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Indian Approaches to Multilateral Cooperation and Institutions in Eurasia

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The changing nature of the world order and the uncertainty this brings into international affairs is pushing countries to hedge their bets by investing in multilateral and bilateral economic projects as well as creating new groupings – regional and global. India sees many benefits in joining such organizations and has joined quite a few in recent times, albeit for different purposes. This paper looks at India's historic and current approaches towards multilateralism, the importance of Eurasia in Indian foreign policy and its aims in joining several multilateral organizations in Eurasia.

Introduction: Locating Multilateralism in International Relations

The structure of the international system is undergoing transformation of a scale unprecedented in recent times. This change has been brought about by the relative decline in the dominance of the US and the rise of other powers like China, Russia, and India. The world is moving towards multipolarity, admittedly an asymmetrical one, but also one which could coalesce into a bipolarity between the US and China in the long run. In this churn, none of the major powers are satisfied with the existing balance of power: the US wants to remain the sole superpower, China wants to be acknowledged as the other superpower, Russia wants to again be treated as an equal by the US and China, while India is apprehensive of Chinese hegemonic aspirations. These aspirations are the cause of much distrust among the major powers today: relations between the US and Russia are at their worst since the end of the Cold War, China and the US have tense relations, India and China are trying to stabilize relations after a period of acrimony. The major powers appear today to be like the unhappy families in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: 'Each unhappy family (major power in this case) is unhappy in its own way.'

One view is that greater multilateral engagement, particularly at the regional level, will help overcome this distrust and unhappiness. Thus, countries are rediscovering the virtues of multilateralism,¹ and are seeing renewed merit in pooling national sovereignty in cooperative institutional arrangements² with the belief that multilateral institutions and norms can help stabilize the international consequences of rapid changes³ and help overcome distrust.

This approach to multilateralism is predicated on the belief that if states become part of organizations or institutions, they will be forced to communicate between themselves. Being part of the same organization will increase interdependence and raise the costs associated with provocation

¹ Robert O. Keohane defines multilateralism as 'the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states' (see Keohane, RO, 1990 'Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research', *International Journal*, Autumn, no. 45, p. 731.

² Hampson, FO, & Heinbecker, P, 2011, 'The "New" Multilateralism of the Twenty-First Century', *Global Governance*, vol. 17, no. 3, *Emerging Powers and Multilateralism in the Twenty-First Century*, July–September, pp. 299–310. P. 299.

³ Ruggie, JG, 1992, 'Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution', *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 3, Summer, pp. 561–598. P. 561.

and aggression, making states think twice before starting hostile actions. States are forced to cooperate as they confront common problems such as depletion of resources, environmental issues, pandemics, refugees or immigration in addition to traditional security challenges. But this enthusiasm for multilateral organizations is also anchored in realism or human nature and the saying attributed to Sun Tzu that one should keep one's friends close, but enemies even closer. Being part of multilaterals in which adversaries are members also helps states to shape outcomes which are not unfavourable to them. International organizations provide information about the objectives of other members and thus offer transparency, reducing distrust and fear of being taken advantage of. This, perhaps, explains the mushrooming of regional organizations, particularly in Eurasia, which has become the main arena for great power competition.

India's Approach Towards Multilateralism: A Short Review

India is a member of more than 2000 international organizations out of 6000 organizations in the world today. However, India is not a member of any organization based on the collective security system in which a war against one state is *ipso facto* considered a war against all.

In the years after gaining independence, when the world was in the throes of the Cold War, as a weak and poor country, India saw merit in joining a number of multilaterals, mostly big groupings such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the G77, the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, the Colombo Conference of 1954, and the Bandung Asian-African Conference of 1955 – because it understood the strength of numbers. It realized that alone, there was little it could do to make its presence felt. However, as part of collectives like NAM, it did more than made its voice heard at international forums, a key interest for the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. As Mukherjee and Malone argue, 'in the early years, India turned to multilateralism as a way of magnifying its influence in international affairs until it could exert influence more materially.'⁴

But it did not show much interest in joining regional groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In fact, it refused to join ASEAN when it was offered membership because it felt that ASEAN was founded under American influence, and it had ideological differences with the South East Asian countries which were allies of the US. It was only towards the end of the Cold War that it became more active in seeking out membership in regional bodies and helped establish regional organizations, e.g. the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), as it saw these as a means to promote its national interests. After the end of the Cold War and post globalization, the number of regional groupings increased substantially because countries, including India, saw the need to create interdependencies for prosperity and security. As India's economy opened up in the 1990s, India sensed the importance of regional organizations in helping its development and ensuring stability on the periphery. A key part of this extended periphery is Eurasia.

