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## The new quad in West Asia: The present and the future of I2U2

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### Abstract

India is taking a significant step in framing the Jewish state within its larger Middle East policy, nearly three decades after Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao broke with the past and normalised relations with Israel in January 1992. Up until this point, the Indian government considered Israel while deciding how to deal with Washington. However, in a virtual conference with his the U.S.A., the UAE, and Israeli colleagues, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar established the groundwork for a bigger regional approach with Israel as the pivot during his five-day visit to Israel this month. There are already hints that the so-called "minilateral" would include like-minded nations including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and France.

The new and tiny Quad, made up of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, is innovative and non-confrontational, and will therefore last. A number of security issues prevent the other one, which consists of Australia, India, Japan, and the US and whose seeds were sown in 2007, from coming to fruition. The main reason these nations came together was because of their worries about China's strategic ascent, but the Quad still had to overcome many political and economic obstacles. None have the luxury of being outwardly anti-Beijing given that China is their main trading partner. Additionally, the US chose AUKUS when it needed a stronger structure without informing or consulting the other Quad members beforehand.

**Keywords:** I2U2, West Asia, New QUAD, geopolitics, mutual cooperation

### Introduction

It has been popularly argued that there are neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies in politics, and what is permanent is the only interest. This cannot be truer than in the case of geopolitics, where 'convergence for benefit' triumphs over 'convergence of ideology'. States come together when they find that they can gain more in being together than being against each other. However, all this is easier said than done. It is because sometimes converging with one country for one's own interest may harm its relations with other countries, and thereby its interest. Therefore states need to be extremely cautious and well-balanced in their approach. This fine balancing of interest is at the heart of Indian diplomacy ever since Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014.

The year 2023 is a very special for India as the country will be hosting two major international political events that will be keenly watched by world media and academia. The two events are G20<sup>[1]</sup> summit and SCO<sup>[2]</sup> summit. But the question that is being asked is that why is there so much discussion and interest over India hoisting two big events same year? The reason for it lies less in the composition of the two bodies (G20 and SCO) but more in the orientation of the two. While G20 more or reflects the triumph of the hegemony of the west, SCO is more about the countering of the Western hegemony by countries Russia and China. In a way, the two groups remain each other's contradiction, if not the confrontation.

<sup>1</sup> The G20 is an informal group of 19 countries and the European Union, with representatives of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The G20 membership comprises a mix of the world's largest advanced and emerging economies, representing about two-thirds of the world's population, 85% of global gross domestic product, 80% of global investment and over 75% of global trade.

<sup>2</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is an intergovernmental organisation focused on issues of politics, economics, development, and the military. It began in 1996 as the 'Shanghai Five' by the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Currently, the organisation has eight member states - including India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan in the above list - four Observer States, and six Dialogue Partners. The organisation was renamed the SCO in 2001. Its main aims are to ensure regional security, resolve border issues, counter-terrorism and religious extremism, and enhance regional development, among others.

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Yet, India remains comfortable in being a part of both the group. Scholars call this a success of India's policy of multi-alignment/multi lateralism. This philosophy of multilateralism gets best reflected in its participation in I2U2 summit, a group that has become the talk of the town for bringing those four countries under one roof that have very different structure and ideologies. This paper will first define the theory multilateralism then delve upon India adoption of the philosophy of multilateralism since its independence. It will then look at India's 'Look West' Policy under Modi administration and the role as well the future of I2U2. A critical analysis and overall assessment of the organisation will be taken up in the last section of the paper and conclusion will be drawn upon accordingly.

### Understanding multilateralism

The coordination of ties between three or more states based on a system of norms or principles is a common definition of multilateralism (Ikenberry, 2003, pp. 533–550) <sup>[9]</sup>. It combines the idea of "coordination among three or more states" proposed by Robert Keohane in 1990 <sup>[13]</sup> with the "coordination based on rules and principles" proposed by John Ruggie. Ruggie (1993) <sup>[22]</sup>, modifying Keohane's theory, argues that multilateralism differs from other types of interstate relations because it is based on "certain principles" that have been agreed upon by at least three states. These guiding concepts include "diffused reciprocity," "indivisibility," and "generalised standards of conduct" (Ruggie, 1993, pp. 533–550) <sup>[22]</sup>. Indivisibility denotes the collective, non-discriminatory, and indivisible nature of the norms and principles. Diffused reciprocity states that even if a state suffers a temporary setback, overall advantages will outweigh the setbacks in the long run.

