

Act East in the Indo-Pacific: India and Quad 2.0

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Abstract

The Trump Administration has announced the “Indo-Pacific” strategy in 2017/2018, in which India is described as “a Major Defense Partner” of the US. New Delhi responded cautiously with the possibility of collaboration within its own framework of “Act East Policy (AEP).” Will — or how well will — the Indo-Pacific strategy, or “Quad 2.0” work with AEP? I trace the history and evolution of AEP and identify the core elements of it: trade, development, security, and multilateralism. I argue that, if Quad 2.0 can continue to be a flexible, open, and inclusive platform that goes beyond only military cooperation, the prospect of synergy is good. Compared with “Quad 1.0” initiated by Shinzo Abe in 2007, conditions have changed for Quad 2.0 with more incentives for the four Indo-Pacific countries coming together to counterbalance the growing influence of China in the region.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Act East Policy, Quad 2.0, India

I. The New US Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's Role

The Donald Trump Administration has overhauled America's East Asia policy since his inauguration in 2016. After the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Quad was revived and entered American foreign policy. The previous "Asia Pacific region" in the Obama Administration was replaced by the new "Indo-Pacific region" in the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS 2017) and National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (NDS 2018).

The change is beyond rhetoric. First, the term "Indo-Pacific" broadens the geographical concept of "Asia" in the strategic plans of America by extending the "defensive perimeter" to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Second, the role of India is promoted in the US grand strategy and elevated to "a Major Defense Partner of the United States" from the previous "capable actor" and the "security provider" mentioned by the Obama Administration. Third, China is identified and depicted as the major strategic competitor in the Indo-Pacific region.

Compared with the Obama period, the military role of India in the new American Indo-Pacific strategy is emphasized. Rather than "leading from behind," Trump and his aides take a realist stance, which emphasizes more responsibility on the shoulders of allies of the United States, as the national power of the US has been diminishing.

The term "Indo-Pacific" only appeared once during the Obama Administration. Hillary Clinton, as the Secretary of State, referred to the "Indo-Pacific Basin" when she mentioned the importance of US-India Dialogue and bilateral cooperation between the two navies.¹ Throughout the whole Obama Administration, "Asia-Pacific" had

been used to refer to the region. As for the role of India, in the NSS published by the Obama White House in 2015, the US saw “a strategic convergence with India’s Act East policy and our continued implementation of the rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” as the US will continue working with both India and Pakistan to “promote strategic stability.”² In Trump’s National Security Strategy (NSS 2017), however, India is elevated from “an increasingly capable actor” to an emerging “leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner” welcomed by the USA.³

As the fulcrum of the new quadrilateral security framework, how — and how much — New Delhi is willing to incorporate itself into the strategy seems to be an indicator for the success of Trump’s new Indo-Pacific strategy. When the military aspect of the Indo-Pacific strategy is emphasized, it is expected by many to be a quasi-military alliance or even the “Asian NATO”⁴ and the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) created by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2006.

1. U.S. Department of State, “America’s Engagement in the Asia Pacific,” October 28, 2010, *U.S. Department of State*, <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150141.htm>>.

2. The White House, “National Security Strategy,” February 2015, pp. 1-29, *National Security Strategy Archive*, <<http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015.pdf>>.

3. The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, pp. 1-56, *The White House*, <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>>.

4. Cary Huang, “US, Japan, India, Australia...Is Quad the First Step to An Asian NATO?” *South China Morning Post*, November 25, 2017, <<http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2121474/us-japan-india-australia-quad-first-step-asian-nato>>.

Nevertheless, for a country with a history of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that has refrained from collaborating too much with the US, will India be incorporated into the new US security platform, or Quad 2.0, easily in the future? As New Delhi has expressed that the “Act East Policy [is] the cornerstone of its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region,” in response to Trump’s Indo-Pacific initiative, it will be helpful to examine the development and foci of the Act Easy Policy and see which items of AEP can be developed, incorporated, and synergized within the Indo-Pacific quadrilateral framework.

I argue that, as an open platform, Quad 2.0 has great potential to be a flexible and incorporative security framework to coordinate well with AEP in the current situation once it addresses India’s need for development and its tradition of multilateralism in international affairs. As China involves itself more in the Indian Ocean region, the need to balance Beijing’s influence becomes more compelling for India’s strategic planners.