⁴ Mukherjee, R & Malone, DM, 2011, 'From High Ground to High Table: The Evolution of Indian Multilateralism', *Global Governance*, vol. 17, no. 3, *Emerging Powers and Multilateralism in the Twenty-First Century*, July–September, pp. 311-329. P. 311.

Eurasia's Importance for India

The importance of Eurasia⁵ has long been recognised by strategic thinkers right from the time of British strategist Halford MacKinder who in 1904 said: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.' Subsequently, in more recent times, former US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski described Eurasia as the 'grand chessboard' on which the struggle for global primacy is played and argued: 'A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions.'⁶

The region's importance has renewed in the wake of the rise of China and India and with the centre of geopolitics and geoeconomics shifting to the region. The region is host to six out of the nine nuclear powers, home to large reserves of energy and around 70% of the world's population. It is the arena of many conflicts and therefore competition among the major powers. As an emerging power and one that is physically located in Eurasia, India has no choice but to engage itself in relations, both multilateral and bilateral, in the region. This is particularly important given the lack of a security architecture in the region. Thus, New Delhi sees merit in being part of most of the important multilateral organizations in Eurasia.

We will now look at the important multilaterals in Eurasia of which India is a member.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

The only regional organization, which brings all the South Asian countries together in a region dominated in every sense by India, SAARC, unfortunately has not been a success. A combination of factors – India–Pakistan rivalry, China's offers of economic largesse, which tempts smaller countries to play the 'non-alignment' game, India's tardiness in execution of committed projects and inability to match China's deep pockets, and the lack of trust among members – has ensured that South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions globally. India itself today appears to give reduced importance to the organization and prefers other regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and sub-regional groupings within SAARC such as the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) involving only four SAARC nations, i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. This is probably because India wants to contain China's influence in the South Asia as well as avoid giving Pakistan an opportunity to stall progress in these groupings.

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, Eurasia is defined as the unbroken stretch from London to Tokyo.

⁶ Brzezinski, Z, 1997, 'The Grand Chessboard', New York: Basic Books, p.31.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

India became a sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1992, a full dialogue partner in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, and a founding member of the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005. ASEAN is important for India on several levels. It dovetails into India's Act East (earlier known as Look East) Policy, which aims to connect India to the countries towards its eastern borders. The idea is to build interdependencies so that India's eastern and north-eastern provinces share the prosperity of Southeast Asia, thus tackling the perennial underdevelopment in that part of the country. This is being done through a variety of trade related agreements and connectivity projects and at the political level, through enhanced bilateral and multilateral ties with the region. ASEAN's value for India is that it brings all the Southeast Asian countries together along with the major powers. Moreover, membership in the ARF and the EAS are a sign of India's arrival as a major political and economic player and gives it a certain global status. It also grants India a platform for a larger geopolitical role in the Indo-Pacific. Being an ASEAN partner also helps ensure that China does not completely dominate the region.

The Russia–India–China (RIC) Trilateral

First articulated by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, the RIC brings together the three largest countries in Asia. Notably, these countries are contiguous and represent over 19% of the world's total landmass and around 37% of the total global population. All the three are nuclear powers and two, Russia and China, are permanent members in the UN Security Council, while India also aspires to become one. On the face of it, the RIC looks like an unlikely *troika* given the less than cordial history between India and China and the USSR and China. However, what binds the group together is the now strong partnership between Beijing and Moscow and the historic relations between Russia and India. So, in a sense, Russia becomes the bridge between India and China, since it enjoys strong relations with both.

