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## Original Article

## Formation of Informal Alliances in Indo-Pacific: Analyzing the Role of India

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### ABSTRACT

The present world order is dominated by informal security, economic, cultural and strategic alliances across the regions. The Indo-Pacific region attracted the International community in the recent past due to the formation of informal alliances such as QUAD, AUKUS and IPEF. China's rise, which is seen as a threat to the existing World Order, has also helped the Indo-Pacific in getting the attention it long deserved. The presence of Informal Organizations or Informal 'Inter-Governmental' Organizations (IIGOs) plays a significant role in the region which still lacks a regional integration process. Internationally, the focus is mostly given to formal institutions, while the informal ones remain ignored because of their lower chance of enforcement. It needs to be understood that IIGOs can assist in the better and proper functioning of Formal Inter-Governmental Organizations (FIGOs), where the members are divided upon their national interests. In certain scenarios, they can also replace and transform into a formal organization. The presence of bilateral conflicts and lack of strong regional mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region also led to the emergence of informal alliances based on mutual interests. This paper primarily focuses on the dynamics of informal alliances in the Indo-Pacific region and highlights India's interests.

**Keywords:** QUAD; AUKUS; IPEF; Belt and Road Initiative and Pacific Network

### SIGNIFICANCE OF INDO-PACIFIC

The term 'Indo-Pacific' consists of the words 'Indo' and 'Pacific', referring to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This region representing 38 nations, 44% of the global surface area, 65% of the world population, and 62% of global GDP got the attention it deserved only after 2011 when the US realized the Chinese threat to its power.<sup>1</sup> The 'Indo-Pacific' region has always been advantageous for trading and globalization due to the important sea-routes it has. This region accounts for 46% of the global merchandise trade; 70% of India's trade is carried out through this region, but the area started to seem strategically important only when

China launched its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.<sup>2</sup> China had already gained the position of being the "biggest trading partner" for many of the major countries, and completion of the BRI would only fuel the Chinese dream of world domination.<sup>3</sup> This has been the reason for the creation of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", which can rebalance China's influence in its region before it could go for the world.

### THE INTER-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN INDO-PACIFIC

Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs) are institutions of three or more states which act as an instrument for their



member states to pursue any decided objective, though from a realistic point of view: these organizations exist only as a platform for the member states to further their national interests. The presence of an IGO is necessary not just for deliberating over any concerned issue, but also to represent its member's point of view on that issue.<sup>4</sup>

IGOs can be of different types based on several factors like membership eligibility, formality, functioning, etc. Based on formality, Inter-Governmental Organizations can be divided into Formal IGOs and Informal IGOs. Normally, when IGOs are discussed, those are the Formal IGOs or FIGOs, whereas the Informal IGOs (IIGOs) otherwise called Informal Organizations are not much talked about.

Formal IGOs (FIGOs) are formed by an internationally recognized treaty and have a permanent secretariat (Headquarters and staff), giving it a much higher legal characteristic; whereas the Informal IGOs (IIGOs) are formed due to a shared expectation in regards to a purpose rather than a binding agreement among a group of states who are participating in regularized meetings with no permanent institutions or staffs.<sup>5</sup>

Before discussing the informal IGOs and their needs in the Indo-Pacific one should look at the existing Formal Inter-Governmental Organizations (FIGOs), as they would help understand the development of the region and the priorities that have been set already. So, some of the Formal IGOs, which are present in the Indo-Pacific Region are SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, Pacific Islands Forum, etc.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations or ASEAN was created in 1967 to enhance economic, social and cultural development and to promote peace and stability in the region, i.e., South-East Asia.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, i.e., SAARC, was established in 1985 to improve the economy, welfare and better quality of life, to promote mutual trust and enhance collaboration among the nations in the South Asian region in fields of science and technology.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation or the BIMSTEC was created in 1997 to act as a "bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia", mostly in the economic dimension.<sup>8</sup>

The pattern that could be noticed from these three organizations is that all three FIGOs are representing only a part of Asia, rather than the entire continent. This makes one understand that the continent of Asia is divided internally. It is not like the culture of respect, the presence of social hierarchy or the wish to expand the economy is not present in all the Asian nations, the basic values shared among all the Asian nations are the same. Yet, the fact that there is no formal organization representing the entire continent, like that in Europe (European Union) and Africa (African Union) is astonishing.

## NEED FOR INFORMAL INTER-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (IIGOS)

The rise of IIGOs started in the post-Cold War Era when it was not fully clear who was going to be the new power on the international platform. IIGOs can play "a unique multi-faceted role as a flexible, open and transparent brainstorming and bridge-building forum for governments" as mentioned by WHO in regards to IFCS.<sup>9</sup> It provides a mechanism which can be used by both strong as well as weak states to satisfy their demand and preferences. This feature fits perfectly with the Indo-Pacific region, where developed, developing as well as under-developed countries co-exist.<sup>5</sup>

The potential of the Indo-Pacific can be acknowledged by all, and it can be confirmed that India, China, Japan, the USA, and Australia are the big powers in the region, but still, there is a cloud of uncertainty present in the region which needs to be cleared.