II. From “Look East” to “Act East” Policy

India’s Look East Policy (LEP) began in the early 1990s, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao announced the importance of enhancing relationships with Asian countries. It was changed and elevated by the new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, as Act East Policy in 2014 in the 12th India-ASEAN Summit.⁵ Geographically, Southeast Asian/ASEAN countries were the focus of LEP when it was first announced. The LEP/AEP can be roughly separated into three phases, with three

5. Prashanth Parameswaran, “Modi Unveils India’s ‘Act East Policy’ to ASEAN in Myanmar,” *The Diplomat*, November 17, 2014, <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/modi-unveils-indias-act-east-policy-to-asean-in-myanmar/>>.

focal areas for each phase: trade & commerce, multilateral diplomacy through institutions, and security/military cooperation.

The first phase stretched from the early 1990s to 2000, the second phase was from 2001 to the early 2010s, and the third phase began with the victory of Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. In Phase 1, the core of LEP was to increase and promote trade with ASEAN countries. Rao led trade missions to ASEAN countries and South Korea in 1993 and 1995, respectively.⁶ In this phase, India also began to conduct bilateral and multilateral military exercises with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. This was the phase when India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum and founded both the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC).

In Phase 2, the emphasis of LEP began to shift to more institutional establishment and engagement. New Delhi was transformed from the original “Sectoral Dialogue Partner” to be the “Summit Level Partner” in ASEAN. In addition, it signed to become a member of the ASEAN Treaty for Amity and Cooperation in 2003.⁷ Phase 2 also was marked by a series of free trade agreements (FTA) with ASEAN and East Asian countries, for example the Early Harvest Scheme with Thailand (2004), the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore (2005), Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agree-

6. Lavina Lee, “India as a Nation of Consequence in Asia: The Potential and Limitations of India’s ‘Act East’ Policy,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, Fall/Winter 2015, pp. 67-104.

7. M. S. Pardesi, “Southeast Asian in Indian Foreign Policy: Positioning India as a Major Power in Asia,” in Sumit Ganguly, ed., *India’s Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 106-131.

ment (CEPA) with Korea (2009), ASEAN FTA (2010), and CEPA with Japan and CECA with Malaysia (2011). There were also some attempts to forge FTAs with other AEP countries, such as China and Taiwan (2013), but they failed for various reasons.

The multilateral interaction through institutions has become one irreplaceable pillar of LEP/AEP, even in security-related area. The participation in ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 and in ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2007 has set the template for security dialogue for India.⁸

Phase 3 of LEP/AEP has put more emphasis on security issues and military aspects in the relationship with Southeast and East Asian countries. Actually, in the later stage of Phase 2, India strengthened defense cooperation with various AEP countries. Cooperation with Singapore Forces began with a bilateral dialogue in 2004, which was a year after the Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed. Closer military collaboration, such as joint exercises, base leases, and technical support began between India and especially Singapore and Vietnam. The relationships with Japan and Korea have warmed up, and progress has been made in the security area, too. In 2015, Japan announced that it would sell several amphibious airplanes to the Indian Navy, as Hyundai Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. contracted cases to build combat vessels for India.⁹

8. Rohan Murherjee, "East by Southeast: Three Challenges for India's 'Act East' Policy," *Business Standard*, January 23, 2018, <http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/east-by-southeast-three-challenges-for-india-s-act-east-policy-118012300197_1.html>.

9. Roger Liu, "China in the Lens of India's Maritime Strategies," paper presented at the International Conference on Strategizing the Rise of China: Development, Dynamics and Driving Forces (Taipei: National Chengchi University, May 7, 2016), pp. 1-21.

Beginning in 2014, India stepped up its naval diplomacy efforts. Visits and port calls by the Indian Navy in the year covered 40 plus countries, the most in India's naval history. In 2016, India hosted the International Fleet Review, with nearly 50 navies participating. The Indian Navy also collaborated on several naval exercises, such as SIMBEX (with Singapore, May 2015), CORPAT (with Indonesia, Apr-May 2016), AUSINDEX (with Australia, Sept 2015 for the first time), MILAN (with Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, in 2014), and other smaller scale port-call exercises.

