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India's A La Carte Minilateralism: AUKUS and the Quad

When US President Joe Biden hosted a lavish state visit for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2023, he described US-India relations as among the “most consequential in the world.”¹ It seemed that the United States had finally secured India as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific,² the region at the nexus of contemporary great power rivalry. Washington's overtures toward Delhi fit into Biden's strategy of working with like-minded states in overlapping coalitions of the willing. India is the world's fifth largest economy—projected to be third by the late-2020s³—and is already the most populous nation. Modi's visit was portrayed as a resounding success in the American and Indian press, with several business and military deals signed.

Yet little had changed in strategic terms. India had no intention of giving up its traditional stance of “strategic autonomy,” and remained cautious about cultivating overly friendly ties with the US. From India's point of view, Washington's expanding military presence in the Indo-Pacific and minilateral frameworks like AUKUS

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and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”)—all of which implicitly seek to contain China—are problematic.⁴ Delhi is concerned about provoking Beijing’s ire, and relatedly, about the danger of China’s deepening ties with Russia, with which India holds strategic ties forged during the Cold War. Modi is especially wary about adopting any policy position that endangers China-India trade. Strategic autonomy is here to stay for India. Yet, Delhi is also concerned about security and is seeking

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AUKUS**

new ways to shape the order transition occurring in the regional system which will promote its status and protect its distinctive identity.

In this article, we examine why India is amenable toward the Quad—of which it is a member together with the US, Japan and Australia—but is far more reticent toward AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between the US, Australia and the UK. It also seeks to answer whether these US-led minilateral frame-

works help or hinder the regional order that India ultimately seeks to build—and analyzes how Delhi is seeking to shape them.

This analysis builds upon the contributions of previous scholars who have employed notions of legitimacy, rule-setting and status to explain the dynamics of rising powers and great power rivalry.⁵ It argues that externally-imposed projects like AUKUS designed to engineer a new regional order create difficulties for Delhi, not only in terms of their jostling of the Indo-Pacific’s intrinsically hierarchical system of power, but also because of India’s concerns about legitimacy and inclusivity—necessary ingredients to build a regional order that supports its rise. In so doing, the article explores India’s self-conceptualization as a rising great power, the complexities of India’s interactions with regional peers, and India’s navigation of an increasingly complex global security landscape.

We first assess India’s recalibrated grand strategy and identity as a rising power, then explore the salience of notions of legitimacy and inclusivity for India alongside its material calculations of power. This is followed by a longer section that delves into how AUKUS and the Quad—as US-led minilateral frameworks—present both risks and opportunities to India. Here, India’s highly cautious approach to AUKUS is compared with the way it has embraced the Quad (although even for the latter, Delhi’s support has limitations). We argue that India has deftly managed to circumvent diplomatic fallout from challenges to world order, as are being played out in the Indo-Pacific, in part by seeking to benefit from the legitimacy derived from the Quad’s soft power imperatives, while tacitly enabling AUKUS, which supports hard power projection in the region.

Nonetheless, although India is able to garner benefits from AUKUS and the Quad, this will remain valid only if Delhi is able to continue playing these frameworks

off against one another—an essentially fragile construction. These benefits will be reaped only in the short term as India shores up its own military capabilities, and ultimately this is not the regional order that Delhi wants. With a general election in spring 2024, we argue that a rigorous examination of India's strategic vision to remake the Indo-Pacific order will provide insights much needed by policymakers at this time of rising global tensions.

Recalibrating Indian Grand Strategy

In the post-Cold War period, India has risen from a developing state with one of the world's most protectionist economies to an emerging great power with super-power potential. Its territorial size, geographical characteristics, vibrant economy, and large population—including a fast-growing middle class—have enabled Delhi to join the top table in international affairs, challenging the unipolar element of the liberal international order and shaking up the balance of power in Asia. India's rise as an Asian colossus has also initiated a transformation in its external relations, particularly in terms of loosening its traditional attachment to non-alignment, initially pursued as a post-colonial strategy and subsequently in response to Cold War bipolarity.

