India's security dilemma: engaging big powers while retaining strategic autonomy

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Abstract

India currently faces a security dilemma specifically because of the rise of China, Russia's strategic convergence with China, and the US's indeterminate Indo-Pacific policy stance. To overcome this dilemma, India's shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy poses several questions about its future strategic orientation, notably: Will India enter into a formal alliance with the USA, will India continue to engage China, will India retain close historical relations with Russia or will it more robustly pursue its 'Act East' policy? This article attempts a critical analysis of the different strategic options available to India and argues that while entering into a quasi-alliance with the USA, it will retain its strategic autonomy. India could simultaneously retain relations with Russia, China and the ASEAN. However, to the extent possible, its tendency will be to support a multipolar-Asia paradigm rather than a zero-sum alliance system to play a leading role in international fora.

Keywords Border conflict · Military–technological cooperation · Quadrilateral Security Dialogue · Strategic autonomy

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Introduction

Since its independence in 1947, India has been aiming to play an active role in the international fora. In that direction, during the Cold War it followed a ‘non-alignment’ policy, while being ‘quasi-aligned’ with the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War period, it pursued ‘strategic autonomy’, while seeking close partnerships with the established big powers. However, in the current strategic imbroglio, India faces credible security challenges from a rising China both on its disputed border and in the Indian Ocean. Thus, New Delhi finds itself in a security dilemma mainly because of continuously deteriorating relations with Beijing.

The historic and time-tested ‘quasi-alliance’ that India enjoyed with the Soviet Union/Russia although continues but with Russia–China strategic convergence, the bilateral relationship is being reduced to defence cooperation and limited-scale economic relations. Thus, while Moscow having limited leverage over Beijing, ‘India’s deterioration in relations with China coincided with rupture in the US engagement with China’ (Mohan 2021). That convergence trajectory of the last two decades indicates that India has entered into several foundational security agreements with the USA, in addition to joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). India has also been robustly pursuing its ‘Act East’ policy by working in collaboration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). To address the security dilemma that it currently faces, India while retaining its strategic autonomy is countering China through hedging.

This article outlines evolution of India’s security and strategic framework since its independence in 1947. Further, it attempts a critical analysis of the strategic options available to India to mitigate the security dilemma it currently faces and establishes that India is on the threshold of entering into a ‘quasi-alliance’ with the USA. From within this ‘quasi-alliance’ framework, it would like to retain its strategic autonomy to hedge against China by both engaging and confronting Beijing. India would also retain its times tested relations with Russia mainly because of its 70% defence supply being dovetailed to Moscow. Overall, India while being in a ‘quasi-alliance’ with the USA would simultaneously opt to retain relations with Russia, China and the ASEAN. To the extent possible, New Delhi’s tendency will be to support a multi-polar Asia paradigm rather than a zero-sum alliance system.

From NAM to the quad: India’s search for security

After its independence in 1947, at the beginning of the Cold War, India aspired to ‘attain her righteous place in the world and make her full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace and welfare of mankind’ (Subrahmanyam 2012, 13). To achieve that goal, India’s leadership endorsed the concept of non-alignment, thus making decisions based on merit, without aligning with either of the power blocs. That decision worked well during the Cold War as the non-aligned

movement (NAM) became the biggest bloc with a membership of 125 countries. India's primary objective within the NAM was to support 'self-determination, national independence and the sovereignty and territorial integrity' (Ministry of External Affairs 2012).

However, the NAM proved to be of limited value during the China–India border war of 1962. New Delhi, caught unaware and unprepared, approached both the superpowers for assistance. The USA, notwithstanding its alliance with Pakistan, offered conditional assistance, that India make every effort to resolve the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir (Steele 2002, 5–6). The Soviet Union, despite China being a fellow communist country, offered support, albeit delayed. Thereafter deterioration in relations between Moscow and Beijing in the 1960s contributed to the Indo-Soviet strategic rapprochement. Soviet Union supported India's balancing act against China-supported Pakistan by consistently coming to New Delhi rescue on the Kashmir issue, offering developmental aid, technological assistance and later military support. This evolving relationship even impinged on India's NAM credentials, one in 1971 when it signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, and the other in 1979 when it supported the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. An important clause of the 1971 Treaty constrained both parties from joining security and defence alliances that could threaten either side, or offer any form of assistance to a third party that may be involved in hostile activities against either one (Gromyko et al 1986, 165–166). In the 1970s–1980s, thanks to the 1971 Treaty, India became the largest recipient of Soviet economic assistance outside of the socialist bloc, with bilateral trade reaching almost US\$5 billion by the 1990s. In effect, for India, Moscow turned from being an important and trusted friend to a pivotal quasi-ally in Asia.

