

Chapter 7

India, the Quad, and the Liberal International Order



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Abstract After the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China stands out as the predominant challenger to India's international interests and the international order. Despite its tradition of a post-colonial, developing democracy that was non-aligned during the Cold War, India upholds the rules-based international order together with the U.S., Europe and Japan. Quad is one of the most important new arrangements to uphold a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, India has sought to retain a leadership role in the Global South, given concerns about China's growing influence. Besides defending the rules-based international order, India has also been a staunch defender of national sovereignty, and believes that the open trading system has not always offered a level playing field. India will simultaneously seek cooperation with the Quad, the middle-powers outside the Quad and the Global South, so that critical technology and best practices necessary for India's transformation and increased leverage are secured.

As a post-colonial, developing democracy that was non-aligned during the Cold War, India has traditionally been ambivalent when it comes to the common American, European, or Japanese conceptions of the liberal international order. On the one hand, India has frequently worked to uphold a rules-based international order and recognizes the material and normative benefits of international security and stability, open and fair economic engagement, and the governance of the global commons.¹ At the same time, India has been a staunch defender of national sovereignty.² It has also argued that an open trading system has not always offered a level playing field.³ Furthermore, India's leadership perceives the current governing institutions of the

¹ Modi (2018).

² Puri (2016).

³ Jaishankar (2020a).

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international order as fundamentally unequal and unrepresentative.⁴ These considerations have sometimes put it at odds with the political, economic, and international relations conceptions of “liberalism” often associated with the liberal international order. Not surprisingly, Indian officials and commentators eschew the nostalgia for the liberal international order that often characterizes discourse in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

In recent years, three major developments—the rise of China, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—have significantly shaped India’s approach to the international system. On some matters, India has felt compelled to take further steps to uphold a rules-based international order, as on the law of the sea, climate mitigation and adaptation, emerging technologies, connectivity infrastructure, and trade agreements with trusted partners.⁵ In a few cases, as on climate and connectivity, this has even required India to assume a greater leadership role. At the same time, India has also sought to deepen its partnership with the United States, the European Union (and its member states), Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other U.S. allies in order to respond to emerging challenges. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—represents the most prominent expression of these twin objectives in the Indo-Pacific.⁶ India has also sought to retain a leadership role in the Global South, given concerns about China’s growing influence. This has occasionally put India at odds with the United States and its allies.⁷

For the foreseeable future, India is likely to perceive China as the predominant challenger to its own international interests and the international order. This will contribute to the deepening of the Quad partnership as a vehicle for upholding the international order in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, given concerns about U.S. staying power, India has invested in a proliferation of issue-specific “middle-power” coalitions, also involving France, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia, among others.⁸ A further series of parallel steps involves a deepening of economic and technical partnerships with the United States and its allies—including both the European Union and Japan—in an effort to internally balance and thus strengthen Indian capabilities. These countries still constitute a large proportion of the global economy and—outside China and Russia—would be the likely sources of critical technology and best practices necessary for India’s transformation.

Despite these simultaneous efforts by India to partner with the United States, Japan, Australia, the European Union and its member states such as France, in

⁴ Akbaruddin (2021).

⁵ Jha (2021), Rehman (2017), “Official Spokesperson’s Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (May 13, 2017), Arakkal (2021); “Joint Statement from Founding Members of the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence,” U.S. Department of State (June 15, 2020).

⁶ Jaishankar and Madan (2021, 2022).

⁷ Thakkar (2021).

⁸ Madan (2020a).

support of a more stable international order, there will continue to be complications and limitations. India's traditional concerns about the inequities and nature of the liberal international order will almost certainly become a recurring theme in bilateral and multilateral negotiations. A second factor will involve competing calculations reflecting India's role in the Global South. Both dynamics will continue to create divergences in perceptions and policies with even close partners, despite many aspects of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the established democracies that continue to uphold a rules-based international order.

