

Emerging India

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From a nonchalant, passive to developments in Asia & elsewhere, India is fast emerging into an assertive Regional Power center.

By Shankar Kumar

India has witnessed a shift on the foreign policy front in the past several years. From being a weak, complacent and non-assertive regional power with limited global vision, India is gradually emerging as a powerful force in Asia. It is the first country in the world to extend humanitarian assistance and disaster relief material to cyclone-hit Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi within hours after disaster hit these countries.

In fact, extending support to adversity-hit nations fast and in calibrated manner has become a crowning feather of India's strategy. While such moves have helped India in earning goodwill for it, New Delhi has begun to align with like-minded countries to take on geopolitical forces which work hard to ensure that India's political, diplomatic, economic and geographical interests are harmed. Sources say inclusive and transparent strategy in the Indo-Pacific region against aggressive design of China are being worked out with the help of Japan, the US and Australia.

A brainchild of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, quad will be strengthened to the level that it becomes a force to reckon with in the Indo-Pacific region. Since its revival in 2017, quad members have held meeting thrice. The last meeting of the quad was held in Singapore in November 2018. Since both India and Australia are going through election in April-May month, it is expected that the fourth quad meet will be held after the formation of new governments in New Delhi and Canberra. There is a push from Japan and the US to elevate the present quad level, involving officials of the four countries to ministerial-level.

However, buzz doing rounds in the diplomatic corridor of New Delhi is that India may accept elevation of the quad to a ministerial level, mostly involving foreign ministers of the four-member of the group, but to accept defence ministers' participation in the future group meeting is a remote consideration among Indian diplomats. If indications given by these diplomats are to be acknowledged, India is against militarization of the quad. It wants the group to focus on infrastructure development and capacity building in the Indo-Pacific region to win over countries from China's influence.

In this regard, India wants on-going Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to move out from drawing boards to ground. The Indian government is working as a facilitator in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. Both India and Japan have identified projects like port development, road connectivity, special economic zones and others. Officials of both countries, which are in regular touch with each other, have also improvised on their listing of countries where they will pump in money for projects. Though sources have not revealed what is criteria of the listing of the countries, but they have changed their plan where they had earlier identified poor countries for their projects.

Sources say India is optimistic about participation of Germany, France and the US in the Growth Corridor, once it takes a speed, which in most likely manner happen when the incumbent government in India returns to power in the forthcoming LokSabhapolls. With regard to quad, India's cautious move emanates from several factors, including its aim to become a member of NSG and permanent member of the UNSC-where Russia is helping New Delhi cross hurdles. Also Moscow is against the US-design in the Indo-Pacific region. However, diplomatic sources say India wants quad to evolve first in the initial years of its revival.

New Delhi has drawn conceptual and structural policy demarcations between the quad and the Indo-Pacific through its actions, inhibitors and statements, outlined in some ways by Ambassador Pankaj Saran. In the aftermath of two important informal summits at Wuhan and Sochi in China and Russia respectively, India's enthusiasm towards the quad has appeared faded. As such, New Delhi seeks to place the quad as one of the many multilateral frameworks operating in the Indo-Pacific region, not as the regionally consequential one. India has distinctively carved a space with its emphasis on the principle of freedom of navigation and respect for the laws of the sea, finding resonance with the central ideas of the quad enumerating its Indo-Pacific strategy in largely a multi-lateral format, India seeks to avoid restricting its Indo-Pacific strategy to the quad at its helm, but also seeks to maintain its long cherished principle of strategic autonomy by keeping its options open to engage with Russia in the region, as also by making conscious decisions not to provoke China.

But India has no plan to allow Australia's participation in the Malabar naval exercises. Japan became a permanent member of these exercises in 2015. After the resumption of the quadrilateral dialogue, the US, Japan and Australia in 2017, most analysts had assumed that Australia would be allowed in the Malabar exercises too. But Canberra has found it tough to woo New Delhi despite Tokyo and Washington backing Australia's entry. In fact, India sees the Malabar exercises separately from the quad. It also draws a clear line between the quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy. One of the reasons India has been refusing Australia's participation in the Malabar exercises has to do with its own perception of Australia-China relations. New Delhi is not sure that the current tensions between Australia and China will outlast the stint of a Labor government in Canberra. It was, after all, Kevin Rudd, the ex-Australian Prime Minister, who had pulled his country out of the quad in 2008. It is also believed that India fears that quadrilateral naval exercises will invite reprisals from China. As a country which shares a long and disputed border with China, India would be most vulnerable to such hostilities.

However, it has been proven time and again that respecting China's sensitivities is a one-way street; Beijing doesn't respect New Delhi's sensitivities in return. It was seen recently at the UNSC. All members of UNSC were on the same page on designing MasoodAzhar, Jaish-e-Mohammad chief as the global terrorist, but China using its veto power again killed a resolution to this effect. This was the fourth time in the last five years, China trampled on India's sentiment on terrorism. Time has come to send a political message to China by undertaking quadrilateral exercise in Malabar. It will also send a much needed message to other countries in Southeast Asia which are afraid to confront China on their own. Moreover, these exercises aren't merely about messaging. They are about building joint procedures to work together in crisis situations. A crisis need not be triggered only by China's activities but could well be the result of some natural disaster in the shared maritime space.