

The Bhartiya Narrative in Regional Multilateralism: India's role in Indo-Pacific forums

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Abstract

The concept of the "Bhartiya narrative" in regional multilateralism pertains to India's strategic and ideological stance within Indo-Pacific forums. It delves into how India's vision and participation in Indo-Pacific multilateral platforms, such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, both shape and mirror its broader geopolitical and economic ambitions. India's involvement in these forums is motivated by its aim to balance regional power dynamics, stimulate economic growth, and safeguard maritime interests. The Bhartiya narrative underscores a commitment to a rules-based international order, advocating for free and open sea lanes and ensuring the strategic autonomy of regional states. This research paper examines how the Bhartiya narrative, rooted in India's cultural heritage and political philosophy, influences and enhances its role in these forums. The paper offers a comprehensive analysis of India's contributions to regional stability, economic cooperation, and diplomatic initiatives within the context of multilateralism.

Keyword: India, Regional Multilateralism, Indo-Pacific, Non-alignment, Economy

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of global affairs, India's role in regional multilateralism, particularly within South East Asia and other Indo-Pacific forums, has undergone significant evolution and transformation. This evolution is not merely a reflection of India's geopolitical aspirations but also underscores its strategic recalibration towards fostering multilateral cooperation and shaping regional dynamics. Anchored in its rich historical ethos and propelled by contemporary imperatives, India's narrative in regional multilateralism serves as a pivotal element in the unfolding tapestry of Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

India's engagement in regional multilateralism is rooted in its profound historical and philosophical underpinnings, notably encapsulated in the concept of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," the world is one family. This ancient Indian philosophy underscores the interconnectedness of humanity and the imperative of global unity amidst diversity. Drawing inspiration from this ethos, India's approach to regional multilateralism emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, and consensus-building as foundational principles in its interactions within Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. These guiding principles shaped India's international role as a champion of Asian solidarity and decolonization, opposition to racism and apartheid, rejection of militarism and call for general and complete disarmament, contributor to international peacekeeping, and proponent of peaceful coexistence between different political systems.

The contemporary relevance of India's role in regional multilateralism is underscored by the urgency of addressing multifaceted global challenges. Issues ranging from climate change, maritime security, and economic integration to pandemic response and sustainable development require concerted multilateral efforts. India, with its burgeoning economic prowess as the fifth-largest economy and the demographic dividend of being the world's most populous democracy, wields considerable influence in shaping regional agendas and priorities. The proactive stance of India in economic diplomacy further enhances its regional footprint. Through initiatives like the Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), Quad Cooperation, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), India seeks to strengthen economic linkages with ASEAN nations and other Indo-Pacific partners, promoting trade, investment, and connectivity. In April 2019, India set up an Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The division is meant to integrate under one Indo-Pacific umbrella, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, and the Quadrilateral of the US, Japan, Australia, and India. This strategic alignment of economic interests with diplomatic priorities underscores India's commitment to fostering regional prosperity and stability through multilateral cooperation.

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Objective:

This paper aims to analyze the impact of the Bhartiya narrative on India's participation and leadership in ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific multilateral forums. It explores how India's cultural and historical ties, coupled with its political philosophy, influence its multilateral engagements.

The Bhartiya Approach to Multilateralism:

India's approach to regional multilateralism is deeply rooted in its civilizational ethos and historical experiences, shaping a foreign policy that balances idealism with pragmatism. The guiding principles of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (the world is one family) and non-alignment provide the philosophical and strategic foundations for India's engagement in regional and global multilateral forums. These principles underscore India's emphasis on inclusivity, peaceful coexistence, and strategic autonomy, while also responding to contemporary geopolitical realities. This approach has allowed India to play a constructive role in regional multilateralism, particularly in the context of the Indo-Pacific.

In multilateral settings, India advocates for dialogue and diplomacy as the primary tools for conflict resolution. India has consistently pushed for peaceful settlements of disputes, including maritime conflicts, in forums like the United Nations and regional platforms like ASEAN and IORA. Rooted in its respect for sovereignty, India's foreign policy approach avoids interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In the Indo-Pacific, for example, India's support for principles such as freedom of navigation and respect for international law reflects a balanced approach that respects the sovereignty of all nations while advocating for a rules-based order.