In the post-Cold War period, India's foreign policy and strategy shifted away from non-alignment to strategic autonomy. That meant pursuing strategic hedging while interacting with all the major powers in order to maintain the balance of power in its favour. To hedge against China, it moved closer to the ASEAN through its 'Act East' policy, as well as joined the US-initiated geo-strategic constructs. To hedge against the USA, it engaged China and joined China-initiated institutional frameworks. To hedge against China and the USA, it continued to nurture its special relations with Russia, although at a lower level. This worked well for India way into early 2000s.

By the second decade, China's strategic transformation to an aspiring global superpower coincided with a relative decline in the US' strategic weight as the global superpower. This geo-strategic shift heightened India's concerns in its own region. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi realized that China considered India's hedging role as counter-productive to Beijing's interests.

According to Jervis (1978, 169), 'many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others', thus invite countermeasures from the affected states. A security dilemma is posed when a state enhances its security postures and that in turn results in counter-balancing by other state/s, resulting in security vulnerability of other states. India witnessing enhanced Chinese hegemonic overtures both on the disputed border and in the Indian Ocean identified that there was more an intent of containment than competition. To offset the security

dilemma, India chalked out several strategies that include reinforcing its forces along the disputed border with China, procuring advanced weapon system from an array of countries to build a credible minimum deterrence, as well as engaging major powers to hedge against China. Thus, India appears to be acting on the premise that 'If the offense has less of an advantage, stability and cooperation are likely' (Jervis 1978, 213).

In the evolving multipolar world order, hedging appears to attract more currency in India's strategic thinking (Twining 2020, 38). Although strategic hedging is interpreted differently by different scholars but popularly it is considered as an option somewhat between bandwagoning, i.e. 'return-maximizing', and balancing, i.e. 'risk-contingency' (Kuik 2008, 171). In addition, it is also considered as sending 'ambiguous signals to competing powers about possible future alignment decisions' to build necessary deterrence (Haacke 2019, 396). In other words, strategic hedging facilitates an equilibrium of power to maintain peace and stability against an anti-status quo power.

To mitigate the current security dilemma associated with these tectonic shifts, India is broadening its strategic options, analysed in this article, by supporting the Quad and bolstering its relations with the USA; strengthening its special relationship with Russia; firming-up multilateral arrangements through the ASEAN to pursue its strategic interests.

The Quad emerged as an informal strategic dialogue in 2007 between Australia, India, Japan and the USA to discuss issues of common interest in the Indo-Pacific region. However, a lack of clear objectives and mounting pressure from China, including filing official demarches, led the Quad to dissipate. It cropped up again in 2017, this time more determinedly, to contain China's hegemonic overtures and assertive claims over the South China Sea and other disputed territories. In particular, the Quad supported 'freedom of navigation and overflight', 'rules based order' and 'maritime security' in the Indo-Pacific region (Bennett and Garrick 2020).

With China's more assertive posturing across the region, the Quad progressed from the senior-official level to the ministerial level in September 2019. Still finding China undeterred in its military assertion and geopolitical intent, the Quad progressed to the summit level, when President Joe Biden held a virtual summit with the Quad leaders in March 2021. The summit was historic in the sense that for the first time the leaders issued a joint statement entitled 'The Spirit of the Quad' (The White House 2021).

Notwithstanding elevation of the Quad to the summit level, still key differences remain among the member states. Since its inception, its members have had varying opinions over its nature and scope, as well as a 'lack of consensus of the issues facing the region' (Nicholson 2020). Even after its reinvigoration in 2017, the four countries failed to issue a joint press statement. India in its press release while agreeing on 'a free, open, prosperous' Indo-Pacific region emphasized 'inclusive', implicitly including China and remained reticent on freedom of navigation and overflight, and maritime security. India also hesitated to use the term 'Quadrilateral' in its press statement (Ministry of External Affairs 2017).

The mixed signals given out by Trump's 'America First' policy, policy changes in Japan after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's resignation and then Australian Prime

Minister Kevin Rudd's reversal of policy indicate that the Quad has been, until at least now, a personality-based platform. Moreover, the USA, Japanese and Australian economies are currently going through a recession and how they will cope with China's trade bellicosity is yet anybody's guess. India perceives Beijing differently from the other Quad members as it shares 3488-km-long disputed border with China. Therefore, considering the volatility of its disputed borders with Pakistan and China, India is uncertain whether the Quad members 'would risk their relationship with China to stand with India' (White 2020) since none of them has a direct stake in the India–China territorial dispute (Jha 2020).¹ Therefore, India believes that it may have to deal with China and Pakistan on its own. Even China acknowledges that a 'battle' with India is 'evolving rapidly amid the changing geopolitical pattern' but is confident of finding 'a way of getting along' (Editorial 2020). It is quite pertinent that in the absence of a comprehensive Quad security and strategic framework, together with the treaty-backing of that construct, provoking China would not be in India's interest.

