_RTRMADP\\_3\\_JAPAN-QUAD-scaled.jpg](https://www.eastasiaforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-05-24T025736Z_390262591_RC2EDU9CPZUS_RTRMADP_3_JAPAN-QUAD-scaled.jpg)

## 2.7 Footnotes

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## 2.8 Author notes

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# 3 Brookings Foreign Policy briefing : China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe

*Célia Belin, James Goldgeier, Tanvi Madan, and Angela Stent*<sup>2</sup>



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## 3.1 Executive summary

The Russia-Ukraine war has generated or accelerated negative trends in China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe. By fall 2022, the growing limitations in China's relationships with all three were evident. Russia is now a less reliable partner given the uncertainties over the longevity of President Vladimir Putin's regime; China's rhetorical support of Moscow's justifications for its brutal invasion of Ukraine has heightened European concerns about Chinese influence on the continent; and India's attempts to balance its ties with Russia and the West have not created new openings for Beijing.

## 3.2 Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has generated or accelerated negative trends in China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe. Before February 24, 2022, China largely viewed Russia as a stable, reliable partner as the two worked in tandem to undermine U.S. dominance of the international system. While Europe was moving closer to the U.S. position that China posed military, political, economic, and technological challenges to Western interests, many in Europe were reluctant to harm Chinese investments across the continent. India's ties with China were already at a low point due to the 2020 Sino-Indian border crisis.

By fall 2022, however, the growing limitations in China's relationships with all three were evident. Russia's power had diminished as a result of its colossal failures on the battlefield in Ukraine, and Putin's hold on power had become more tenuous as criticisms mounted from around the globe.

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Russia's increased dependence on China might benefit the latter generally, but the prospect of regime change in Moscow has created uncomfortable uncertainty in Beijing. Similarly, the Russia-Ukraine war has heightened New Delhi's concerns about Beijing's intentions and actions. Beijing has been unsuccessful in using New Delhi's differences with its Western partners on Russia to build a common stance supporting Moscow's narrative, to create a wedge between India and the United States, to stem the deepening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), and to normalize Sino-Indian ties.

Meanwhile, Europeans have been shocked and deeply concerned by China's rhetorical support for the brutal and unprovoked Russian assault against Ukraine, and the war has strengthened trans-Atlantic ties.

### 3.3 China-Russia

On February 4, 2022, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a "no-limits" partnership. But more than nine months after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that this partnership does have limits. China has supported Russia rhetorically since the war began, claiming that because of provocations by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Russia had no choice but to initiate its "special military operation" in Ukraine. Chinese media have also repeated Russian disinformation about the United States constructing biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. Beyond this rhetoric, however, since February 24, 2022, China has given little material support to Russia for the war effort. The United States has warned China that if it were to supply weapons to Russia, Washington would impose sanctions on it. There is no evidence so far that China has supplied any weapons to Russia.



Source: [https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/2023-02/The\\_flags\\_of\\_Russia\\_and\\_China.gif?itok=IXt9c5p8](https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/2023-02/The_flags_of_Russia_and_China.gif?itok=IXt9c5p8)

Beijing has been careful not to violate the extensive Western sanctions regime imposed on Russia because China has a far greater economic stake in relations with the United States and America's Asian and European allies than it does with Russia. For instance, the Chinese technology corporation Huawei has moved some of its staff from Russia to Central Asia over fears of Western sanctions. At the September 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, a much diminished Putin acknowledged that China had "concerns" about the crisis in Ukraine.

Xi did not mention Ukraine in his public remarks and instead said that he and his "dear friend" Putin were committed to making the world a more stable place. While China has clearly been taken aback by the poor performance of the Russian military, Beijing does not want Russia to lose the war. It also wants the West to acknowledge that Russia's security interests were previously violated and must be taken into account in any postwar settlement. Xi's nightmare scenario would be a post-Putin government that, after the disastrous Kremlin decision-making on the war, might reexamine Moscow's foreign policy choices and seek a rapprochement with the United States, distancing itself from China.



