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A Congruous Multilateral Security Framework? Searching for an Asian Democratic Partnerships

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The Indo-Pacific is currently witnessing growing attention from major powers that have immense strategic and economic stakes in the region. The rise of intense geopolitical competition in the region has given rise to a ‘democracy vs autocracy’ narrative and raised several questions about the future of democratic unity in the Indo-Pacific. In response to Chinese projects like the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), which represent Beijing’s growing political and military influence, Western and democratic Asian powers (like India and Japan) have sought to build a ‘democratic axis’ via issues-based networks and institutions. These platforms represent the ideological contestation between autocratic closed systems and democratic nations. In a diverse Asia however, where the universality of democratic norms may be contested, these initiatives are controversial as it is viewed as Western players' attempts to impose a certain set of ideas.

In this context, questions persist about how suitable the Asian landscape would be for Western institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which is rooted in norms of liberal democracy (Lucarelli 2002). Could exclusively regional multilaterals like the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has not been fully effective due to its burden of diversity and consensus building, be the answer? Or is there a newer alternative middle path? Can the diverse Asian (and Asia-Pacific) region find the ways to foster democratic partnerships? In what ways can lessons from the ongoing war in Europe be translated into proactive measures in the Indo-Pacific? Will the creation of an Asian government-led democratic axis resolve or complicate the richly diverse Indo-Pacific geopolitics?

Ukraine War and Asia: New Challenges to Democratic Unity

Across the past few years, threats to democracy and the democratic way of life have surfaced all over the world, through both conventional and unconventional tactics of assault. The rise of the minilateral and multilaterals, primarily driven by democratic and authoritarian states, only complicates the ideological facets of such rivalry. China’s assertive actions along maritime and land borders have

long created security tensions in Asia, especially for powers like Japan and India. However, more recently, it is the Russia-Ukraine war that has sent strong ripples over Asia, especially as tensions between China and Taiwan have escalated after Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi's visit in August, causing fears of a Moscow-like "special operation" action by Beijing vis-à-vis Taipei (Blumenthal 2022).

Russian-Ukraine war projects a lot of threat on the future of multilateralism and democracy. As Ukraine's Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Yevheniia Filipenko warned that actions by Russia threaten the "future of multilateralism and global security" especially if violations go unaddressed and business with Moscow continues instead of focusing on a united push in isolating Russia (Schein 2022). Importantly, the world itself is presently split on how to respond to Russia. This split in opinions of Russia's military operation in Ukraine is amply evident in Asia too. A sizable number of states (such as India) have shown that they are unwilling (or unable) to censure Moscow or ban it from multilateral institutions. China also has officially stated its support for Russia's participation in international affairs with the recent meeting between Xi Jinping and Putin at the SCO showing a continuation of China's restrained balance vis-à-vis Ukraine (Time 2022).

Further, the war in Ukraine has brought to the forefront questions of territorial integrity and democracy and pitted them against notions of aggressive expansion and authoritarianism. The inability of the UN to effectively respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the increasing inefficiency of international multilateral institutions in handling the world's diplomatic, security, and socioeconomic concerns (Dossani 2022). It has caused Asian states to question the efficacy of such liberal democratic institutions and platforms and made it apparent that 21st century challenges, particularly those pertaining to national security, require new solutions. One such alternative path is the creation of smaller minilateral arrangements, like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad; the core group comprises Australia, India, Japan, and the US), which brings together like-minded democratic states with shared objectives and imperatives and mutual trust – akin to a democratic axis.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has set a precedent for major conflicts elsewhere wherein protection of sovereignty and upholding of democracy are critical facets. The South and East China Seas, India-China border dispute as well as India-Pakistan border, tensions across the Taiwan Strait, and Northeast Asian peace architecture with a focus on the Korean Peninsula all emerge as impressionable conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region. Such fears evoke a sense of déjà vu from 2015, when Russia's annexation of Crimea and the slow response by the US and Europe set precedents that allowed for the growth of a stronger Russia (Boot 2015). In Asia today, any precedence of such a nature bodes national security threats for democratic states like Japan, India, and South Korea. The Ukraine crisis is an example of how an autocratic power can undermine the international liberal order and violate the inherent democratic principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. It has, therefore, highlighted the need for Asian democratic states to band together. The need for strengthening an Asian democracy (including some semi-democratic countries) alignment hence becomes all the more critical. Whether such a democratic axis emerges via creation of a new Regional Cooperation and Integration (RCI) institution or a minilateral format that is more flexible and effective remains to be seen.