Yet in many ways there has been continuity, or more precisely “dual continuity,” with traditional non-alignment priorities—like championing multipolarity, reformed multilateralism, and the Global South—being pursued alongside Western priorities such as the market economy and the rules-based international order.⁶ Despite these endeavors, however, India has undergone an illiberal domestic degeneration under Modi, most obviously with the politicization of religion, which somewhat undermines Delhi's professed commitments to liberal democracy. Grappling with its own ascendancy in the face of existential challenges to world order—amid China's rapid rise, America's relative decline, and Russia's isolation—has led to India's pursuit of becoming what we term a “bridge builder” in the Indo-Pacific.

India is seeking to be a bridge builder in the Indo-Pacific

Delhi's approach to international affairs has long been informed by its principle of strategic autonomy (reconfigured as “multi-alignment” in 2020 by India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, but essentially the same concept).⁷ The unhealed wounds of a century of British occupation are still apparent in India's external interactions, and despite its recent rise, fears of external interference in domestic affairs lie behind every policy decision. Non-alignment discourses also inform foreign policy, a legacy of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Prioritizing the need to protect sovereignty, India has historically distanced itself from the international community, employing strategic partnerships rather than alliances,

and even then accepting only limited external support. Emerging from the Cold War, India focused on maintaining its status instead of seeking to amplify it—attributed to “reticence” by scholar Manjari Chatterjee Miller.⁸ It also sought to defend the existing world order as oriented around US-directed liberalism, even if this was, in the words of scholar C. Raja Mohan, “unjust from India’s own past criteria,” which had rejected all forms of imperialism during the Cold War.⁹

Exceeding expectations, India in the past decade has transformed into a rising power—and potential superpower—but this has brought changes to the very fabric of its political identity: modernity pursued at the expense of tradition, economic liberalism at the expense of protectionism, international diplomacy at the expense of regional certainties, and most challengingly, cooperation with Western states at the expense of non-alignment. India’s grand strategy has come to focus on developing what researcher Sumitha Narayanan Kutty terms a “networking” response to its most obvious strategic challenge: China’s near-regional hegemony.¹⁰ Engaging with a range of traditional and non-traditional actors, Modi’s networking has entailed cultivating partnerships that maximize its tools of statecraft in support of strategic autonomy while reducing economic dependency on China.

The Inflection Point

A turning point for India’s recalibrated grand strategy was the June 2020 border clash with China. Although skirmishes had occurred previously along the ill-defined 3400-kilometer border, this incident saw the first loss of life in the area in 45 years, with twenty Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers killed.¹¹ For Delhi, this was a wake-up call of its military power differential with Beijing; not only was it incapable of securing the shared border, it continued to lack a viable sea-based deterrent. Nonetheless, India took a highly measured response to the border dispute, even if this meant border flareups continued. It sought to avoid escalation over fears of coordinated Sino-Pakistan operations, but also because China was a key trading partner. A self-styled pragmatist,¹² Modi kept channels open—apart from in the military domain—and trade with China has continued to grow, accounting for approximately 11 percent of India’s global trade.¹³

India has instead focused on cultivating closer links with the US and its allies—especially France, India’s oldest strategic Western partner. In recent years, Delhi has cooperated in multiple areas with Paris including defense, connectivity, infrastructure and sustainability.¹⁴ In the first half of 2023 alone, the duo undertook joint military exercises, agreed to the co-development of jet and helicopter engines, and approved India’s initial proposals to procure 26 *Rafale* M fighters and three *Scorpène*-class diesel-propelled submarines from France.¹⁵

The overtures go in both directions. To balance against China, Western states are seeking to align more closely with India, perceived as a fundamental stabilizer

and democratic pillar in the Indo-Pacific. In parallel, Western firms are looking to diversify their supply chains away from China—for example, Apple shifting to Indian manufacturers to build its newest iPhones—in a process the Biden administration has dubbed “friend-shoring.”¹⁶

Yet Delhi's warming ties with Western governments remain precarious. In autumn 2023, a diplomatic spat with Canada over the alleged involvement of Indian officials in the killing of a Sikh separatist leader led to Ottawa recalling 41 diplomats following Delhi's threats of expulsion. Thus, while Delhi's dalliances with Washington have been interpreted as a willingness to support US efforts to maintain a more favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, such tentative reorientation is a fragile construction—and Washington cannot rely on Delhi's future support, particularly where the issues stand to cause contention with the other great powers: Russia and China.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created particular difficulties for India in its wider cultivation of new partnerships. Underscoring the centrality of its strategic autonomy doctrine, India has chosen not to abandon its historical partner, and Delhi-Moscow ties have in fact strengthened since the invasion. Most notably, India has increased imports of cut-price Russian oil, now constituting around half of its total oil imports.¹⁷ All this has led to some awkward diplomatic maneuvering by India to avoid condemning Russia's invasion outright, as attested by watered-down language when presiding as G20 president in September 2023.¹⁸