Meanwhile, any nuclear use by Russia in the war would also make it difficult for Beijing not to distance itself from Moscow. The White House readout from President Joe Biden's meeting with Xi at the G20 summit in November 2022 stated that the two leaders "reiterated their agreement that a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won and underscored their opposition to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine." (Notably, the Chinese readout mentioned reaching agreement on the first part of the sentence but did not include the language on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.) Even with China and Russia's current partnership and antagonism toward the United States, the two countries' visions for world order diverge.

Even with China and Russia's current partnership and antagonism toward the United States, the two countries' visions for world order diverge. China's notion of a "post-West" order is one where there are still rules but China has a greater say in making those rules and maintains the right and ability to flout the rules as a great power in the Indo-Pacific. By contrast, Putin's Russia prefers a disrupted world order with no rules, where Russia can flex its muscle. Ultimately, these two visions are irreconcilable.

### 3.4 China-Europe



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Since the war in Ukraine began, the China-Europe relationship has rapidly moved toward greater separation. China's Europe strategy long prioritized trade and investment relations with Europeans, particularly those working in China, as well as deepening investments in European physical (ports) and digital (telecoms) infrastructure.

However, about five years ago, China's relations with Europe, and the European Union (EU), began to deteriorate significantly. This is because of both increasing U.S. pressure on Europeans to adopt a tougher line on China and increasing recognition that Europeans need to limit China's influence on their economies, societies, and technologies. Meanwhile, with the EU's condemnation of human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as with Lithuania's stance on Taiwan, China has engaged in aggressive cultural and political "wolf warrior diplomacy" to intimidate European nations as well as to support its global strategy of de-Westernization.

Over a short time span, the relationship between China and the EU has shifted from economic engagement to an increasingly tense standoff. In spring 2019, the European Commission characterized China as a "systemic rival." A year later, the COVID-19 pandemic underlined European vulnerabilities given the need to procure masks and other personal protective equipment from China, while China's continuing travel closures complicated longstanding business ties.

Meanwhile, U.S.-EU dialogue has deepened, including via the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, but China and the EU have yet to ratify the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment despite the completion of negotiations at the end of 2020. Europeans continue to focus on protecting their critical infrastructures, screening investments, and technological advancements.

The criticism leveled at German Chancellor Olaf Scholz for going back to “business as usual” during his visit to China in November 2022 highlights the growing fears in Europe about the threats China poses. China’s rhetorical support for Russia as it carries out a devastating war on European soil has deepened the rift between Beijing and European leaders. For example, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock linked Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and integrity to the risks Taiwan is facing, while French President Emmanuel Macron, at the 2022 U.N.

General Assembly, raised the alarm on the dangers of the international community staying passive in the face of Russian aggression. Yet because Europe’s energy decoupling with Russia has proceeded at a heretofore unimaginable pace — coming at a high economic cost — Europe might avoid further actions that risk harming existing Chinese investments and European long-term security, including vis-à-vis China. Paradoxically, the war in Ukraine has caused China to simmer down its intimidation of Europe, mainly to avoid further solidifying the trans-Atlantic axis.

Absent Russia’s war against Ukraine, the United States would have pressed its European allies to devote more attention in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept to the threat China poses. Even so, the document calls out the ways in which China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our [NATO’s] interests, security and values,” citing a range of tools Beijing uses and arguing that the China-Russia strategic partnership has created “mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order.”

NATO members met with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea at the June 2022 summit in Madrid, signaling the importance of the relationship between the alliance and key Indo-Pacific partners. Meanwhile, Chinese efforts to strengthen investment ties across Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe through its “17+1” initiative have been largely unsuccessful, with several nations recently exiting this institutional framework.



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### 3.5 China-India

Even before the war in Ukraine, China-India ties were, as a former Indian ambassador to China and foreign secretary noted, “at the lowest point since the 1962 [Sino-Indian] war.” This is because, in 2020, a border dispute fueled tensions once again, with India accusing China of attempting to use force to unilaterally change the territorial status quo. The crisis involved the first fatal clash between the two militaries in 45 years and is ongoing. It has been an inflection point in the relationship, hardening Indian views of China and leading to changes in India’s domestic and foreign policy. New Delhi has deepened ties with partners, such as the United States, that can help balance Chinese power and influence and help build capabilities.

