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India's Role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in Countervailing China

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Abstract

The significant rise of China's economy and military power has severe implications for the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. In response, the United States (US), Japan, Australia, and India formed a strategic partnership, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), which aims to countervail China in the region. In addition, the transformation of the Asia-Pacific region into the Indo-Pacific region, which unites the two geographic features of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans in a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, encourages India to play a more significant role. India represents a regional power in the Indian Ocean that counterbalances China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, this article analyzes the impact of India's engagement in QSD to countervail China's power in the region. This research uses a qualitative methodology in a case study with secondary data collection techniques and the concepts of balancing as analytical tools. On the one hand, the authors conclude that India's presence in QSD as a Net Security Provider provides an advantage for QSD to countervail China in the region. On the other hand, QSD offers an opportunity for India to enhance its role and strengthen its position as a regional hegemon with its Act East policy.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, QSD, Chinese military, the balance of power

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1. Introduction

A significant improvement in China's national power in the last two decades, as a whole, affects the dominance of the United States (US) in the international political order. The economic impact embodied in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mega-project and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has attracted the attention of many countries, especially the US (Singh, 2016; Morrison, 2019; Anam & Ristiyani, 2018). In addition, China's policy to increase its naval power to maintain maritime security in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) and its unilateral claim to the ownership of SCS and ECS pose problems, particularly for countries in Southeast Asia and Japan (Damayanti, 2015). Not to mention, China's efforts to build military bases and facilities in Djibouti to secure its trade routes lately are considered capable of changing the security architecture of the Indian Ocean and threatening India's position as a regional power in these waters (Chaziza, 2018, p. 6-11).

The above conditions perform that the current geopolitical is dynamic, where the international political order is witnessing a gradual shift in regional power and architecture. We may spot what Robert Kaplan theorized as US strategy to prevent China from becoming a hegemon and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept to replace the Asia Pacific for a strategic purpose (Kaplan, 2010, p. 41). Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe initially introduced the terminology of Indo-Pacific at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) in 2007 and has become increasingly prominent since Trump announced "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy at the APEC Summit in Manila in November 2017. Such a strategy promotes an open Indo-Pacific region with sustainable growth and mutual connectivity. It means that all countries are free to enjoy access to international waters from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, establish fair and reciprocal cooperation, create transparent agreements, and reach a settlement of territorial disputes (Shanahan, 2019).

The center of gravity of the global economy and politics is shifting to the Indo-Pacific region with the increasingly important role of the Indian Ocean to the world. Some experts say that the main reason behind the US shift in construction from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is the expectation of India's involvement and cooperation in maintaining order at sea (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018, p. 181-194; Tertia and Perwita, 2018). The US-India strategic partnership has strengthened over the past two decades as they share a collective view of the region's importance. The US continues to pursue various initiatives with India to allow broader cooperation, particularly in defense. In June 2016, the US designated India as an essential defense partner, intending to strengthen the partnership with India. The US-India 2+2 Ministerial dialogue in September 2018 also marked a clear commitment of the two countries to promote the principles of FOIP (Shanahan, 2019). The US perceives India as an essential partner to counter China's rise, create a new power landscape in the region, and reshape the regional security order under its hegemony support (Zhu, 2019).

Therefore, this article aims to explain the role of India in counterbalancing China's military power in the Indo-Pacific region through QSD and how India benefits from its involvement in QSD. This study uses a

qualitative methodology in a case study model and the concept of balancing in analyzing the behavior of a state to protect its national security and regional stability from threats and to understand the reasons for a state making alliances with other countries. This article is divided into six sections, starting from the introduction, an explanation of China's military aggressiveness, which is perceived as a threat in the region, the implications of China's military hostility toward India, QSD as a security alliance to counterbalance China's military strength, India as a Net Security Provider in the Indo-Pacific and closing with a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), as mentioned by Kumar, Nayyar, and Anand (2021), is a strategic dialogue between the US, India, Japan, and Australia which aims to discuss the cooperation of the four countries in promoting democratic values throughout Asia. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe initiated the dialogue by emphasizing the need to build a high-level strategic dialogue among the "Asia-Pacific Democratic G3 plus America" in 2007. This dialogue works parallel with a large-scale joint military exercise known as the Malabar while responding to China's increasing economic and military power.

