

China-India Brief

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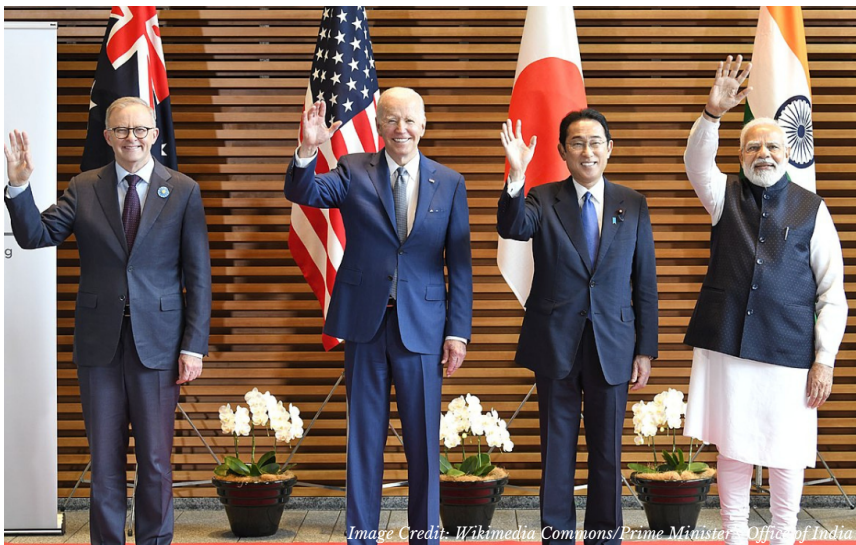


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Guest Column

Competing Minilateral Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: India's Dual Hedging Approach to Symbolic vs. Concrete Cooperation

By Stephen Nagy

The Indo-Pacific region is witnessing an expansion of symbolic versus concrete **minilateral cooperation**. It is a response to frustration with institutional designs that make some regional organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) **vulnerable to being fractured** from exogenous actors owing to their consensus-based, non-binding decision making.

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AND GLOBALISATION

The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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Contemporary examples include **China fracturing ASEAN unity** on a shared position related to the dispute between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea in 2016, **Greece blocking EU criticism** at the United Nations (UN) on China's human rights record in 2017, and Beijing's efforts to create a coalition of developing states to **vote down** a motion to discuss a UN report on China's serious human rights violations in Xinjiang. More recently, we also saw **Beijing's action** to bring together Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) members to abstain from a resolution on Russia's "aggression against Ukraine."

The frustration with large scale multilateralism is palpable in non-Western countries as well. China, Russia, and other authoritarian states resent what they understand as Western dominated institutions with prominent Chinese academics such as **Yan Xue Tong** stressing that:

China will work hard to shape an ideological environment conducive to its rise and counter Western values. For example, the United States defines democracy and freedom from the perspective of electoral politics and personal expression, while China defines democracy and freedom from the perspective of social security and economic development. Washington should accept these differences of opinion instead of trying to impose its own views on others.

As a result, minilateral cooperation is expanding in number but also bifurcating into two camps exemplified, but not limited to, concrete cooperation through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the more symbolic cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), with India being the only country participating in both **minilateral groupings**.

On the one hand, we have countries like Japan, India, the United States, and Australia, engaging in minilateral cooperation in the Quad. It remains an exclusive coalition of like-minded states that have evolved from a maritime security-focused grouping to one that has expanded to include **public good provision, technology cooperation, and infrastructure and connectivity initiatives**.

While the Quad is open to functional, ad-hoc cooperation with non-Quad members, it does not aim to establish a formal military alliance with security guarantees.

Regardless, Beijing has interpreted the grouping as an attempt to create an "**Asia-Pacific NATO**."

We also have the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and the United States pushing forward on the AUKUS agreement along with other minilateral forms of economic and regulatory cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)** and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).



The commonality we find in these minilateral relationships is that they are based on like-minded states engaging in concrete and evolving cooperation to foster a rules-based order in the broader Indo-Pacific region especially in the areas of economy, security, technology, and diplomacy.

On the other hand, we have minilateral cooperation such as the SCO, which has **recently expanded to include Belarus**. Iran is said to have signed a **memorandum of commitment** to become a full member state. There have also been preparations for the **formal joining** of Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners, in addition to the **granting of dialogue partnerships** to Bahrain and Maldives.