A major imperative for India's networking approach toward Russia is mitigating the threat from the “no-limits” partnership announced by Beijing and Moscow in February 2022. India is also increasingly aware of its military vulnerability after years of dependency on substandard Russian (often Soviet) weaponry. Counterintuitively, all of this has happened with the tacit approval of Washington, which appears unwilling to endanger recent diplomatic gains made with Delhi.¹⁹ Such complex dynamics between this growing collection of state actors jostling for power problematize the prevalent Western conception of great power rivalry being simply between Washington and Beijing, as well as India's rise being premised merely on rational calculations of power.

Delhi's warming ties with Western governments remain precarious

Legitimacy, Rule-Setting and Status in Order-Engineering

In recent years, a body of scholarship has emerged eschewing traditional conceptions of power based on realist understandings that emphasize material capabilities and national security interests.²⁰ There is greater recognition that legitimacy, rule-setting and status also affect the dynamics of great power

rivalry and the process of states ascending, which is relevant in India's case given the heavy normative component to its grand strategy.²¹ Particularly germane to the Indian experience is the research of Rohan Mukherjee, who has developed a conceptual framework termed "institutional status theory" (IST) which explains how aspirations for great power status and the legitimacy of international institutions shape the relationship between rising powers and international orders.²²

If one follows the logic of IST, India as a rising power makes judgements about either challenging or cooperating with international institutions based on legitimacy and inclusiveness: the degree to which it perceives decision-making within these institutions as procedurally fair and how open they are to rising powers taking on leadership positions. Despite the seemingly altruistic nature of these values, however, judgement on them inherently lies in the eye of the beholder. This framework sheds light on how Delhi has so far struggled with AUKUS—an externally-imposed vehicle of Anglosphere order-engineering would appear anathema to such values—but has embraced the Quad, though support for the latter has its limitations. India's various strategic choices are not only driven by concerns related to national security underpinned by its material capabilities, but by a desire to be recognized as deserving and as an equal by other great powers. How India responds to AUKUS is thus not only about rational calculations of power but whether the Indo-Pacific is being developed as an inclusive and fair regional order that acknowledges India's rising power status and allows it to share in rule-setting.

Within the Indo-Pacific, India aspires to a role of legitimizer, networker and bridge builder—and also enforcer when the conditions are right. Under Modi's leadership, India has been particularly successful in achieving such roles by the way it engages in regional institutions and other fora, including through "institutional balancing." This aligns closely with the role Delhi has carved out for itself in the Quad. Regarding AUKUS, its opportunities for strategic influence are far more limited, although there is a potential role for Delhi to exploit as regional bridge builder, such as when China objects to AUKUS within multilateral fora. Nevertheless, status is inherently both a relational and perceptual concept.²³ The Indo-Pacific order that Delhi is seeking to build will be one that not only supports its rise but is at least partially constructed around its own distinct identity and is aligned with its national interests.

India's International Statecraft

Modi has sought to expand India's toolbox of statecraft more broadly to exert influence on the world stage. Under his watch, Delhi has made its presence felt in prestigious groups like the G20—hosted by India in September 2023—and the Asian Development Bank, and has become a candidate to join

the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It has also engaged in some limited strategic partnerships, including a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” with Japan, and various trilateral frameworks (India-Japan-US; India-Japan-Australia). A particularly promising arena for engagement is BRICS, an intergovernmental organization of top emerging economies that India co-founded. With six new states expected to join in January 2024, the revitalization of the bloc will provide India alternative options for exerting geopolitical influence among a non-Western grouping—notably all of them rising economic powers.