India's strategic autonomy allows it to maneuver through intricate geopolitical landscapes by forming a variety of alliances. For example, India collaborates with the United States and Japan in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, it sustains a strong economic relationship with China and participates in organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). India's democratic ideals, which are embedded in its constitution and political framework, highlight inclusive governance, the rule of law, human rights, and pluralism. These values are fundamental not only to India's domestic policies but also to its international interactions. The Bhartiya perspective in regional multilateralism is guided by several core principles:

Strategic Autonomy: India has consistently sought to maintain its independence in foreign policy while fostering relationships with major global and regional powers. This principle underpins India's approach to multilateralism, where it engages with a range of actors without becoming excessively aligned with any single power bloc.

Inclusivity and Openness: India advocates for an inclusive and open regional order, where all nations—regardless of size or power—have a voice in shaping the rules that govern the Indo-Pacific. This approach is particularly important in ensuring that smaller states in the region are not dominated by larger powers, particularly China.

Rule-Based Order: India champions a rules-based international order, with particular emphasis on respect for international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). India's commitment to upholding the principles of freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of disputes, and sovereignty of states forms the foundation of its Indo-Pacific policy.

Maritime Security: As a major maritime nation with a vast coastline and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, India places significant emphasis on maritime security. Ensuring the security of sea lanes of communication, preventing piracy, and countering maritime terrorism are critical components of India's regional engagement.

Economic Integration: India's involvement in regional multilateralism is also driven by economic considerations. With its fast-growing economy, India seeks to deepen trade relationships, participate in regional supply chains, and invest in infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity within the Indo-Pacific region.

India's Key Strategic Objectives in the Indo-Pacific:

In accomplishing the status of a 'leading power' India now clearly understands the critical role of

geoeconomic heft. As such, New Delhi has strategically woven economic diplomacy into the fabric of the country's development goals, focusing on securing investments and generating employment. By actively pursuing new trade agreements and nurturing foreign investment inflows, India has brought about a transformative shift in its economic diplomacy. India's engagement with Southeast Asia and its role in the Indo-Pacific is guided by a multifaceted strategic framework aimed at deepening economic ties, enhancing regional security cooperation, and bolstering cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Defence analyst Derek Grossman rightly examines that India through its continuous efforts to improve goodwill without business interest is pushing back against China in major regions of South Asia.

A. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)

The Quad, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as one of the most significant Indo-Pacific multilateral initiatives in recent years. Originally conceived in 2007, the Quad was revived in 2017 as a platform for strategic dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues. India's participation in the Quad is driven by several strategic considerations. The Quad is not a formal alliance but a strategic forum aimed at maintaining a rules-based order and promoting regional security and stability. Key areas of cooperation under the Quad include:

1. **Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation:** The Quad emphasizes the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and ensuring that maritime disputes are resolved according to international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
2. **Economic and Infrastructure Development:** The Quad countries have committed to working together on infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific, offering alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This includes initiatives to promote transparent and sustainable infrastructure development.
3. **Emerging Technologies and Supply Chain Resilience:** Cooperation on emerging technologies such as 5G, cybersecurity, and resilient supply chains is also a key focus of the Quad, with India playing a pivotal role in discussions on these issues.
4. **Health Security:** Quad cooperation has expanded to include health security, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Quad Vaccine Partnership aims to boost vaccine production and distribution in the Indo-Pacific.

B. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The IORA, established in 1997, brings together countries bordering the Indian Ocean to promote economic cooperation, maritime security, and sustainable development. India plays a leading role within IORA, using it as a platform to foster regional collaboration in areas such as trade, fisheries management, disaster risk reduction, and maritime safety.

C. ASEAN-Centered Indo-Pacific Forums

India's involvement with ASEAN has been a fundamental aspect of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Forums centered around ASEAN, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus), offer India opportunities to engage in discussions on security, economic, and strategic matters. The Act East Policy of India highlights the significance of strengthening relationships with ASEAN and East Asian nations. India has consistently advocated for ASEAN's pivotal role in Indo-Pacific multilateralism. By endorsing ASEAN-led initiatives, India emphasizes its commitment to inclusive regionalism, ensuring that all perspectives are considered. This approach aligns with India's traditional non-alignment policy, which aims to avoid exclusive alliances and promote regional stability through dialogue and cooperation.

D. Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

Introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019 during the East Asia Summit, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) aims to enhance collaboration among Indo-Pacific countries in areas such as maritime security, sustainable marine resource utilization, and disaster risk management. It promotes an open, inclusive, and non-treaty-based global effort to address challenges, particularly in the maritime sector, through practical cooperation. The initiative strives to cultivate a sense of community by forming new partnerships with like-

minded nations through tangible collaboration. India is advocating for other countries to join the IPOI and take the lead in some thematic areas within the Initiative. The IPOI encompasses seven thematic areas that address a broad range of issues across the 'security-development-capacity building' spectrum, including security, safety, resource development, science and technology, resilient infrastructure, and marine environment-ecology. The initiative reflects the spirit of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" by inviting all Indo-Pacific nations, regardless of their size or power, to participate in shaping the region's future.

Challenges to India's Role in Indo-Pacific Multilateralism

Although India is actively engaged and strategically committed to promoting a "Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific," it encounters numerous intricate challenges that restrict its influence and effectiveness in regional multilateral forums. A major obstacle arises from the intensifying strategic competition with China. Beijing views India's involvement in initiatives such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India), along with its broader Indo-Pacific activities, as efforts to encircle or limit Chinese influence. Consequently, China has taken on a more assertive and sometimes confrontational stance—especially in the South China Sea, where it continues to militarize contested islands, and in the Indian Ocean, where its expanding naval presence challenges India's traditional sphere of influence. The 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley further heightened tensions, underscoring the volatility of the India-China bilateral relationship.

India faces the challenge of balancing its strategic goals: on one side, enhancing its influence in regional alliances that can act as a counterbalance to China; on the other, steering clear of overt hostility that might lead to escalation or threaten regional peace. This delicate balancing act is further complicated by the varying threat perceptions and strategic objectives among India's Quad partners, which can occasionally result in differing strategies towards China and weaken the group's overall effectiveness.

A key obstacle for India is the mismatch between its strategic aspirations and its actual resources. While India seeks to become a prominent power in the Indo-Pacific, its capacity to extend influence across this vast maritime region is hampered by financial limitations and insufficient infrastructure. Budgetary restrictions have impeded the progress of modernizing India's naval, air, and coastal capabilities, which are crucial for asserting maritime authority and managing regional issues. Moreover, India is not keeping pace in offering regional public goods such as connectivity initiatives, disaster assistance, and capacity-building activities, which are essential for bolstering soft power and cultivating trust with smaller Indo-Pacific countries.

India's efforts are further complicated by the increasing influence of foreign powers in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is steadily pulling Indo-Pacific nations into its economic sphere, often with investments that India currently struggles to match in terms of size and speed. At the same time, the United States' varying commitment to multilateralism, influenced by its domestic politics, introduces an element of unpredictability into India's strategic planning. Additionally, regional organizations like ASEAN, which are pivotal to Indo-Pacific diplomacy, typically operate on a consensus basis and are hesitant to take firm positions, which limits their effectiveness as platforms for countering aggressive actions.

India also faces internal challenges related to policy and bureaucracy. Decision-making delays, difficulties in coordinating between agencies, and inconsistent foreign policy messages can weaken India's credibility and ability to respond effectively in the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific region. In conclusion, although India's increasing involvement in Indo-Pacific multilateralism highlights its desire to play a significant role in shaping the regional order, it must address substantial diplomatic, economic, and strategic obstacles to turn this ambition into lasting influence.

Conclusion:

The Bhartiya approach to regional multilateralism, drawing from the philosophical underpinnings of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and the strategic principles of non-alignment, is characterized by inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence. India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects these ideals, as it seeks to promote a free, open, and inclusive regional order while maintaining independence in its foreign policy decisions. This approach allows India to navigate the complexities of contemporary geopolitics, balancing relations with major powers and promoting cooperation

across a wide range of regional and global issues. India's diplomatic strategy is defined by a careful balancing act, navigating between aligning with Western powers (including the US, European Union, and Quad) and maintaining engagement with China and Russia. Rather than committing to fixed alliances, India's strategic autonomy enables her to act as a mediator, fostering dialogue and partnerships across major global powers. As a distinctive middle power, India places its interests at the forefront, a stance strengthened by its expanding geoeconomic influence, increasing geopolitical stature supported by military capabilities, and a robust national confidence fostered by stable political leadership.

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