India is part of both of these minilateral groupings. New Delhi has joined like-minded countries in the Quad to **balance China's growing influence** within the region. Furthermore, India has inculcated itself into the SCO to ensure that it can be part of discussions on what India sees as a challenging geopolitical environment with regards to relations with Pakistan and China. From **India's point of view**, being at the table with rival partners is better than not being at the table for dialogue instead of potentially being on the geopolitical menu.

Comparing the aforementioned symbolic versus concrete cooperation minilateral trends, we see that both groupings of countries are creating smaller groups of like-minded states to combat the inherent **difficulties of large-scale multilateral cooperation**, being fractured by exogenous rival actors or the reality of many large multilateral organisations, the tyranny of the lowest common denominator in policy outcomes.

A second element of comparison for these two groupings is the concrete initiatives that they are striving to achieve. The Quad, AUKUS, IPEF, and the CPTPP are all concrete and evolving minilateral partnerships that are attempting to cooperate in the areas of economy, technology, diplomacy, and security.

To illustrate, at the **Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022**, Quad members agreed on several initiatives including the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the Quad Fellowship, the Quad Vaccine Partnership and Global Health Security.

They also set up a **Climate Working Group**, which mapped **collective capacity and vulnerabilities** in global semiconductor supply chains, and launched the **Common Statement of Principles on Critical Technology Supply Chains**, which will provide a cooperative foundation for enhancing supply-chain resilience in the region.

With regards to IPEF and CPTPP minilateral cooperation, the view is that promoting economic and regulatory cooperation, protecting intellectual property rights protection, and **limiting the role of state-owned enterprises** will be important in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's **political economy**, ensuring that it is rules-based, transparent and led by like-minded countries in the **technological and economic domains**.

The **minilateral cooperation of AUKUS** focuses on artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, cybersecurity and nuclear-powered submarine cooperation. The three minilateral partners understand that aside from the deterrence capabilities that the nuclear-powered submarines will provide in the Indo-Pacific region against assertive states, they also recognise the importance of being the first mover on critical technologies such as AI, quantum computing and cybersecurity. These technologies can be mobilised to redefine military conflicts, the relationship between the state and citizens, and the twenty-first century economy.

The SCO in contrast, has limitations in terms of its ability to achieve concrete objectives and initiatives, given the diverse range of partners involved and the consensus-based decision-making process that characterises the organisation. To illustrate, India has **security concerns with both Pakistan and China**, it is part of the Quad, and continues to deepen its bilateral security cooperation with both Japan and the US. For India, it is simply easier to cooperate within the Quad compared to the SCO as it is composed of like-minded states that are focused on a narrower span of practical cooperative areas.

The SCO has **several main objectives** including but not exclusive to: strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among member states; promoting their effective cooperation in the fields of politics, trade, economy, research, technology and culture, as well as education, energy, transportation, tourism, environmental protection and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and advancing towards a new democratic, equitable and rational international political and economic order.

According to **Article 16 of the SCO Charter**, the SCO bodies shall make decisions by agreement without vote and their decisions shall be considered adopted if no member state raises objections during the vote (consensus). Decisions are non-binding based on “mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas.”

India’s position as a full member of the SCO, coupled with the grouping’s without-vote/consensus-based decision-making process, ensures that the organisation, however anti-US or anti-Western it may be, has limits in terms of what kind of security, economic, or technological cooperation can move forward.

The unity of the SCO has further been challenged since the **February 24 invasion of Ukraine by Russia**, with Moscow becoming an international pariah. This has made cooperation with Russia in many multilateral and minilateral organisations such as the SCO, problematic or worse still, as it could open up members of the organisation to secondary sanctions by Western countries.

While minilateralism is on the rise in the Indo-Pacific region, it is clear that they are not qualitatively evolving in the same direction. The constellation of minilaterals that includes India, Japan, Australia, and the US are not exclusive to concrete cooperation in the spheres of economy, technology, security, and diplomacy.

The SCO to date has not exhibited this level of concrete cooperation and it is likely to get more difficult according to scholars such as **Yamei Xue and Benjamin Mwadi Makengo**. They argue that great power competition, the lack of a sense of community, and the transformation of cooperative patterns following India and Pakistan joining creates limits to the depth and breadth of cooperation.