Nonetheless, the QSD did not last long and was decommissioned in 2008 following Abe's resignation as Prime Minister and Australia's withdrawal under the tenure of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Nonetheless, military cooperation between the US and Australia resumed in 2010. The deployment of US marines near Darwin, Australia, realized their military affiliation. At the same time, India, Japan, and the US continue to carry out Joint Naval Exercises through the Malabar Exercise program.

Further, Shinzo Abe (2012) revitalized the concept of QSD in an opinion entitled 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond.' Abe stated that peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from the Indian Ocean. Abe added that as one of the oldest shipping democracies in Asia, Japan should play a more significant role in maintaining joint stability in the two regions. So, to achieve this agenda, as noted by Eisentraut and Gaens (2018, p. 1-8), Japan proposed the establishment of a security alliance between Japan, Australia, India, and the US. However, it is undeniable that the rise and expansion of China's influence and its aggressive attitude in the South and the East China Sea have provoked Japan to re-engineer the formation of the QSD alliance.

Efforts to reform the QSD alliance continue. At the 2017 ASEAN Summit in Manila, four state leaders, Shinzo Abe, Malcolm Turnbull, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump, agreed to revive the QSD alliance. The alliance mainly aims to fight China through military and diplomatic measures in the South China Sea. Therefore Kumar, Nayyar, and Anand (2021) confirmed that tensions between QSD and China had raised concerns about a new cold war in the region.

Furthermore, Ryosuke Hanada (2019) explained that although the so-called "Quad" is still ambiguous in its strategic objectives, the cooperation framework between these four countries has become one of the essential elements in geopolitical and geo-economic discussions in the Indo-Pacific region. The re-emergence of QSD in 2017 proves that the four countries are carefully shifting their foreign policy priorities in Indo-Pacific more broadly by developing quadrilateral security cooperation. This cooperation mechanism is also an effort to deal with the rise of China and is driven by the increased threat perception of the four countries toward China.

According to Hanada (2019), the QSD forum is a vital instrument to realize a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) based on four dimensions of power, namely diplomacy, information, military, and economy (DIME). Quad plays a significant role in realizing the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) by becoming a policy coordination mechanism to set priorities and a collective counterweight to expansionist China. It is also to perform the US involvement in Asia and as an instrument for India to direct other countries' attention to IOR and enhance ASEAN's role as a regional peace-keeper agency.

As Jie (2019) concluded, the formation of the QSD transpired on the decline of US regional influence in the Asia-Pacific region since Trump decided to leave the Asian rebalancing policy and withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). On the other hand, China's influence increases, triggering countries' concerns towards China. Therefore, the revival of QSD, initiated by Japan and Australia, ensures that the US remains involved in efforts to maintain security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and includes India to deal with the rise of China jointly.

In the beginning, as Jie (2019) mentioned, QSD was only a means of informal strategic dialogue, not a substantive alliance. However, in addition to meeting for functional cooperation, its existence also implies member-states concerns about China's rise and influence. These two factors encourage strengthening QSD dialogue cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia, and India to develop regional infrastructure. Furthermore, such dialogues focus on increasing economic cooperation to enhance security architecture, especially in maintaining the freedom of navigation and flight and making the Indo-Pacific a rule-based, accessible, and open region.

The term Indo-Pacific as a regional construct seems to have shifted from mere geography to a geostrategic concept in recent years. As Damayanti mentioned (2017), it shows that the Indian and Pacific oceans are

interconnected geopolitical spaces, essential for global sea lanes and trade, and have enormous strategic implications. Chinese strategic and academic circles believe that the widespread use of "Indo-Pacific" stems from the Obama Administration's strategy to rebalance the Asian political order and strengthen US political and military ties with countries in the region (Yang, 2016). Indo-Pacific also signifies the geographical unification of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans and becomes a battleground for major powers to maintain or seize power. Consequently, QSD focuses on defense cooperation and jointly maintains the Indo-Pacific region's openness, freedom, and security. Efforts to reactivate QSD simultaneously also demonstrate the inherent changes in Asian geopolitics that feature a new US construction for the Indo-Pacific region (Jie, 2019).