On the other hand, India keeps exporting its military technology and assistance to Vietnam. In 2016, New Delhi extended its military aid to Vietnam to the 500-million credit line, which is the largest ever in its foreign military aid history. India also has announced the sale of its *BrahMos* supersonic cruise missile to Hanoi to counter the Chinese Navy's presence in the South China Sea Area.

In 2018, during the first-ever visit of Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang to New Delhi, India and Vietnam signed three memoranda of understanding (MoUs) for further bilateral collaboration on nuclear energy, agriculture, and trade. The Vietnamese President is promising to support India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council.¹⁰ In the joint statement with Tran, Modi was quoted as saying that India and Vietnam will work together for "an open, independent and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international laws are respected,"¹¹ which is the closest version to Trump's "free

10. "Vietnamese President Praises PM Modi on Act East Policy, Bats for India's UNSC Membership," *The Indian Express*, March 4, 2018, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/vietnamese-president-praises-pm-modi-on-indias-act-east-policy-5085490/>>.

and open Indo-Pacific region” in talk at APEC in Da Nang, Vietnam.

Other than the three aspects – trade, institutions, and security – another important part of AEP is to promote development in India’s Northeast Region (NER) states bordering Myanmar. Separatism movements have been an issue in NER, while the border issue with China in Arunachal Pradesh is another concern for that region. To enhance the culture, commerce, and connectivity, New Delhi has promoted trade relations with Myanmar by signing the first Border Trade Agreement in 1995 and has built the India-Myanmar Friendship Road and other infrastructure. Armed forces of each side have conducted joint actions to combat separatism and armed groups in the border area. By focusing on this region, India also can counter the growing Chinese influence in the Bay of Bengal area and Southeast Asia.¹²

III. Domestic Politics of India and China’s Increasing Presence in IOR and Border

A big and elastic framework, the following elements lie at the core of AEP: trade and commerce, development, and security co-operation conducted in the multilateral style.

Development is the leading item on the agenda for Modi and BJP. If the initiation of the Look East Policy was driven by the need

11. Aishwarya Kumar, “Vietnam, India Cement Modi’s Act East Policy, Sign 3 Agreements,” *News 18.com*, March 4, 2018, <<https://www.news18.com/news/india/vietnam-india-cement-modis-act-east-policy-sign-3-agreements-1677861.html>>.

12. A. K. Gupta, “Transition from ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’: India’s Constructive Engagement with Myanmar,” in N. N. Jha & Sudhir Singh, eds., *Modi’s Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities* (New Delhi: ICWA & Pentagon Press, 2016), pp. 11-21.

for economic development, the Act East Policy still keeps it as one of the underlying goals at its core. Projects like “Make in India,” “Digital India,” and others all depend on foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign technological support. In Phase 2 of LEP, India included Japan, South Korea, and China in the plan, and the three countries currently play an increasingly important role in the Indian economy. Nevertheless, with the fear of China, India has not participated in China’s BRI.

China’s presence and influence in the Northeast region (NER) is a major concern (as well as a key focus in AEP) for New Delhi. Modi and BJP’s emphasis on development has garnered political support and momentum in NER. The recent electoral victory of BJP in Manipur and Tripura has ensured the control by this right-wing nationalist party in the region, where the left wing and the Communist league had ruled for decades.¹³ This is an indicator not only for the solidifying support for current ruling government on development,¹⁴ but also for more likely success of Modi and BJP in the 2019 central Parliamentary election.¹⁵

13. Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, “‘Kohima to Kutch’: BJP’s Stunning Expansion Makes it the Dominant Player in North East,” *Scroll.in*, March 4, 2018, <<https://scroll.in/article/870718/kohima-to-kutch-bjps-stunning-expansion-makes-it-the-dominant-player-in-north-east>>.

14. “Unity, Development of Northeast Is Highest Priority, Says PM Modi in Tripura,” *Hindustan Times*, March 9, 2018, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/unity-development-of-northeast-is-highest-priority-says-pm-modi-in-tripura/story-WUhF9pQwmT9KMzirZnOFgN.html>>.

15. Amit Mudgill, “BJP’s Big Win in Northeast Likely to Boost Confidence on D-Street,” *The Economic Times*, March 4, 2018, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/stocks/news/bjp-flexes-its-muscles-in-tripura-d-street-bets-big-on-modis-2019-win/articleshow/63147426.cms>>.