Russia's inclusion is also problematic given its violation the UN Charter and main principles of the SCO emphasising mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use, and seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas.

India's participation in the Quad while not in AUKUS, IPEF or the CPTPP suggests that Quad members view New Delhi's involvement and joint leadership important to recognise and nurture over time. Other Quad members acknowledge India's importance in minilateral cooperation but also its incremental approach to deepening cooperation as it readjusts its traditional non-alignment stance to international affairs to be more responsive to twenty-first century geopolitical competition.

Moreover, its engagement in the SCO is not contradictory, it is seen through the lens of hedging, ensuring that India's interests are not marginalised in a minilateral organisation that includes neighbours New Delhi has security concerns with.

Stephen Nagy is currently a Professor at the Department of Politics and International Studies at the International Christian University. Concurrently, he is a Senior Fellow at the MacDonald Laurier Institute, a Research fellow the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI); and a Visiting Fellow with the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA). He tweets at [@nagystephen1](https://twitter.com/nagystephen1).

News Reports

Bilateral relations

China and India diverge on border dispute status after foreign ministers meeting

South China Morning Post, May 6

Sino-Indian relations 'cannot be normal if peace and tranquillity' in border areas is disturbed, says New Delhi's top diplomat at regional conference.

Chinese FM calls on youths to contribute to China-India cooperation, friendship

CGTN, May 5

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang on Thursday called on youths from China and India to contribute to mutually beneficial cooperation and friendship between the two countries.

China to skip Global Buddhist Summit in India amid border tensions

India Today, April 19

Amid border tensions with India, China will not attend the upcoming Global Buddhist slated to be held in New Delhi.

India shores up China border strategy with 'Vibrant Villages'

Nikkei Asia, April 14

Nearly \$600m infrastructure plan counters Beijing's 'well-off society' hamlets.

China and India in the Region

US eyes Mideast-India transport network to counter China

Nikkei Asia, May 10

The US is talks with Saudi Arabia, India and the United Arab Emirates about a massive transport infrastructure project.

Chinese militia boats cross Indian, ASEAN warships exercising in South China Sea

Reuters, May 9

China's foreign ministry dismissed accusations that boats belonging to a Chinese maritime militia had deliberately approached an area of the South China Sea where the navies of Indian and ASEAN countries were holding drills.

ASEAN push for Myanmar peace continues as it ropes in 'quiet' partners China, India, Japan

South China Morning Post, May 8

ASEAN countries took part in low-key dialogues that included India, China, Japan and Bangladesh as the bloc seeks to help Myanmar resolve its crisis.

Pakistan, China's participation at SCO foreign ministers' meeting in India a sign of reduced tensions: Experts

Channel News Asia, May 4

The participation of Pakistan and China at a foreign ministers' meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) this week is seen as a sign of reduced tensions with host nation India, said observers.

Trade and Economy

Apple posts record quarter in India; analyst says Cook eyes market to be bigger than China

CNBC, May 5

Apple brought in record revenue in India in the first quarter of the year, CEO Tim Cook said, as he touted the potential of what could become a key market for the tech giant.

Chinese companies are moving supply chains out of China to manage risks, with India, Malaysia and Indonesia benefiting

South China Morning Post, April 23
Even Chinese manufacturers are shifting parts of their supply chains out of China to manage risks, and heading to India and other nearby countries.

14-countries, including India, look to wrap up Indo-Pacific Trade talks this year, Tai Says

The Economic Times, April 21
Momentum is growing for the 14-nation economic initiative known as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity.

China and India 'bright spots' in world economy, despite gloomy global growth outlook: IMF official

Channel News Asia, April 12
The two most populous countries in the world are expected to account for about half of all global economic growth this year, according to the IMF.

Energy and Environment

India, China propose 'multiple pathways' on cutting use of fossil fuels

Reuters, May 2

India, backed by China, is trying to build a consensus within the G20 group to let countries choose a roadmap to cut carbon emissions instead of setting a deadline to end the use of fossil fuels, three Indian government officials said.

