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The Emerging Era of Minilateralism in Indian Foreign Policy and Its Impacts on South Asian Politics

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary trends of Indian foreign policy cannot be studied without understanding the extension of New Delhi's strategic collaborations with different states beyond its traditional bilateral and multilateral cooperative frameworks. The prevalence of a minilateral approach to New Delhi's foreign relations has started focusing on creating different trilateral and quadrilateral engagements with diverse states to address the emerging security challenges of contemporary global power politics. These security challenges are fundamentally linked with the emerging role of China in the international system and New Delhi's longstanding confrontational ties with Beijing. The position of the United States, and its strategic support to New Delhi, cannot be ignored in the evolving India-China confrontations in economic and strategic domains. The continuation of cooperation against common security threats originating from China has witnessed a bilateral Indo-US strategic collaboration against China in the broader Asian balance of power. Thus, the increasing shadows of minilateralism on Indian foreign policy cannot be treated separately from South Asian regional politics, where India has created a security dilemma parallel to introducing various new trends in the regional arms race of South Asia. This new strategic alignment of New Delhi with the international community tries to counter the increasing role of China in the South Asian region, where Pakistan provides a gateway to China for its South Asian entry. Therefore, the central theme of this paper revolves around the newly evolved era of minilateralism in New Delhi's foreign relations and their impacts on the politics of nuclearized subcontinent due to Islamabad's strong trading ties with China. This paper is an academic endeavour to provide a comprehensive understanding of New Delhi's increasing reliance on minilateralism and its relevance with the decades-long India-Pakistan rivalry.

Key Words: Indian Minilateralism, Indian Multi-Alignment, New Delhi's Strategic Relations, India-Pakistan Conflict, South Asian Regional Security.

Introduction

Indian foreign policy has undergone various upgrades with Narendra Modi's arrival in Indian politics as the fourteenth Prime Minister. The Modi government's reforms in the Indian foreign policy resulted in a more assertive and extensive global engagement of India for becoming regionally influential and internationally an important player. These considerable shifts in foreign policy have let New

Delhi secure the diverse strategic alignments in the surrounding regions based on different small alliances of trilateral or quadrilateral nature (Josukutty, 2020). These changes in New Delhi's foreign relations focused on the Southeast Asian region and transformed Indian Look East Policy into Act East Policy. The broader framework of Act East Policy fostered economic and security collaboration of New Delhi with specific states to counterweight China in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. The quest to counterbalance Chinese economic rise in the sub-regions of Asia has led New Delhi to include South Asia in its strategic calculations, where Pakistan provides a gateway to China for its South Asian entry through the Gawadar Port project. Chinese-sponsored Pakistan's efforts to construct a deep-sea port at its oceanic borders are the second biggest developmental project between Beijing and Islamabad after the Karakoram Highway. The launching of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by Beijing and New Delhi's announcement of its Act East Policy are important developments linking South Asia with India-China multileveled competition. It has also started dragging Pakistan towards broader Asian power politics. In the evolving Asian power politics, Washington's multifaceted strategic support to Indian anti-Chinese obsession has become a permanent feature of Asian politics. The United States has also been proved to be an active player in supporting and shaping New Delhi's unilateral arrangements in its surrounding territorial and maritime affairs (Pant, 2016). In this way, the alternation in the Indian foreign policy revised the mainstream priorities of New Delhi's relations with the outside world. This scenario has introduced various initiatives of the Modi government for improving the country's economic ties, expanding security relations, and constructing more strategic connections with the outside world.