To keep the Chinese influence off NER, Modi has chosen to work with Japan to develop the Northeast region. Support from Japan includes loans, expertise, infrastructure (roads and highways), and investment.¹⁶ The “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” of Japan and AEP is well synergized in the Northeast.

The Northeast of India is an example of successfully combining commerce, development, and security. In IOR, India is also facing the growing presence of China, for example the support from Beijing to Pakistan through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the construction of Gawdar Port, the acquirement of Hambantota Port by China on a 99-year lease in Sri Lanka and the Chinese monopoly on the Port City Colombo Project, the return to political power of pro-China Prime Minister K. Prasad Oli and his left government in Nepal, and the *coup d'états* by the long Chinese supporter President Abdulla Yameen in Maldives.

Besides growing economic and political support from China, Beijing’s growing military influence in the region has been alarming for New Delhi. Colombo has hosted vessels of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), including nuclear submarines, in the past few years. China also is conducting marine and hydrological studies with Sri Lanka. In January 2018, the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 18 conducted the first-ever wintry marine research in the Indian Ocean. In March, according to Reuters, PLAN sent a naval combat force to IOR to deter the possible military intervention of India in current Maldivian political turmoil.¹⁷

16. Dipanjan R. Chaudhury, “Japan Teams Up with India for Northeast, to Extend Rs 2,239-crore Loans,” *The Economic Times*, September 18, 2017, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/japan-teams-up-with-india-for-northeast-to-extend-rs-2239-crore-loans/articleshow/60703906.cms>>.

Increasing military pressure from Beijing would strengthen the incentives of India to be further incorporated into the new quadrilateral security structure. Nevertheless, India has failed to tackle China alone in military power and infrastructure. Weapon acquisition usually falls behind schedule with subpar quality. One example is the project of *Tejas* multirole fighter aircraft by the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). Originally scheduled to be delivered in the mid-1990s, the indigenous light fighter aircraft were not delivered to the Indian Air Force (IAF) until 2016, and more delays are expected.¹⁸

For the Indian Navy, the lack of new vessels is a big issue. Based on the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (2005-2022), the Indian Navy has to maintain no fewer than 127 warships, including 65 major surface combatants, like aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, and corvettes, along with 13 conventional submarines. Nevertheless, “[t]he navy has barely half the submarines, destroyers and frigates it needs.” The estimated deficiency before 2022 of the ships are 1 aircraft carrier, 6 to 8 frigates, 3 to 5 destroyers, 4 submarines, 18 to 22 corvettes, and at most 51 other vessels. At the same time, the aging of vessels is an issue for the Indian Navy.¹⁹ Delays in weapon delivery and R&D have added another hurdle on the road to a blue water navy for India.²⁰

17. Sanjeev Miglani & Shihar Aneez, “Asian Giants China and India Flex Muscles over Tiny Maldives,” *Reuters*, March 7, 2018, <<https://in.reuters.com/article/maldives-politics/asian-giants-china-and-india-flex-muscles-over-tiny-maldives-idINKCN1GJ12N>>.

18. Jon Grevett, “India’s Tejas Programme Suffers More Delays,” August 9, 2017, *Jane’s 360*, <<http://www.janes.com/article/72988/india-s-tejas-programme-suffers-more-delays>>.

19. Ritika Behal, “Momentum in Indian Naval Shipbuilding,” March 9, 2018, Accessed, *Defence ProAc Biz News*, <<http://www.defproac.com/?p=2700>>.

20. Roger Liu, “China in the Lens of India’s Maritime Strategies,” pp. 1-21.

Along the controversial border area in the Eastern Sector of Doklam, India's infrastructure also falls behind. According to a recent report submitted by the Government of India to the Parliament, among 61 strategically important Indo-China Border Roads (ICBRs) entrusted to the government agency, only 28 were completed with the total length being 255 kilometers. For the total 73 ICBRs, the original deadline of completion was 2012, but, at current speed, they will not be completed before 2022.²¹

IV. Further Incorporation into Quad 2.0? Possible Opportunities and Challenges

As China is looming larger militarily in the region, New Delhi is expected to forge more security cooperation within the framework of Quad 2.0, especially if the collaboration can focus on and begin with trade, development, and security cooperation, or (in the best scenario) the synergy of the three. For example, in the first phase, other Quad countries can address India's defense insufficiency issues first by offering technological support in weapon acquisition and key area infrastructure. Further and closer cooperation in defense industries can also create "spill-over" effects to benefit the economy of India.

