

By Invitation

Delhi's great power diplomacy: The Great Indian Rope Trick?

How is it possible that India is concurrently a member of the Quad as well as the Brics grouping as one, on the face of it, is the antithesis of the other?



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For The Straits Times

Earlier this week at the bilateral meeting with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Tokyo, United States President Joe Biden underlined his "commitment to making the US-India partnership among the closest we have on earth". Even after discounting Mr Biden's rhetoric, there is no doubt about the solid bet his administration has made on building deeper ties with India.

Delhi's persistent refusal to say even a word against the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the most important global issue of the moment – has not dimmed the strategic enthusiasm for India in the US, Australia and Japan, all four of which are partners in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad. Delhi, meanwhile, has steadily moved closer to the US and its allies on regional issues, making India a critical partner for shaping the future of Asia.

This convergence has led to the growing consolidation of the Quad in the four summit-level meetings in the last 16 months since Mr Biden took charge of the White House. The Quad, which had a false start in 2007 and was moving rather slowly after it was revived in 2017, has now acquired greater momentum, an institutional framework, and an ambitious agenda.

China and Russia – with a brand new alliance of their own – are not hiding their concerns. Even as the Quad leaders were meeting in Tokyo on Tuesday, Beijing and Moscow sent their bombers to buzz the airspace near Japan in the East China Sea. These provocative actions are likely to reinforce the growing political commitment in the Quad capitals to build a solid partnership.

But is not India a dear friend of Russia and China? Delhi is indeed a founding member of the Brics forum that brings together five non-Western nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. How is India sailing in two boats – eastern and western – at the same time?

Just a week ago, Indian foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was participating in the Brics foreign ministers' meeting held virtually. China's President Xi Jinping is set to host the annual Brics summit, in a virtual format, in the coming weeks. Mr Modi will surely join the discussions, as he has in the last few annual iterations.

BRICS AND THE QUAD

On the face of it, the Quad is the antithesis of Brics which had its origins in the mid-1990s when India joined the Russian initiative to set up a so-called "strategic triangle". The objective of the RIC (Russia-India-China) coalition was to limit the dangers of the "unipolar moment" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The RIC was expanded eventually to include Brazil and then South Africa to develop a solid non-Western coalition against American hyperpower that dazzled at the turn of the millennium. Campaigning for a "multipolar world", Brics became the self-proclaimed standard bearer against Western hegemony in the 21st century.

In a strange twist, even as Brics was gaining traction, Delhi joined hands with Canberra, Tokyo and Washington to set up the Quadrilateral forum in 2007 that was initiated by Mr Shinzo Abe in his first term as Japan's prime minister. Although it met only at the level of officials, the Quad was inevitably seen as aimed at balancing, if not containing, China. But the forum fell apart quickly, given the high stakes each of the four members had in a good relationship with China.

But much has changed in the last few years – none of them more consequential than China's growing assertiveness. Former US president Donald Trump replaced the four-decade-old policy of engaging China with a strategy of contestation. Washington framed the new geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific in 2017 and identified the Quad as the principal vehicle to implement the new strategy.

Despite many differences with Mr Trump, the Biden administration doubled down on the Indo-Pacific strategy and raised the level of Quad engagement to the summit level. It has also added a measure of sophistication to the Trump strategy of challenging China's policies.



In many ways, India is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific idea as well as the Quad as a strategic institution. The essence of the new political geography – invented by the Trump administration – was about getting India back into the Pacific. India and its resources played a critical role in shaping the geopolitical outcomes in Asia until World War II. But independent India consciously walked away from such a role in the second half of the 20th century.

The Indo-Pacific strategy needed a new institution that went beyond the traditional allies as well as a large nation like India with considerable heft to make it work. This seemed a very big ask from India, whose international identity was rooted in the idea of non-alignment.

Although India's relations with the US steadily improved and Delhi experimented with security cooperation with Washington in the new millennium, the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government that preceded Mr Modi's was terribly squeamish about joining any institution that seemed to put India in the "Western camp".