Most significant of all, India is a member of the Quad, whose identity is explicitly premised on building a liberal, rules-based, democratic order in the Indo-Pacific.²⁴ Although created in 2007, it wasn’t until 2017 under the Trump presidency that the Quad was revitalized as a framework focused on China. In many ways, India’s engagement in the Quad has gone further than was initially expected, with Delhi offering support for naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and military logistical arrangements at the bilateral and trilateral levels.²⁵ As scholar Kate Sullivan de Estrada notes, Quad membership—and through it the (caveated) embrace of a liberal regional vision—has helped elevate India’s status and agency, not only with its Quad partners, but regionally.²⁶

Nevertheless, while Delhi attaches great value to the Quad, its interactions within the group are complicated and it has been labelled the “enigmatic weak link.”²⁷ Most obviously, Delhi has resisted securitizing the Quad. While it appreciates the Quad as a vehicle for order-engineering to curb Chinese influence, Delhi is wary of supporting hard power projection that could risk its own security. There are also consequences for its legitimacy within the Indo-Pacific community of states of advocating (essentially Western) narratives that rest on exclusionary principles. Thus, India acts as a brake in extending the Quad beyond much more than a loose framework for dialogue. Sullivan de Estrada writes that India is not interested in the Quad as a framework for adopting “identical strategic positions”; rather it favors a flexible tack “in line with India’s preferred approach to influence-building in its own ‘strategic backyard.’”²⁸

Above all, India does not share the same aspirations for the Indo-Pacific as the US and its allies, even regional states like Japan and South Korea. Although it has expressed consistent support for the Quad and is cultivating close ties with Tokyo, Delhi has retained its non-aligned discourse and has resisted external efforts to bring it into security alliances. And while contemporary great power rivalry is mostly conceptualized as a dyadic polarized competition between Washington and Beijing, Delhi does not view the world in these terms. As Jaishankar describes it, India “sees an

India does not share the same aspirations for the Indo-Pacific as the US and its allies

emerging dance of big powers—chiefly America, China, Russia and itself—in which it will engage multiple partners, albeit to different degrees.”²⁹ There is a carefully constructed “art” of diplomacy here, with Delhi deftly building bridges—both on the regional and global levels—to secure an influential stake in a future more multipolar community of states.

Shaping US Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific

The launch of AUKUS in September 2021 took the world by surprise, including Delhi. Foreseeing the delicate diplomatic dance that India would need to perform as it related to the Quad, then-foreign minister Harsh Vardhan Shringla said at the time: “The Quad is a plurilateral ... group of countries that have a shared vision of their attributes and values ... [and] has adopted a positive proactive agenda ... to address some of the issues of the day ... On the other hand, AUKUS is a security alliance between three countries. We are not party to this alliance. From our perspective, this is neither relevant to the Quad, nor will it have any impact on its functioning.”³⁰ In another press briefing that same month, Arindam Bagchi, spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, was asked repeatedly about AUKUS but demurred on each occasion, saying only: “the Quad has its own dynamics.”³¹

AUKUS is at the sharpest end of a broader architecture of minilateral partnerships being developed under the Biden administration to contain China in response to its rapid military and technological advances and perceived territorial ambitions. Together with AUKUS and the Quad, US-led order-engineering projects include Build Back Better World and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), among others. They are premised on America’s 2022 National Security Strategy, which asserts that realizing its national interests cannot be accomplished “alone” and requires an “integrated deterrence” strategy.³²

Despite the significance of AUKUS, India has been reluctant to publicly recognize any commonality of interests between this Anglosphere-based security pact and the Quad, preferring to maintain a clear distance and preserve its strategic autonomy. Thus, elusiveness has so far characterized India’s position on AUKUS—and policymakers and officials have been highly cautious in their public statements, including on how the two minilateral frameworks interact. On the surface, India’s traditional non-alignment discourses suggest it will not favor AUKUS; meanwhile, sharpening strategic competition with China suggest engagement with the Quad could become increasingly fraught for India if its partners push on the Quad’s securitization imperative. Nevertheless, the dynamics are more complicated in view of India’s competitive yet economically interdependent relationship with China, alongside Delhi’s efforts not to derail its

own upwards economic and political trajectory. In sum, as we set out below, there are both challenges and opportunities for India in these US-directed Indo-Pacific minilateral frameworks.