Intergovernmental agreements, legally enforceable rules and principles, and even unofficial general consultations are all examples of multilateralism (Ikenberry, 2003, pp. 534–535) <sup>[9]</sup>. International regimes are what set multilateralism apart, according to Krasner (1983) <sup>[15]</sup>. "Implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a certain sector of international relations" are how he defines regimes (Krasner, 1983) <sup>[15]</sup>. Therefore, the rules and organising principles of an organisation are more important than its "formal" components.

When "coalitions dissatisfied with existing institutions combine threats of exit, voice, and the creation of alternative institutions to pursue policies and practises different from those of existing institutions," Morse and Keohane (2014) <sup>[20]</sup> use the term "contested multilateralism" to describe the situation (p. 385). This can take place if "states and/or non-state actors either change their attention from one existing organisation to another or construct an alternative multilateral institution to compete with existing ones," according to the study (Morse & Keohane, 2014, p. 387) <sup>[20]</sup>. A multilateral conflict results from the disgruntled states' incapacity to alter the status quo. There are two main variations of it: "competitive regime creation" and "regime shifting." Disgruntled nations will change to an existing alternative multilateral forum or establish a new one in an effort to impose their will. There are several instances of non-Western states changing their regimes, but Morse and Keohane did not address these instances. The new proponents of multilateralism and regime change are the SCO and the BRICS.

### India and multilateralism

India's multilateralism has a mixed outlook as a result of the intricate interaction between traditional Indian ideals and Western principles. Despite adhering to western internationalism, New Delhi is more closely aligned with China and Russia due to its emphasis on sovereignty, multipolarity, non-interference, and non-intervention. India was a free democracy that never attempted to overthrow Western institutions, but when it was unhappy, it frequently sought solace in alliances with non-Western nations. India's present strategy is to interact with all major powers at various levels of closeness without joining forces with any of them (Saran, 2012) <sup>[23]</sup>. This is frequently referred to as the "multi-alignment" approach in its broadest sense.

Three periods of Indian foreign policy existed from 1947 and the middle of the 2000s which highlight how India's policy of multilateralism took shape over the period of time. (Ganguly and Pardesi, 2009) <sup>[8]</sup>. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Prime Minister, pursued the policy of "non-alignment" throughout the first phase, which spanned the period from independence to the border conflict with China in 1962. Nehru argued that India could better serve itself and the world by maintaining parity with the superpowers, advancing causes like decolonization and disarmament, and working to bring about the internationalist ideal of "One World" through persuasion rather than force because it was too weak to have a significant impact on the Cold War (Bhagavan, 2012) <sup>[3]</sup>. NAM (Non Aligned Movement), a platform for post-colonial countries mostly from Asia, Africa and Latin America came to existence in this period.

In the second phase, which spanned the early 1960s to the end of the Cold War, Nehru's successors laid out a more radical agenda for the developing world, rearmed India's armed forces in response to threats from China and Pakistan, and took a more assertive stance toward its close allies as well as the West. In 1974, it conducted a nuclear device test and began a very slow but steadfast endeavour to establish, if not completely deploy, a latent deterrent capability. In order to avoid dependency on the West or other emerging economic powers, India continues to pursue economic self-reliance and maintain minimal contact with the global market economy. The goal of these different actions was to increase India's "strategic autonomy," or more specifically, its capacity to advance its interests with little regard for those of other major countries, particularly in South Asia (Acharya, 2015) <sup>[1]</sup>. Although India championed the cause of third-world countries and spoke against bandwagoning, yet did not shy away from allying with a superpower (1971 Indo-Soviet treaty).

In the final stage, which lasted from 1991 until the mid-2000s, India tried to shore up its deteriorating political and economic positions with a number of new strategies: partially reforming and opening up its economy in 1991 to encourage more foreign trade and inward investment; implementing the "Look East" policy in 1994 in search of partners who might provide finance and know-how as well as opportunities to boost trade; testing five nuclear devices (Kapur and Ganguly, 2007) <sup>[11]</sup>. It came closer to states like US and Israel, yet did not give up its proximity with Russia or other third-world countries.