Adapting a new unilateral approach for cultivating more strategic connections, mainly with the Western states, has departed New Delhi's conventional ways of managing its foreign relations on bilateral, regional, and multilateral domains from its traditional domain. The increasing focus of New Delhi on the trilateral and quadrilateral frameworks of cooperation with the states of the Pacific Region generally, and the Southeast Asian region specifically, is presently a focus of India. It is mainly based on the pursuit of maintaining a strategic monopoly in the South Asian region, and Indian formal defence planners believe that the emerging unilateral alliances of India are deeply inherited with the objective of creating a global network of small strategic alliances to make India a prominent and influential player beyond its home region (Pant, 2019). The validation of this argument can be obtained from Cold War politics when Nehru's vision adopted a neutral stance in the bipolar divisions of the world without formally declaring opposition to two contesting superpowers of the world. It was the initial phase of Indian politics in the era of the post-partitioned subcontinent, and the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, declared a policy of non-alignment in the growing US-Soviet fight for dominating the international system internationally.

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The impacts of Indian rising minilateral strategic alignment in the world have a direct impact on the politics of nuclearized subcontinent, where New Delhi has already introduced various strategic trends at the regional level under an intense arms race with Pakistan. These strategic multi-alignments, cemented in trilateral and quadrilateral alliances, leave worse impacts on the scope of strategic stability in South Asia. It potentially hampers Islamabad's strategic calculations due to the Indian quest for strengthening its position in the surrounding oceanic politics. In the maritime domain of the South Asian region, the primary focus of New Delhi is on Pakistan's interests in using its oceanic border trading purposes with the support of China. Therefore, this paper seeks to explain the arrival of a new era of minilateralism in Indian foreign policy and its aim for facilitating New Delhi in expanding its strategic alignment with the international community. This paper attempts to emphasize China as a key driver behind the Indian vision of multi-alignment with economically developed and technologically advanced states while believing that these patterns of Indian foreign policy complicate the emerging oceanic politics of South Asia. The descriptive and analytical nature of this paper identified China as a factor and Chinese emerging economic collaboration with Pakistan as the primary concerns of New Delhi in South Asia.

Indian Foreign Policy and Minilateralism

Minilateralism generally refers to a smaller, more flexible grouping of states committed to collaborating in specific areas under particular agendas. This kind of inter-governmental arrangement of states explains the behaviours of middle powers in the international system like India, and the governments of these middle powers prefer to rely on minilateral engagements with their like-minded peers for the pursuit of their national interests. In this way, the Indian leaders have preferred to sign different minilateral security alliances to secure New Delhi's core strategic values in the emerging multi-aligned and multi-networked world. The core values of Indian foreign policy sought to safeguard the country's national interests, which revolve around the Western-dominated global world order. The association of Indian foreign policy with the Western world evolved throughout history, and this evolution passed through various phases during the Cold War period (Acharya, 2006). The growth of Indian foreign policy during the period of the Cold War exclusively focus on four main points; making India an emerging significant power, upholding the scope of social and economic development, improving Indian security against the potential threats mainly originating from the territorially adjoin Pakistan and China, and the promotion of soft power in diverse areas to cultivate worldwide diplomatic support in the regional and extra-regional affairs.

The post-Cold War environment brought various changes in the basic framework of Indian foreign policy, and it has led the government of Narasimha

Rao to alter Indian Cold War foreign policy through liberal economic reforms (Ganguly, 2016). The launching of the Look East Policy by the Rao government proved to be a strategic objective of New Delhi for securing its geo-economic interests in the Southeast Asian economies. The protection of geo-economic characteristics of the Look East Policy convinced India to start developing various minilateral frameworks in Southeast Asia. Transformation of the Look East Policy into Act East policy under the Modi government has refreshed New Delhi's efforts for protecting Indian geo-economic and geo-strategic interests in the Southeast Asian Region (Bajpae, 2022). So, the improving strategic alliances of New Delhi under Modi's leadership has facilitated India in gaining strategic support from the Southeast Asian region and using it for the achievements of New Delhi's core strategic interests in its home region (Destradi, 2012).

The quest for defending the country's national interests and realizing the strategic demands of the nation, in this way, led Indian leaders under various political administrations to create strong strategic collaborations with powerful nations across the globe (Hall, 2019). For the achievement of these goals, Indian leaders emphasized the formulation of different bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral engagements in the world while believing that the signing of multileveled strategic collaborations with the international community will enable New Delhi to strengthen its global standing. Compared with the bilateral and multilateral initiatives, the New Delhi-based leadership paid less attention towards minilateralism, and it remained a marginalized domain of New Delhi's foreign relations.