New Delhi has been long concerned about China-Russia relations, but with the potential for escalation in the Sino-Indian crisis, a particularly acute problem would be if Russia went from a neutral stance to a pro-China stance. The border crisis has also shaped New Delhi’s perception and approach toward the Russia-Ukraine war. One concern has been the impact on India’s military readiness, given that a significant amount of its frontline military equipment and components comes from Russia and Ukraine.



Source: [https://www.tnpscstheruvupettagam.com/assets/home/media/general/original\\_image/ic1.jpg](https://www.tnpscstheruvupettagam.com/assets/home/media/general/original_image/ic1.jpg)

A second concern has been the war's impact on Chinese behavior in Asia, particularly vis-à-vis India; in other words, would Beijing use the moment when the world's attention was on Europe to escalate the Sino-Indian conflict at the border, or would it seek to stabilize relations with India? A third concern has been the war's effect on the Sino-Russian relationship; for instance, would a Russia potentially more beholden to China act at Beijing's behest in ways that adversely affect India? A particularly acute problem (especially given Indian dependence on Russia for defense supplies) would be if Russia went from a neutral stance to a pro-China stance.

Therefore, New Delhi has been careful not to do anything that would push Moscow more firmly to Beijing's side. Another concern has been whether the U.S. focus on the European theater would lead to less attention and resources being devoted to the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the economic impact of the war has implications for India's budget and the capabilities it can acquire to deter or respond to its China challenge. Regarding the second concern, within a month of the Russian invasion, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to India.

This was seen in part as an attempt to (1) stabilize ties with India given Western criticism of China's backing of Russia and the upcoming 20th Party Congress, (2) fuel — or take advantage of — India's differences with the West on Russia, and (3) urge India to speak with "one voice" along with China and Russia. After all, India, like China, has had concerns about sanctions, having been at the receiving end of them, and about Western weaponization of interdependence. Whatever Beijing's motivations, however, apparently they were not sufficient enough to compel China to attempt to resolve its border crisis or other differences with India.

One oft-asked question is whether a Chinese offer to resolve the border crisis would result in a return to business as usual in the China-India relationship. There is little doubt that the Indian government would like a more stable border situation. It would enable Prime Minister Narendra Modi to focus on the Indian economy, buy time to enhance Indian military capabilities and border infrastructure, host the G20 next year, and avoid the border crisis becoming an issue in his 2024 reelection campaign.

However, a sustainable stabilization of the relationship would at the very least require not just disengagement at all the 2020 friction points but also deescalation; and it is unlikely that China would agree to dismantle the infrastructure it has built up near the border in the last two years. Moreover, even if this occurred, New Delhi would not trust Beijing to never again try to change the territorial status quo. Finally, even if India and China were to manage the boundary dispute, New Delhi's concerns about Beijing extend beyond the crisis; the countries have different visions for the region — India believes that China wants a unipolar Asia, and India wants a multipolar one.

Policy implications for the United States The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy have defined China as America's "pacing challenge." The NSS states that U.S. foreign policy goals include "out-competing China and constraining Russia."

Left to be fleshed out is the administration's management of the potential tension between competing with China while at the same time seeking cooperation on shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

These two strategic tracks (competition and cooperation) will shape each other in ways not yet well understood. Since February 2022, the United States has used sanctions, diplomacy, and military assistance to punish Russia economically, isolate it diplomatically, and weaken it militarily, so that, in the words of U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, "it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."

While talk of weakening Russia does not resonate well in the Global South, the United States and its allies will continue to seek to contain the threat Moscow poses to European security. If Putin is replaced, any possibilities of creating fissures in the Russia-China relationship through outreach to a new government in Moscow will depend on the nature of the regime that replaces him. While skepticism of any post-Putin government claiming to want to pursue rapprochement with the West would be warranted, there might be an opportunity in that instance to pull Russia away from its alignment with China.



