

POST-COVID WORLD ORDER AND INDIA'S EMERGENCE AS A LEADING POWER IN INDO-PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a catalyst for the new world order, pivoted towards the Indo-Pacific. It is likely to enhance India's strategic position as a key stakeholder in the region. On the one hand, it would present a challenge to India's foreign policy to cope up in the post-COVID world having the possibility of intensified rivalry between the US and China, while on the other hand, it would create a rare opportunity for India to lead and play a pivotal role in stabilising the Indo-Pacific region and the world at large. Thus, the article will explore the prospects of India's emerging role as a 'leading power' in the world and particularly, in the Indo-Pacific against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will examine—how would India realign its geopolitical and geo-economic interests in the post-COVID world and how would its active engagements in Indo-Pacific with major players in the multilateral formation of ASEAN, Quad and Quad-plus help to stabilise and secure the emerging world order

KEYWORDS: Post-COVID world order, India, Indo-Pacific, US, China, ASEAN, Quad.

INTRODUCTION

The world order is shifting and witnessing numerous geopolitical and geo-economical changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The enormity of the pandemic is a clear indication of the fact that the post-world war-II structure and architecture are not competent to manage a crisis of this unprecedented scale. Indeed, the pandemic has “accelerated the transition to a more fragmented world order in which the future organising principles of the international system are unclear” (CSIS 2020). However, the present state of flux of the world order due to the pandemic is indicating a major shift and realignment of power in the world and seems to be a catalyst for a new (Post-COVID) world order, pivoted towards the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific region is consistently emerging as a new centre of gravity of geopolitics, geo-economics and geo-technology. Moreover, it is now a new battlefield of powers, where a great game of realignment between the predominant power—the United States and emerging power—China is set to be launched as defined by A.F.K. Organski in his ‘Power Transition Theory’¹, however, “neither China nor the United States is positioned to emerge from Covid-19 as a ‘winner’ in a way that would dramatically shift the balance of world power in its favour” (CSIS 2020). Hence, being a key stakeholder of the region, it is certainly a challenge for India to enhance its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific-centred world that is on the verge of a contest for supremacy between the US and China, and it is also a rare “moment of opportunity for India to prove its capacity, leadership vision

and chart a decisive course to the frontline” (Khushnam 2020) of the Post-COVID World Order. As India has intensified its engagements with countries such as the US, Australia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand and Vietnam to share ideas and best practices under the Indo-Pacific strategic set-up in an effort to fight the unique and complex challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (MEA 2020), it showcases India's potential to become a ‘leading power’ in the post-COVID world order.

Thus, this article begins with the assessment of the causes and consequences of the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a new geopolitical theatre and subsequently, India's strategic position and realignment in the region. The article investigates India's ‘free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) policy as well as its endeavours to strengthen the ‘Act East’ policy in the region. Furthermore, it explores India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific under three theoretical perspectives—liberalist, realist and constructivist. Therefore, India's incorporation with regional institutions such as ‘Indian Ocean Rim Association’ (IORA), ‘ASEAN Regional Forum’ (ARF), ‘East Asia Summit’ (EAS), etc. and strategic cooperation with major players of the region in the multilateral formation of Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and Quad-plus in counterbalancing China's growing influence and aggressive footprints in the region are analysed in the article along with India's pursuit of secure, inclusive and rule-based world order. In this context, the article also attempts to analyse India's Indo-Pacific Policy and its significance in accelerating India's rise as a ‘leading power’, in the emerging new world order.

INDO-PACIFIC: A PIVOT OF POST-COVID WORLD ORDER

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a catalyst for the new world order, pivoted towards the 'Indo-Pacific'. The Indo-Pacific is a new emerging geopolitical and geo-economical super-region that encompasses both the Indian and Pacific oceans, defined in large part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of major stakeholders— ASEAN (Association of South East Nations), Australia, China, India, Japan, etc. and the continued strategic role and presence of the United State (Medcalf 2015). It denotes a shift from the idea of 'Asia-Pacific' to a new and broader construct of 'Indo-Pacific'. As a geographical concept, 'Indo-Pacific' has existed for decades. But in geopolitics, it was occasionally used in the early and mid-20th century. Notably, the concept has gained wide currency among the foreign policy pundits, security analysts and government officials, particularly from Australia, the United States, Japan and even India in recent years.