The genesis of Indian minilateralism can be traced in the post-Cold War foreign policy of India because the creation of a Soviet-less international system hampered the conventional designs of New Delhi's foreign relations with the outside world. The post-Cold War circumstances of world politics resulted in an increased reliance of New Delhi on the liberal economic reforms parallel to averting the potential security threats to India in the newly emerged Soviet-less international system. During the Cold War era, the strict division of East-West politics formed a non-aligned Indian foreign policy in which the Nehru administration preferred to improve Indian relations with all the great powers under its non-aligned alignment (Malone, 2011). The survivability of this policy, contradicting its stated vision, became a serious question for New Delhi with the end of the Cold War. Thus, the end of the Cold War turned into another chapter in the history of Indian foreign policy and instructed the New Delhi-based security planners to revise the mainstream priorities of Indian foreign policy in light of the emerging unipolar structure of the international system.

The transformation of minilateralism into practical measures started in 1992 when the American and Indian defence planners institutionalized their maritime collaboration and laid the foundations of a series of annual naval exercises. Prime Minister Vajpayee's decision to test Indian nuclear devices slightly disturbed the Indo-US Malabar naval exercises 1998. However, the resumption of this exercise

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attracted more states and convinced Japan, Australia, and Singapore towards bilateral naval collaboration (Basrur et. al., 2019). The extension of a maritime-specific alliance of Malabar started increasing its participants and formulated a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) in 2007 on the proposal of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It was the extension of Malabar's vision and the success of interstate Indo-US strategic communication in maritime politics. The Japanese leaders coined the idea of a quadrilateral alliance to avert the strengthening position of China in the Pacific Region, and India's involvement in this four-state security alliance made it a vital strategic group of the region. In this way, the changing phases of Indian foreign policy and its advancement towards various trilateral and quadrilateral security alliances reflect New Delhi's objective for securing strategic autonomy in the world (Panda & Rockwell, 2022).

Contemporary Trends of Minilateralism

The prevalence of minilateralism in Indian foreign policy has facilitated New Delhi to construct its multi-engagement with economically developed and technologically advanced nations. The rise of several minilateral alliances of New Delhi has revealed various plans of the present Indian government for exploring more avenues for trilateral strategic collaborations in world politics. The contemporary trends of these anti-Chinese alliances of a few states can be identified in the creation of QUAD or QSD. The contemporary debates on QUAD have started visualizing the extended role of this quadrilateral alliance in the international system with the inclusion of other states such as South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand. The representatives of these states have already developed initial communications with the four members of QUAD, which is intended to rename as QUAD-Plus (Rossiter & Cannon, 2022).

The subsequent development of QSD also structured two frameworks of trilateral political communications in the forms of India-Japan-US and India-Japan-Australia alliances. A recently held meeting of India's foreign minister with his counterparts from France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) coined the idea of trilateral cooperation with the support of existing bilateral interaction of three states. In February 2023, this meeting between the formal representatives of three states resulted in a trilateral nexus in the energy, security, and technology sectors. In a joint statement, the three nations' leaders showed their intentions to explore specific cooperation platforms with the states of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). In addition to involving UAE in their bilateral cooperation, the French and Indian governments have adopted the same plans for Australia, intending to create a new domain of trilateral strategic collaboration in the South Pacific region. The first meeting of India-France-Australia was held in 2021 to tackle the oceanic politics of the Pacific region. In this meeting, the plans of strategic collaboration were formalized under a trilateral commitment of three states. Another trilateral

meeting between Australia, India, and Indonesia (AII) let the three governments of three states agree to formulate a maritime-specific security alliance in the Pacific Ocean in 2017. The security-oriented political conversation of India with the Australian and Indonesian governments formulated a shared vision of maritime-specific cooperation (Ayres, 2018).