Traditionally, India has been an Indian Ocean-centric power, and its vision and strategy is mainly confined to the Indian Ocean. Maritime security and strategic balancing in the Pacific maritime theatre still appear to be beyond India's capability, so in the short term its engagement will largely remain confined to 'diplomatic, economic and rhetorical' levels (Roy-Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada 2018, 181).

China, ASEAN and the quad

China and India, both victims of the colonial past, after independence in the late 1940s embarked on different paths. China opted for indigenous Maoist revolution and later joined the communist bloc, whereas India adopted a democratic model and joined the non-aligned movement. Adding to the divergences, the 1962 war generated a deep trust deficit that still persists between the two. Furthermore, formation of the China–Pakistan–US axis caused India to enter into an institutional framework with the Soviet Union. In addition, India's nuclear tests in 1974 infuriated China, triggering a robust military–technological cooperation (MTC) between Beijing and Islamabad. Thus, to contain India's increasing influence, Beijing kept the border settlement in abeyance to use it as leverage in its dealings with India.

After collapse of the Soviet Union, to gain a strong foothold in Asia, China attempted to engage India by initiating several confidence-building measures. Major among these included maintaining peace and tranquillity at the disputed border, resolving the border dispute through institutional mechanisms, taking a neutral stand on Kashmir, enhancing bilateral trade and even assuring sufficient space for two countries to prosper simultaneously. Considering these positive overtures, India joined the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) and Russia, India, China (RIC) groups. In a sense, China prodded India to maintain its 'strategic

¹ This remains the case despite US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's various statements castigating China's belligerence on the Sino-Indian border.

autonomy' with the objective to isolate the USA in Asia. Notwithstanding that engagement, however, Beijing continued its 'salami-slicing' approach by bolstering infrastructure across the border areas and encroaching on what India believes to be its territory (Brewster 2020).

Since 2014, with the Modi government's nationalist overtures and its enhanced relations with the ASEAN and the Quad members, China perceives India as a spoiler to the Beijing-led order in Asia. To begin with, it tried to accommodate India by expanding bilateral trade and prompting India to join the institutional frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which Beijing initiated to offset the US influence in Asia. However, witnessing Beijing's strategic ploy to contain India's power through a network of dual-use seaports in the Indian Ocean ('string of pearls') and wooing away India's immediate neighbours, India realized the real intent of the evolving geo-strategic and security challenges it faced (Prakash 2017). As a countermeasure, India boycotted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) because in its view the BRI's flagship project the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through the territory that it disputes with Pakistan (Pakistan Administered Kashmir—PAK), hence violates India's sovereignty. More baffling for India was Beijing's reticence over the terrorist activities that emanated from Pakistan, and signing of an agreement with Islamabad to build Diamer-Bhasha Dam in PAK, that India claims impinges on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

To offset the China–Pakistan axis and increasing terrorist and insurgency activities in India's Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the Modi government revoked the special status granted to J&K and bifurcated it into two union territories in August 2019. One of the territories, Ladakh's map included the Aksai Chin area that is under Chinese control since 1962 war and the Shaksgam Valley that Pakistan ceded to China in 1963 to offset India (Warikoo 2020, 180–81). China equated this cartographic change akin to losing Aksai Chin that, in turn, 'would jeopardize the stability of China's entire western frontier' (Sun 2020). This situation led to a critical point of face-off in May–June 2020 when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) built infrastructure within eight kilometres of the disputed border in Galwan Valley that India claims as its territory (Ruser 2020). After the commander level talks to de-escalate, demobilize and avoid any actions that threaten each other, the Chinese military's attempt to erect an outpost within the mutually agreed buffer zone at the junction of the Galwan and Shyok rivers led to a skirmish between the two sides. That resulted in killing of 20 unarmed Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese personnel. India lamented this action as a premediated and pre-planned 'ambush' (Mohan 2020).

That incident took place despite the confidence-building measures initiated in the post-Doklam face-off in 2017, and the subsequent summits between Modi and President Xi Jinping in 2018 and 2019. During the Doklam incident for the first time, Indian forces crossed the disputed border and obstructed the PLA's construction of a road that overlooked India's strategic Siliguri Corridor that connects eight north-eastern states with rest of India (Ahlawat and Hughes 2018). The Doklam and Galwan incidents proved turning points in the bilateral relationship when Modi declared that 'This supreme sacrifice of our Martyrs will not go in vain' (Modi 2020).

It appears China intends to prolong the resolution of the border dispute to retain its geo-strategic advantage and distract India from the Quad activities in the Indo-Pacific region. To engage India on the long-term basis over the border dispute, China put forward its 'sovereignty over the Galwan valley area' that India considered as its integral part until now (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2020). With this incident, offensive military posture along the border, and other related issues such as objection to India's membership of the extended United Nations Security Council and membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, India appears to be pushed hard into a security dilemma to look for credible options to counterbalance China's overtures.