In all these three stages the underlying theme was that of multilateralism. Although the degree in the three varied, the kind remained the same as in all these phases India tried to become a key player in global politics by promoting the idea

of rule-based world order, respect for global institutions, sovereignty and principles of global justice. Even during the thick of cold war, it tried to have good relations with both the global powers so as to reduce tensions and promote international peace (Jaishankar, 2016) <sup>[10]</sup>. This gets reflected in its policy of climate justice and demands for reforms at the UN.

### Modi's West Asia policy

When Modi came to power in 2014, there were a lot of apprehensions as to what way the Indian Foreign policy would move as Modi did not have any past experience of handling international affairs and was largely considered as an 'outsider' to Delhi (Banerjee, 2019) <sup>[2]</sup>. Of all, the biggest focus was on his treatment of West Asia, a region with continuous turbulence, yet extremely crucial for India. However, Modi not only reformed India's West Asia policy by launching 'Look West' policy, but also transformed it by building personal relations with the leaders of West Asian Countries like Israel, UAE and Saudi Arabia (Blarel, 2022) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Instead of choosing a different direction, the new administration continued along the same road but reinforced the "Look West" policy by concentrating on three key areas: the Arab Gulf states, Israel, and Iran. During the 1970s, India's connections with Arab Gulf nations changed and intensified. In contrast, India's ties to Iran and Israel are relatively recent, having developed primarily since the 1990s.

India and Israel had long maintained a chilly relationship. India had openly supported the Arab nations and the Palestinian nationalism movement during the Cold War. Domestic factors were crucial in this situation. They included the support of Arab states, or at the very least the absence of criticism, for their administration of Jammu and Kashmir, which has a sizable Muslim population and is dominated by Muslims (Ward, 1970).

Both of these factors lost significance with time. The 1990s saw an increase in Arab-Israeli engagement, and the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians lessened the conflict's prominence in the area and among Indian Muslims. Additionally, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which was made up of a number of Muslim Arab states, kept passing resolutions that criticised India's authority over Jammu and Kashmir.

Israel, on the other hand, showed more sympathy for India in Kashmir. Israel stepped up and became a major supplier for India when the US imposed an arms embargo over the Kargil incident in 1999. Between 2000 and 2015, the Israel-India arms trade was worth over \$2.2 billion (Burton, 2018) <sup>[6]</sup>. Israeli appeal extended outside the arms trade, as well. It may have offered more high-value commerce and investment because it is one of the Middle East's most technologically advanced economies. Modi visited Israel for the first time as prime minister of India in July 2017. Benjamin Netanyahu, then prime minister of Israel, and Modi signed agreements on collaboration in space exploration, agriculture, and international development during the visit (Keinon, 2017) <sup>[12]</sup>.

By hosting Israeli leaders in late 2018, Oman and the UAE demonstrated a growing rapprochement between Arab Gulf Arab governments, which is said to have diminished the position and influence of the Palestinians in India's foreign policy (Kumaraswamy, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup>. In his 8 years in office,

Modi has paid visits to UAE in 2015, 2018, 2019 and 2022. Modi also visited the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in UAE in 2015 and was awarded the highest civilian award by the UAE. The UAE is India's third largest trade partner and second largest export destination. UAE FDI in India has increased over the past few years and currently stands at over \$12 billion (Chaudhary, 2022) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### I2U2: the new dimension of India's Multilateralism and Look West Policy

The I2U2 Grouping was conceptualized during the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the four countries held on 18 October 2021. According to the MEA press release (2022), "I2U2 is aimed to encourage joint investments in six mutually identified areas such as water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security. It intends to mobilize private sector capital and expertise to help modernize the infrastructure, low carbon development pathways for industries, improve public health, and promote the development of critical emerging and green technologies." It is the most recent Quad in which India participates, and it alludes to the first letters of the names of the four nations.

The inaugural summit of the new West Asia Quad took place in mid-July during US Vice President Joe Biden's trip to Israel. President Joe Biden electronically met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan of the UAE along with interim Prime Minister Yair Lapid of Israel. Western news sources have claimed that Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador, organised a meeting in Washington at which Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid also participated and where the need for the I2U2 grouping was revealed. This is not unexpected given that India and the UAE have recently improved their already strong ties because to Prime Minister Modi's close friendship with both Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the previous ruler of the UAE, and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the current ruler (Parthasarthy, 2022) <sup>[21]</sup>.