On November 4, 2019, the Trump Administration released a document entitled "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision," outlining its administration's vision for the Indo-Pacific region. The paper highlights the involvement of the US with regional countries, particularly its strategic partners, in maintaining a free and open regional order. The document also emphasizes that India has an essential role in addressing the challenges and joining regional and global development in advancing the FOIP vision (Pompeo, 2019). The US, Australia, and Japan realize that India is a country that can maintain regional security and stability, especially in the maritime domain. Therefore, these countries facilitate a platform for India to achieve its goals, showing that the US, Japan, and Australia recognize India as a rising Asian power. The recent strengthening of India-US relations also drives this plan due to the willingness of the US to facilitate the improvement of India's military capabilities through the purchase of weapons. According to released data, the leading buyer of US weapons in 2020 was India which reached 3.4 billion USD, up from the previous 6.2 million USD in the 2019 fiscal year (PTI, 2020).

In addition, the 2019 Ministerial meeting held in the middle of the United Nations (UN) general assembly in New York marked a significant development for the future of the QSD. The meeting continued in Tokyo in 2020, attended by India's Foreign Minister Dr. Jainshankar, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Ann Payne, and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. At the meeting, the four countries reaffirmed their collective vision to maintain a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, especially in China's firm stance (Patil, 2021, p. 12-55). Moreover, Dr. Jainshankar stressed that India is committed to upholding a rules-based international order supported by the transparency and freedom of navigation in global seas by respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty in the peaceful settlement of disputes (Patil, 2021, p. 12-55).

From the various studies above, we can see the importance of India as a significant country in the region to counterbalance China in the Indo-Pacific. However, the above articles have not explained how India can play a role in balancing China through the QSD mechanism. Accordingly, this article will further explain India's strategy to counterbalance China in the Indo-Pacific region, mainly through the QSD mechanism and as a regional net security provider.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology which, according to Mohajan (2018, p. 23-48), emphasizes how one interprets and understands the experiences of others to understand social reality by exploring and trying to explain the 'how' and 'why' of a specific phenomenon. Furthermore, qualitative researchers emphasize the importance of context for understanding the social world, including explaining phenomena in international politics. So that when a context is removed from the occurring phenomenon, the meaning and significance will be different (Neumann, 1997). For that reason, in this article, the authors try to understand and explain the increasing power and aggressiveness of China's military in the region and its impact on the relations of countries in regions such as India and the US initially before finally explaining the formation of QSD and India's engagement in QSD.

This article mainly uses the case study model to explain the phenomenon of India's participation in QSD. Using various data sources, the authors use this model to explore a phenomenon in its context. This model ensures that a phenomenon is not only explored through one view but through multiple perspectives that allow several aspects of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554-559). The case study model also helps the author view actors' patterns of action in the context of a problem entirely and thoroughly (Neumann, 1997).

This article uses secondary data from trusted written sources, such as newspapers, journals, papers, e-books, essays, and internet sites related to the discussion. The authors also utilize information from well-known international online news sites such as The Diplomat, Times of India, Economic Times, and Reuters, as well as data from research centers such as SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Embassy of the People's Republic of China, Embassy of India, Observer Research Foundation, journals, and books published by well-known publishers. Afterward, the authors interpret, analyze and validate data by collecting, selecting, classifying, studying, and triangulating various sources.

4. Concept and Theories

This study uses the concept of "Balance of Power" to analyze India's effect on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), which puts forward a process of balancing power in which countries do not want an ability to dominate the international system (Kissinger, 1994). Proponents of this theory perceive those dominant actors engage in aggressive behavior, and single hegemony tends to impose its will on other countries. That is why peace will be maintained when balancing power among the actors who seek to preserve their identity, integrity, and independence (Claude, 1962; Fay, 1930; Vagts, 1948, p. 82-101; Seabury, 1948).