Although the Quad supports the global commons that are vital for the Indo-Pacific, however, some differences remain among its members. Australia and Japan being alliance partners of the USA feel more comfortable with the latter than India. India finds the Quad as a group of large democracies that exclude the major ASEAN countries that have strong trade ties with China. Nevertheless, in his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Modi, while endorsing the Quad for promulgating 'freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the international law', castigated the regimes (implicitly China) that put other nations under 'impossible burdens of debt' (Ministry of External Affairs 2018a). At the same time, while reiterating the importance of China, Modi recommended 'Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests' (Ministry of External Affairs 2018a).

What Modi underlined was that he supported an inclusive approach that included China. Further, he noted that India's passage to the Quad would be through the ASEAN. That means giving due consideration to the regional arrangements such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-PLUS), as potential platforms for dialogue with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. To a large extent, the objectives of these institutions also coincide with those of the Quad. This includes ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, which falls within the mandate of the ASEAN Maritime Forum and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (Saha 2018). Therefore, India appears intent on ASEAN centrality. This constitutes the core of India's 'Act East' policy and legitimizes its role among the ASEAN countries by supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific region, strengthening its reach in the ASEAN region and aligning its security, defence and trade domains to counterbalance China and playing an enhanced (sub-superpower) role.

That intention was reinforced during the Delhi Declaration after the ASEAN-India summit in 2017 towards realization of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 (Ministry of External Affairs 2018b). Similarly, during the 16th ASEAN-India Summit held in November 2019, while expressing satisfaction over the implementation of the Delhi Declaration, a new Plan of Action (2021–25) was launched as a guiding document to bring tangible benefits to the 'promotion of peace, stability, and prosperity in the region' (Chairman's Statement of the 16th ASEAN-India Summit Bangkok/Nothaburi 2019).

By participating simultaneously in the ASEAN, Quad, RIC, SCO and BRICS, India is signalling that it supports the Quad principles, engagement with China and centrality of the ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific. This strategic hedging is more like a multipolar-Asia paradigm rather than a zero-sum alliance system, where India could maintain its strategic autonomy and have independence to make decisions that serve its national interest best.

The Russia factor in India's strategic calculus

India's commitment to the Quad has to be also considered in the context of New Delhi's ongoing special strategic relationship with Moscow. The collapse of the Soviet Union caused a long-lasting impact on the bilateral strategic relations. Russia's strategic priorities under its first President Boris Yeltsin changed, as a result India was no longer considered as an important geopolitical balancer against China and Pakistan. Furthermore, Moscow started to actively promote Evgeniy Primakov's concept of the grand Moscow–Beijing–New Delhi trilateral partnership, fiercely trying to convince India to overcome its strategic anxiety about China and embrace Primakov's concept (Primakov 2011, 159). Considering the predicament in which India was placed, its evolving strategic priorities and urgency to acquire advance weapon system made New Delhi to move closer to the USA.

However, the presidency of Vladimir Putin marked a turnaround in the Moscow–New Delhi strategic dialogue. Over the past decade, the level of bilateral economic cooperation noticed an upward trajectory. India invested US\$1 billion in developing Russia's Far East as a step towards fulfilling its goal of investing US\$15 billion in Russia and increasing two-way trade to US\$60 billion by 2025 (Chaudhury 2019). Indian energy companies purchased stakes in Russian companies and oilfields worth US\$5.5 billion in 2016. Russia's energy giant *Rosneft* acquired the Indian energy company, *Essar*, for US\$13 billion (Embassy of India, N.D.). A Russian company *Rosatom* has already built two nuclear reactors in Tamil Nadu (South India) and is in the process of building four additional reactors.² In addition, both nations continue their close cooperation in space exploration, communications, tourism and other fields.

The pivot of the current strategic relationship is bilateral security and defence cooperation. Of utmost importance is the bilateral MTC, which is an effective confidence-building measure, and a potential stepping stone towards an allied-type relationship. India's heavy reliance on Russia as a provider of a large nomenclature of advanced military technology can be gauged from over 70% of all armaments and military equipment currently operated by the Indian military is Soviet/Russia-designed/made. India's defence forces remain heavily dependent on Russian military technology (Table 1).

Russia intends to offer its most advanced military technology to India, something it normally does not share with a non-allied nation. In addition, Russia not only

² In 2018, India and Russia signed an agreement to build another six nuclear reactors in India.