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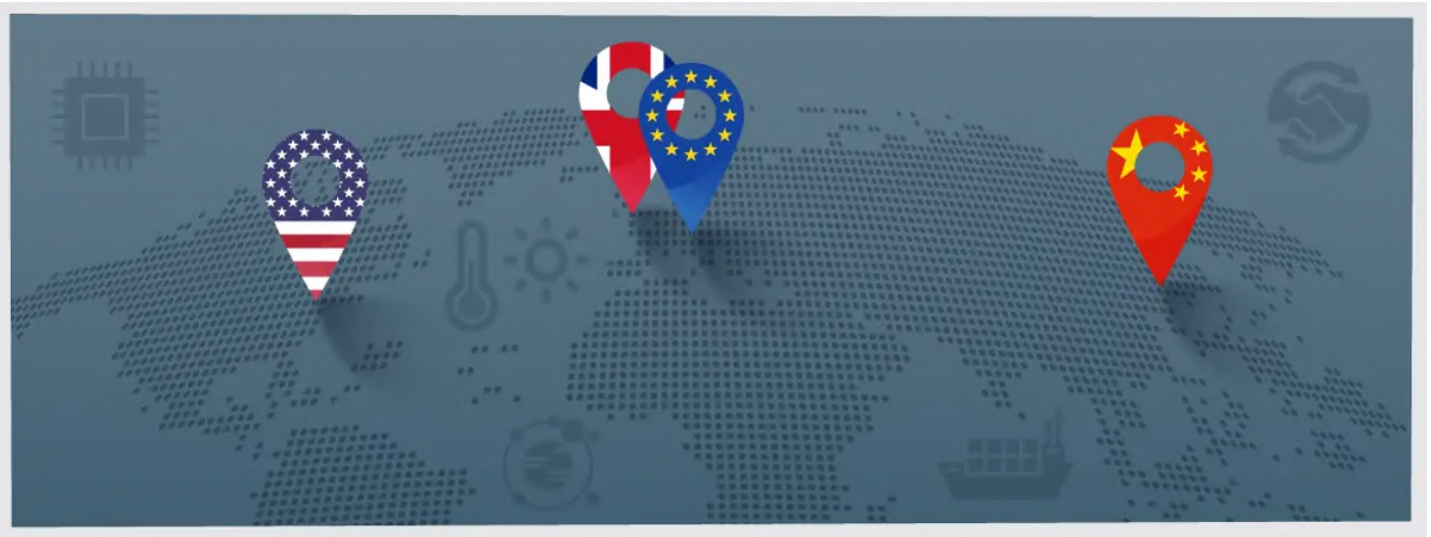
Absent a change in government, Putin has tied himself as closely to China as he can, and there is not much scope for altering that fact unless China seeks to pull away from a weakened Russia. If China were to be interested in pulling away, perhaps this would give the United States an opportunity to create a divide between the two countries, although Washington's need to defend of its core interests in the Indo-Pacific would limit what is possible. Shared, albeit not identical, concerns about China have strengthened U.S.-India ties in recent years, particularly in the defense and security domain. The 2020 border crisis accelerated that trend, and Washington should continue to explore ways to deepen cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The United States and India will, however, need to ensure that their differences on Russia do not become a major obstacle to this cooperation. For instance, Washington needs to recognize that New Delhi is not going to jettison its ties with Moscow, and New Delhi needs to understand that steps that seem to support or endorse Russia's invasion will heighten concerns in Washington.

The two governments should also frankly discuss their assessments of China-Russia relations and the implications for the Indo-Pacific. The United States should also honestly discuss its China policy with European partners and address their concerns. Washington needs to alleviate any lingering fear that aligning with the United States means joining a policy toward China that is excessively tough and that could potentially provoke a conflict in the Indo-Pacific or unnecessarily harm European economic interests.

The Biden administration has done an admirable job working with allies in 2022 after rifts emerged in 2021 over the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal and the fallout with France over its absence from AUKUS, the trilateral security deal, between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Europeans were relieved that the tone of the U.S. NSS was more nuanced than they feared prior to its release. They have also reacted positively to the administration's success in working with allies to support Ukraine and revitalize NATO and to its renewed use of the term "rules-based order." However, Europe remains nervous about future U.S. policy, given the potential for changes in Congress and the presidency that could weaken bonds across the Atlantic once again and undermine U.S. efforts to build a more coherent trans-Atlantic approach to the China challenge.



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