The merit of this trilateral is seen in that it could become an important forum to discuss the foundation of a stable security architecture in Eurasia given that all three countries are already, in varying degrees, significant players in Eurasia. Former Indian Ambassador to Russia, Ajai Malhotra, suggests that the RIC can also be useful to foster some regional approaches and in handling the regional dimensions of some global issues such as the situation in Central Asia, drug trafficking, terrorism, cyber security, etc.⁷ Regular RIC interaction could also help the three countries identify other issues with congruent views such as the volatile situation in the Middle East. An important takeaway that points to the potential of the format can be seen in the statement of the RIC Foreign Ministers in 2016, which called for cooperating in the interest of 'peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region, and the development of an open, inclusive, indivisible and transparent security and cooperation architecture

⁷ Malhotra, A, 2015, 'India-Russia-China: Is there a Case for Strategic Partnership?', New Delhi: Vij Books, p. 37.

in the region.⁸ They had also pledged to work towards a regional security architecture in the Asia Pacific region within the framework of the East Asia Summit.⁹

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The SCO began as a minor multilateral institution designed to deal with China's border issues with Central Asian states. It has since evolved into the principal vehicle for China's relations with Central Asia and a means by which to move beyond economic cooperation into the realms of politics and security.¹⁰ India became an observer in 2005 and a full-fledged member of the SCO in 2017. For India, the SCO gives a formal and structured *entrée* into Central Asia, which it sees as part of its extended neighbourhood. India also expects the SCO to play the central role in stabilizing Central Asia and Afghanistan and ensuring that it does not come under the clutch of extremism of any kind. India has for many years experienced the cruelty of terrorism and realizes the effect this has on the country's social psyche and development.

Thus, eradication of religious extremism and terrorism is an aim that Russia, China, and India share. India also hopes that a stable Central Asia will allow it to tap the region's energy resources much needed for its growth. Moreover, the SCO provides India with another platform for it to hold talks with China and also keep an eye on Beijing's strategies and tactics in the region that might have implications for New Delhi. Finally, India's membership in the SCO adds to the variety of the countries engaged with Central Asia giving these states greater choices. India's deeper involvement in the region could also help thwart the emergence of a hegemon in the Central Asia – a development which would probably be welcomed by most countries. Apart from that, unlike groupings like ASEAN, SCO is more security focussed, and therein lies its value for India.¹¹

The Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)

India has been a core member of CICA right from the beginning. The importance of CICA stems from the fact that it could be a template for an Asian security system. The CICA brings together countries from SAARC, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), China, Russia, Turkey, Vietnam, Mongolia, and Israel i.e. from all the major regions in Asia.

⁸ Mitra, D, 2016, 'Consultations on Asia, Illegal Drug Trade and Cyber Security: Key Takeaways from Russia-India-China Summit', *The Wire*, April 20. Available from: <https://thewire.in/30443/consultations-on-asia-illegal-drug-trade-and-cyber-security-key-takeaways-from-russia-india-china-summit>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Payne, JS, 2015, 'Eurasia: The Hype of Continentalism', *The Diplomat*, February 3. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/eurasia-the-hype-of-continentalism/>

¹¹ Ayres, A, 2018, 'Our Time Has Come: How India is Making Its Place in the World', New York: Oxford University Press, p. 174.

Outside of the SCO, CICA is probably the most important platform for international cooperation in Asia that does not include the United States and its important ally, Japan, as members.¹² However, since it has the UN, US, and Japan as observers, no country is able to dictate the agenda at CICA. India views CICA as a useful platform for confidence building measures among member states, which could incrementally help build 'a cooperative and pluralistic security order in Asia based on mutual trust, understanding, and sovereign equality'¹³ as well as peace and stability in Asia.

At CICA meetings, New Delhi has raised issues of importance to itself such as terrorism, including nuclear terrorism, the global financial crisis, climate change, and the situation in the Middle East – in recognition of the fact that these are transregional and transnational challenges which can only be effectively dealt with multilaterally. CICA's focus on counterterrorism suits India, which has suffered immensely because of this global disaster. India leads confidence building measures on energy security and transport. As well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Development Bank, CICA can be seen as an example of India making common cause with China and other important regional countries in creating alternative institutions.¹⁴ Like the SCO, CICA's focus on security is important for India. India has not so far given much importance to CICA, but it is a body on which it would be worthwhile to focus and ensure that nothing comes on its agenda that is inimical to India's interests. Perhaps, in the future, the SCO and CICA could coordinate or work collectively, and this is something which would be useful for India.¹⁵

