

Should There Be a New Grouping for the “Non-Nuclear Five” of South Asia?

Written by Rudabeh Shahid and Nazmus Sakib

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RUDABEH SHAHID AND NAZMUS SAKIB, AUG 28 2022

The former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, pointed out that as late as November 2017, China did not take the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) seriously. He quoted how the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi took the security pact nonchalantly and described its formation as “...the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they get some attention but will soon dissipate.” Yet, just four years later, in 2021, Rudd notes how Chinese officials began to view the QUAD with growing concerns when the alliance held its first leader-level summit.

Rudd believes QUAD’s goal of creating a global resistance coalition in the Indo-Pacific is troublesome for China’s approach. Rudd’s analysis is classically realist, focusing on “larger nation-states” without considering “smaller countries.” This indifference, among other things, has allowed the condition to remain throughout South Asia, especially in the “non-nuclear five”—Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—where China has made notable inroads. So how did this happen and why should Western countries rethink their South Asia policy to realise their aim of curbing the rise of China?

The QUAD is an initiative created by four “democracies”—US, India, Japan and Australia—back in 2004 with the intention of providing humanitarian support for countries hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami. It appears that in recent years it has been rejuvenated to counter the growing Chinese sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

All four countries have good reasons to come together at this point in time. The US has \$1.9 trillion worth of trade passing through the Indo-Pacific region. India and Japan have territorial disputes with China which have intensified over the last few years. Australia continues to bear the brunt of Chinese economic sanctions after suggesting a WHO investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

The maritime strategist, Alfred Mahan, had said “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia as the destiny of the world will be decided there.” There are a number of key maritime areas within the vast Indian Ocean region, which stretches from the Strait of Malacca and western coast of Australia in the east to the Mozambique Channel in the west. The Indian Ocean Region is of paramount importance to the world’s powers. In 2016, trade between the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca was worth 18 trillion US dollars. Due to its rapidly growing economy, China requires a lot of energy for industrial production, including crude oil, which passes through this region. For example, in 2020, China imported 47 per cent of its crude oil from the Middle East.

The geopolitical significance of South Asia is not just that it has some of the youngest and fastest-growing economies, but also that it borders the Indian Ocean region which serves as a critical sea-route for trade and a gateway both to the Middle East and East Asia. China has created “friendship ports” in South Asia. These include Pakistan’s Gwadar and Sri Lanka’s Hambantota ports. Myanmar and Bangladesh also plan new ports. All these ports are among India’s neighbours; therefore some say the goal is to choke India.

As QUAD takes center stage and China exercises its might, it’s crucial to note how “smaller” neighbors react. The fundamental reason China is making such huge advances is because to the common regional hegemon, India, which is considered as a “big brother” by the elites of five smaller neighbouring countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives,

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Nepal, and Sri Lanka. These nations could be caught between two emerging giants if China flexes its muscles in them. For example, recently Sri Lanka got “stuck between China and India over Beijing’s ‘spy ship’”. In the southern Hambantota port that Beijing leases from the Sri Lankan government, a Chinese navy ship arrived in mid-August. Its arrival sparked security concerns from India, which said the vessel could have military capabilities, with a considerable aerial reach – reportedly around 750 km, which means several ports in southern India could be on China’s radar. Although Sri Lanka described the Yuan Wang 5 as a “scientific research ship”, in response to India’s concern, Sri Lanka asked China to defer entry. China declared that “security concerns” are unfounded and the ship left after six days. This episode shows how even China’s non-military endeavors become security worries owing to its military potential.

So, what explains this almost selective bandwagoning behavior by the non-nuclear five to jump into the Chinese ship? The “non-nuclear five” have traditionally been in the “sphere of influence” of India. While most of the countries by itself are not small by any means—for example, Nepal has a population of 30 million, Sri Lanka with 22 million, and Bangladesh with 165 million, India is the most dominant country in the region with approximately 75 per cent of the landmass and 80 percent of South Asia’s GDP. As a result, India has an upper-hand in its bilateral relations with these countries.

Such a scenario has traditionally been perceived by the elites of these countries as India’s “big brother attitude” as they feel that they get a lesser share in their bilateral relations. Therefore, these elites practice something called “balancing” their foreign relations between India and China. This conduct of balancing and bandwagoning simultaneously may seem contradictory, but it is not as the non-nuclear five are eager to counterweight their domineering big brother India with the help of its adversary China. However, aligning with China is analogous to hopping on the bandwagon driven by the actual source of threat, because of the Asian giant’s track record of engaging in “debt book diplomacy”.

The non-nuclear five are in a perpetual balancing act while trying to maintain stable relations with both India and China. This reflects a region with complex political connections that do not generally ascribe to camp politics. While a significant portion of the trade of the non-nuclear five has historically been with India, bilateral trade between other countries of the non-nuclear five has been limited. There was widespread enthusiasm among the non-nuclear five countries when the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed as its membership was considered to bring about greater regional engagement. SAARC, however, remained hostage to the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan, and failed to deliver the economic integration that the non-nuclear five had expected.

After SAARC achieved limited success in bringing about regional engagement, additional subregional groups formed. One effort connects Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN). BBIN would give landlocked Nepal and Bhutan access to Bangladeshi ports, and Bangladesh will gain electricity for its fast-growing economy. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a more ambitious association of littoral countries. Over the past few years, it appears that Bangladesh’s foreign policy has been framed around its maritime domain, with the country having demarcated its maritime boundary with Myanmar in 2012 and India in 2014. As Bangladesh is a Bay of Bengal coastal nation, BIMSTEC gives it an alternate access to the open seas via its south, lessening its dependence on land-based trade as it is otherwise landlocked by India.

Besides trade and connectivity, there are other areas where the non-nuclear five can cooperate with each other. Climate change adaptation policies take utmost priority in governmental legislations of most of these countries, with Bhutan becoming the first country in the world to achieve carbon negativity. According to the World Bank, during the past decade almost 700 million people—half of South Asia’s population—were affected by climate related disasters such as droughts and floods. In particular, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka have many low-lying areas which are among the foremost regions in the world bearing the brunt of climate change due to rising sea levels.

Another area where the non-nuclear five can cooperate is in the domain of tourism. While in 2019, tourism was among the fastest growing sectors in South Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in losses of over US\$ 50 billion to the regional gross domestic product. In particular, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka saw between a 70 and 80

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percent reduction in tourist arrivals in 2020.

Therefore, there is a need for the United States and its western allies to revisit their South Asia Policy. The foreign policy of the current US administration has focused on managing competition with a rising China. Observers point out that there have been efforts to revive trust and confidence among the traditional allies, maintaining stability at regional levels, and also emphasising on alliance building, for example with the QUAD. Also, there is an increasing need to go beyond the India-Pakistan focused South Asia policy of the US and more importantly—not just depend on India. For this, the US needs to prioritise bilateral or multilateral engagements with the non-nuclear five countries of the region by genuinely understanding their interests, views and concerns. One way to do that is to push for a grouping like the East African Community or the Caribbean Community. These groupings can serve as a model for how to protect the national interest without being a ‘doormat’ to anyone else. Additionally, the non-nuclear five should refrain from being exploited as a pawn by any party in the escalating security dilemma brought about by India and China. The SAARC has been a failure due to being a hostage to India and Pakistan’s bilateral issues—so why not push for a new grouping just for the Non-Nuclear Five?

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