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Quad v/s Act East Policy:

A Cautious India Needs to Move Closer to Regional/Sub-regional Initiatives

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Introduction

November 2018 witnessed few significant developments with regard to India's Act East Policy and India's broader approach to the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Singapore to attend the ASEAN-India Breakfast Summit, 13th East Asia Summit (EAS), 2nd Regional Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (RCEP) Summit and other meetings related to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Mr. Modi specifically mentioned about the broader canvass of India's approach towards Indo-Pacific and India's Act East Policy (AEP) where ASEAN plays a central role in the Summits and meetings that he attended in Singapore. The AEP and India's approach to the Indo-Pacific seem to be complimentary to each other as both these policies reiterate about India's reinvigorated involvement in the geo-strategic affairs of the wider construct of the Indo-Pacific. However, the question remains, whether the four-country Quad forum, which seems to be one of the visible outcomes of the construct of the Indo-Pacific, has been received well by the ASEAN countries.

Parallel to these developments, India has also been nurturing the existing sub-regional initiatives including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral

Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). As India continues to enhance its presence in the Indo-Pacific, the major world powers as well as some of the regional powers have expressed their support to New Delhi's AEP. The factsheet, published by the US Department of State, after Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Papua New Guinea for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit on November 18, titled as "Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region," spoke about US involvement in augmenting and strengthening the bilateral and regional mechanisms including BIMSTEC.¹ In this given background, this commentary seeks to analyze why India (along with three other members in the Quad) had to be careful and changed the nomenclature of Quad to Quadrilateral Consultation to make it more accommodative to the interests of Southeast Asia and why India needs to strengthen its engagements with the sub-regional initiatives like BIMSTEC to gain confidence in the immediate and extended neighborhood, towards the east.

India and AEP: Recent Developments under the ambit of ASEAN and BIMSTEC

Much in sync with the previous occasions, PM Modi spoke about the centrality of ASEAN and its role in "open and inclusive Regional Security Architecture,"² as well as in India's Act East Policy in Singapore. Within the sphere of AEP, India has taken major initiatives like India Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multimodal Transit and Transport project, Rhi-Tidim Road, Rhi-Falam Road to connect India's landlocked Northeast with Southeast Asia via Myanmar; India-Indonesia Task Force to develop connectivity between Sumatra and Andaman Islands; expansion of India's National Knowledge Network to BIMSTEC partners etc. Additionally, India and Indonesia have started talking about developing Sabang port in Indonesia and India and Vietnam are in discussion about establishing direct maritime transport linkages. India has been negotiating with ASEAN on a maritime transport agreement; with

¹ "Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region," Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Embassy Jakarta, last modified on November 18, 2018, <https://id.usembassy.gov/advancing-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-region/>

² "Visit of Prime Minister to Singapore to Attend ASEAN-India Breakfast Summit, the 13th East Asia Summit and Related Meetings," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), last modified on November 16, 2018. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30601/Visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Singapore+to+attend+ASEAN+India+Breakfast+Summit+the+13th+East+Asia+Summit+and+related+meetings>

BIMSTEC, on a coastal shipping and a motor vehicle agreement (MVA); and with Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal (BBIN), on another MVA. The BIMSTEC Working Group on Connectivity has been engaged to prepare a draft master connectivity plan right now.³

India and the Indo-Pacific: Quad and other Recent Developments

At the sidelines of the last ASEAN Summit, the Quadrilateral Consultation also had their third meeting. Post the meeting, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, released a statement which mentioned that the objective of Quadrilateral Consultation needs to be understood through the prism of cooperation between the involved countries in areas like “connectivity, sustainable development, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and maritime and cyber security.”⁴ In an order to convince the ASEAN member states, all four Quad members mentioned about the possibility of extension of the four-country Consultation to include other countries. This has been done to address the concerns expressed by some of the ASEAN member countries about the objective of Quad, China’s objections to it and repercussions for the region. For example, Indonesia, the largest country within ASEAN, had come up with an “ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook” concept early in 2018 where it opposed the idea of the Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral and instead spoke about an ASEAN-centric Indo-Pacific concept.⁵ While countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore are claiming for a more prominent role for ASEAN in the construct of Indo-Pacific; countries like Philippines, especially under President Rodrigo Duterte, expressed its willingness to be more accommodative towards China. Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR are the countries that are expecting to be benefitted from China’s Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative. Evidently, the divided ASEAN, for one reason or the other, does not want to aggravate the geo-political tensions in Southeast Asia by infuriating the mighty China by openly appreciating and welcoming the idea of the

³ Dinakar Peri, “BIMSTEC to Boost Connectivity,” *The Hindu*, last modified on November 18, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bimstec-to-boost-connectivity/article25532597.ece>.

⁴ “India-Australia-Japan-US Consultations,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), last modified on November 15, 2018. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30593/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS_Consultations

⁵ Evan A. Laksmana, “Buck-passing from Behind: Indonesia’s Foreign Policy and the Indo-Pacific,” The Brookings Institution, last modified on November 27, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/11/27/buck-passing-from-behind-indonesias-foreign-policy-and-the-indo-pacific/>

Quad. Hence, the recent addition with regard to the possibility of expansion of Quadrilateral Consultation was incorporated in the statements released by India, Australia, Japan and the US after their latest meeting in Singapore. In another attempt to woo the Southeast Asian leaders, both USA and India have spoken about the passage of the BUILD Act by the US which will facilitate the establishment of an International Development Finance Corporation to invest money in third countries to promote connectivity. India has shown its interest to be involved with this US initiative to enhance connectivity in Southeast Asia.⁶

Concluding Observations

Overall, ASEAN has been enthusiastic about India's Act East Policy. In fact, in its earlier form, which was known as Look East Policy, initiated in early 1990s, New Delhi's vision of re-engaging the Southeast Asian region also had evoked much interest in ASEAN. India-ASEAN trade has expanded to reach USD 80 billion per annum and the negotiations for RCEP⁷ are under process. India's ambivalence towards RCEP has however generated a mixed feeling about India's intentions to enhance its economic cooperation with the region. The Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, along with many other leaders from the region, has been vocal about urging the Indian leadership to join the force of ASEAN to provide a much-needed push to the RCEP.⁸ On the other hand, ASEAN remains doubtful about the future of Quad. Hence, for New Delhi, the pragmatic decision would be to continue to highlight the opportunities in the sub-regional cooperation initiatives like BIMSTEC as well as nurture mega-regional blocs like the Indian Oceans Rim Association (IORA) to gain confidence from the regional neighbours, without invoking any fear about destabilizing the region by adding to the existing geo-political tensions.

⁶ Vijay Keshav Gokhale, "Address by Foreign Secretary at the Regional Connectivity Conference: South Asia in the Indo-Pacific Context," (Speech, New Delhi, November 1, 2018), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30556/Address_by_Foreign_Secretary_at_the_Regional_Connectivity_Conference_South_Asia_in_the_IndoPacific_Context

⁷ RCEP has 10 ASEAN members and 6 of its dialogue partners including India.

⁸ Bhagyashree Garekar, "Join ASEAN in Push for RCEP by Next Year, PM Lee Tells India PM Modi," *The Straits Times*, last modified on November 15, 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/join-asean-in-push-for-rcep-by-next-year-pm-lee-tells-india-pm-modi>

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