Worst April heatwave in Asian history, with extremes in India and China

The Tribune, April 19
A severe heatwave has swept across much of Asia, causing deaths and school closures in India and record-breaking temperatures in China.

India and China snap up Russian oil in April above 'price cap'

Al Jazeera, April 18
India and China have snapped up the vast majority of Russian oil so far in April at prices above the Western price cap of \$60 per barrel, according to traders and Reuters calculations.

Analyses

Demographic dividend for both China and India

China Daily, May 9

By Swaran Singh, Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver) and a Professor of International Relations at the Jawaharlal Nehru University

The international media have been busy debating the implications of India's possible overtaking China to become the world's most populous country.

Hydro-hegemon? Complexities of shared rivers between China and India

The Interpreter, May 9

By Genevieve Donnellon-May, Researcher at Oxford Global Society

Alarm about China building dams upstream of Brahmaputra River must be tempered by India's own record on water-sharing.

The US–India Relationship Is Key to the Future of Tech

Harvard Business Review, April 17

By Hemant Taneja, CEO and Managing Director of General Catalyst; and Fareed Zakaria, Host of Fareed Zakaria GPS on CNN and a columnist for The Washington Post

As the US becomes more concerned about China, its relationship with India will become more important. This is particularly true in terms of technology.

Emmanuel Macron's China visit: How the French president missed an opportunity to cement ties with India

Firstpost, April 13

By Claude Arpi, Distinguished Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence (Delhi)

The French president could certainly have avoided falling into the Chinese trap by visiting India and further developing the 25-year-old strategic partnership.

Taiwan as the central front: Deterring China with help from key allies and India

The Hill, April 12

By Bradley A. Thayer, Director of China policy at the Center for Security Policy

Asia will be the cockpit of great-power politics in the 21st century.

Books and Journals

How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?

Routledge, March 30

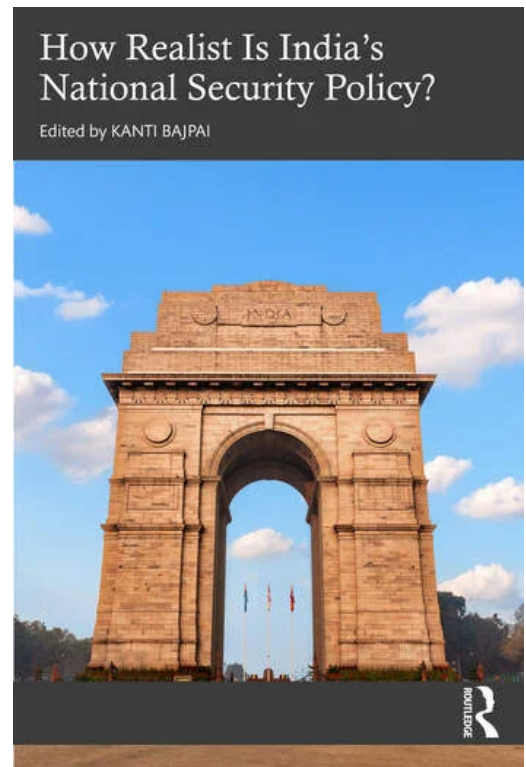
By Kanti Bajpai, Co-Director of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Vice Dean (Research and Development) and Wilmar Professor of Asian Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

In managing national security, how Realist is India in terms of cultivating and using power and especially military power? A conventional view of India is that it has been uncomfortable with realism or 'power politics' as a guide to policy. This volume shows that it has been more realist than is generally recognized and that it has increasingly become comfortable with power in the service of its interests.

The essays in this volume:

- Examine the different aspects and types of realism in India's national security policy
- Include a range of perspectives from academics as well as former military officers and diplomats
- Focus on India's military and foreign policy in dealing with China, Pakistan, the United States, Southeast Asia, and West Asia.

This key volume will be indispensable to scholars and researchers of politics and international relations, defence and strategic studies, and South Asian studies and to government officials, journalists, and general readers interested in the external dimensions of India's national security.



Our team



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The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *Failure to launch? Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics* by Evan Laksmana (IDSS Paper No.37)
- *India-Australia-Indonesia Maritime Partnership: Shared Challenges, Compelling Opportunities* by Premesha Saha, Natalie Sambhi, and Evan Laksmana (ORF, 2022)
- *India Versus China : Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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