Table 1 Russia's major defence exports to India, 2000–2020. *Source:* Data collated by the authors from different sources. *INS Chakra II (RFS Nerpa) was returned back to Russia in June 2021

Fighting service	Year, contract signed	Combat platforms/systems	Quantity
Navy	2004	Project 1143.4(I) aircraft carrier	1
	2004, 2019	Akula II class SSN*	1+ (leasing)
	2004, 2010	MiG-29K/KUB fighter aircraft	45
	2006	Project 11356 guided-missile frigates	3
	2009, 2020	Ka-31 helicopters	11
	2018	Project 11356 guided-missile frigates	4 (partially local production)
	2000, 2007, 2020	Su-30MKI tactical aircraft	192 (licensed production)
Air Force and Air Defence	2004	A-50EI AWACS aircraft	3
	2020	MiG-29 fighter aircraft	21 (plus 59 to be refitted)
	2008, 2012	Mi-17V-5 helicopters	151
	2015	Mi-17V-5 helicopters	48
	2015	Ka-226T helicopters	200 (partially local production)
	2018	S-400 SAMs	5 regiments
	2018	Igla-S MANPADs	5175 (partially licensed production)
	2005–2006	300 mm 9A52 Smerch MRLs	28
	2019	T-90S/SK	1000 (partially local production)
	2019	T90MS	464 (licensed production)
Army	2019	AK-203 assault rifles	750,000 (licensed production)

actively supports 'Make in India' initiative and promotes local production of many of its supplied platforms and systems but also plans to help New Delhi transit from buying off-the-shelf to a joint capability development, which represents the most advanced stage of security and defence cooperation. A most striking example is the collaborative production of the family of *Brahmos* shipborne and airborne supersonic guided missiles in India.

Based on the high levels of trust and mutual confidence, India became the only foreign country with which Moscow has a formal long-term MTC programme (2011–2020). During Putin's visit to India in October 2018, Moscow and New Delhi signed several bilateral agreements, including one for Russia to supply five regimental sets of S-400 *Triumf* advanced long-range surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) worth approximately US\$5.5 billion, the largest-ever defence contract signed between the two countries (Gady 2018). In 2019 and mid-2020, both sides agreed on an additional suite of important defence contracts. The overall volume of confirmed Russian defence contracts with India exceeds US\$14.5 billion. Furthermore, both countries have agreed on the principal parameters of a bilateral MTC until 2030 (Chugunov and Belov 2020, 15).

The importance of India's special security and defence partnership with Russia came to light in June 2020 during the most serious escalation of border tensions between New Delhi and Beijing. Following tense border clashes and rapid military build-up in Galwan Valley, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh while formally attending commemorations marking the 75th anniversary of Soviet victory over the Third Reich used the occasion in Moscow to hold talks with senior Russian defence officials to accelerate the delivery of S-400 SAMs to India. He also emphasized on acquisition of 21 MiG-29 *Fulcrum* and 12 Su-30MKI *Flanker* aircrafts, ammunition and spare parts to various Russian-made systems to bolster India's operational capability (Raghuvanshi 2020; Strokhan 2020, 2).

In addition to an ongoing intense MTC and military diplomacy, the two militaries have been engaging in annual joint training activities codenamed *Indra* since 2014. In 2017, the military-to-military ties received a further boost when annual *Indra* exercises were expanded to tri-services, army (*Indra*), navy (*Indra-Navy*) and air force (*Avia-Indra*). India engages in tri-service exercises only with Russia and the USA, thus highlighting not just strong partner confidence but valuing practical opportunities to achieve close operational and tactical interoperability with both principal military powers.

From 2015, the Indian military has participated regularly in the International Army Games (ArMI) organized by the Russian Ministry of Defence, and international military events involving Russia's closest allies and partners, despite being boycotted by the USA and its allies. Another example of close defence ties was the participation of India's military in anniversary Victory parades, which were held in Moscow in May 2015 and June 2020. The symbolism of such engagements was twofold. Firstly, India demonstrated special strategic bonds with Russia despite the targeted sanctions imposed against Moscow by the USA and other countries. Secondly, an Indian military unit paraded on the Red Square in 2015 and 2020 along with a PLA unit. It is worth noting that Indian military participated in Russia-led strategic manoeuvres *Tsentr-2019* (Centre-2019), which also

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2018) ‘arms imports from the USA rose by 557% between 2008 and 2017, making it India’s second largest arms supplier’ after Russia.

The diversification also led to suspension or termination of its participation in some of the Russia–India joint capability development projects such as the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft and the Multirole Transport Aircraft. Adding to that, India’s decision to cancel its involvement in Russia-led *Kavkaz-2020* (Caucasus-2020) strategic manoeuvres is another example of India demonstrating its strategic autonomy, even to Moscow (Peri 2020; Mukhin 2020).³

India appears to become apprehensive of Moscow’s very close security and defence relationship with Beijing and Pakistan; the latter was highlighted during the South Asia tour of Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in April 2021 (Malhotra 2021). Similarly, Russia is concerned about New Delhi’s MTC with Ukraine as well as deepening security and defence cooperation with the USA. Associated with that, India’s engagement with the Quad is yet another issue of friction that Moscow interprets as an active deterrence against a rising China by way of political and military means (Chernenko 2020, 5).