India's Ambivalence About the Liberal International Order

Despite its close association with nonalignment during the Cold War, India in fact had a more complex and multifaceted relationship with the U.S.-led liberal international order since independence. India was a founding member of the United Nations, a participant in the Bretton Woods conference, and among the initial signatories of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the precursor to the World Trade Organization.⁹ It received significant aid from the United States and allies between 1947 and the 1960s, including technical assistance, agricultural technology, and military support.¹⁰ It also took part in UN military and peacekeeping missions, whether in Korea or in Congo.¹¹ This changed after 1971, and was reflected during the latter half of the Cold War, when India—concerned about a U.S.-China-Pakistan partnership—entered into a treaty with the Soviet Union.¹²

The 1990s were a period of transition, defined by India's gradual economic opening after 1991 and questions about its nuclear status. Following its 1998 nuclear tests, however, India embarked upon active diplomatic outreach efforts with the United States, Japan, and Australia, as well as France and other European powers.¹³ By 2008, this resulted in the effective mainstreaming of India's nuclear weapon program, ensuring that it was on a stronger footing to engage with the international community on defense and sensitive technologies. Nonetheless, the period between 2008 and 2014 witnessed India partnering with China and Russia in a bid to negotiate a stronger position for itself in the international order, resulting in such coalitions as BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the BASIC coalition on climate change.

Despite efforts to engage Beijing, India's relations with China grew more competitive after about 2012. Indian and Chinese forces faced off on their disputed border in 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020–22, with the latter crisis resulting in the first military casualties on both sides in over four decades. Greater Chinese influence in South Asia

⁹ Rajadhyaksha (2019).

¹⁰ Madan (2020b), Engerman (2018).

¹¹ Bhagavan (2019), Raghavan (2016).

¹² Singh (2019).

¹³ Talbott (2004).

and the Indian Ocean region, often under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, exacerbated regional tensions. The permanent presence of China in the Indian Ocean region necessitated recasting the wider region as a single strategic continuum: the Indo-Pacific. Chinese intransigence at multilateral institutions and on economic and trade concerns contributed even further to deteriorating relations with India. These tensions were exacerbated by two further shocks: the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the resulting disruption in supply chains, as well as the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 and the very direct impact for India's energy and food security.

Collectively, these developments have accelerated several trends that had begun gradually after 2000. Most notable has been India's growing relationship with the United States and its allies. Relations with Japan steadily grew but accelerated during Shinzo Abe's period as prime minister.¹⁴ India's relations with Australia were traditionally marked by greater suspicion but major breakthroughs followed after 2019.¹⁵ At the same time, India's partnership with France—a country that opposed sanctions against India after its 1998 nuclear tests—assumed a strategic dimension, encompassing defense, civil nuclear, and maritime security cooperation. After difficulties, including over bilateral issues involving Italy and Denmark, India-EU relations also broadened, resulting eventually in the establishment of a Trade and Technology Council.¹⁶ The consequence of all this has been a network of interstitial military and economic arrangements that have resulted in much more cooperative and trusted partnerships between India, on the one hand, and the developed democracies allied to the United States.

The Quad: Necessary but Insufficient

The Quad involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, has emerged as one—perhaps the most important—new arrangement to uphold a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. Its antecedents stem from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, after which the four navies quickly coordinated relief efforts. In 2007, officials from the four countries met in Manila and the four navies—along with Singapore—conducted a multilateral naval exercise. Quadrilateral cooperation stopped in 2008 following an Australian decision, but there was in any case little enthusiasm in all four capitals for continuing the partnership given equities with China.¹⁷ In 2017, the Quad was revived, was gradually upgraded to the ministerial level, and in 2021 to the leadership level.

Since 2021, the Quad has developed into a series of issue-specific working groups, rather than continue as either a talk shop or an overly bureaucratized international

¹⁴ Basrur and Kutty (2018).

¹⁵ Jaishankar (2020b).

¹⁶ “EU-India: Joint Press Release on Launching the Trade and Technology Council,” European Commission (April 25, 2022).