The balance of power dynamics affecting major powers and global politics is also relevant to regional subsystems. Increasing state power in the region or regional alliances creates problems at the regional level. When one actor or alliance gains too much military power in a region, that actor or alliance might take aggressive action against neighboring countries. Therefore, regional balance aims to produce a stable distribution of power to prevent war at the regional level (Paul, 2004). Randall L. Schweller conveyed the same thing as he noted that the balance of power is a strategic system run by a country and then balanced with other countries' capacity (Schweller, 2016). Thus, when a country's power increases to a threatening point, counterbalancing must be in place to contain that power.

Schweller also stated that balancing is an effort to preserve and protect the state's values by creating or merging military forces through internal mobilization or alliances (Schweller, 2016). It means that such a balancing concept consists of two variables: internal balancing, which refers to the state's actions to offset the accumulation of threatening forces by building weapons, and external balancing, by forming alliances that aim to gather military power with each other. Realist and neo-realist scholars believe that a balancing strategy is crucial and remains relevant to create stability and prevent occupation and domination by foreign powers to intercept the loss of territory, either the homeland of a country or vital interests abroad, including sea lanes, colonies, or other areas deemed of strategic importance.

5. Results and Discussions

The Indo-Pacific region currently encounters China's behavior which is more confident in pursuing its political, economic, and security interests. As a rising power, China performs itself as an essential actor in the regional and international order with its military and economic power (Amayanti, 2016). On the one hand, China actively plays its role through financial aid and investments using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mega-project and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Singh, 2016). On the other hand, along with its economic policy, China's behavior threatens other countries, particularly in its maritime strategy in the South (SCS) and East China Seas (ECS).

Since 2013 China has carried out extensive dredging and construction of artificial islands, which has resulted in 3,200 hectares of new land in the Spratly and a substantial presence in the Paracels. China also built runways, missile launchers, barracks, and communications facilities to increase its coast guard presence at SCS (Kipgen, 2020). In April 2018, China conducted a massive military exercise in the SCS region. It displayed the most advanced carrier strike group in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) arsenal for the first time. Moreover, China deployed YJ-12B supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles and HQ-9B anti-air missiles at Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs. As a result, China has reclaimed these three largest islands and made them home to the complete facilities of the PLA's inventory of military equipment (Stashwick, 2018).

China has relentlessly continued its efforts to change the status quo by force in the Diayou/Senkaku Islands region. For example, from April to August 2020, China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels were seen almost daily in the adjacent zone around the Islands for 111 consecutive days. In addition, throughout 2020, 1161 Chinese coast guard vessels patrolled the area near the Senkaku Islands for 333 days and repeatedly infiltrated Japanese territorial waters. Furthermore, a CCG vessel approaching a Japanese fishing vessel further exacerbated the situation. Such a situation prompted the Chinese government to enact the China Coast Guard Act of February 2021, including provisions governing geographic areas, patrolling, and the use of weapons (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2021).

The East China Sea has become a bone of contention between China and Japan as it has a strategic value for both. For China, Diayou/Senkaku Island is strategic for its naval military base. As for Japan, this island provides a strong defense and becomes Japan's defense point against China if China attacks its territory. Japan's concern about China's military increase continues, as stated in Japan's 2021 White Defense Paper. According to Japan, when China rapidly increases its military strength, it affects the changes in the military balance between the US and China. It has consequences for the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the trend of increasing China's military power and budget, considered not transparent concerns the regional and the international community, mainly Japan.

Apart from Japan, India is one of the countries that feel threatened by the modernization of weapons and the increase and activity of China's military. Beijing's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) has created a power and control competition between China and the US with its allies. The Indian Ocean maritime

communication lines (SLOCs) are vital for many Asian countries as they are energy and trade corridors, making them sensitive to any vulnerability. China's growing presence and influence in the Indian Ocean is about competing for a strategic role in the IOR; it is also part of becoming a global maritime power (Rajagopalan, 2021).

