

ENLARGING INDO-PACIFIC INTO THE ORBIT OF EURO-ATLANTIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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Following the release of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy that called for building bridges between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic, the idea of interlinking the two geopolitical theaters has gained significant currency, especially against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As China and Russia's diplomatic and military cooperation deepened amidst the Ukraine crisis, the U.S. and some of its European and Asian allies declared that the security of the two geopolitical regions is indivisible and requires an inter-theater outlook. India, which is a major player in the Indo-Pacific region, has been lukewarm to such a strategic merger. However, notwithstanding India's reservations, endeavors are underway to re-imagine the two geopolitical theaters as one. In this context, this issue brief explores the factors driving the merger of the two geopolitical theaters and its possible implications for India.

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Introduction

A few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States (U.S.) on February 11, 2022 published its new Indo-Pacific strategy.¹ While the policy document largely reiterated the views that have already been prominent within the American political discourse, one noteworthy addition was that it declared “building bridges between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic” as one of its goals.² Thereby the idea of aligning the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic into a single geopolitical theater gained significant currency in the wake of Russia's

threats against Ukraine. Subsequently, leaders and government officials from the U.S., United Kingdom (UK), European Union (EU), Japan and Australia began asserting that security in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic are indivisible.

Here, it is noteworthy that while many U.S. partner countries endorsed the proposal, India, which is a major player in the region, demonstrated considerable discomfort with the idea with India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar expressing reservations regarding the reasonableness of the

approach.³ However, notwithstanding India's reluctance, the consensus to merge the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic is perceptible. This, in turn, is likely to focus more political, diplomatic attention and military resources to the Indo-Pacific region and transform the regional security architecture.⁴ Against this backdrop, the possible implications of this development for India's strategic position and foreign policy choices need to be carefully evaluated.

As a single geopolitical theater gained significant currency in the wake of the Ukraine war, leaders and officials from the U.S., UK, EU, Japan, and Australia began asserting that security in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic are indivisible.

Why Merge Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic?

One of the major reasons for the ongoing push towards merging the two geopolitical theaters is the threat perception from the deepening geostrategic cooperation between Russia and China. Various events like declaration of “no-limits partnership” by Russia and China, Beijing's diplomatic support to Kremlin in the Ukraine war, increasing Russia-China joint military exercises in the Baltic, Mediterranean and South China Sea have all been perceived as indications of an evolving coalition between two authoritarian states driven to challenge the existing balance of power in the international system.⁵ Highlighting this threat perception in a discussion session held by the Atlantic Council in

February this year the former U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley observed that the Sino-Russian joint statement of February 4, 2022, is a manifestation of their plan to assume global leadership to replace the U.S. and other democratic powers.⁶ Similarly, speaking at the Raisina Dialogue, the President of the European Commission Ursula Gertrud von der Leyen described the Russia-China cooperation as a rising challenge to the rules-based international order that can upend international technological, cyber and economic domains.⁷

Compounding the fears of peace-time collaboration between Moscow and Beijing, there are also concerns about China and Russia engaging in aggressive behavior in Europe and East Asia simultaneously during crisis situations to test Washington's security commitments in both these regions.⁸ Apprehensions regarding such a development heightened in the initial days of Russian invasion of Ukraine as both the U.S. and EU warned China against adventurism over Taiwan and extending military support to Kremlin.⁹ Further, the Biden administration as a deterrent to any possible Chinese belligerence in the Indo-Pacific sought to signal its continued monitoring of regional developments through constant dialogues with the ASEAN, Quad countries, South Korea and Japan.¹⁰

The second major argument forwarded in favor of the merger proposal is that in a globalized world, issues of supply chain resilience, economic, food and energy security of the two geopolitical theaters is interlinked in such a way that disruptive events in one geopolitical space will have reverberations in the other.¹¹ The idea was extensively communicated in the 2022 edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue as participants conveyed that the security between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic was not only interdependent but also co-dependent.¹² As an illustration of the idea, South Korea's Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-sup referring to the dangers of Pyongyang's nuclear missile program termed it as threat to the security and stability of both Europe and Asia. Affirming his position,

Netherlands' Defense Minister stated that "there is no far away" as the war in Ukraine has affected populations far beyond Ukraine. She explained further that disruptive events in the Indo-Pacific could also impact global prosperity as oceans are key to the global economy.¹³

In view of these factors, the idea is to combine the economic, political and military resources of partner countries to forge a collective security system spanning the two geopolitical theaters. Presumably, such a coalition of like-minded powers is expected to lead to greater burden sharing between Washington and the partner countries as America will be hard-pressed to deal with China and Russia single-handedly. Moreover, an expansive politico-military front will project a powerful strategic posture to deter China and Russia from violently challenging the present balance of power.

As a step towards forming such a coalition, UK's Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss called for forming a "Network of Liberty" whereby the NATO would be more global in its approach and the western countries would build new partnerships through bilateral and plurilateral organizations.¹⁴ Additionally, besides the U.S. outreach towards South-East Asia, the EU in a bid to "maintain and diversify value and supply chains"¹⁵ adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy in the area of trade and investment, which will enable the EU to expand trade relations with South Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Vietnam; and launch new trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Taiwan, and ASEAN.¹⁶ Further, in the past few months countries like France, Germany, and UK have recalibrated their defense diplomacy with Indo-Pacific partners while the Asia-Pacific 4 (AP4) countries were invited to join to demonstrate "global resolve" to respond to common threats.¹⁷

In this context, it is noteworthy that despite visible enthusiasm about merging the two geopolitical theaters, considerable differences persist within the EU and between the U.S., EU and Asian countries about foreign policy approach towards China and

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Russia which in the long run could impact inter-theater commitment. For instance, France's far-right leader Le Pen who gained considerable electoral support in the latest legislative election has called for rapprochement between NATO and Russia and has sounded shaky in her commitment to counter China in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ Similarly, in Germany the coalition government of Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens hold conflicting views towards China and Russia. While the SPD advocates realism and the need to safeguard Germany's interest in relations with China and Russia, the Liberals and Greens favor a value-based approach and are less accommodative of China and Russia.¹⁹ In Asia, South Korea, one of the U.S.' alliance partners, has cautiously avoided voicing extreme rhetoric against Moscow and Beijing. For instance, President Yoon Suk-yeol steered clear of any mention of Russia or China in his address during the NATO summit and a few days later at the sidelines of the G-20 Ministers' meeting, China and South Korea pledged to deepen bilateral cooperation.²⁰ Other South-East Asian countries too have not been eager to follow Washington's confrontational approach towards China and Russia.

