

Maritime Connectivity and Security in the Indo-Pacific 2.0

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Maritime connectivity is the lifeline of the world economy. The region accounts for over 60 per cent of global gross domestic product. The Indo-Pacific contains the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and maritime choke points that are extremely crucial to the world, such as the Strait of Malacca. Over 80 per cent of the world's trade takes place via international transport of goods and services via shipping routes.¹ This article analyses China's assertive actions in the South China Sea (SCS), which have further compounded challenges to maritime connectivity and security, making the evolution toward an Indo-Pacific framework, which is now known as 'Indo-Pacific 2.0'. It also studies China's assertive behaviour viewed by other actors, like Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) and South Korea.

Indo-Pacific 2.0: Concept and Evolution

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) was reintroduced in 2016 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who called for a 'Free and open maritime order' based on the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and resistance to coercion. However, FOIP 1.0 was limited to fundamental values and 'Value-oriented Diplomacy' to enforce the 'Rule of Law' and 'Freedom of Navigation'², but it could not succeed in bringing all the members under one umbrella as member countries faced internal political challenges. Moreover, Japan moved towards a more inclusive approach in FOIP 2.0. Therefore, Tokyo, under successive administrations, has expanded the scope of maritime security beyond traditional naval concerns. This development arises from the evolving strategic environment characterised by increasing geopolitical rivalry, technological change, and the growing clout of the Global South. Even though the novel idea of Japan is to bring all QUAD members along with Association of Southeast Asian Nations centrality, the concept of QUAD 2.0 is also facing some challenges. As the world noticed, President Donald Trump refused to join the QUAD. What message did the United States (US) give to FOIP? What are the other major challenges the notion of FOIP countries facing? How do middle powers like South Korea view FOIP 2.0?

Despite these challenges, the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US in 2022 stated that it was about deepening their relationship with alliances like Australia, Japan, the

Republic of Korea (ROK), the Philippines, and Thailand—and strengthening relationships with leading regional partners, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands. The US also wants the ‘Allies and Partners’ to strengthen their ties with one another, particularly Japan and the ROK.

However, this is also one of the major challenges: the middle powers like South Korea differ from the Japanese perspective of FOIP for two major reasons. Firstly, for South Korea, maritime security and freedom of SLOCs are crucial for its survival as a trade-based middle power; about 90 per cent of the nation’s economy depends on maritime transportation. South Korea strives to position itself as a ‘Global Pivotal State’ by enhancing its maritime cooperation with the US and Japan, mainly via joint drills and coast guard collaboration, as well as establishing maritime situational awareness systems. South Korea’s ‘Pragmatic Diplomacy’ under President Lee Jae-Myung is committed to strong alliances that ensure deterrence, but it refrains from officially participating in questioning China in FOIP as it still engages economically with China as well as extends to European allies regarding issues of marine governance and resilience of supply chains.³ South Korea’s equilibrium approach balances strategic autonomy with alliance obligations. The future of the world community depends on an Indo-Pacific that is free, peaceful, and prosperous. Yoon Suk-Yeol strongly supported it. He released South Korea’s first official Indo-Pacific Strategy, ‘Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region’, in Dec 2022, aligning closely with the US-led FOIP framework 2025.⁴

Secondly, South Korea is dependent on China for resources like Rare-Earth Materials (REM); around 90 per cent of the REM it imports are from China, which is the backbone of industry 4.0, in addition to other raw materials, intermediate goods, and components.⁵ Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) did not fully support the Indo-Pacific vision. He avoided using the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ to prevent upsetting China. Instead, he advocated for the New Southern Policy (NSP), emphasising economic and ‘People-to-people’ relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations while preserving strategic ambiguity and not completely agreeing with the US’s security-focused stance.⁶ Lee Jae-Myung has drifted away from Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. His administration is returning to a more pragmatic approach like Moon’s NSP, de-

emphasising the Indo-Pacific framing, and focusing on economic pragmatism and balanced ties with China.⁷

Other Challenges in Maritime Connectivity and Security in the Indo-Pacific

Indo-Pacific 2.0 has broadened its concept, which may be viewed as digressing from its core objective. How far was Indo-Pacific 2.0 able to challenge China's illegal claim in the East China Sea and SCS? There are numerous examples where China has been able to threaten their neighbours, like the Philippines, by ignoring the Permanent Court of Arbitration judgement, it continued to put its own dictates in the SCS. Similarly, during the COVID pandemic in 2020, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in the SCS. Vietnam strongly protested the incident, the US condemning China's actions, and the Philippines expressing support for Vietnam.⁸ Some examples include the use of intimidation tactics for offshore oil exploration efforts, restricting the freedom of navigation and overflight, employing military, coast guard, and maritime militia ships (water cannons, flares, ramming, and blocking), and militarising disputed areas.⁹ At the QUAD Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2026 held in New Delhi, all four countries expressed deep concerns about the East and SCS and strongly condemned any act of destabilisation which might threaten the security of the region. In addition, there were some internal issues among QUAD members that were also reflected in the Quad Leaders' Summit in 2025, when the US President refused to attend the QUAD Summit. The main reasons were serious trade disputes, especially high US tariffs on Indian goods, and differences between Trump and Prime Minister Modi. As a result, the planned 2025 Quad Leaders' Summit in India was cancelled.¹⁰

However, in the recent QUAD summit (2026) there was some silver lining that strengthened the vision of QUAD. How would QUAD function in the future? Firstly, the member countries launched the Indo-Pacific Energy Security initiative to ensure open and stable energy markets along with resilient supply chains, with special focus on protecting the uninterrupted flow of commerce through critical routes like the Strait of Malacca, Hormuz. Secondly, the member countries also announced the QUAD Critical Minerals Framework to create diversified and reliable supply chains for critical minerals, reducing dependence on any single country while strengthening mining, processing, and recycling capabilities. It may give more space to countries like South Korea to integrate with the QUAD members. Thirdly, the QUAD agreed to advance

port infrastructure development in Fiji and support trusted undersea cable connectivity for Pacific Island nations to enhance regional resilience and connectivity, and finally, it strengthened maritime domain awareness through Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness and Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration; firmly reaffirmed freedom of navigation and overflight consistent with United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; and opposed destabilising actions in the SCS.¹¹ These aspects are now changing the perspective of China towards QUAD. Earlier, China's foreign minister replied to the QUAD question that these types of minilateralism come and go and compared it with the wave of the ocean. However, now China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Mao Ning made a comment on the development of QUAD that "China does not support the formation of exclusive cliques or bloc confrontation. No cooperation should undermine mutual trust and cooperation among regional countries".¹²

To sum up, the notion of FOIP could be strengthened by avoiding their bilateral disputes at the QUAD summit. South Korea needs to reduce its trade dependence on China and work more closely with like-minded countries. This united approach may help in building a more successful and stable Indo-Pacific region, and the success of FOIP could be seen from how member countries are implementing the commitment made in the QUAD summit, like building ports in the Indo-Pacific countries.

Endnotes

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