First, exactly which countries are part of the Indo-Pacific? To the US, the Indo-Pacific region consists mostly of the nations in the Pacific Ocean, India being the only participant from the Indian Ocean. But, to China, it excludes the existence of the Indian Ocean as its focus mostly goes towards the South-East Asian nations along with the US and Australia. For India, the view of the Indo-Pacific looks different as well, as it considers some of the African and West Asian countries as part of this region along with the other nations present in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>8</sup> Through the presence of an informal organization, this difference of opinion must be cleared out as it is critically important for all the key players to have a uniform opinion on which nations exist within this particular geo-political zone and which don't. Without a properly defined and accepted boundary, it would become difficult for the member nations to know which other nations they are dealing with. With this particular knowledge, the nations would be able to formulate their strategy better.

Secondly, different nations have different demands from the Indo-Pacific region. With the help of IIGOs, all these demands could be addressed adequately. For Example- China is looking to increase its influence in the regions by making a web of trading partners thus it is participating in SCO and is proposing the Belt and Road Initiative, whereas India, the USA, Japan, and Australia are looking to increase the security status of this region, which led to the formulation of QUAD.

Thirdly, what exactly is the future of the region? China, the USA, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India have already laid down various strategies on what to do in the region, but more often than not, these strategies clash with one another and threaten other nations' interests and security. In this type of situation, it becomes difficult to predict which strategy would become successful and which would not. For example, - The Free and Open Indo-Pacific was created as an opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>3</sup>



This point leads us to the fourth question: Who exactly is going to be the 'big-power' in this region? Whose strategy is going to be successful, in formulating the new World Order? Being part of informal organizations, the member nations can lobby for their strategy. In this manner, the strategy can gain support from other member nations and can increase the success rate of its implementation, without letting the non-member nations (who made opposing strategy) know. The member nations being part of the same IIGO can anticipate each other's motives and prepare better policies to further their national interest, without facing many obstacles from others. IIGOs also serve as a platform for the member nations to reconcile the differences present amongst themselves, so that they can formulate strong alliances to achieve their common interest.

Thus, the presence of any Informal Inter-Governmental Organizations would help the nations present in gaining more clarity while making new alliances, trading off information, and in the process gathering more information. Through this the nations cannot just spontaneously participate in the dynamic politics but can also predict its course, further modifying its action to have a better power position in the region.

Other than that, the IIGOs can also help solve conflicts between its members without letting the opposition or enemy alliance know about the problems that they might be facing internally.

### **WHY ARE THE ORGANIZATIONS USING 'INFORMAL' STATUS?**

One might say that these functions could be performed in a formal organization as well, but the responsibility and cost of negotiation in a formal organization are very high. Formal organizations are obliged to entertain the media and announce their activities and progress to the public. Hence, there is a high possibility of the opposition using this publicly announced information in their favour, to formulate consequent strategies. However, this is unlikely to happen in informal ones as the member-states have control over the flow of inside information.<sup>5</sup> Further, the IIGOs can also formulate various collective strategies without having the legal responsibility and accountability to go through the plan. This lack of accountability and low chance of actual enforcement encourages the states to freely propose their ideas, which allows other member-states to predict individual states' approaches towards the matter being deliberated upon.

In the Indo-Pacific, these features play a significant role due to the contemporary geo-political developments happening in the region. The US and its allies have identified China as the aggressor in the Indo-Pacific region, which is trying to challenge the existing rule-based world order. Yet, one could undeniably agree upon the trade relations and economic dependency that China shares with the

countries in the region. Surprisingly, China is the largest trading partner for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, who are considered to be major US allies in the region.<sup>10</sup> The contemporary world order is rather unpredictable as one could only wonder if the US would succeed in maintaining its status quo. The probability of China formulating a new world order also cannot be denied- especially after its intense economic growth in the past decades. China uses its economic prowess to invest in infrastructure projects abroad. In December 2022, Chinese Direct Investment abroad increased by USD 44.2 billion compared to the previous quarter.<sup>11</sup> Currently, China forms the largest trading partner with more than 120 countries. These figures indicate China's strengthening position in the contemporary scenario. Most countries are worried about engaging in activities that might provoke China's direct aggression towards them. Therefore, the 'informality' of an organization creates a 'grey zone' where members can engage without bearing the responsibility of taking any definite action.

Vabulas and Sindal in their paper, Informal Intergovernmental Organization have mentioned how IIGOs can assist a FIGO in their functioning. They stated how the presence of IIGOs can help in centralized coordination and the process of agenda setting.<sup>5</sup>

The formal Organizations in the Indo-Pacific, like SAARC, ASEAN and BIMSTEC have already proven their failure in regulating and solving conflicts in the Indo-Pacific. Examples- are the disputes over several islands, the ongoing nuclear proliferation, the ongoing South-China Sea Dispute, etc in East Asia; and the multiple instances of economic and political crisis and cross-border terrorism in South Asia. This proves the need for informal organizations that would approach the disputes from a different angle and would help the countries cooperate better in settling them.