Rise of the Indo-Pacific and Its Democratic Dimension

The rise in authoritarian models in Asia—China’s global revisionist agenda and dismal human rights’ record; the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan; North Korean regime’s focus on nuclear ambitions; and the Military Junta-sponsored violence in Myanmar—has accelerated regional distress to an all-time high. Simultaneously, regional institutions like ASEAN with their insistence on non-interference in domestic affairs and consensus-building have been unsuccessful in reigning in the undesirable ramifications of such decline (Ebbighausen 2017). The near-constant threat of limited war erupting in South Asia, South China Sea, or East Asia amid China’s military interventions after years of peaceful rise has necessitated a renewed focus on constructive security engagements that can deal with both the threat perception as well as the growing developmental and humanitarian needs.

Among the US-led initiatives, the resurgent Quad with its wide-ranging ambit, and the nascent “Quad Plus” format that represents an amalgam of “like-minded” states with Western and Eastern sensibilities, have the potential to develop into a broader, comprehensive multilateral security framework dealing with shared challenges while pursuing its ultimate aim of a free and open Indo-Pacific (Panda, 2022). However, autocratic states (particularly China) have criticized the Quad and its variants as efforts by democratic Western nations to impose their values in Asia and heighten regional tensions by creating a precursor to an Indo-Pacific NATO, that would be modeled on the trans-Atlantic institution.

Yet, criticisms about Quad evolving as a possible “Asian NATO” – based on the failure of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which was created in 1954 to counter communist expansionism and modeled on NATO – are unfounded (Nairn, 1968; Choong and Seah, 2022). Firstly, unlike SEATO, the Quad has its origins as a humanitarian assistance grouping that is still evolving into a “plurilateral” mechanism beyond the China-centric agenda (AIR 2022). Born from the disaster assistance to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Quad is still focused on delivering public goods in the region (Duggal 2022). In this context, it is foremost a grouping rooted in democratic values than defense considerations. Secondly, the Quad format is inherently an Indo-Pacific phenomenon, dominated by regional powers with its extension set to include more regional states. Even Quad members have shown some differences in responding to the Russian war in Ukraine, this has not caused any significant cracks in responding to regional challenges. The Quad’s focus on non-traditional security challenges – including climate change, disaster relief, and quality infrastructure to name a few – has allowed it to grow as a collaborative democratic grouping. Thirdly, the presence of India, which has still not relinquished entirely its non-aligned past, would hardly encourage the transformation into a military alliance, at least under normal conditions (Panda 2021).

Nonetheless, the Quad’s perception as an anti-China tool has not yet allowed it to gain pan-Asian acceptance. Though ASEAN centrality and outlook is an integral part of the Quad’s “spirit,” an absence of ASEAN-Quad interaction, besides Vietnam participating in the COVID pandemic-related Plus meetings, has fueled speculations of unease (Kwek 2021; Stromseth 2021; White House 2021a). Simultaneously, the introduction of minilaterals like the Australia-United Kingdom (UK)-United States (US) (AUKUS) has put under scrutiny the democratic nature of Indo-Pacific groupings. Thus, if the Quad has not been welcomed by many Asian states as a core platform for democratic unity, the search for a befitting and effective democratic partnership, as a way to strengthen the regional security architecture, is urgent and ongoing.

An Alternative: Need for New Plurilateral Democratic Partnerships

At present, since multilateral bodies in Asia and the Indo-Pacific remain non-bound to overtures that categorically and systematically strengthen the liberal international order, the ideation of a new plurilateral body for democratic unity allowing for economic and judicial sanctions can be envisioned. Such a new RCI institution in the region should, most importantly, be driven by Asian states. Asian middle power democratic countries, with strong and proactive foreign policies, such as Japan, can take a leading role here. India's current foreign policy approach of non-alliance may limit the leadership role it can take in such a venture. Nevertheless, India remains a critical part of the regional liberal construct and key force in any potential democratic partnership or a grouping. Without India, the power of the proposed institution would not reach its true potential, especially as Delhi has accepted asymmetric and non-reciprocal benefits in dealing with smaller states. Hence, if the RCI is built as an organization with a mandate to work towards maintaining of peace, and not an alliance centric entity, ensuring the role of India can be possible.