The enduring anti-Americanism in the Congress party and the broad left-wing opinion in the UPA as well as entrenched support for the idea of "strategic autonomy"

meant there was no question of India joining any coalition that looked like a gang-up against China.

Although the Cold War had ended, Delhi seemed comfortable with a modified version of non-alignment. Some have characterised India's post-Cold War foreign policy as "multi-alignment" that allowed for the accommodation of two diametrically opposed institutions. After all, Brics is about limiting American power and the Quad is about balancing China.

But much has changed since then, thanks to a number of new elements at work.

THE CHINA FACTOR

One of the most important factors has been the recurring military tension on India's disputed border with China. A series of increasingly serious military crises – in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2020 – have finally convinced Delhi it can no longer pretend that China's muscular approach to the border dispute is not a threat or sweep it under the ideological carpet woven around the themes of Asian solidarity and non-alignment. Addressing the growing security challenge from Beijing has convinced Delhi of the need for closer ties with Washington.

Second is the growing weight of the US in India's economic relations and the steady decline of Russian salience. Last year, India's total trade with the US was around US\$160 billion (S\$220 billion); with Russia it is around US\$12 billion. But Russia remains a major source of weapons, including special systems like the S-400 air defence missiles and nuclear-powered submarines.

Delhi would prefer to keep the longstanding relationship with Russia going, but Moscow's deepening confrontation with the West and its growing reliance on Beijing have been a source of gathering discomfort for India. The Ukraine crisis has only made it acute.

While India is reluctant to criticise Russian aggression in Ukraine, it has been quite vocal about affirming its interest in the basic principles of international order that Moscow has so brazenly violated – respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

Non-use of force in addressing territorial disputes is of special interest to India, which has been at the receiving end of Chinese efforts to alter the territorial disposition on the contested border. It is no surprise then that Delhi joined its Quad partners in a resounding critique against China's "unilateral attempt to

change the status quo" in Asia.

Finally, Mr Modi has brought unprecedented realism to Indian international relations and has been willing to take a fresh look at many of India's challenges. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, bet big on solidarity with China but the giants went to war in 1962. His successors were reluctant to confront China's power and ambition.

They repeated Nehru's mistake in the 1990s by over-determining the threat from the West and underestimating the challenge from China. Brics was part of the calculus. Mr Modi, too, came to power in 2014 determined to a special relationship with China. But there are no illusions left about the unending military tension with China. As a realist he is determined to strengthen India's position in its relationship with China; that turn has produced a revitalised Quad.

As China's power and assertiveness grew rapidly in the last few years, the partnership with the US has become a much higher priority for India. Some Chinese scholars have called Modi's policy "aligning with the near" – it is a strategy that has long lineage in Chinese statecraft. It is also a path that Beijing followed during the Cold War to navigate the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong had no qualms about switching sides when it suited Beijing's interests. He chose "lean on one side" in the 1950s (towards the Soviet Union) and the other (the US) in the 1970s. Today China is back to working with Russia to counter the US. In all these major turns, China remained steadfast in pursuing its own interests.

India's own geopolitical shift towards the US can be understood within the same framework. China, Delhi will never abandon its independent foreign policy, much like Beijing, Delhi too must make strategic adjustments in its posture to suit the circumstances that it finds itself in.

Through the Cold War, India's non-alignment had a distinct tilt towards the Soviet Union. To India's strategic autonomy was an unmistakable tilt towards the US and the West. Unlike the Soviet Union, though, India does not make dramatic overnight changes in foreign policy. It evolves at a glacial pace, organically.

But how on earth can India be part of both Brics and the Quad? There is no great rope trick behind India's great power diplomacy. It is the incremental adaptation that masks the structural change in India's international relations.

Any close look at Delhi's diplomacy would suggest that the weight of the Quad is growing rapidly in India's geopolitical calculus while that of Brics is slowly eroding. Delhi's unresolved territorial problems with Beijing and India's deepening economic ties with the US, and Russia's need for confrontation with the West, this trend line sharper over time.

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