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Edited by Naval Jagota



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Editor's Note

Vivekananda International Foundation organized two expert group interactions through webinars in the month of December 2021. The reduced number of expert groups meetings were due to previous commitments, and holidays for most of the participants. However the two expert groups covered a wide geographic swath of the Indo-Pacific and West Asia and deliberated on very important events and thus provide understanding and contextualized the present discourse from a larger geo-political and Indian perspective. The diversity of the expertise brought rich flavor and knowledge on the topic. This edition contains views on issues affecting the Indo-Pacific and West Asia.

In the West Asia experts group meeting the discussion was focussed on “Israel and the New QUAD” and the key speaker in the session was Prof. P R Kumaraswamy. The discussion was centred on how Israel’s diplomatic isolation after its formation in 1948, has shaped its foreign policy objectives driving its efforts to seek recognition and acceptance internationally. In this regard the formulation of the Peripheral Doctrine and its evolution that have transformed ties

between Israel and the region was focused upon. Also discussed was the role of great powers in the region and the New Quadrilateral Initiative which has offered an opportunity for India to frame a regional policy as India's engagement has traditionally been on bilateral lines.

The recent developments in the Indo-Pacific with China dominating it in terms increasing its military infrastructure overseas, air incursions in Taiwanese ADIZ, China-ASEAN special summit and China's actions in South Asia was discussed in one segment of the Indo-Pacific expert group. The other areas of focus for the group was Post-AUKUS developments in ASEAN and the Western Pacific, India-Russia relationship in the context of IP and Quad and Development as well as the prognosis on Afghanistan and Myanmar.

The coordinators and researchers associated with the Expert groups have put unfaltering efforts to coordinate the meetings and collate the notes for the reports in this issue.

Naval Jagota

New Delhi
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Israel and the New Quadrilateral

Prepared by Hirak Jyoti Das

The West Asia Experts Group Meeting was virtually held on 13 December 2021 by the Vivekananda International Foundation, the discussion was focussed on “Israel and the New QUAD”. The key speaker in the session was Prof. P R Kumaraswamy, Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; members attending and contributing were Amb. Anil Trigunayat (Coordinator); Prof. Kingshuk Chatterjee; Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain; Dr. Meena Singh Roy; Amb. Anil Wadhwa; Amb. Sanjay Singh and Amb. D P Srivastava.

Israel’s Peripheral Doctrine

Israel’s diplomatic isolation after its formation in 1948 has shaped its foreign policy objectives driving its efforts to seek recognition and acceptance internationally. On the regional level, Zionist and Israeli treatment of Palestinians has shaped Arab states’ hostility towards the Jewish state. Israel in order to overcome its isolation formulated the Peripheral Doctrine by reaching out to non-Arab neighbours such as Iran, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Azerbaijan, and Ethiopia. Despite Israel’s efforts, it was unable to break the regional isolation until the 1991 Madrid Conference

and the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord. Among Arab states, only Jordan and Mauritania normalised relations with Israel in the 1990s.

On the Palestinian front, Yasser Arafat in an unpopular decision supported Saddam Hussein's expedition during 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis, causing divisions within the Arab world. The handling of the Kuwait crisis by the Palestinian leadership directly affected the scale of support by the Arab states. Several Arab states after the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord, developed tactical understanding with Israel. The normalisation process that began in the 1990s eventually culminated into the Abraham Accord. Israel after conceding to demands for Palestinian autonomy and eventual independence has backtracked. It intends to perpetuate the occupation of Palestinian territories and on repeated occasions has displayed unwillingness to compromise on fundamental issues that could facilitate two-state solution.

Israel has tactfully utilised the Iran factor to enhance intelligence cooperation with the Arab states. Revisiting the peripheral doctrine, the dynamics have transformed with Israel developing ties with the core i.e. Arab states. At the same time, the relationship with peripheral states including Iran and Turkey has deteriorated. It has maintained an assertive policy towards Iran coinciding with Saudi Arabia and the UAE's policies. The UAE in particular has been the pivot for the normalisation process that facilitated the Abraham Accord.

Great Power Role

From the US perspective, the Donald Trump administration changed the facts on the ground by shifting the embassy to Jerusalem and recognising Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights. President Joe Biden has attempted to re-engage with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and promised

re-open its consulate in East Jerusalem, however, it would be difficult to revoke acceptance of Jerusalem as capital; returning embassy to Tel Aviv and rescinding recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights. The US policy in the region is facing multiple dilemmas that could shape the future of Israel-Palestinian dynamics.

The question remains if any other great power besides the US is ready to assume a dominant role in the region. In the case of China, it enjoys considerable economic heft and warm relations with all actors in the region. The US is likely to resist offering the platform for China to play the leading regional role in the future. Russia is another likely contender. It has to be seen if it is ready to play a serious role in the region.