5.1 Chinese Military Activities and the Implication for India

The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is vital to China since its sea-based trading and energy resources traverse this route. China realizes the importance of protecting and securing its interests while adapting to the new landscape of strategic competition. Therefore, in 2015 Chinese government released its national defense white paper, justifying its defense policy, strategy, military reform, and defense budget spending to deal with such a situation. In this paper, Xi Jinping urged the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to strengthen its preparedness and enhance its combat capabilities commensurate with China's global position (Kania, 2019).

The mission was reiterated in 2019 when the Chinese government confirmed that its PLA should take a more active role in advancing its foreign policy. Accordingly, throughout 2019 with approximately two million military personnel, China continued to pursue its ambitious modernization effort by prioritizing enhancing the PLA's capabilities in all domains of warfare, including cyberspace. With this strategy, China will likely resist enemy intervention in the Indo-Pacific region and project power globally, including the IOR. (Office of The Secretary of Defense, 2020)

Nevertheless, the PLA Naval presence extending into the IOR directly threatens India (Rajagopalan, 2021). The perception that China is the biggest threat to India's security increases by discerning China's sensitive attitude toward gaining its lost territory. The case of Tibet, Taiwan, and SCS, considered China's core interests, are some of the sensitivities. China's behavior in including its territorial disputes in the list of core interests has provoked anxiety among Indian strategic circles that China may soon add areas disputed with India (Saha, 2016, p. 73).

The development of the PLAN and its presence in the IOR, particularly in India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), suggest that China is building a calculated military force. In early 2021, Indian Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh said that Chinese research and fishing vessels operate in the Indian EEZ (Rajagopalan, 2021). In August 2020, even amid the ongoing conflict in East Ladakh on the Indian border, China sent its Yuan Wang class research vessel to the Indian Ocean via the Malacca Strait (Ani, 2020). An Indian Navy official said four to six Chinese research vessels are operating at the IOR. This research vessel surveys various parameters, including channel and salinity and seabed mapping, which will support PLAN in conducting submarine operations in these waters (Gurung, 2020).

China's expansion of naval presence in the IOR is also supported by China's decision to build its first military base in Djibouti. This military base provides an experience for China to build more military bases abroad and expand its sphere of influence in the region. It is a springboard for conducting maritime and air operations in the IOR (Chaziza, 2018, p. 6-11). Consequently, China's permanent military presence in Djibouti and Pakistan's Gwadar Port threaten the Indian Navy. In addition, the Djibouti military base is critical to successfully implementing the BRI initiative. Although the BRI is primarily an economic plan, this initiative also has a solid military component. China dominates global sea-based trade routes and uses its naval power accordingly to protect its sea-based trading (Chaziza, 2018, p. 6-11)

The increasing influence of China in the Indian Ocean forces India to consider the region's implications and secure its maritime security. Therefore, in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Act East policy, which provided a new impetus to intensify economic and cultural cooperation at various levels. This policy focuses on strategic and diplomatic ties with countries with similar perceptions of India regarding China's growing economic and military power and its implications for regional order (Kesavan, 2020).

Formerly known as the "Look East" policy, these policies are like two sides of the same coin, representing different but continuing phases of India's policy evolution in Asia-Pacific. When India launched its 'Look East' policy in 1991, its economic power and status in the global order were not as strong as today. India is still in the process of transitioning from a state-controlled economic regime to a more liberal one. It took many years for India to adjust to the new economic system, and it prevailed. Therefore, when Modi launched the policy transformation from 'Look East' to 'Act East' in 2014, India became more robust in its economy and influence (Kesavan, 2020).

In the contemporary context, the Act East policy bridges India's interests to become a global power and seeks to expand its influence with other regional authorities. The Asia-Pacific construction shifting to the Indo-Pacific signals new challenges for the region, and India is expected to play an essential role, particularly in the region's maritime security. In mid-2018, Modi delivered his keynote speech defining the Indo-Pacific region stretching from the African coast to the American. However, according to Modi, the core of the Indo-Pacific region is ASEAN, where ASEAN plays a significant role in bridging the interests of India and other countries based on free, open, and inclusive platforms. According to Roy Chaudhury, the word 'inclusive' means that the

Indo-Pacific includes all countries within its geographic scope and other countries interested in it (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

India seeks regional leadership in partnership with ASEAN while balancing its relations with the US and China. India determines to maintain stable ties for mutual security interests in the region by dealing with its border disputes with China. Recognizing that India does not have sufficient military and technological resources, the policy choice of partnering with China makes more sense than against it. India continues to engage in multilateral forums with China (Kesavan, 2020). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a new development bank under Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the India-Russia-China trilateral forum reflect India's partnership with China.