Setting out the Drawbacks for India

One of the issues that India struggles with most is the premises of both AUKUS and the Quad (albeit to a lesser extent) to contain China. The rise of US-led minilateral partnerships has created layers of security architecture across the Indo-Pacific, akin to a defense-in-depth model. There has also been an upsurge in joint exercises undertaken by the militaries of the US and its allies—including regional states like Japan, South Korea and the Philippines—as a way to strengthen interoperability and present a symbolic front. India is deeply conscious that regional securitization will be perceived as encirclement by Beijing, which could lead to it lashing out. This is a situation that India prefers to avoid given its own complicated relationship with China.

Related is the concern that AUKUS could spark a regional arms race.³³ Although fears of arms racing are not new and often emerge with new military acquisitions, there is justification for this concern in the AUKUS case amid escalating military stand-offs in the South China Sea.³⁴ Sharing the view of a number of ASEAN countries, India fears that AUKUS could add further momentum to this upwards spiral, with potential for conflict spillover. In a region where nearly all the world's nuclear-weapons states have a presence, this is not a trivial issue.

Another problem for India is how AUKUS contributes to building orders of power based on exclusion, fundamentally contradicting India's inclusive worldview.³⁵ Within regional fora Delhi promotes inclusivity and diversity, even if this is partly to create acceptance of its own distinct identity, and thereby promote its own interests. Underscoring how it perceives these notions as compatible with the Quad, Modi's keynote address at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue—less than a year after the Quad was revitalized—mentioned the terms “inclusive”/“inclusiveness” and “diverse”/“diversity” four times each.³⁶ By contrast, AUKUS has a fundamentally Anglo-Saxon character: it is a partnership of Anglosphere states.³⁷ Notwithstanding speculation that AUKUS may expand, it currently represents a narrow and exclusive structure that essentially serves Anglosphere interests.

AUKUS, as a partnership of Anglosphere states, fundamentally contradicts India's inclusive worldview

The Anglosphere construct also brings with it colonial connotations, not least because the Indo-Pacific region was presided over by Britain at the peak of

Empire. The fact that France was one of the states that suffered the most with the creation of AUKUS only accentuates the pact's Anglosphere character.³⁸ France's exclusion from AUKUS (but also the Quad) creates another problem for India. The day after AUKUS was announced, the European Union, led by Paris, issued its own regional strategy: the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, underlining the growing divergence between European and Anglosphere countries over their visions for the Indo-Pacific.³⁹ The potential for AUKUS to trigger a rupture between Western allies makes Delhi uneasy given that this would destabilize the regional order.⁴⁰

Any further deterioration of the security landscape in the Indo-Pacific has an outsized impact on Delhi. With its dependencies on the Chinese economy and relative lack of military depth, India is arguably exposed to fallout from conflict more than any other regional state. An active boundary dispute with China that frequently risks escalating and growing Beijing-Islamabad cooperation further complicate Delhi's calculations. And notwithstanding all the talk of India becoming the world's third largest economy, much of the country retains deep pockets of poverty and lacks basic infrastructure and public services, weakening any resilience to conflict spillover.

The Anglosphere dimension is already impacting the Indo-Pacific security spectrum. Although Australia's acquisition of a new class of nuclear-propelled submarines under Pillar I of AUKUS is decades away, there are other aspects of AUKUS that alter the near-term regional balance-of-power. This includes the advanced capabilities being developed under Pillar II, Australia's purchase of between three and five Virginia-class submarines, and rotational deployments of American and British SSNs to Western Australia starting as early as 2027. Furthermore, the deep levels of military interoperability and unprecedented sharing of highly sensitive technologies underscore the partners' long-term commitment to work cheek-by-jowl in the region.

Another indirect impact on India of the creation of AUKUS is that Australia will become the seventh nation to acquire submarines fueled by highly-enriched uranium (India was the sixth, commissioning its first SSN in 2016). Such novel acquisition lowers India's naval competitive advantage as more militaries gain these capabilities. While nuclear-propelled submarines do not add to a state's nuclear posture, they provide important undersea muscle—of increasing salience as the Indo-Pacific's maritime domain comes to the fore amid great power rivalry. Meanwhile, there is increasing speculation that AUKUS will enlarge, most likely in the area of Advanced Capabilities under Pillar II. In June 2023, a US official confirmed that Washington is “in conversation with a variety of countries who are interested.”⁴¹ Potential new members such as Canada, Japan and South Korea would strengthen AUKUS capabilities, but this would have an isolating impact on India given that it would be highly unlikely to join AUKUS even with an enlarged membership.