Indo-Pacific term was first used by Guruprret S. Khurana in an article carried out in the January 2007 issue of the "Strategic Analysis journal" titled "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation" (Khurana 2007). The spirit of the term was picked up by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, as reflected in his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007 that talked about the "Confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans" as the dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity in the broader Asia (MOFA 2007). The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, first officially used the term 'Indo-Pacific' in October 2010, in Honolulu, in a geopolitical sense, to elucidate developments in the Asia-Pacific region (Clinton 2011). An Indian scholar Gnanagurunathan acknowledged "the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a mental map to propound emerging geopolitical realities" because, Indo-Pacific is a region which contains close to half the world's population and draws Australia together with the emerging powers of China and India, the dynamic sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, and the resource-rich and sometimes volatile Middle-East and Africa with the continuous strategic and military presence of the United States (Gnanagurunathan, 2012).

Indo-Pacific is also the most militarized area in the world with seven of the world's ten largest standing armies, the world's largest and most sophisticated navy and five of the world's declared nuclear nations (Yoshihara 2013:91). The sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific region have nearly five major maritime chokepoints for global commerce including the 'Strait of Malacca', through which almost a quarter of world trade passes and it also serves as a maritime super highway for in-demand energy resources that drive the world's largest economies. Almost 68 per cent of India's, 80 per cent of China's and 62 per cent of the United States' oil is

shipped from this Region. This emerging region is also a source of approximately 70 per cent of natural resources in the world (Michel and Passarelli 2014).

Hence, as a geopolitical and geo-economical concept, 'Indo-Pacific' certainly seems more expansive than the term 'Asia-Pacific'. Presumably, it is more rational in so far as it adequately reflects changing priorities of the dominant power—the United States in the region (Gupta 2011) as well as it represents the inclusion of the western Pacific within the range of India's security interests against the concept of the 'Asia-Pacific', which hitherto excluded India (Saran 2011), and demands a pivotal role of India as a 'leading power' in the region against the growing clout and aggressive footprints of a rising power—China in the region. Therefore, Indo-Pacific Region is growing as a geopolitical as well as a geo-economic centre of an emerging new world order where a shift in the global balance of power is occurring. Analysing the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a new pivot of world order, Former US Ambassador Chas W. Freeman stated that,

Since the end of the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the world's most dynamic geopolitical zone. Shifting balances of power there are reshaping international perceptions . . . the Indo-Pacific region is the world's new economic centre of gravity and that balance of power within it is evolving . . . The Indo-Pacific region is now the fulcrum of global geopolitics. (Freeman 2012)

Thus, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has acquired prominence among foreign policy analysts and security experts as they refer to the 'Asia-Pacific' region. The Australian government has gone furthest, adopting the 'Indo-Pacific' term as the country's formal definition of the region in its Defence White Paper of 2013 (Australia's Defence White Paper 2013). India also signalled the adoption of the idea while unveiling Act East Policy (AEP) at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in 2014 (Narendra Modi 2014). Japan announced the "free and Open Indo-Pacific" in 2016 as an updation of Shinzo Abe's idea of Indo-Pacific to foster the region into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous (MOFA 2016). The United States in November 2017 outlined a vision for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) in which all countries prosper side by side as sovereign, independent states (US Department of State 2019). India again in 2018 at the Shangri La Dialogue espoused the idea of a 'free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) to call for a common commitment, based on shared values and principles, to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. It certainly seems a strategic projection and gradual transformation of India's policy of 'Act East' into 'Act Indo-Pacific' (MEA 2018). Association of South East Asian Nations also adopted an 'ASEAN

Outlook on Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) in the 34th ASEAN Summit held in 2019 as a guide to ASEAN's engagement and cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region and to ensure ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, complementarities, a rules-based order anchored upon international law, and commitment to advancing economic engagement in the region (ASEAN 2019). Here both the US and China worked behind the scenes to protect their interests with ASEAN in the wider Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region but the ASEAN's outlook on Indo-Pacific is seen to have a "US tilt despite China's best efforts" (Strategic News International 2020). Hence, contrary to the US, China is not yet comfortable with the idea of the Indo-Pacific as it believes that the Indo-Pacific conception is a threat to its power and interests, and it is designed to contain China's rise.

