



COVID-19: BOOSTING INDO-PACIFIC ALIGNMENT AND INDIA'S REGIONAL ROLE

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Covid-19 is regarded by many as the catalyst for a new world order, pivoted toward the Indo-Pacific—the geopolitical and geoeconomic nerve center of the 21st century. Faced with the common challenge of a non-traditional security emergency, Covid-19 has caused significant strategic shifts, lending traction to the Indo-Pacific security architecture. This is witnessed in the emerging role of the Quad as a multilateral formation committed to an enhanced partnership in the post-Covid-19 world order. Three primary factors drove the shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: the rise of China, the rise of India's economic and strategic clout, and most importantly, the growing importance of the Indian Ocean as a strategic trade corridor carrying almost two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. Covid-19 has provided a boost to the Indo-Pacific security framework, as exemplified by the active role of the Quad.

The Quad, consisting of four Indo-Pacific democracies—Australia, Japan, India, and the United States—formally resumed their dialogue in late 2017 after nearly a decade of inactivity. Since then, they have met twice a year. In 2019, the grouping upgraded the dialogue to the level of foreign minister/secretary of state. With Covid-19, the group was upgraded to “Quad Plus,” adding three additional Indo-Pacific countries: New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam.

This expansion is driven by the logic of convergent security interests under the pandemic and jointly looking at a way forward. The “Quad Plus video-conference,” a weekly meeting initiated by US Deputy Secretary of State Steve Biegun in March, [discusses](#) issues of cooperation such as “vaccine development, challenges of stranded citizens, assistance to countries in need and mitigating the impact on the global economy.” These topics have reaffirmed the spirit behind the formation of the Quad in response to the 2004 tsunami—collaborating in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR); however, over time the Quad evolved to possess a strategic outlook regarding concerns over free and open seas and a rules-based order. In this light, Covid-19 has pushed Quad to further act on non-traditional security objectives—aiming at human security against the scourge of the coronavirus.

Covid-19 has also increased India's strategic weight in the region. There is little doubt as to the emerging role of India, not just as a key player but also as a responsible actor in the Indo-Pacific. Here, India's aid in fighting the pandemic is noteworthy. India lifted its export ban on drugs such as hydroxychloroquine (seen by some as a possible cure for Covid-19) and paracetamol in a bid to supply them to countries such as the US. It also sent such medicine to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, as well as to Mauritius and Seychelles, and provided medical aid to Caribbean and Latin American countries. India is also levelling up its position as a key player in the global supply chain given countries' plans to shift production away from China. Companies from Japan, the US, and South Korea have expressed interest in relocating to India. To facilitate this possibility, India has [identified](#) land parcels across the country spanning 461,589 hectares—almost the size of Luxembourg—in support of these anticipated investments.

Covid-19 has not just pushed India to step up its proactive engagement in the region but has also provided a boost to India's strategic interests in Indo-Pacific, which can be argued under a five-fold framework. First, unlike the Asia-Pacific architecture, the Indo-Pacific provides New Delhi with an opportunity to rise above its label as a “middle-power.”

Joining of the league of great powers, mainly the US and Japan, reinforces India's rise in status and enhances its great power aspirations and power projection both in the Indo-Pacific region and globally.

Second, India's active engagement in the Indo-Pacific automatically provides a boost to its "[Act East Policy](#)," as well as its "[Extended Neighborhood Policy](#)." These policies are reinforced by New Delhi's [closer ties with ASEAN](#) and countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar.

Third, India's strong foothold in the Indo-Pacific provides a counterbalance to China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean. India's security concerns include China's encirclement policy through port facilities in India's neighborhood—Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka; open and free sea lanes of communication against concerns over Chinese chokepoints in the South China Sea; and China's increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean under the shadow of anti-piracy operations.

Fourth is a stronger push toward strengthening the India-US Strategic Partnership, mainly through defense ties. There has been increased engagement between New Delhi and Washington: agreements such as the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the 2018 Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA); arms transfers, as American arms exports to India [have risen](#) from zero to \$15 billion over 10 years; increased military exercises between India and the US, such as Tiger Triumph, a US-India bilateral tri-service amphibious military exercise; and the [Blue Dot Network](#)—an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

India's fifth and final strategic interest is to further boost to India-Australia relations. This relationship has recently been upgraded to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) signed under nine arrangements that include "Mutual Logistics Support" for their militaries.

It can be rightly argued that Covid-19 has provided the major players in the Indo-Pacific the opportunity to make the Quad more functional in both scope and

scale. It provides justification to enlarge the Quad framework, allowing key players to work together in tackling pressing regional challenges, both traditional and non-traditional. Such developments will further strengthen both the idea and the prospects for the Indo-Pacific in 21st century global politics. Under these shifts, India will see an enhanced position as a strategic weight in the Indo-Pacific.

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