Modi described India's vision in the Indo-Pacific region as Security and Growth for All in the Region or SAGAR, which means ocean in Hindi. This policy has four strategic interests for India. First and foremost, India is concerned about the strategic uncertainty in the region due to declining US influence, followed by China's rapid rise. Therefore, India is interested in partnering with other countries with similar perceptions of a new regional order developing an open, rules-based, free from a single hegemon's influence.

Second, as a country that depends on sea-based trading, India recognizes the inherent rights of all nations to freedom of navigation, overflight, and unhindered trade on the high seas. For this reason, maritime security is vital for the Indian Act East policy. Third, India wants to ensure that no country uses violence to resolve disputes, especially those in the waters, to maintain the security and stability of the region's seas. Fourth, India perceives the Act East policy to support connectivity programs to promote regional cooperation and integration.

As China's influence increases in the Indo-Pacific, India must moderate to counter China. Accordingly, India has responded positively to the revival of QSD, aligning with its strategic interests and needs. India's increasing economic growth and national strength have maximized its regional influence in recent years. After Modi took office as Prime Minister of India, he pledged to "build a safe, prosperous and strong India" and "make the 21st century the century of India". In addition to its economic growth and maritime vision, some security issues in border areas, such as the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, have compelled India to revive QSD.

Moreover, tensions and competition with China are critical drivers for India to increase its military spending. In 2019, India was the world's third-largest buyer of defense systems. India's military expenditure reached \$71.1 billion in 2019 and grew by 6.8 percent from the previous year (SIPRI, 2020). In 2020 India's military spending increased 2.1 percent from 2019 to \$72.9 billion, despite being hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (Silva, Tian, and Marksteiner, 2020). Nevertheless, in 2021, India's defense sector started looking for a large capital injection amid the growing need to strengthen military infrastructure in several border conflicts with China. Over the past decade, India has openly and intensively prepared for potential threats by increasing its military budget. As a result, India's overall defense spending increased by an average growth of 9 percent in the last ten years, as shown in the chart below (Bhatnagar, 2021).

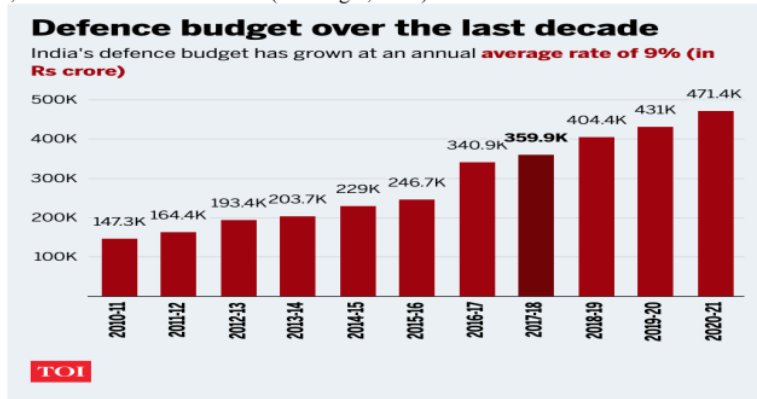


Figure 1. India's Defense Spending 2010 - 2020
Source: The Times of India 2021

5.2 India in QSD and as Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific

Chinese military and economic activities have triggered India to perceive China as a threat. The Belt and Road Initiative toward Pakistan and Sri Lanka, coupled with PLA's mission, provoked concern in the Indian government. Accordingly, India views Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) initiated by Japan and the US as a helpful mechanism for its interests. There are at least four benefits for the Indian government through QSD, especially since China has demonstrated its influence and power. They are: (1) supporting India in maintaining

stability in the Indo-Pacific region, (2) enhancing the friendly relationship with its counterparts, mainly with the US, Japan, and Australia, and (3) supporting India in addressing power inequalities in the Indo-Pacific, and (4) maintaining its strategic interests in the maritime domain.