Even though their long-term goals are essentially complementary, AUKUS risks minimizing the importance of the Quad as the other main US-led minilateral in the Indo-Pacific due to the potential for overlap in some activities. Inter-Quad relations have been also significantly undermined by Delhi's relationship with Moscow, most obviously as its failure to condemn the Ukraine invasion suggests differences between India and its Quad partners over conceptions of sovereignty and the rules-based order. In reality, such differences in worldview are less significant than they have appeared, given that Delhi's diplomacy toward Moscow is driven more by security imperatives vis-à-vis China than mutual long-term interests.

What is more, if AUKUS was to enlarge to include Japan, there is a risk that the Quad would become redundant. The other three Quad members (the US, Australia and Japan) might seek to refocus their collaboration within the AUKUS framework, especially if significant differences were to arise with India. In effect, the larger AUKUS becomes, the less the Quad would be needed. Conversely, an enlargement of AUKUS to include Asian states Japan and South Korea would create greater legitimacy for the pact by diluting its Anglosphere character, seemingly an aspect that India should value. Meanwhile, scholars have speculated as to how the Anglosphere partners might seek to reorient the Quad toward their regional security objectives, although any integration of the Quad into AUKUS, or vice versa, is extremely unlikely.⁴²

Notwithstanding these future potential scenarios, AUKUS has already caused problems for India pertaining to the development of its naval capabilities. India has an aging submarine fleet; as of mid-2023, India possessed sixteen operational conventional submarines—nine of which had been in service for over three decades, three for over two decades.⁴³ India has historically procured submarines from Germany, France and Russia, although in the past decade has focused on shoring up indigenous production. Nonetheless, progress has been slow and its nuclear-power attack submarines are still not ready.⁴⁴ In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron floated the idea of an India-France-Australia (IFA) trilateral, a potential opportunity to expand military cooperation between the three countries, including in the area of procurement. However, the diplomatic meltdown with Paris that followed the AUKUS announcement effectively scuttled the IFA framework.⁴⁵

Judging by official Chinese statements, AUKUS and the Quad have provoked serious consternation in Beijing. Still, China's foreign policy thinking is somewhat opaque to the outside world, and it is still too early to fully gauge China's response to AUKUS, particularly as many aspects of the pact will be delivered decades from now. Nevertheless, there are already several potential scenarios that can plausibly be inferred, such as China potentially seeking its own alliance to rival AUKUS in a move to ease its diplomatic isolation. Attesting to the

viability of a “rival AUKUS” led by China, an August 2023 report by the US Naval War College noted how Russia might aid China with submarine technology.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, China could make an offer to Pakistan through enhancing defense ties. Manpreet Sethi of Delhi’s Centre for Air Power Studies writes, “Pakistan would be thrilled to equip its naval Strategic Forces Command with SSNs,”⁴⁷ while Anjum Sarfraz of Islamabad’s National Institute of Maritime Affairs has suggested Pakistan could use AUKUS as a pretext to build its own nuclear-propelled submarines.⁴⁸ Although less likely, China could potentially make the same offer to Iran in a further challenge to world order—with India facing particular consequences due to its geopolitical location sandwiched between the two and as an importer of Iranian oil.

Even more fundamentally, a new security partnership under AUKUS disrupts India’s own grand strategy, even though it is primarily focused on its near-abroad—the Indian Ocean—rather than the much larger Indo-Pacific. A partnership that India is excluded from leads to recalibrated power dynamics within the region, in which the Anglosphere’s expansion poses an additional barrier that restricts India’s longer-term options for strategic influence. In particular, AUKUS impacts India’s goal of becoming a capable naval nation to complement its great power status. But even the mere existence of the Quad and AUKUS implicitly puts India in a rival camp to China, accentuating the rivalry and tension in their bilateral ties.