On the other hand, to counter the presence of Chinese PLAN, the current multilateral naval cooperation framework under the annual Malabar exercise could expand geographically with more members, maneuvers, and practice.

Adherence to international law and multilateralism should be a

²¹ "India Lagging Behind China in Strategic Infrastructure Along Border - Report," *Sputnik*, March 5, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/20180305_1062245353-india-lags-behind-china/>.

better principle and *modus operandi* when the US and other Quad countries attempt to integrate India into Quad 2.0. Washington should avoid bilateral military requests, such as the joint patrol in the South China Sea in March 2016 before the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). The Indian Navy rejected its US counterpart due to being “wary of being part of a military alliance with Washington.”²²

The pursuit of “strategic autonomy” has prevented New Delhi from getting too close to Washington D.C.. Although the US-Indian relationship has improved considerably since Modi became the Prime Minister, the legacy remains. The two countries signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016 on a case-by-case basis, while the other two pillar agreements Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) remain unsigned.

Plans to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation between Washington and New Delhi should continue. While working to get the remaining agreements, like CISMOA and BECA, signed with India, along with more collaboration in the defense sector, the strategic planners and decision-makers in Washington D.C. should also avoid too quickly relying on the Indo-Pacific strategy/Quad 2.0 before hard tests, especially those ones requiring bilateral intervention.

When “Quad 1.0” was formed in 2007, it was defined by Australia as a functional forum that involved only department-level officials

22. Anjana Pasricha, “India Rejects Joint Naval Patrols with US in South China Sea,” *VOA*, March 11, 2016, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/india-rejects-joint-naval-patrols-with-us-in-south-china-sea/3231567.html>>.

from ministries of foreign affairs in the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Quad 1.0 failed due to the lack of political momentum at the top level. The creator of the Quad concept, Shinzo Abe, resigned from the PM position in 2007. Kevin Rudd became PM of Australia in the same year. With improvement of economy in mind, Mr. Rudd had a plan where China obtained the priority. Quad 1.0 did not thrive under the left governments.

Nevertheless, when the officials of Quad countries met again after 10 years in 2017, the world was different than 2007. The “sharp power” and military posture that China has exerted in many democracies has raised vigilance in Western countries, like the US and Australia. Right-wing leaders regained power in the government, securing the political foundation for Quad 2.0.

Jennifer Rawson, then the First Assistant Secretary at International Security Division of Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, denied in the Parliament that Quad is a “quadrilateral security alliance.”²³ Ten years later, Australia and India had their first “2+2 dialogue” between the secretaries of ministries of defense and foreign affairs.²⁴

Quad 2.0 is still developing, with great potential to become a multifunctional and complex security platform beyond merely a tra-

23. Parliament of Australia, “Official Committee Hansard, Australian Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade,” May 28, 2007, p. 10, *Parliament of Australia*, <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/10266/toc_pdf/5451-3.pdf>.

24. “After Quad, India and Australia Hold First Meet on Strategic, Defence Ties,” *The Economic Times*, December 12, 2017, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/after-quad-india-and-australia-hold-first-meet-on-strategic-defence-ties/articleshow/62039003.cms>>.

ditional security agreement. Japan, Australia, India, and Japan are eyeing an infrastructure project to compete and complement with China's Belt and Road Initiative. If the four countries can coordinate on infrastructure projects within the Quad 2.0 framework, it would help further institutionalize this platform, making it bigger and more consolidated.

How Quad 2.0 will develop in the future depends on whether it is a US-dominated scheme or it is a more open platform where each member can contribute part. Trump's realist ideology might paradoxically create the space for allies' liberal institutional platform to work in the Indo-Pacific region. Judging from how the US handled the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Quad 2.0 likely will be more like the latter. In the case of TPP, after the US officially announced its withdrawal, Japan took the responsibility to continue this multilateral trade scheme.

After the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP; TPP-11) was signed into effect, the US expressed its intention to come back to join. If the TPP approach can be applied to other multilateral security mechanisms, then, without too much US domination and dictation, Quad 2.0 should be able to grow into a more flexible structure and accommodate the interests of member nations. The more flexible and resilient the Indo-Pacific strategy can be, the more likely it would synergize with the Act East Policy of India.

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