The New Quadrilateral

The Quadrilateral Initiative has offered an opportunity for India to frame a regional policy. India's engagement has traditionally been on bilateral lines. India should seek to maximise its economic interests in the region. India should overcome hurdles that affect its productivity causing delays in delivering projects. There is a need for India to develop sophisticated business ethics and technological skills to compete with high-tech and developed economies such as Israel and UAE. India should identify the areas of cooperation that could be mutually beneficial for all four states. There is a serious risk in transforming the new group into a strategic forum due to the diverse political and economic interests of its constituent members. The UAE and Israel enjoy huge economic ties with China. Therefore, it is not likely to shape into an anti-China bloc.

Israel is pushing the QUAD members to formulate an anti-Iran posture. Israel wants QUAD partners to express private support and refrain from making critical comments about Israel's actions in Iran. India despite its

uneasy relations with Iran does not view it as a hostile country. India is likely to block an open anti-Iranian posture within the QUAD. Therefore, emphasis on strategic issues is likely to slow down the smooth functioning of the new group. It should therefore remain development and economy-centric. The QUAD without getting drawn into strategic issues could serve as an effective forum to share their concerns. In the future, it is likely that other regional actors may join the group. However, the inclusion of new members should be a gradual process or else it could turn into a talk shop like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Fast Moving Developments in the Indo Pacific

Prepared by Amruta Karambelkar

The VIF Experts Group on the Indo-Pacific met virtually on 16 Dec 2021 discussed the recent developments pertaining to China, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Putin's visit to India, and AUKUS. The meeting was moderated by Vice Adm Anil Chopra (Retd), and was attended by Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd), Amb Anil Wadhwa, Amb Anil Trigunyat, Amb Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Amb Deepa Wadhwa, Mr Anil Devli, Gp Capt Naval Jagota, and Cdr Shashank Sharma.

China in the Indo Pacific

China's increasing military infrastructure overseas. There have been perceptible efforts on the part of China to augment its military infrastructure at locations, particularly in the Indo Pacific.

- Based on reports, US has cautioned UAE over port of Khalifa, 80 km north of Abu Dhabi, where China is said to be developing military facilities unknown to the UAE. The Chinese shipping company COSCO had built a container terminal here. This location is close to Al Dharfa, the US airbase in UAE and Port of Jebel Ali which is frequented by US Navy ships and therefore a cause of concern for the US.

- US satellite imagery revealed expansion work by the Chinese at the Ream naval base in Cambodia. Cambodia had earlier demolished buildings funded by the USA at the naval base. US in Sep 2020 had stated that Cambodia has entered into a 30 year agreement with China that permits latter the use of Ream naval facility. This was however denied by Cambodia.
- Recent US reports suggest that China could be looking at setting up a military base in port city of Bata in Equatorial Guinea, an oil rich country. China is not only Guinea's largest trading partner but has also been investing heavily in the latter's infrastructure projects for more than a decade. Equatorial Guinea's ruling family has over the year's amassed significant illicit wealth and the US Department of Justice has long running cases against the son of the President whose assets have been frozen by the US Government. This possibility of Chinese military base is a cause of concern for the US owing to its poor relations with Equatorial Guinea.

Chinese air incursions in Taiwanese ADIZ. Chinese intrusion continued on 27 November with 18 Chinese fighter aircraft entering the Chinese ADIZ. These aircraft refuelled mid-air from a tanker as China continues to develop and augment capabilities to project power further away from Chinese mainland. The Chinese actions appear to be part of grey zone warfare aimed at wearing down Taiwanese forces and also to assess Taiwanese readiness and response.

China-ASEAN special summit and the divide in ASEAN. China and ASEAN special summit was held on 22 November on the 30th anniversary of their dialogue partnership and was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership. In the joint statement, centrality of ASEAN is maintained, defense relationship is emphasized, UNCLOS has been

upheld and commitment is made to implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). However, in spite of the President of Philippines raising the issue of Chinese transgressions in their maritime regions, no such mention was made in the joint statement. Nor was there any mention of China's actions in the South China Sea. ASEAN has displayed the inability to speak in one voice over the issues of South China Sea, China, USA, AUKUS etc. As the friction and strategic competition between the US and China in the region intensifies, the geopolitical buffer of ASEAN appears to be shrinking because of this lack of unity within ASEAN.

China's Land border law – Impact on India and Bhutan. In order to strengthen their position over disputed territories, China over the last two years has passed the Coast Guard law and the maritime territory safety and security law for the South China Sea. The present land border law is a third such law in the series. It will come into effect in January 2022. This law enables China to set up and arm villages on the borders under the pretext of self-defence and also provide cover for activities like diversion of rivers waters.

China in Maldives. In November, the Sino Soar hybrid technology company from China signed an agreement with Maldives to build solar diesel hybrid power projects on 12 islands of the Tha atoll, 220 km south of Male. Earlier this year, Delhi had persuaded Sri Lanka to call off a similar project by the same company in three islets off Jaffna, 45 km from Rameshwaram.

Increasing US Engagement in the Region

US meanwhile continues its engagements with ASEAN nations with the ongoing visit of US Secretary of State to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand

for cultivating greater economic engagement and defence cooperation. Earlier Vice President Kamala Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam in August while Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin had visited Singapore, Vietnam and Philippines in July. Reports in US media suggest that these visits are possibly in preparation for a possible conflict with China in the region although the discussions were on issues like space, cyber-security, climate change etc.