However, it seems that the emergence of Indo-Pacific as the newest idea which constitutes the Asian region and as a pivot to the emerging new world order is widely accepted among major stakeholders. By extending reach into the Indian Ocean—at a minimum via the inclusion of India, and potentially the entire Indian Ocean littoral—the Indo-Pacific concept offers a competing vision of the geographic scope of Asia. For many, the Indo-Pacific is therefore used as a "replacement geography" (Chacko 2014). The concept has now become sufficiently ingrained in the foreign policies of countries such as Australia, India, Japan and the US as well as under the strategic framework of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) of these countries, where the term Asia-Pacific would have previously been used officially.

The unprecedented wave of COVID-19 pandemic has also provided a boost to the Indo-Pacific security framework, as exemplified by the active role of the Quad. With COVID-19, the group was upgraded to 'Quad-Plus', adding three additional Indo-Pacific countries: New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam. On the one hand, this expansion is driven by the logic of convergent security interests under the pandemic and jointly looking at a way forward to the issues of cooperation such as "vaccine development, challenges of stranded citizens, assistance to countries in need and mitigating the impact on the global economy" (Jash 2020), on the other hand, it is indicating the formation of an alliance to counterbalance China's aggressive posture in the region. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic is also being used by the US to defame and counter China by saying it is a China virus/Wuhan Virus. Therefore, the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for the Indo-Pacific-centred world and how would the post-crisis world look for China would be critical to be mapped in the emerging new (post-COVID) world order. However, it would be a fascinating global strategic landscape to observe as a post-COVID world order emerges, and for sure, India as a responsible and key stakeholder could play an important role in its possible transformation.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The growing geopolitical and geo-economic significance of the Indo-Pacific region amid in COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored by India's security and economic perspective. However, debate in India about Indo-Pacific evokes various divergent views. For many, the inclusion of the term 'Indo' in 'Indo-Pacific' will make India's strategic position in the region more authentic and enhance its security nexus. Hence, "India will be justified in claiming a national interest across the region and can then tailor policies accordingly" (Gupta 2011). But others feel that it is too early to make a major shift in India's foreign policy and "the unwitting adoption of a geopolitical categorisation might send a wrong, if not false, signal to other countries about India's intentions and actions" (Gnangurunathan 2012). And, some of them see this, as an attempt to establish a new security architecture between India, Australia, Japan, the United States and ASEAN to contain the rise of China in the region. However, with the declaration of 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific' (FOIIP) by India in 2018, it is very obvious to understand India's stances and strategic position in the region.

ANALYSIS OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC POSITION

India's strategic position in Indo-Pacific can be analysed from three International Relations theoretical perspectives of—liberalist, realist and constructivist.

1-LIBERALIST PERSPECTIVE

Liberalism in International Relations primarily emphasises economic interdependence and the importance of institutions in facilitating cooperation among nations (Keohane 1984). Hence, According to the liberalist perspective, India's strategic position in Indo-Pacific can be seen in its active engagement and accommodation in regional institutional settings such as 'Indian Ocean Rim Association' (IORA) 'ASEAN Regional Forum' (ARF), 'East Asia Summit' (EAS), etc. as well as in its efforts to establish institutional dialogues to facilitate cooperation among states across the region. India was behind the formation of IORA in 1997 along with South Africa, which is a dynamic organisation, promoting a common vision with an ever-growing momentum for mutually beneficial regional cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach. India became the sectoral partner of ASEAN in 1992 after the launch of its 'Look East Policy' and later became a Dialogue partner in 1992 and a Summit partner in 2002. India was also accommodated in EAS in 2005 as a member along with Australia and New Zealand. Medcalf (2014:472) opined that when EAS accepted India, Australia and New Zealand as members in 2005, the "contemporary Indo-Pacific era began, even if few noticed at that time".