The formulation of the Indian partnership with the US has added UAE and Israel to their bilateral cooperation and converted their bilateral collaborative ties into a quadrilateral group commonly known as the I2U2 Group. In July 2022, the leader of four states arranged a quadrilateral meeting of the I2U2 in which Prime Minister Modi and UAE's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed virtually participated and ensured their commitment to addressing common challenges in diverse domains. The creation of this Group extended the Indo-US objective of countering China in the Middle Eastern region, which was an appropriate articulation of the Indian Look West Policy. Thus, the cooperative alliances of New Delhi have shaped multifaceted alliances of varying strengths in which the creations of IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa dialogue forum) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa group) are the important development alarming the security bells of the west (Stuenkel, 2020). The recent decision of BRICS members to launch their own currency to reduce the dependency of BRICS states on the dollar has shown the economic strengths of BRICS states in the evolving geo-economic transformations of the international system (Salzman, 2019). In this way, it is appropriate to maintain that the modern history of Indian foreign policy has started launching New Delhi's unilateral engagement consisting of various multileveled strategic alignments with different states. The Modi government has an exclusive focus on formulating various small cooperative alliances with the states located in different regions, with the belief that New Delhi's global outreach will facilitate India in securing its strategic autonomy in the world.

South Asia and Indian Minilateral Approach

The South Asian application of the Indian minilateral approach has let New Delhi convince the members of the *South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) towards India-centric cooperative alliances such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)*. The BIMSTEC is an initiative of seven states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand), and it was created in 1997. The BIMSTEC is also known as the Bay of Bengal initiative due to the dependency of member states on the Bay of Bengal. Indian global outreach has connected New Delhi with different other regions where Central Asia recently emerged as the prime focus of India after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (De, 2019). The first meeting between India and the leaders of five Central Asian Republics was held online in January 2022. This virtual meeting is internationally known as the First India-Central Asia Summit, in which Indian Prime Minister Modi discussed

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the significance of the Chabahar Port and the security situation of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. The meeting with the Central Asian states is a reflection of New Delhi's interests in countering Islamabad's increasing cooperative ties with the neighbouring states and the important positions of these five states in supporting the Chinese BRI project. Indian reaction to the CPEC in its home region has led New Delhi to deepen its standing in global power politics while believing that the support of anti-Chinese circles of the international community will enable New Delhi to counterweight Beijing in the South Asian region (Small, 2015). The formal standings of Indian state officials against CPEC have started aligning New Delhi with the states having critical positions in Beijing's South Asian, Southeast Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern regions. The focus of New Delhi on China shows that the Modi government is strong-minded in constructing multileveled minilateral engagements with the states having common security issues.

All the mentioned initiatives of New Delhi have strong coordination with each other because the states aligning with New Delhi's minilateral efforts share common features in their formal security frameworks. The formal commitment of these states to preventing the overwhelming wave of security threats of traditional and non-traditional nature resulted in the increasing appreciation of these states to the Indian minilateral vision (Naqvi, 2017). The application of this vision in India's surrounding regions has formed various small inter-governmental alliances. These anti-China coalitions have started moving from the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea due to the Sino-Pak signing of the mega economic corridor project and the construction of the Gawadar Port under the CPEC (Brewster, 2018). The growing interstate economic collaboration between Beijing and Islamabad has raised several New Delhi's apprehensions regarding China's global rise. The position of Modi's leadership is important in formulating an international web of different small coalitions and flexible strategic alliances to keep different states away from Chinese trading influences. In this way, it is accurate to say that the Indian government under Modi's leadership is concentrating on the objective of shaping new alliances to diffuse Chinese multiplying economic alignments in the South Asian region.