Expanding on notions of democratic unity, with ASEAN as a regional anchor, such a new organization can take on a guiding role in the Asia and Indo-Pacific region especially vis-à-vis threats to national security. Mobilizing solidarity with nations in peril will require a collaboration approach to cooperative security; for instance, human rights abuses in Myanmar can be a cause for intervention based on humanitarian grounds. Such interventions, unlike those of the West, do not have to involve sending of troops. Rather, united multilateral sanctions in the economic and military domain can guide the RCI while allowing it to emerge as a strong backbone supporting the reinvigoration of existing bodies, especially underperforming or almost-defunct organizations in South Asia such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) (Ghate 2011). ASEAN can profit from a more assertive RCI that frees it from the perils of changing its own mandate while allowing ASEAN stronger support to implement the rules-based order in the region.

The starting point for the creation of such an RCI would be based on smaller dialogues; its expansion should be left to gradual growth. Even as common values of democracy and adherence to rules-based systems remain core principles of each state-actor, differences in approaches and history adversely affect the development of multilateralism in the region.

Nonetheless, as US President Joe Biden articulated in the 2021 Summit of Democracy, the defense of democracy has emerged as the “defining challenge” of the 21st century (White House 2021b). Hence, even as Asia struggles with regional integration and growing authoritarianism, it is important for leading democratic economies like Japan, India, and South Korea, which are at a crucial juncture vis-à-vis regional and global ambitions, to spearhead an Asian counter against unilateral changes in the region's status quo (e.g., China's reunification goals). This will promote an Asian-led democratization process, instill confidence in these middle powers as responsible governance providers, and push forward the multipolar wheels of regional integration.

Mobilizing a Democratic Asia

How democratic Asia can be mobilized to build democratic unity in the Indo-Pacific is the foremost important question. There is no doubt that Asia's relationship with democracy is exceedingly complex. However, as geopolitical competition in the region takes shape of a democracy-versus-authoritarianism dynamic, it is vital for influential middle power democracies to come together over their shared values and imperatives.

Although support for democracy and democratic values remains high in the Asian populations, there is immense dissatisfaction over trends like elite corruption and inequality, racial and ethnic tensions, and increasingly restricted space for civil society (Ford and Hass, 2021). This has provided greater space for authoritarian states, especially China, to expand its regional footprint and promote its alternative world views. For example, Beijing's export of its highly autocratic digital surveillance tools and policy playbooks have made it easier for states in the region to make illiberalism more acceptable and restrict space for civil rights and liberties in their own countries (Ford and Hass, 2021). Under such circumstances, the most pressing challenge for regional democracies is to come together and demonstrate the corrective features and positives of democracies and democratic global governance. Regular discussions and exchanges between like-minded democracies through an RCI will be vital in this regard; they can help democratic states guard themselves against the tendency toward complacency and implement appropriate checks and balances to help governments protect against attempts by authoritarian states to exploit their vulnerabilities. Such regular exchanges can form the starting point for democratic states to devise micro and macro political reform that can be immensely consequential for reinforcing global governance driven by democratic values.

Earlier in 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson proposed the formation of a Group of 10 Democracies (or D-10) that better reflects the democratic world of today with the inclusion of Asian states of India, Australia, and South Korea (in addition to the G-7 economies). Although the proposal has all but disintegrated, it brought forth an important idea for the need of a summit of democracies aimed at standing as a stalwart against rising trends of authoritarianism. Such a model can come about in the Indo-Pacific, with forums (or RCIs) established for such a purpose. Importantly, by virtue of being region-centric, and therefore driven by Asian democracies rather than Western ones, such a forum will be able to better represent the Asian voice. The foremost aim of such a forum will be to reinforce the resilience of smaller democratic states so as to ensure autocratic forces do not gain a stronghold in the region. ■

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