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India needs more than Quad to secure the Indo-Pacific

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A few days back, Moscow-due to its strategic pact with Beijing- raised questions about New Delhi's alignment with Washington on the issue of Quad. Since its rebirth in 2017, the Quad has been upgraded and now signifies a coalition of 'like-minded' democracies who want to keep international waters free. While India has rebuffed Russia's comments, it needs to work on a holistic policy for the Indo Pacific region. Limiting its vision only to the Quad exposes it to

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political uncertainties in the US, Japan and Australia.

Indo Pacific – and not Asia- Pacific as it was earlier called- signifies the centrality of the role that India plays- or is expected to play in the region. It needs to work towards two goals- cementing its position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and towards building long term partnerships with the littorals. External affairs Minister S Jaishankar in his book highlighted New Delhi's I-P strategy with IOR at the core and the Pacific Islands in the Far East at the periphery, indicating order of priority. To execute this vision, there are three important policy decisions/directions that are needed.

In the IOR, New Delhi – despite its historical and cultural ties with Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles – has lost out to the concerted plan by Beijing to buy influence and malign India. China- which did not even have an embassy in Male till 2011- is now Maldives' largest lender with an exposure of $3.1 billion. While relations with India have been on the rise since Mohd. Ibrahim Solih came to power; New Delhi needs to do more. A recent 'India Out' campaign by opposition points out to the deep inroads made by Beijing in Maldives and exposes New Delhi's limited clout. India – which needs to work on deepening its defence and security

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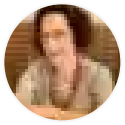
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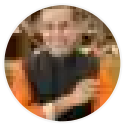
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relationship with Maldives – should focus on training navies of IOR littorals. For Seychelles, where its proposal to jointly develop Assumption Island has now fallen apart, India needs to show more patience and willingness to revise alternatives and bring in more transparency. In Mauritius, New Delhi can double down on its investments, on the back of its goodwill. In August 2020 as the pandemic tore the tourism-dependent economy, Mauritius declared a state of emergency. New Delhi should assist its small neighbor in its hour of crisis.

IOR littorals are acutely aware of their geostrategic importance and maritime value and will look to maximize their gains between India and China. While China will entice these smaller nations with more funds, Indian government needs to continuously highlight the pitfalls of taking Chinese money. As Former Maldivian President Modh Nasheed , in reference to the enormous debt pile from China recently said, 'even if we sell our grandmother's jewellery, we cannot repay the debt." Besides, India will have to continue to offer funds- in the form of grants and assistance for development projects. However, New Delhi does not have the economic heft that Beijing has; more so after coronavirus has caused enormous economic damage. India needs to get onto the high growth

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trajectory to create enough funds to fuel its regional ambitions. India can offer a perfect counter to China's debt trap model by creating long lasting partnerships and boosting the local economy, without any ecological damage.

Of course, there will be hiccups as the return of Rajapaksa – a China champion in Sri Lanka– highlight. While India may not be able to wean Sri Lanka out of Chinese influence, the possibility of a US-India-Sri Lanka exercise could provide an opportunity for Indian policymakers to rebuild ties. The US has a large presence in Diego Garcia – south of Sri Lanka and has sought logistics support from Colombo. New Delhi could use this opportunity.

Secondly, India must move forward decisively on its roadmap for Andaman and Nicobar Islands- presently only geared towards reconnaissance. India's projection of power play into the Western Pacific to counter China begins from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which houses the first joint military command. There has to be a shift towards a more active engagement and collaboration with other navies-including the US Navy. India must shed its hesitation that any partnership with world powers to take on China would further increase tensions

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between Beijing and New Delhi. China does not suffer from any such compunctions. As recently as December 2019, Chinese research vessels violated India's exclusive economic zone by entering in it. Beijing's intentions regarding the Bay of Bengal are clear from its strategic partnerships with Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand. For India to have a long term response, it needs to further build on its nuclear-armed submarine capabilities housed in Andaman and Nicobar Islands- which is the flank of Bay of Bengal.

Lastly, India needs to move out of its mindset of its security policy having a continental orientation. This mindset must adapt itself to respond to present challenges. Between the period 2000-2018, China built more frigates, submarines, corvettes and destroyers than India, Japan and South Korea combined. In the last 5 years, the total tonnage of new warships and auxiliary launched by China exceeds the total tonnage of Indian Navy since independence. Even the present order book-which is woefully inadequate- is delayed by 12 years due to lack of sufficient warship building capacity. This asymmetry needs immediate attention and fund allocations.

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For India to be in a commanding position in the Indo Pacific region, it needs to do more. In a post-corona economic recovery, there are competing claims for reduced government revenues and there may be legit ground to avoid a bump up in defence spends. But in a post pandemic world order, the theatre of any hostilities has shifted squarely to the seas. Can India afford to be complacent? The answer is crystal clear.

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