Yet, India has retained its special status of a privileged partner with Russia, and that Moscow will continue to prioritize its strategic engagement with New Delhi, a fact, which was highlighted in the 2021 edition of Russia’s National Security Strategy (Strategiya Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2021). Similarly, there is an understanding in India that despite differences of opinion on some geopolitical matters New Delhi and Moscow will continue close cooperation without having to make choices (Pradhan 2021).

Considering the strategic equation with Russia and its policy of strategic autonomy, India is unlikely to enter into any formal alliance. While wary of Beijing, New Delhi is likely to continue to engage the USA and Russia to maintain its close relationships with both major centres of global influence.

The US factor in India’s strategic calculus

Since the formation of the Quad framework, India has considered the US factor to be of utmost importance, even though the two countries share a rather chequered history. India and the USA remained at odds with each other during the Cold War, mainly because of New Delhi’s claim of being non-aligned, the dispute over Kashmir with the US Cold War partner-Pakistan, and New Delhi’s tilt towards the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the US rapprochement with China and India’s conduct of nuclear tests in 1974 proved irritants in the bilateral relationship. Finally, India’s nuclear tests in 1998 led to Washington imposing sanctions on it.

³ While formally justifying its decision by COVID-19 emergency, India made it clear that the main reason to withdraw from the manoeuvres was driven by its unwillingness to participate alongside PLA and Pakistani units amid border tensions in Kashmir.

However, India's justification of the 1998 nuclear tests as an act to deter the 'China threat', as well as to show its displeasure with China's assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme, led to a convergence of India-US interests. The USA, in its efforts to counter a rising China and finding limited advantage in supporting Islamabad,⁴ considered it opportune to court India as an ally and avail of the opportunities that an emerging India offered. It began with a stern USA warning to Pakistan to withdraw its forces from Kargil following a brief border conflict with India back in 1999. A further shift in the US's Kashmir policy became apparent when it 'advised Islamabad to forget about history and see ahead' (Mahmud 2005, 84–5). India reciprocated these initial US policy postures by extending unconditional support for Washington's fight against international terrorism after the 9/11 attacks.

Increasing proximity resulted in the two countries signing a Defence Framework Agreement in 2005. That 10-year defence accord further strengthened the relationship by opening new vistas to technology transfer, weapons production and missile defence cooperation, ultimately resulting in India being awarded the status of 'a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology' and providing it with de-facto recognition as a nuclear weapons state (Gopal 2016, 27).

Their changing perceptions of each other were reflected in a substantial positive shift in relations, taking down barriers that had previously existed. Washington saw New Delhi, furthermore, as a potential balance against China's strategic rise. The two countries intensified high-level consultations, including the US presidential visits to India. Between 1947 and 1999, only three US presidents visited India while in office. Between 1999 and 2020, four US presidents visited India on five occasions while in office. The bilateral relationship received a further boost with President Donald Trump's visit to India in February 2020, during which it was announced that the relationship had been elevated to a 'Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (Ministry of External Affairs 2020). In his speech, Trump clearly had China in mind when he compared Indian democracy to an unnamed 'nation that seeks power through coercion, intimidation and aggression' (The Print Team 2020). By making that comparison, he appeared to imply that the world's two largest democracies were united against a common enemy, thereby underlining a further convergence between them.

Beginning with the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIS) signed in 2002 the two countries progressed to sign several security agreements (Pandit 2020), including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). These agreements offer both countries access to classified military information and facilities on either side for refuelling and replenishment purposes. The USA and India signed the third foundational agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (CCSA), in September 2018, at the first '2+2 Ministerial Dialogue'. That agreement enabled India to acquire specialized equipment for encrypted communications for US-origin military platforms that

⁴ After assassinating Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, witnessing Pakistan's churlishness and spite when it handed over remnants of the downed US Special Forces helicopter to China and after its decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Table 2 The US's major defence exports to India, 2000–2020 (United States Defence Security Cooperation Agency, multi-years). *Source:* United States Defence Security Cooperation Agency, 'Major Arms Sales', <https://tinyurl.com/y3zttdnl>