Setting out the Benefits for India

Although Delhi has taken a highly measured approach toward AUKUS, going so far as to avoid discussing it in official statements, the pact’s central objectives—to deter Chinese transgressions and maintain a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific—resonate closely with India’s objectives for a free and open regional order. One of the most telling episodes regarding India’s thinking on AUKUS came at the 2022 General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). During this annual meeting of IAEA member states, China attempted to pass a resolution against Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-propelled submarines, arguing that it was in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Employing what journalist Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury calls “deft diplomacy,” the Indian Mission to the IAEA worked with other governments to condemn Beijing’s proposal—an outcome that China did not appear to be expecting.⁴⁹ Lacking majority support, Beijing was ultimately forced to withdraw the resolution on the last day of the conference.

From a long-term perspective, the goals of AUKUS are essentially complementary to those of the Quad and the other partnerships that India engages in. By emphasizing the “softer” aspects of the Quad (including climate change,

critical technologies, infrastructure investment, COVID-19 vaccines, and humanitarian assistance, among other areas), India can be seen to be pursuing a constructive approach to regional development and prosperity, while leaving the AUKUS partners (and potential new joiners) to pursue hard military projection.⁵⁰ This is an efficacious strategy as India focuses on shoring up its military capabilities, especially its need to enhance naval forces in the Indo-Pacific and land power in the Himalayan borders. As India's grand strategy has never prioritized becoming a military power, AUKUS provides India convenient strategic space to focus on economic prosperity and other national priorities. Thus, the AUKUS framework is mainly beneficial to India in the short term, perhaps on the time frame of a couple of decades.

AUKUS is mainly beneficial to India in the short term, perhaps for a couple decades

Washington is increasingly attempting to cultivate relations with Delhi, precipitated by India's acceptance into the global nuclear order under the Bush administration and continued by the Obama administration identifying India as central to its "rebalance" strategy.⁵¹ Particularly relevant to Pillar II of AUKUS, India has recently begun to collaborate with Washington in the areas of space, technology and semiconductors, signing the bilateral Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in 2022.⁵² It has also participated in the Exercise Malabar regional military naval exercise alongside its Quad partners (but officially delinked from the Quad), including developing some limited naval interoperability.⁵³ This suggests that the Quad's security and military aspects are more useful to India than it has wanted to broadcast officially.

Given India's strong scientific research and development capacity, the AUKUS partners also have strong incentives to work with Delhi—so the benefits go both ways. In March 2023, there were unconfirmed reports that India was holding exploratory conversations with the partners on how they might cooperate over emerging technologies—purportedly in the areas of artificial intelligence, electronic warfare, and cyber technologies—although formal dialogue has yet to take place. It has been argued that India's defense of AUKUS at the 2022 IAEA General Conference opened the door for these discussions.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, a potential enlargement of AUKUS could possibly see India working more closely with touted future members South Korea and Japan on strategic technologies, providing Delhi another means to exert regional influence while contributing to its own security. As stated, an enlargement of AUKUS to include Asian states would confer greater legitimacy for the pact, and thus help India feel more comfortable about collaboration (albeit this would still come heavily caveated).

Question marks over its future naval capabilities suggest that AUKUS and the Quad might confer other benefits for India. Despite lofty ambitions to develop a naval power that offers a deterrent to Beijing,⁵⁵ there is a real possibility that India will acquire less than half of the 24 submarines (including six SSNs) planned for delivery by 2030—a combination of delays in decision-making, indigenous construction issues, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. As a result, scholars have suggested that India may move closer to the West in the meantime to benefit—albeit indirectly and in the short term—from the security umbrella developing under AUKUS and other regional arrangements.⁵⁶ Still, it seems highly unlikely that India would be willing to support the US and its allies in any military response to a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan.⁵⁷

India’s greatest regional fear is the emergence of a trilateral China-Russia-Pakistan arrangement

The war in Ukraine has not only caused a shortfall in the planned leasing of Russian SSNs, but also initiated a larger strategic challenge for India. As Russia moves closer to Chinese power and detaches from the West, China gains an ally of sorts while consolidating its position in the order hierarchy as Russia is weakened as a result of the war. This also comes in the context of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and China’s successful Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which stretches across Central Asia to Europe.

Amid these changing order dynamics, India’s greatest fear is the emergence of a trilateral China-Russia-Pakistan arrangement; but even a hardening of regional bipolarity would create challenges for India by reducing its options for strategic influence.