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

The EAEU, which comprises Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, primarily focuses on regional economic integration. India is negotiating a possibility of concluding a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the organization. It hopes to get access to the vast reserves of natural resources like oil, gas, electric power, mineral fertilisers, coal, iron and steel, etc. in the EAEU and to its market. Once the North–South Corridor fructifies, India–EAEU trade will see a huge boost since it will cut distance between India and EAEU nations by 40%, time taken for trade by 50%, and transport cost by 30%.¹⁶ The EAEU is emerging as an important player in the region because of several reasons: a) the broad geographical space it occupies; b) its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and c) its growing economic outreach – like FTA with Vietnam and interest from Iran and Turkey to collaborate with it.

¹² Chunshan, M, 2014, 'What is CICA (and Why Does China Care About It)?', *The Diplomat*, May 17. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/what-is-cica-and-why-does-china-care-about-it/>

¹³ 'Statement by H.E. Mr. Anand Sharma, Minister of Commerce and Industry of India', *Secretariat of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia*. Available from: http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=292&lang=1

¹⁴ Ayres, A, 2018, 'Our Time Has Come: How India is Making Its Place in the World', New York: Oxford University Press, p.174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ 'India for Early FTA with Five-Nation Eurasian Economic Union', 2017, *Business Standard*, June 1. Available from: http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-for-early-fta-with-five-nation-eurasian-economic-union-117060100621_1.html

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)

Of all the multilaterals India is engaged in in Eurasia, perhaps the most talked about in recent times is the Quad, or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprising India, Australia, Japan, and the US. What brings these countries together is a shared concern about China's rise and their common political values as democracies. The Quad builds on the cooperation on disaster relief and rescue among the navies of the four countries during the tsunami in 2004. It was created in 2007 but did not last then because Australia backed out of it due to Chinese opposition. However, it was revived in 2017 along the margins of the ASEAN Regional Forum. The Quad builds on the India–Japan–Australia trilateral interaction. Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister, provided the intellectual ballast for the grouping in his 2006 book, *Towards a Beautiful Country*. Later, in a speech to the Indian parliament in 2007, Abe pointed out that a 'broader Asia' was emerging through the 'dynamic coupling' of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and called for a partnership between Japan and India – and also Australia and the US – to build an 'arc of freedom and prosperity'.¹⁷

The Quad members have stressed that they are committed to ensuring a 'free and open' region, with 'respect for international law' and 'the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific', clearly a reference to their disquiet about Chinese assertiveness and actions in the East and South China Seas. However, while the Quad has been revived, it is still at the nascent stage and the members seem unclear and unsure about what its objective is: maritime security, connectivity, countering China's moves in the Indo-Pacific and on the BRI, or a combination of all three.¹⁸ But the Quad's value is that while it is unlikely to become an instrument of hard containment *vis-à-vis* China, through the elucidation of high principles and regular naval exercises, it will show the assertive China that there is an alternative centre whose powers could be brought to bear when needed.¹⁹ The Quad demonstrates India's wish to prevent any country from dominating the Indo-Pacific and its desire to give more credibility to the Indo-Pacific construct, which places India at the centre of regional security. It is a response to the security threat posed by the rising China and a display of India's willingness to take more responsibility for the security of the region.²⁰ There are also some scholars who argue that India should fill the gaps that are being created by the US retreat and the Quad would be a good tool for this. The Quad, moreover, fits President Donald Trump's new strategy of reviving US influence in East Asia, through his references to the 'Indo-Pacific', rather than the 'Asia Pacific', and also his strategy on the Korean Peninsula which has put China on the backfoot.