Fighting service	Year contract signed	Combat platforms, systems	Quantity
Navy	2009	Boeing P8-I Maritime Surveillance Aircraft	8
	2011	Mk-54 All-Up-Round Lightweight Torpedoes	32
	2016	Boeing P8-I Maritime Surveillance Aircraft	4
	2019	MH-60R Multi-mission Helicopters	24
	2019	MK-45 5-inch/62 Calibre (MOD 4) Naval Guns	13
	2020	Boeing P8-I Maritime Surveillance Aircraft	6
Air force and air defence	2008	HARPOON Block II Missiles	Not stated
	2008	CBU-105 Sensor-Fused Weapons	Not stated
	2010	Boeing C-17 GLOBEMASTER III Aircraft	10
	2010	AGM-84L HARPOON Block II Missiles	21
	2011	Lockheed-Martin C-130J Aircraft	6
	2014	UGM-84L HARPOON Missiles	Not stated
	2017	Boeing C-17 GLOBEMASTER III Aircraft	1
	2019	777 Large Aircraft Countermeasures Self-Protection Suite	2
	2019	C-17 Sustainment Follow-on Support	N/A
	2020	Integrated Air Defence Weapon System	Not stated
Army	2020	AGM-84L HARPOON Air-launched Block II Missiles	10
	2010	M777 155mm Light-Weight Towed Howitzers	145
	2010	AH-64D Block III APACHE Helicopters	22
	2018	AH-64E APACHE Helicopters	6
	2018	CHINOOK Heavy-Lift Helicopters	15
	2019–2020	Sig-Sauer 716 Assault Rifles	145,000

it has purchased from the USA. As with the LEMOA, the CCSA is an India-specific version of the agreement that the USA signs with its military partners. Both countries signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, the last of the four foundational agreements in October 2020 (Express Web Desk 2020). Once ratified, it will give India access to the US geospatial maps and the military-grade accuracy that its automated hardware systems and weapons such as cruise and ballistic missiles require.

The two countries have, similarly, entered into the Information Security Agreement, the Helicopter Operations from Ships other Than Aircraft Carriers programme and agreed on the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative Standard Operating Procedure. To align and benefit from the US technology, India has purchased aircrafts, helicopters and field artillery from the USA (Levesques and Solanki 2020) (Table 2).

The India–US defence trade increased significantly from US\$200 million in 2000 to over US\$20 billion in 2020. In addition, in order to support New Delhi's 'Make in India' initiative and its defence requirements, the major US aerospace contractors Lockheed-Martin and Boeing have announced plans to localize production of F-16 and F/A-18 fighter aircrafts for the Indian Air Force (Press Trust of India 2018a, b).

The common concerns of the two countries regarding China were alluded to in their 'US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region' of 2015 (The White House Office of the Press Secretary 2015). That document enunciated the convergence of India's 'Act East' policy and the US' re-balancing efforts in East and Southeast Asia. To formalize the Vision, both have regularized joint military exercises (Wadhvani Chair in US–India Policy Studies, N.D.).⁵ Some of those exercises include *Cope India*, which is conducted between the Indian and US air forces resumed in 2018; *Tiger Triumph*, which was conducted in November 2019 involving all three of India's military services; *Vajra Prahar*, the most recent iteration of which was held in Seattle in October 2019; *Yudh Abhyas* in September 2019; and the trilateral naval *Malabar* exercise conducted with Japan until 2019. In October–November 2020, Australia also participated in the *Malabar 2020* multinational naval exercise (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2020). In May 2019, in response to China's ongoing coercive activities, warships from the US, Indian, Japanese and Philippines navies staged a coordinated deployment through contested waters in the South China Sea.

Notwithstanding the strengthening relationship between India and the USA, New Delhi is cautious about Washington's approach and sincerity. For example, during the June 2020 border conflict in the Galwan Valley, Trump offered to mediate between the two countries. That offer was perceived by India that instead of pressurizing China to withdraw, the offer was simply to negotiate China's forward position in the disputed territory, which appeared to place India in a less than an equal partnership. On the other hand, shortly after the clash between Indian and Chinese troops, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo telephoned his Indian counterpart, S. Jaishankar, to convey a message of support (Roy 2020). However, the nature of the 'support' remained undefined.

In addition, the US export of advance technology is subject to stringent terms and conditions including, among others, restrictions on India importing military technology from other countries. For example, in October 2018, after India signed an agreement with Russia to procure S-400 SAMs, Washington threatened New Delhi with its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

Yet another aspect is that with a new administration in the White House, priorities in security and strategic policies shift, whereas India prefers to have a long-term, reliable and trusted relationship. President Joe Biden has followed some of his predecessor's policies regarding China. Notably, however, he has re-engaged with America's traditional allies to do that, thereby rejecting Trump's 'America First' policy. Biden has affirmed to re-join the Paris Accord on climate change (McGrath 2020). He would also ensure that China holds to its obligations. It is very unlikely

⁵ India now holds more annual military exercises with the USA than any other country.

that Biden will trade his interest in seeing the further evolution of the Quad for China's compliance with climate change proposals. Even if in the process China negotiates hard to remove some of the restrictions and constraints imposed by the Trump administration and reduce emphasis on the Quad, it is now clear that the Biden administration will not lift some of those restrictions to reduce the current heightened tensions. (Pamuk and Shepardson 2021). If Biden follows his policy of working to balance China from within established international institutions, it is possible that the USA will seek to participate in the newly formed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Given his presidential track-record, however, even if China once again seeks to have the US drop at least some of the trade restrictions against it as a pre-condition to Washington joining the RCEP, it is unlikely that Biden will accede to that demand.