¹⁷ Flitton (2020).

organization. Quadrilateral defense cooperation continues with the Malabar naval exercise, but the Quad is now working towards specific outcomes on maritime domain awareness, green transportation, supply chains, COVID-19 vaccines, scientific education and research, cybersecurity, 5G telecommunications, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance, and space-based earth observation.¹⁸ All these efforts are driven by a desire to demonstrate meaningful impact in providing global public goods, making the Quad appear less exclusive and threatening to partners in the Indo-Pacific, and shoring up the regional order.

Despite the considerable progress made and the importance given to the Quad by the four countries' leaders, it is not a panacea for the challenges facing the international order in the Indo-Pacific. Many of those challenges—whether concerning territorial disputes, arms control, unfair trade practices, and interference—will have to be addressed either through bilateral engagement with China or through other means. The question of Taiwan—involving the United States as well as Japan—is perhaps of greatest consequence. Other regional efforts will by necessity be broader. For instance, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework advanced by the United States, but with buy-in from 13 other partners, intends to define regional standards on trade, digital cooperation, supply chains, environmental factors, anti-corruption, and tax policies. Similarly, India's Act East policy is meant in part to integrate more with Southeast Asia and play a supporting role in a broader region including the South Pacific. Meanwhile, more global efforts will require cooperation with extra-regional partners, such as the European Union on many matters of standards and regulations. Furthermore, there are areas where other specific actors outside the Quad—such as France, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, South Korea, and Canada—bring certain competitive advantages to the table. For all these reasons, the Quad is likely to remain one of many parallel efforts to strengthen the emerging international order in the Indo-Pacific.

Multiple Building Blocks

China's growing assertiveness as a single party state, a non-market economy, and a revisionist power has had a transformative effect on the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and on the broader international order.¹⁹ It ought to be no surprise that India—another large and rising Asian power—should feel the effects. Many of China's efforts have undermined both the international order and Indian security and well-being: anti-satellite tests at high altitudes, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, artificial island building in the South China Sea, non-market trade practices, and unsustainable and non-transparent lending.²⁰ India has had to respond by more actively building up its own capabilities, stepping up in its neighborhood,

¹⁸ "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022," The White House (May 23, 2022).

¹⁹ Doshi (2022).

²⁰ Broad and Sanger (2007), Hannas et al. (2013), Hayton (2014), Small (2015).

contributing to a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, and representing itself in institutions of global governance.²¹

Partnerships with the industrialized democracies in North America, Europe, and Northeast Asia are critical, and several efforts are likely to proceed in parallel. One is the Quad, which brings together the four most capable and willing partners in the Indo-Pacific. A second is a series of issue-specific middle power coalitions involving France, Indonesia, Japan, Australia, and possibly others. All share different degrees of anxiety about the United States' staying power but have different priorities. Finally, India will on some issues engage directly with the European Union and bilaterally with the United States and Japan as large and capable economies that can contribute to India's internal balancing. This could conceivably extend to trade, investment, development cooperation, and technology partnerships.

All these lines of efforts will strengthen the building blocks necessary to uphold an international order already under immense strain. A more capable India will have greater resources to share the burden in such efforts, which remains very much part of the logic of the Quad. Bilateral relations will over time build habits of cooperation and trust with partners, particularly on sensitive issues and technologies. Ultimately, however, it will come down to leveraging these partnerships to strengthen and update international institutions and norms. Whatever the precise operating definition of the international order, the objectives would broadly be to preserve security and a stable balance of power against territorial revisionism and weapons proliferation; facilitate fair and equitable international commerce; and ensure the responsible and transparent governance of the global commons.

At the same time, there are reasons for caution. India will have misgivings about compromising its own sovereignty. It will insist on more equitable economic and trade terms to allow its still developing economy to compete in the global marketplace. It will also argue for a greater voice and vote for itself at the global high table. And it will support the perspectives of the Global South, in part motivated by concern about China's growing influence in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. If these considerations can be kept in mind and sufficiently navigated, it would certainly benefit India's partners in the developed democratic world.

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²¹ Jaishankar (2019).

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