India's Perception

India views the Indo-Pacific as an important strategic space that plays an important role in safeguarding its security, military, and economic interests.²¹ Highlighting its centrality to India's foreign policy, S. Jaishankar stated in a virtual address to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Partnership Summit in 2020 that the "Indo-Pacific is actually bread and butter expression of our political, economic, connectivity, travel and societal interest" and due to India's central position in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi will play a leading role on issues of maritime security, connectivity, resource management and humanitarian and disaster relief.²² Thus, in view of the Indo-Pacific's prominence, any modification of its geostrategic vision will be of considerable consequence for Indian foreign policy making.

While India has welcomed the U.S. and Europe's greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific, its response to calls for linking of the two geopolitical theaters has been very reserved. Addressing the Quad leaders' virtual summit held to discuss the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that events in Europe should not divert attention from the Indo-Pacific and that the Quad must remain focused on its core objective of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.²³ On another occasion, speaking at

the Munich Security Conference, S. Jaishankar demonstrating India's divergent approach suggested that the two geographies are different and that situations in the Indo-Pacific and the Transatlantic are not analogous.²⁴ Likewise, debates and doubts continue to exist among the Indian strategic circuit over the merits of interlinking the security matrix of the two geopolitical theaters. Indian scholars see that despite convergences on various security issues, considerable differences exist between New Delhi and West's approach to the Indo-Pacific and the nature of threat posed by China and Russia in the two geopolitical theaters. They argue that the Indian and Western vision of the Indo-Pacific are not only different but also the NATO-like military alliance that lies at the heart of the Euro-Atlantic theater might not be applicable to the Indo-Pacific. Further, while India is close to Russia and views China as an existential threat, NATO and the EU perceive Russia as their nemesis. Moreover, questions are also raised about what role India will play in a reconceptualized security framework.²⁵

Implications for India

The merging of the two geopolitical theaters would inevitably complicate India's strategic environment. To begin with an inter-theater outlook is likely to be incompatible with New Delhi's policy of 'strategic autonomy'. As India assiduously guards its independence in foreign policy decision-making, any constraint imposed externally though an inter-theater approach will be unacceptable to New Delhi on a regular day and more so in times of crisis. Therefore, India will resist attempts of external manipulation of its policies. This in turn could lead the West to view India's position with suspicion and consequently strain diplomatic ties between the two. Such a tense situation was evinced recently when a diplomatic skirmish ensued between India and the West following India's refusal to echo Western opinion on the Russia-Ukraine crisis. India responding to Western pressure highlighted the latter's duplicity in approach to international problems while the Western countries decried

“Indian experts argue that the Indian and Western vision of the Indo-Pacific are not only different but also the NATO-like military alliance that lies at the heart of the Euro-Atlantic theater might not be applicable to the Indo-Pacific.”

India's stance as disappointing. The political rupture was evident when U.S. President Joe Biden termed India's response as "somewhat shaky". Later, although the West exhibited an "understanding" of India's position, questions continue to be raised about India's reliability as a strategic partner.²⁶

Second, an interlinkage between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific could adversely impact India's security interests in the region largely due to intensification of bloc rivalry. Maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific is central to New Delhi's security perception but bloc rivalry that views the region from a zero-sum perspective could make it a more contested space and dampen the political environment required to keep the Indo-Pacific open and inclusive. Also, as the two theaters get interlinked and China and Russia align their actions on basis of reciprocity, Moscow could side with China on security issues in the Indo-Pacific resulting in a possible fall out with India. Besides, in future if Moscow keeps silence on Chinese aggression along the disputed border and in the maritime domain or even endorses Beijing's actions, this could weigh heavily on India's security environment.²⁷ Lastly, the merger could shape India's engagement with the U.S., Europe and Asia especially if the element of reciprocity underlying the trend becomes a major determining factor in inter-state ties. In that case, New Delhi will have to carefully evaluate the new terms of engagement, deftly manage differences with partners and identify areas of convergence.

Conclusion

The ongoing efforts to merge the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic bring into play a new strategic alignment which, in turn, will impact India's geostrategic calculus in the region. At this point, New Delhi's best bid is to engage in multilateral platforms and dialogues in order to mitigate the impending uncertainties. To that end, India should strengthen its defense diplomacy with both the ASEAN and Quad countries to ensure manageable

competition and predominance of a rules-based regional order. Further, it is imperative that India continues to work to establish a multipolar set-up as a bulwark against the constraining effects of bloc rivalry. Accordingly, New Delhi can work more closely with Africa, South East Asia and Pacific Island Countries and facilitate their participation in sustaining the regional security architecture. Besides, Indian policy elites need to direct more effort towards consolidating India's economic integration in the Indo-Pacific region by offering the countries developmental aid and assistance, contributing towards strengthening of supply chains and deepening digital and cyber cooperation. This could be a guard against possible pressure tactics from any of the major powers and impart greater diplomatic clout to New Delhi to pursue its own foreign policy goals.

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