The I2U2 Joint Declaration states that "India would provide appropriate acreage for the project and will support farmers' integration into the food parks," which is arguably its most significant clause. The US and Israeli private sectors will be invited to contribute their knowledge and provide creative ideas that boost the project's sustainability. By increasing crop yields, these investments will aid in reducing food insecurity in South Asia and the Middle East.

The UAE's promise to invest \$2 billion in food parks all over India, which will use innovative technology for the conservation of fresh water resources and employ renewable energy technologies with inputs from Israel and the US, was the summit's most important development for India (Mathew, 2022) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Critical analysis of I2U2

As these nations have joined forces to achieve geo-economic goals of increased investments and address global concerns, their cooperation with one another is a game-changer. The I2U2 grouping is particularly important for India because it gives New Delhi the opportunity to use its strategic ties to Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States to forge profitable economic alliances without jeopardising its domestic obligations. With support from the Israel-UAE state and business sector, the investment in food parks would assist increase agricultural output, which will

boost the Indian agricultural system. The investment also hints at the sustainability advantage for India since the food parks will deal with the issue of food waste. In terms of geo-economic characteristics, the investment will improve food security in the Gulf region while giving India room to bargain for energy security (Tiwari, 2022) [24].

The I2U2 grouping also emphasises private capital investment and technical know-how to resolve issues with waste treatment, health access, and start-up connections. As the start-up business in India is expanding swiftly, India stands to benefit from these investments. Entrepreneurial innovation and the development of additional such businesses will be stimulated by investments in start-ups and their connections to other nations. Along with investments geared toward startups and food security, the alliance also helps India with its Clean Energy push.

I2U2 gives Israel another way to support its resistance to Iran and the historic Abraham Accords diplomatic agreement it struck with the UAE in 2020. According to analysts, I2U2, supports American efforts to limit China's influence in Asia and the Middle East, reassures Middle Eastern leaders of Washington's commitment to the region, and strengthens relationships between the country's friends throughout the globe (Kingsley, 2022) [14].

### Conclusion

It may be too early to predict anything about the future of an informal grouping like I2U2, especially at a time when global political dynamics are changing at the drop of a hat. Apart from that, the grouping has two members (Israel, UAE) from West Asia, a region notorious for its sectarian and geo-strategic conflicts that have been protracted both in its nature and extent. Also, since this alliance makes no claim about becoming a military convergent, even in the future, there are very strong reservations that this group may not raise much interest for strategic stake holders.

Any grouping or coalition sans military element or 'hard power' is kept on the secondary desk by the mandarins of the Indian foreign policy establishment. Moreover, the asymmetry that exist between the members of the I2U2 is not only glaring, but too big to be overlooked by any stretch of imagination. While India, Israel and USA are constitutional democracies, UAE continues to be a monarchy, though with strong space for virtues like law and order and concrete freedom.

The issue of Palestinian statehood and so called illegal settlements made by Israel continues to be a bone of contention between Israel and the Arabs. Added to it is the regular popping up of the military conflict between the IDF and militants in Gaza region. These events further complicate things and make it difficult for India as well as the UAE to uncritically stand with Israel. Both India and UAE have different reasons for it. While India would not like to antagonise the entire Muslim world by unabashedly standing with Israel and not condemning it, UAE fears a loss of face and its standing in the Muslim world, especially at a time when countries like Turkey and Malaysia are maintaining efforts to become a decisive voice of the world. Also, if USA and Israel would try to use this platform to confront with Iran, it would bring troubles for India and UAE that do not have any major issue with Iran. The USA under President Biden looks both tired as well as retired from its earlier role of net security provider in the region. Russia-Ukraine war and the rise of China has raised serious

questions about the ability as well the intention of the US to act as the predominant hegemonic power. However, India can gain a lot from I2U2 at least in terms of technology as well as geo politics as this platform will help India in bringing its two closest allies of the region under one roof thereby getting support for its counter-terrorism and defence technology policy. After all, diplomacy is all about turning contradictions into convergence and crisis into opportunity.

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