Moreover, it appears that the institutional logic backing the Indo-Pacific concept stems from the EAS expansion and if India's membership would be confirmed in the 'Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum' (APEC), the Indo-Pacific regional institutionalisation will be strengthened. Though India has been interested in joining APEC long before 2015, its entry is under check yet due to different reasons, namely its unfair treatment of foreign direct investments in the country and its perceived inability to carry out steady economic reforms. Moreover, India's entry into the forum can be beneficial for all members in terms of market access. With India in APEC, it can balance the high dependency of member countries on China as well as offer another channel in diluting the ongoing trade tension/war between China and the US (Mohamad 2019). Moreover, India is also very keen to establish institutional dialogues in the Indo-Pacific just after the declaration of its idea of a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific' (FOIIP). The Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue is an instance of India's liberalist efforts, which was started in 2018 (National Maritime Foundation n.d.). Therefore, it can be said that India has adopted an inclusive approach to institutionalising the Indo-Pacific that would produce positive externalities of peace and stability in the region.

2- REALIST PERSPECTIVE

Realist theory suggests that the balancing of power is normal state behaviour under anarchy (Mearsheimer 2001). Thus, the Indo-Pacific highlights the strategic importance of India in regional security. As "a rising power India is a natural balancer against China" (Scott 2012) and could be a linchpin of a 'balancing strategy' for other states including the US in the Indo-Pacific to form a military alliance against China. The Indo-Pacific concept, therefore, offers a strategic opportunity for India to play a more important role in counterbalancing China's increasing power and influence in regional security. Even some scholars pointed out that the strategic anxiety caused by the rise of China is the major reason for Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to promote this new concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' in regional security (Pan 2014) and to form a multilateral framework of 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' (Quad) to counter China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific (Grossman 2020). India was a vital part of the US 'rebalance policy' under the Obama regime aimed "to prevent China from becoming the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region" (Castro 2018) and is also an important stakeholder in the US 'Asia Reassurance Initiative Act' (ARIA) in Trump's administration focused to "to counter the encroaching influence and growing threat from China and to reinvigorate US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region" (Katoch 2019).

However, three potential problems can distort this balancing function of Indo-Pacific dynamics. First, although

India is rising, it still hesitates to formally balance against China. On the one hand, India is a founding member of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). The NAM-embedded foreign policy principle precludes India from forging a formal military alliance with any country, including the United States. On the other hand, the India-China territorial dispute mainly focuses on land demarcation, not on the maritime domain. Second, although China has expanded its naval activities to build up a so-called 'string of pearls'³ in the Indian Ocean, its military projection capability in the Indian Ocean is still limited (Green and Shearer 2012). Third, China has become India's largest trading partner in recent years. Hence, it would be a very costly decision in the economic sense if India decides to form an anti-China alliance with other states given its deep economic involvement with China. Therefore, India should avoid any act of antagonising China, however, India can choose to be a balancer against China under the multilateral framework of Quad and Quad-plus without being abode by any 'collective defence'⁴ principle by not joining any proposed military alliance like 'NATO'.

3- CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

Constructivism in International Relations emphasises the role of ideas, values, and norms in constituting state behaviour and world politics. According to the constructivist perspective, India's proposition of a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific' (FOIIP) reflects a new social construct based on shared values and identities, therefore, has become a new social glue to connect states in the Indo-Pacific. According to constructivism, India's idea of Indo-Pacific regionalism offers an 'ideational construct' based on a "shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region", which highlighted the importance of partnerships based on shared values and interests. FOIIP promotes the 'rules-based international order' for the region which will be based on "the consent of all, not on the power of the few and it must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons" (Roy-Chaudhary 2018a). It is, therefore clear that India's FOIIP is meant to promote a value-oriented and norm-based order in the region and is committed to working with like-minded partners to maintain the rules-based order.

INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

The Indo-Pacific places significant importance on India by highlighting the country as a key player in the post-COVID world order pivoted towards the super-region. Although India is aware of its central position and emerging role in the Indo-Pacific region, China's rise and its expanding economic, political and military engagements in the region and the United States' contest with China are shifting the strategic realities of the region. Hence, India's approach towards the Indo-Pacific is shaped by these changing realities

and multiplying challenges in the region, where the US fears Chinese dominance, China fears India's rise and US containment, and India fears China's aggression. Therefore, there is the potential for many friction areas to develop into potential areas of conflict in the Indo-Pacific region.