To secure maritime routes within the QSD framework, the US, Japan, India, and Australia joined the Malabar naval exercise. The Malabar exercise was initially a bilateral maritime exercise between the US and Indian navies in 1992. Such an exercise has been conducted annually since 2002, followed by Japan and Australia joining in 2007. Although in 2008, Australia withdrew from the QSD and stopped participating in the Malabar exercise due to China's intervention, in 2020, Australia rejoined the Malabar exercise (Greene, Dziedzic, & Oaten, 2020; Haidar, 2020).

Now, Malabar has become one of the cornerstones of the military interoperability of QSD forces as the four countries ensure freedom of navigation through the QSD mechanism (Kaushik, 2021). The Chief of Indian Defense Staff, General Bipin Rawat, also confirmed that through the Malabar exercise, the four countries collectively determined to create a stable, inclusive, and committed region to a rules-based international order (Kaushik, 2021). Such values are vital to realizing the **free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)**.

India's geographic and geopolitical centrality in the South Asian region is one of the solid reasons for making India a counterweight to China's presence in the Indian Ocean. India's perceived security dilemma primarily drives the need for a balance of power. Such balancing focuses mainly on China's policy through the BRI to build port facilities in India's neighbors, such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The desire to maintain and protect SLOCs by creating open and accessible areas stems from India's concerns about China's choke point in the South China Sea and the increase of China's maritime power in the Indian Ocean (Jash, 2021).

In a 2010 report by The Quadrennial Defense Review, India's military capabilities had increased to build its military influence more broadly. As a result, India is ready to contribute as a Net Security Provider (NSP), especially in the Indian Ocean and its surroundings. India's readiness to become a regional NSP aligns with Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, which wants to contain China by building alliances and increasing countervailing powers. On the one hand, this alignment of visions has pushed India to forge closer ties with the US. On the other hand, the US-China rivalry provides the best opportunity for India to position itself as a potential ally that accommodates US interests in restraining China's increasing influence in the region. Therefore, the geopolitical competition brought India closer to the US and earned the title of a 'Net Security Provider' in the Indo-Pacific region (Ullah and Hayat, 2021, p. 26-39).

Although the term NSP is used frequently in literature, and official statements, Indian and US leaders refrain from explaining what the word means. The lack of a comprehensive or mutually agreed definition of NSP creates different interpretations. However, this term refers to a country that can overcome threats to the security of its own country and the security of neighboring and surrounding countries. Therefore, the term NSP implies the ability of a country to pursue its interests while providing security assistance to other countries in the region. India's role as NSP for the Indian Ocean region mainly refers to the Indian Navy conducting anti-piracy patrols as it has done so far in the Gulf of Aden. In addition, India's support through NSP is enhancing maritime security, dealing with natural disasters, and conducting hydrographic surveys to increase naval awareness (Bhaumik, 2021).

The Indo-Pacific construction allows India to increase its position and status as a middle power and legitimizes India's role in the Indian Ocean. This concept is also directly linked to India's willingness to play a critical role in the US defense strategy against China and foster closer ties with Southeast Asian countries. Under the Act East policy, India portrays itself as a strategic partner of the US in the form of an NSP, further promoting its vested interests in the region. Furthermore, India's strategic alignment with the US under the QSD alliance is driven by the interest in obtaining technological and political benefits that facilitate the achievement of India's political ambitions at the global level through maritime (Bhaumik, 2021).

In this regard, the Bay of Bengal is a strategic connection point in the Indo-Pacific geostrategy and the core area of the Act East India policy. It is crucial as it is located northeast of the Indian Ocean and adjacent to the Malacca Strait, the main gateway to connect the West Pacific and East Indian Oceans. Moreover, India's control of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has strengthened its strategic position along the Bay of Bengal. These two islands provide a natural advantage for India in projecting maritime power in the Straits of Malacca. Moreover, if the South China Sea has been the main target of the US Indo-Pacific strategy in the Pacific Ocean, the Bay of Bengal has become essential for the US to balance China in the Indian Ocean with Indian assistance. Accordingly, in July 2012, India established Hawkeye military base at the southernmost tip of the Andaman-Nicobar Islands, which is vital for India due to its location at the crossroads of the Malacca Strait and leading position in conducting military operations (Zhu, 2019).