Should the Biden administration agree to those requirements, it would leave China with more strategic room to focus on containment of India, thereby forcing New Delhi to turn once again to Moscow for further support. If, on the other hand and seems more likely, the Biden administration perceives climate change and the current tensions as two unrelated issues, or if it creates a re-working of the erstwhile Trans-Pacific Partnership and draws India into the new grouping, it is likely that the India–US relationship will continue to converge. The Biden administration's emphasis on issues such as climate change and trade with China will, therefore, have a very significant bearing on the USA–India bilateral relationship.

Notwithstanding apprehensions about the USA, the quantum and depth of the security agreements signed between India and the USA, and the strategic convergence of interests indicate that both appear to be in 'quasi-alliance' (Kliem 2020, 296; Hemmings 2020, 153; Sheikh 2020). However, according to India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar 'The transition in India is an expression of greater self-confidence.... Its foreign policy dimension is to aspire to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power' (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). Furthermore, India's policy makers appear to be averse to use the term 'alliance', instead the term 'multi-lateralism' is more often emphasized by its foreign minister (Jaishankar 2021).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the current security dilemma will continue to prevail for India in the near future. The Quad is and will be of high importance to New Delhi. Apart from furthering closer strategic ties with like-minded regional maritime powers (Australia and Japan) and the ASEAN, the framework continues to deepen India's strategic rapprochement with the USA. The intent and extent of the agreements that India has signed with the USA demonstrate its convergence on the evolving strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, and swelling Chinese hegemonic overtures. Thus, if India has formally not entered into a 'quasi-alliance' with the U.S. yet, certainly it is on the threshold of one.

Nevertheless on the pattern of the 'quasi-alliance' with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, India may still retain some strategic autonomy within the

framework of the 'quasi-alliance' with the USA. Considering the existing trade ties and long-term MTC with Russia, no matter the size or value of its similar purchases from the USA, dependency will continue on Moscow as between 2015 and 2019, India accounted for a full 25% of Russia's military exports (Weze-man et al. 2020). Therefore, it cannot easily replace its Soviet-era and Russian weapon systems with American analogues. Despite the USA being willing to sell 'transformative defence technologies' to India, New Delhi's capacity to absorb those technologies appears limited. For example, India chose to purchase Israeli *Spike* anti-tank guided missiles instead of the US' next-generation *Javelin* (Pandit 2015). The costs involved in purchasing sophisticated equivalents is also a considerable factor in India's acquisition process. It is also clear that India retains a good deal of trust in Russia's willingness to supply it with military platforms and systems. Thus, in the aftermath of the clash in the Galwan Valley, New Delhi turned immediately to Russia for additional expedited purchase of fighter aircrafts and other armaments (Kumar 2020).

Russia factor aside, China is one of the largest trading partners of India. Notwithstanding this, Beijing has made incursions in the disputed border region that India claims breaches its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Although Beijing considers these advances as irreversible, New Delhi despite the Doklam and Galwan incidents is still hopeful of resolving the border dispute through negotiations. Therefore, India has been adopting an incremental approach. This approach is based on the premise that in the past China has resolved border disputes with other countries when it was under pressure (Fravel 2005, 52–53). So considering that precedent while in 'quasi-alliance' with the USA, India would probably keep a window of opportunity open at least till the ongoing dialogue between the two reaches to a naught.

Notwithstanding the 'quasi-alliance' with the Soviet Union, India maintained its own strategic autonomy to make decisions to best suit its national interests. Therefore, while entering into yet another 'quasi-alliance' with the USA, India will probably follow the same template to retain its strategic autonomy. This will facilitate India to demonstrate its credentials as an alternative power to China in Asia, to avoid being labelled as a 'deputy sheriff' to the USA and pursue its ambition to become a leading power in Asia. This assertion was succinctly summed up by India's Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar (2021) that 'a multi-polar Asia is one of its essential constituents'. Thus, New Delhi's entering into a 'quasi-alliance' with Washington, and retaining autonomy within this framework offers it an opportunity to elevate its international stature without having to make hard strategic choices. India, with the potential and desire to become a leading power, rather than just a balancing power, would continue to engage big powers and avoid a zero-sum alliance system.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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