IIGOs create their alliances based on the common needs of their members and once a FIGO is formulated, each alliance could represent their common needs in a more structured manner. This would make discussions over the issues better, thereby helping the FIGOs function more easily and efficiently.

### **INDIA AND THE EXISTING INFORMAL ORGANIZATIONS IN INDO-PACIFIC**

The biggest IIGO which is present in the Indo-Pacific is none other than the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which is being promoted by Japanese Prime Minister Abe since 2006 who advocated for the development of a 'Pacific Network' within Japan, India, USA and Australia to strengthen the cooperation between the big and emerging powers in the Indian and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>3</sup> The QUAD is meant to look after issues like maritime security, trade, economic cooperation, cyberspace and internet governance, airspace and outer space, the rule of law in conflict areas, in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.<sup>12</sup>



Being part of the QUAD nations has been beneficial to India, as it not only shares common interests with other QUAD members but the organization also tries to uphold rules and regulations in the region. The network created by the QUAD helps India connect with other regions in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean which is beneficial for its trading relations. In 2020, the organization also brought in nations like South Korea, New Zealand and Vietnam and formulated QUAD+ to discuss on matter of COVID-19 and increase the organization's importance.

Other than QUAD, the other informal organization which is getting enough attention is AUKUS, where the USA is planning to provide Australia with submarines with nuking facilities as a means of strengthening the region.<sup>12</sup> This organization in particular is beneficial as well as a threat to India. By providing nuclear submarines to Australia, the security of the region would increase which could help India in defending itself against China's maritime power. But on the other side, this can also end up provoking China and the possibility of another arms race could be anticipated. Further, the presence of foreign submarines in Indian water could decrease India's influence in its neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup>

Five Eyes, an intelligence organization, whose origin can be traced back to 1941, during the Second World War and played a significant role in transferring information during the Cold War has also decided to focus on Indo-Pacific. After the end of the Cold War, Five Eyes shifted its focus to terrorism issues and later on China, thus it wanted powers like India, Japan and South Korea to join hands for sharing intelligence information and maintain peace in the region. Later, India and Japan joined the Five Eyes in 2020, whose original members were the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>14</sup>

The US recently launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for better economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, to ensure free and fair trade and promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The framework has started with fourteen original members from the Indo-Pacific region which represents 40% of the global economy.<sup>15</sup> India in particular has taken a non-anticipatory stance. It has joined three out of four pillars of the organization namely- supply chains, clean economy and fair economy. India has opted out of the 'Trade' Pillar stating its concern that IPEF could "discriminate against the developing nations".<sup>16</sup>

The US has formed this body as a way to tackle China's growing economic influence, it is to be kept in mind that for the other members- China and not the US is their biggest trading partner. Thus, the ambitious plan which was prepared might never come to fruition.

## CONCLUSION

From this paper, one does realize the importance and need of informal organizations. But the most difficult part is to

keep them alive. It is easy to create an IIGO but difficult to keep it sustaining. Due to its low binding mechanism, it is very easy for a state to not fulfill its promises and leave the organization, which affects the health of the entire organization. Till now, we have seen the failure of various IIGOs, QUAD 1.0 was a failure (which was then replaced by QUAD 2.0)<sup>17</sup> and recently USA announced its inability to provide Australia with nuclear submarines- the reason for AUKUS's formation.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, it can be seen that only a handful of countries are part of these IIGOs, the member list of all the IIGOs seems synonymous. But, the Indo-Pacific is not made of these nations only. Many of the small nations like the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, and the Marshall Islands are ignored from this grand Indo-Pacific strategy. It not just hurts the sentiments of these nations but also risks development in the region as it asks for cooperation from all the countries.

The region has seen multiple failures of Formal Organizations as well. SAARC couldn't help its member-states to solve any conflict amongst themselves. The same goes for ASEAN as well who couldn't do anything during the Rohingya Refugee Crisis or the recent Myanmar Coup. These failures only highlight how divided the entire region is and how inefficient the organizations are.

To make the Indo-Pacific more organized and strategically strong, more emphasis needs to be given to the IIGOs. The IIGOs in the region have to be more interactive with each other and need to cooperate with the FIGOs that are present. In that way only, both the FIGOs and IIGOs can exist together, being able to function efficiently. The IIGOs are usually not kept in check by the media or any other civil society organization. This is the reason why they often blend into the background and are forgotten by people, even though the base of the alliance is formed and nurtured here. IIGOs can act as a branch of FIGO and at a later stage can also turn into a formal organization, which is why monitoring them from an early stage is a good alternative to just focusing on the FIGOs.

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