Australia, AUKUS

Australia apart from moving forward with the AUKUS arrangement with the US and UK, Australia signed a defence agreement with South Korea and a similar one is planned with Japan. Among ASEAN countries, Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed concerns over impact of AUKUS on regional security. Australian foreign minister and the UK foreign secretary both travelled to Malaysia and Indonesia and offered reassurance that AUKUS was neither intended for conflict with China nor was it an exclusionary project. The US also reinforced this when Kurt Campbell, White House Coordinator for Indo-Pacific suggested that AUKUS could be extended to other countries in future.

India Russia Relations

President Putin's visit to India of 06 Dec 2021 for the 21st India-Russia Annual summit with PM Modi was short but very symbolic and substantive. The meeting culminated in a 99 para, longest joint statement and also signing off 28 MOUs. It was also decided to initiate a 2 + 2 dialogue between the two countries.

Apart from defense deals, the long-term defence corporation between the countries has been extended by 10 years. The agreement to manufacture

K-203 rifles in India is a very significant development. Economic cooperation which has been a weak area till now, hogged maximum focus in the joint statement. Promoting the use of national currencies for payments was also agreed upon to overcome any hurdles imposed by American sanctions in the future.

Both China and India are key geostrategic partners for Russia, though China offers Russia a bigger geostrategic frontier against the West. However there are indications that Russia wishes to give a fillip to this bilateral relationship. There is an increasing wariness in Russia about increasing Chinese influence in Russia's Far East region as well as in CIS countries. The desire to stem China's expanding influence is driving Russia to increase its engagement with India. Russia also appears to be amenable to India's position on Afghanistan as was evident during meeting of NSAs in India of countries bordering Afghanistan. Russia's leaning towards India was also displayed when it readily responded to defense requirements projected by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh during India China standoff in Ladakh. Russia, despite China's opposition has provided India with S 400 missiles displaying its strategic autonomy.

Russia sees the US Indo Pacific strategy as a means for containment of China and Russia however it appears to be accepting of India's position on Indo Pacific as articulated by PM Modi at Shangri-La dialogue. The emergence of AUKUS has in a way vindicated India's position that its participation in Quad or Indo Pacific strategy of US is not intended to stem the rise of Russia and China in the region. This visit provided the clarity on the stand of both nations vis-a-vis the other in the present geostrategic scenario and provided an outlook for stronger India-Russia relations moving forward.

Afghanistan situation and prognosis

Afghanistan is faced with a major crisis in the form of food shortage and economic crisis. 95% of its population is undernourished and there are reports of girl children being sold into marriages to feed the families. Afghanistan has always been dependent on foreign aid which has now ceased causing the humanitarian crisis. The GDP has fallen by 30 to 50% and there are barely any sources of revenue for the government. Trade has come to a stand-still barring with Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia. Surprisingly Taliban has shunned any responsibility for providing food to the people stating that it is for the people to fend for themselves.

The international community is looking for ways to engage with the Taliban so that the humanitarian crisis can be addressed. Some countries have resumed their embassies in Afghanistan without actually recognizing the Taliban. Even the US may be looking at stabilizing Afghanistan around Taliban. Indian aid of 50,000 MT wheat and medicines is being funnelled through World Food program, WHO and UNICEF through their systems of delivery.

It is becoming evident that Taliban will not be able to provide peace, stability, development and governance to the country. More than 90% of the population is ill disposed towards Taliban. There is a likelihood of a North South resistance taking shape emanating from the Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks in the future. In the distant future it could be predicted that Afghanistan may become a narcotics state with continued strife from multiple sources pushing it into an Iraq/ Syria like scenario.

Myanmar situation and prognosis

The situation in Myanmar remains grim. The military is not able to

control people's defence forces in the western sector along the Indian border. The worst fighting is occurring in the Chin state having cross border ties with Mizoram and Manipur. Many people have taken refuge in the north eastern states of India particularly in Mizoram. Indian insurgent groups have also become active as was seen in the killing of an Assam rifles Commander Officer by the PLA in Manipur. The army in Myanmar is seen to be letting its guard down resulting in an increase in drug trade and a spill over is expected in India.

There is evidence that the Myanmar army capability is declining, its units are not fully staffed and there are gaps in capability. Units are said to be avoiding operations and even bribing superiors to stay away from operations.

Russia appears to be taking advantage of the situation providing defense supplies as also sourcing oil and natural resources from Myanmar. China on behalf of the Myanmar army is attempting to bring together a northern alliance of ethnic armed organizations of Chinese origin so as to control their activities.

For the first time since independence the entire Burmese population is fighting against the army. Yet there exists no alternative leadership to the military government. This resistance in Myanmar is therefore expected to fester for the next 10 to 15 years with spill over effect on India.

The International community has completely left it to ASEAN members to resolve the situation, who themselves happen to be divided over the issue. ASEAN therefore needs to involve external countries having influence and stakes in Myanmar and make efforts to bring about peace in the country.

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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