South Asian Security and Pakistan

The South Asian regional security cannot be divorced from the ongoing India-Pakistan conflict and the contesting standing of both states against each other in regional and extra-regional affairs. The decades-long rivalry between the pair of South Asian neighbouring nuclear rivals always proved to be a fundamental force in shaping the security outlook of the region. The regional security environment of South Asia is heavily dependent on the evolving strategic postures of New Delhi and Islamabad, along with their growing connections with the extra-regional

players. Indian pursuit of keeping its status dominating South Asia's territorial and maritime affairs has already complicated the regional security environment of nuclearized subcontinent (Panda, 2017).

The strategic competition between New Delhi and Islamabad is a fundamental cause of increasing Indian reliance on the extra-regional players for gaining their support in its home region against the territorially adjoining nations. Pakistan, having decades-long hostility with India, has gone through various phases of New Delhi's increasing strategic engagements with the great powers. New Delhi's quest for gaining the strategic, diplomatic, and economic support of extra-regional powers inflicts a sense of insecurity in Islamabad's strategic calculations. It pushes Islamabad towards Beijing and compels Pakistan to construct multidimensional economic ties with China in response to Indian increasing strategic collaboration with the US (Ranjan & Changgang, 2021). The multiplying strategic tendencies of Indian foreign policy with different other states add substantial pressure on Pakistan while forcing the mainstream defence planners of Pakistan to explore more dimensions of strategic collaborations in the international community. In this way, there is no harm in saying that Indian increasing strategic engagement in the world, cemented in its unilateral approach, complicates the regional security environment of nuclearized subcontinent. This scenario upsets Pakistan's position in its home region, where India is determined to dominate the South Asian region.

Conclusion

The completion of three decades of Look East or Act East policy proved that the 'China factor' always remained a gravitational point of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War calculations of New Delhi. Beijing's decision to sign a corridor project with Islamabad further augmented New Delhi's anxieties about China's emerging influence in the South Asian region. The BRI project of Beijing has validated that the 'China factor' is not intended to lose its relevance with the mainstream foreign policy priorities of New Delhi. In addition to the existing bilateral, regional, and multilateral China-centric initiatives in New Delhi, the increasing focus on the unilateral patterns of multi-alignment of New Delhi is less likely to decline in the near future. The pragmatic calculation of the Modi government about the persistently increasing global appreciation of Chinese international trading networking is intended to explore more avenues of unilateral or plurilateral anti-Chinese initiatives. In this way, the policies of Act East, Look West, and the neighbourhood first are significant developments of Indian foreign policy. The eastward extensions of New Delhi's foreign relations are inherited in the 'extended neighbourhood policy', which contrasts its South Asian anti-neighbourhood practices. The neighbourhood-first policy is initially designed for the territorially adjoining nations of India. Apart from South and Southeast Asian regions, the policy of Look West emphasizes the Middle Eastern region for securing New Delhi's geo-economic and geo-strategic objectives linked with the

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Middle Eastern nations. The minilateral approaches of Indian foreign policy are primarily based on the strategic aspirations of New Delhi and their projections in the surrounding regions. Thus, the quest for maintaining strategic autonomy in regional and extra-regional affairs has led New Delhi to explore additional avenues for strategic multi-alignment against China's economic rise and Indian close strategic connections with the US.

The fundamental objective of the Indian projection of its diplomatic and political potential in the emerging trilateral and quadrilateral alliances is to preserve the India-centric notion of regional stability in the South and Southeast Asian regions. The greater impacts of these objectives of Indian foreign policy complicate the regional security environment of nuclearized subcontinent in which New Delhi has already placed the whole regional politics under the nuclear shadows. This scenario upset Islamabad's strategic calculations due to an unstoppable shift in the government's defence planning and its transformation from the territorial to the maritime domain. The degrading impacts of India's expanding strategic connections in the world on the South Asian regional security environment further complicate the New Delhi-Islamabad rivalry. Modi's approach to boosting New Delhi's strategic alignment in the world upsets the existing strategic matrix between the two nuclear powers. In this way, the state governments signing strategic or economic collaboration with New Delhi are now required to calculate the worse outcomes of their strategic alignment with India on the South Asian regional nuclear order.

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