As India has articulated and adopted its version of the 'Free, Open, Inclusive Indo-Pacific' (FOIIP) Policy' under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018 (Roy-Chaudhary 2018b), it is an immense task for the diplomats and policymakers to establish a fine balance between India's emerging geopolitical competition and confrontation with China and its growing engagement and partnership with other major stakeholders of the region such as the United States, Japan, Australia, ASEAN, etc., who seeks India's central role to counterbalance China. Hence, it is very clear to understand that the Indo-Pacific recognises India's strategic position in a way that the Asia-Pacific concept does not. Former Indian Ambassador to the US Nirupama Rao has affirmed this renewed connotation and pithily remarked that "the earlier concept of the Asia-Pacific had sought to exclude India... [but now] the mental map of the Asia Pacific has changed and that the centre of gravity has moved westward to include India" (Rao 2013). However, it elucidates India's role as a responsible leading power of the Indo-Pacific in maintaining peace and order in the region. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar clearly defined that "India treads a fine line in Indo-Pacific region" and Indian vision for Indo-Pacific is "for something" and "not against somebody" ...and that something is peace, security, stability, prosperity and rule-based world order (Chaudhary 2019). Hence, the principles of 'strategic autonomy'⁵, 'openness' and 'inclusiveness' will be core to India's Indo-Pacific policy. India has to maintain cordial relations with most countries and stakeholders in the region without being entrapped into the contested power politics in the Indo-Pacific.

India's Indo-Pacific policy is evolved out of its earlier 'Look East Policy' which was renewed and redefined as 'Act East Policy' in 2014 to recalibrate India's focus on ASEAN states and to shift the emphasis of what had previously been an economic and trade-based policy to nurturing political and security relationships. As the Indo-Pacific region became the centre of geopolitics, it "fits quintessentially into India's already existing 'geopolitical outlook' for the expanded neighbourhood, under the aegis of the AEP" (Scott 2012:169). Hence, starting with fresh vigour in 2014, AEP has gained a new momentum while acting in the east and has soon become a bridge to India's engagement in Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, with the aspiration to become a leading power in the region, India seeks to engage at a broader level

with other major powers active in the region, in addition to ASEAN countries. In recent years, there have been many efforts to revive the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)', which accommodates India with the major powers of the region—the US, Japan and Australia. Quad is a reaffirmation of the fact that countries have begun to express a sense of uncertainty as the power shifts occur and it demonstrates the need to maintain the current status quo in world order (Sundararaman 2017:76). However, among the Quad members, many feel that India is "the most ambivalent of all" (Thu 2019). In his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not even mention 'Quad' he rather used 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific, neither a club of limited members nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. or directed against any country (MEA 2018). However, looking at China's activities in the region, Quad appears to be compelling for India's security interest. Another major dilemma with India's Indo-Pacific policy is to "draw a balance between the Quad and the ASEAN, as Quad can 'dilute ASEAN centrality'" (Saha 2018). Hence, at the same time, if India wants to engage in the Quad actively, it must ensure that AEP objectives are not side-lined. Besides, many in the ASEAN region are concerned about the Quad; however, others believed that the Quad "complements the ASEAN-centred regional framework" as the Quad members have also acknowledged the Centrality of ASEAN (Thu 2018). Some scholars also perceive the "resurgence of the Quad as 'Quad-Plus' to include ASEAN in the future" (Saha 2018) as India's idea of 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (SAGAR) is already acknowledged by the ASEAN (Singh 2018). The recent inclusion of three additional Indo-Pacific powers—New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam in the Quad meeting held in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis hints at the formation of Quad-Plus (Smith 2020), however, it is too early to sense the shape of post-COVID world order.