The US-India strategic relationship is also realized in several military agreements such as (1) Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement which allows both countries to use each other's military facilities, and (2) Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement, which facilitates India in obtaining defense technology

from the US and access communication networks to ensure inter-operability of the US and Indian armed forces, (3) the Industrial Security Annex which facilitates collaboration between the US's and India's defense industries by supporting the transfer of information and technology, (4) and recently the US-India have agreed on the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement to help India gain real-time access to US geospatial intelligence and improve the accuracy of automated weapons systems such as missiles and armed drones (Zhu, 2019).

India also has a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement with Australia, which was agreed upon in 2020 to facilitate access to each other's military bases. This agreement allows both countries to refuel military ships and aircraft and access military maintenance facilities (Migliani and Packham, 2020). India is currently the second-largest arms importer globally, with a 9.2 percent share of total global arms imports. This data reflects India's efforts to enhance the capabilities of its air force while also demonstrating the military plans of the Indian leadership. The Indian Air Force has also reportedly purchased high-tech fighter jets from France and Russia (Zhu, 2019).

On one hand, India's move to deepen partnerships with major powers like the US is a strategy to balance China in the region. On the other hand, the US shares interests with India in ensuring that China does not dominate the Indo-Pacific. For India, China's hegemony over Asia directly threatens India's strategic autonomy. China is not a direct threat to the US, but its strategic partners and China's potential dominance is a challenge to US global dominance. There are slight differences, but both have similar interests; to balance the increasing influence of China's power in the region (Guihong, 2005, p. 277-293).

So far, India has proven that it can be the regional Net Security Provider. Under the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy, which initially focused on strengthening the economy in the region, now includes political and strategic dimensions. India has economically described itself as a rapidly developing country in the last two decades. At the political level, India emphasizes its identity as a democratic country that complements the liberal international order in harmony with the global political aspirations of the West. India believes its capabilities increase from medium to great power with the parameters above.

6. Conclusion

The US, Japan, Australia, and India have reactivated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue since 2017 to discuss strategies to counterbalance China's power, especially in military and maritime domains in the Indo-Pacific. These four democracies realize that the rise of China is a severe threat that has implications for regional security. For this reason, QSD countries agreed to present India as a significant regional power in the Indian Ocean. They believe India plays an essential role in the Indo-Pacific region to countervail China, while India perceives QSD partnership benefits its foreign vision and interests.

The construction of the Indo-Pacific provides an opportunity for India to increase its influence and position as a regional hegemon. At the same time, the Indian government launched the Act East policy, aiming to maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and create the 21st century as India's century. Such a policy is in line with the strategic vision of QSD and the geopolitical view of the development of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

Various defense and military cooperation agreements between India and the US, including the Malabar joint naval exercise under the QSD mechanism, increase India's military capabilities. This is true mainly for India's naval power in maintaining stability and maritime security from threats posed by external forces, particularly China. Such capabilities, coupled with the US support for legitimizing India's role in Indo-Pacific, encourage India to become a regional net security provider (NSP).

Further, the role of regional NSP inspires India to increase its bargaining position when dealing with China. As a potential partner, India accommodates needs that advance US interests. Therefore, through the QSD mechanism, the international order will witness how India is considered one of the main drivers in defending the interests of its allies in the Indo-Pacific and overcoming regional challenges, especially the rise of China.

To conclude, India's strategy of joining QSD and becoming the NSP in the Indo-Pacific region provides an advantage in the geopolitical aspect, mainly for India and its strategic partners. India plays an essential role in countering China's military power and promotes its interests within the Act East policy framework by leveraging the strengths of the US, Japan, and Australia. In addition, India further increases its influence and existence as a maritime power in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

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