As such, AUKUS and the Quad not only contribute to deterrence for the US and its allies but provide a strategic bulwark against revisionist power politics in Eurasia, to India’s benefit. Yet, this also implies that Delhi may be forced to relax its commitment to strategic autonomy in order to move closer to the West. In fact, despite official narratives, it is not the first time Delhi has sought external support, having courted alignment with the US in 1962 and the USSR in 1971. As political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta observes, India’s diplomacy has mostly been “contingent” on circumstances.⁵⁸ For modern-day India, it is perhaps less about strategic autonomy than expanding its toolbox of statecraft to exert influence, which can be thought of as “strategic optionality.”

On balance, AUKUS and the Quad are phenomena favorable to India at a moment when its military capabilities are still lacking relative to its economic might. Although Delhi has repeatedly demurred when questioned, it is not averse to AUKUS and its actions have already made an important contribution

to facilitating—and indeed legitimizing—the pact. Meanwhile, India resists further securitization in the Quad but remains broadly supportive of its other goals, particularly those without an explicit “political” objective which might put the spotlight on its own domestic illiberalism.

Tentative (and Perhaps Time-Limited) Support for US Minilaterals

The view from Delhi is that AUKUS will contribute to deterrence against China's naval power projection and expansionist approach, even though this position is unlikely to ever be formally acknowledged. Delhi also recognizes the overlapping objectives between AUKUS and the Quad, and that both pacts reinforce one another. Through deft diplomacy and regional bridge building, Delhi is able to derive legitimacy by focusing on the soft power imperatives of the Quad while delegating, indirectly of course, hard power projection to the US and regional partners. Nonetheless, it is unavoidable that US-led order-engineering projects in the Indo-Pacific will pose challenges to India. In particular, Delhi will be concerned about regional arms racing and is unlikely to support an enlarged AUKUS if this also includes Japan as a fellow Quad member.

It is unavoidable that US-led Indo-Pacific order-engineering projects will pose challenges to India

Yet Washington and its AUKUS partners cannot assume Delhi's long-term tacit support for AUKUS, or even the Quad. Within the Indo-Pacific order, India is gradually assuming a greater role as regional legitimizer, networker and bridge builder—and it is increasingly confident that it can help set the rules that favor its rise, especially in the Indian Ocean region. At the opportune time, when it has sufficiently advanced its material power, it will seek to consolidate leverage with governments across the wider Indo-Pacific and emerge as a great power. Delhi seeks a just and inclusive world order, even as it pursues security and status for itself. India as a rising great power is aware that it can choose from a range of strategic options to decide how and whether to engage with other actors and international institutions.

Within this context, it seems likely that India will cooperate with US-led minilaterals like AUKUS and the Quad, but will remain apart from them—on occasion even seeking to limit them—as such arrangements bind Delhi too strongly to the objectives of other actors and will never present India the status and recognition it believes it deserves. Moreover, the order-engineering taking place in the Indo-Pacific is not conducive to Delhi's longer-term vision for a regional order based on inclusivity and diversity, built to create acceptance

of its own distinct identity. Thus, the AUKUS partners—but also other Western actors, especially France—will need to find alternative ways in which to engage with India over the longer term. In the Indo-Pacific, diplomacy plays out in a rich cultural but also deeply institutionalized environment where notions of fairness, openness and legitimacy matter as much as, if not more than, rational calculations of power. International diplomacy should emphasize not only India's security needs but its status within institutions and regional leadership potential.

In part, this is a battle of ideas for Delhi, just as it is for Washington: the need to promote more effectively the fundamental necessity of a rules-based order built on universal principles like democracy, rule of law, equity, and respect for sovereignty. The US knows that India will be key to this, even if Delhi's relationship with Moscow complicates its current contributions to a progressive vision for the future of the Indo-Pacific. Here, the US and its allies would do better to understand India's security dilemma, as it grapples with an ascendent China that is looking to cooperate with Russia and could potentially seek to create a trilateral axis with Pakistan. India can be expected to maintain pragmatic accommodation on these fronts. But this still leaves diplomatic space for the US and its allies to work with India in progressive areas such as climate change, human security, and humanitarian assistance, as well as in more strategic areas such as technology cooperation. There is nothing inevitable about great power conflict. With all its diplomatic currency, India will play a mollifying role in easing such tensions but will also be an increasingly assertive actor in its own right, shaping order-engineering in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Notes

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