Therefore, it can be said that the Act 'East' is now getting transformed into Act 'Indo-Pacific' as India unfolded its Indo-Pacific policy. India's foreign and security objectives in Indo-Pacific policy would remain the same to protect its interests in the post-COVID world, but not necessarily through military means. However, facilitating its increasing engagement and securing vital interests will require a certain level of protection under the multilateral frameworks of Quad and Quad-Plus, which could enable it to redress its issues of security and protect its sea lines of communication. Therefore, India should prefer to engage with all regional players in a cooperative arrangement as specified in its 'free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific' policy as it will more likely serve its interests rather than any unproductive antagonism with a major power in the Indo-Pacific-centred world.

CONCLUSION

One can easily visualise the growing uncertainty of the Indo-Pacific-centred new world order which will surely be a matter of strategic concern for India. There is, therefore, a need to search for an alternative model for maintaining peace and ensuring security in the Indo-Pacific region. For India's security interests, the Indo-Pacific concept has been employed in such a fashion that it retains a focus on its 'strategic autonomy' so that it would help in the creation of an open, inclusive, stable, secure and prosperous new world order. Thus, while India supports established regional institutions, norms related to the freedom of navigation and the peaceful settlement of disputes following international laws, its focus in the Indo-Pacific is not confined only to a top-down structure built on multilateral institutions or alliances.

Looking towards India's desire for a 'free, open and inclusive' security framework in the Indo-Pacific, it is recommended that India should focus on 'non-traditional security' and issue-driven cooperative ventures rather than assuming to essentially share the US, Japan, Australia and ASEAN's preoccupations in the region. Moreover, this will be the key to achieve a more substantial level of engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, another crucial issue related to India's strategic position and stances is to recognise the difference between India's intentions and its capabilities. Certainly, the Indian navy possesses the ability to protect its commercial and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and now India has a developing 'Bluewater Navy' but its capacity to engage either in the South China Sea or in the Pacific is currently limited.

Therefore, India's strategic position should be to engage other countries in the region on mutually agreeable and cooperative terms, not at the instruction or behest of another country. It is also vital for India's foreign policy perspective to shape its strategic stances and role in the Indo-Pacific region in a very careful manner so that it could avoid hostile relations with other players in the region because this is a place, where cooperation, competition and confrontation simultaneously occur. Thus, a holistic and balanced approach is essential for India to accelerate its rise as a 'leading power', maintain its strategic autonomy, and enhance its great power aspirations and power projection capabilities in the post-COVID world order pivoted towards the most contested region of Indo-Pacific.

NOTES

¹ The principle predictive of power transition theory is in the likelihood of war and the stability of alliances. The theory states that the war is most likely, of longest duration, and greatest magnitude, when a challenger (emerging power) to the dominant power enters into

approximate parity with the predominant state and is dissatisfied with the existing system. Similarly, alliances are most stable when the parties to the alliance are satisfied with the system structure. For details, See Organski, A. F. K. (1968) *World Politics*. 2d ed. New York: Knopf.

² The 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' or the Quad is an informal dialogue between four democratic countries, such as the USA, Japan, Australia and India. It was informally organized in December 2004 for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to respond to the massive Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. After which in 2007, the four countries met on the side-lines of ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila. Later on, the first naval exercise by the Quad members gained Chinese opposition pertaining to which Australia Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pulled out of the exercise. The Quad became inactive for years; however, in 2017 there was talk of reviving the Quad.

³ 'String of Pearls' refers to a geopolitical theory to the network of Chinese intentions in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and also assumed as China's encirclement policy against India. Precisely, it refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities developed by China in countries falling on the Indian Ocean between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan.

4 Collective defence' means that an attack against one ally is considered as an attack against all Allies.

5 Strategic Autonomy denotes the changing course of India's current foreign policy trajectory. The new phase of Non-Aligned movement (NAM) has now translated into a modern-day phrase - Strategic Autonomy. This term was first time officially documented in a policy paper of CPR (Centre for Policy Research) entitled "Non-Alignment 2.0: A foreign and strategic policy for India in the 21st century", which identifies the basic principles and drivers that would make the country a leading player on the world stage while preserving its strategic autonomy and value system. The findings and views of this document are product of collective deliberation by an independent group of analysts and policy makers: Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Kumar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran, Siddharth Varadarajan.

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