¹⁷ Choong, W, 2018, 'The Revived 'Quad' – and an Opportunity for the US', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, January 10. Available from: <https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2018-2623/january-c361/the-revived-quad-opportunity-for-the-us-ab39>

¹⁸ For more details, see Haidar, S, 2017, 'Quad Confusion', *The Hindu*, November 23. Available from: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/quad-confusion/article20723202.ece>

¹⁹ Choong, W, 2018, 'The Revived 'Quad' – and an Opportunity for the US', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, January 10. Available from: <https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2018-2623/january-c361/the-revived-quad-opportunity-for-the-us-ab39>

²⁰ Unjhawala, YT, 2018, 'Quad Needs Both Economic & Military Plan for Indo-Pacific', *Economic Times*, February 23. Available from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/quad-needs-both-economic-military-plan-for-indo-pacific/articleshow/63049831.cms>

The European Union

If one of India's national interests is to prevent hegemony, particularly Chinese hegemony, Europe would be the ultimate battleground. Although the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) forum brings India and other Asian and European countries together, it lacks an institutional structure and focus so far. New Delhi needs to significantly enhance its economic and political influence in Europe if it aims to prevent Chinese hegemony in Eurasia. India has strong ties with the EU and there are ongoing consultations on security, particularly cybersecurity, but this component is not very strong. India also needs to include the future of Eurasia in its discussions with the EU. Therefore, its economic and political engagement with Europe needs to be supported by security engagements. India has taken first steps towards this goal through its recent security arrangements with France. Among others, it signed a Joint Strategic Vision of Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region with Paris and the two countries agreed to give reciprocal access to each other's naval facilities. But New Delhi needs to expand this engagement to other major European powers like Germany and the UK, which might want to have an 'India option' in their foreign policy matrix while dealing with the US and China.

Maritime Multilateralism

In addition to these multilaterals, India itself has taken the lead to build multilateral institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). These reflect its desire and aspirations to be a global player in the Indo-Pacific, which it considers its sphere of influence, and to advance its maritime interests in the wake of the rising China whose navy is gaining power. Some scholars argue that these 'betray the Indian desire to build coalitions around itself and to become a "balancer of power" particularly against China', and point out that both these initiatives have systematically excluded powers that India considers extra-regional, such as China, the US, the United Kingdom, and France.²¹ Moreover, India has been working on converting its potential as a major maritime power. It started the Milan biennial naval exercises with four foreign navies participating. This expanded to include 17 foreign navies in 2018. In addition, the Malabar Exercises have been carried out with the navies of the US and Japan.

²¹ Alhasan, H, 2017, 'Multilateralism in a Post-Hegemonic World', *Asia Dialogue*, June 19. Available from: <http://theasiadialogue.com/2017/06/19/multilateralism-in-a-post-hegemonic-world/>

Conclusion

India's increasing multilateral engagement does not mean that it deprioritizes bilateral relations. Multilateral diplomacy only complements and supplements its bilateral relations in Eurasia and elsewhere. India's approach to multilateral institutions in Eurasia are a function of its need for a stable and prosperous periphery and broader region due to their impact on its security as well as economic development. Moreover, the lack of an overarching security framework in Eurasia means that India has had to be part of many multilaterals.

New Delhi hopes to shape the emerging security and economic dynamics in these multilaterals and participate in building a regional order while also keeping an eye on its adversaries. Each multilateral of which India is a part has different benefits from India's point of view. Some are focussed mainly on economics like the EAEU, while others focus on security like the Quad; some enable it to play a global role like RIC, and still others have a mix of these benefits. India's stance on multilateralism in Eurasia is thus purely functional. However, Indian approach towards multilateral cooperation and institutions in Eurasia cannot be described as 'obstructionist', unlike the case of its scepticism towards the World Trade Organization or earlier climate change negotiations. This means that it either plays a positive role in shaping the agenda in these multilaterals or its views are highly valued by the other members.

To conclude, India's participation in various multilaterals in Eurasia can be interpreted in two ways: as a demonstration of its enhanced standing in the global arena and, at the same time, a reflection of its need to make its presence visible everywhere so that it is taken as a serious global player. Finally, some significant bilaterals that will affect India's engagement with Eurasia are those with China, Russia, Japan, Europe (either the EU if it evolves a security role, or France, Germany, Spain, or Italy separately), Iran, Saudi Arabia, and at a lower level Indonesia, Australia, South Korea, Turkey, etc. However, the real test of India being a great power will be its ability to establish on its own and promote multilateral organizations that 'protect its interests and reflect its values'²² – as the US did in the post war era and Beijing is doing now through the BRI and the AIIB.

²² Sidhu, WPS, 2014, 'Why Multilateralism Matters for India', Brookings, July 7. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/why-multilateralism-matters-for-india-2/>



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