DISCUSSION PAPER | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India and the Quad in Port Development in the Bay of Bengal Region

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The paper examines the roles of India, the United States, Japan and Australia, both bilaterally and through the Quadrilateral partnership (Quad), in driving port infrastructure development and enhancing shipping connectivity in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) region. Ports are the entry and exit points for international trade and play an important role in the economic and social development of countries. Globally, more than 80% of merchandise trade is transported via seaports (Humphreys, 2023). Approximately 30% of global trade flows are handled by ports in the BoB region, including Colombo (Sri Lanka), Chennai (India), and Chattogram (Bangladesh).

The paper aims to contribute to policy discussions on India and the Quad's role in BoB port development in three ways: it highlights country-specific port challenges, explores India's motivations for regional port investments, and proposes a framework for effective cooperation between India and the Quad countries. The latter addresses a key gap in the existing literature, as Quad partners continue to shape their collective approach.

The BoB is a focal point for global supply chains and geopolitical competition. Despite its significance as a maritime trade hub, its port infrastructure remains underdeveloped relative to evolving global supply chain demands. Challenges in port infrastructure and connectivity in the BoB region include infrastructure deficits, varied governance models, outdated efficiency parameters, lack of digitisation, and growing geopolitical competition. India's engagement in the development of port infrastructure in the BoB is driven by a combination of economic and geostrategic factors.

India has expanded its investments in both domestic and regional port infrastructure, focusing on efficiency improvements, logistics integration, and the construction of new ports and terminals. These efforts are shaped by a combination of economic imperatives and geostrategic considerations. At the same time, the Quad has recognised the importance of supporting sustainable and resilient port infrastructure development across the Indo-Pacific.

Since the first Leaders' Summit in 2021, the Quad countries have recognised ports as strategic infrastructure and have laid emphasis on their development through the deployment of resources for green shipping infrastructure and investments for smart and secure ports. India is leveraging the Quad for pooling resources and advancing resilient port

infrastructure as a counterbalance to China's influence. Each Quad member brings distinct strengths: Japan's financial resources, the US's technological expertise, Australia's expertise in risk assessment and capacity building, and India's expertise in trade facilitation and its strategic positioning in the Indian Ocean region.

The paper highlights the pressing need for enhanced port development and connectivity and proposes a strategic framework to assess opportunities and risks for India to work within the Quad framework. It presents three approaches for cooperation and identifies the advantages and limitations of each type of engagement:

- **Bilateral engagement**: India maintains its status as the preferred development partner by focusing on direct partnerships within its immediate neighbourhood. This allows India to tailor infrastructure projects to its specific needs and security concerns, ensuring alignment with national interests. However, this approach limits access to the Quad's resources, expertise and funding, potentially causing delays in project execution.
- **Diplomatic engagement with the Quad for complementary infrastructure**: In this model, India strategically collaborates with Quad members on specific projects while maintaining autonomy. This hybrid approach allows India to access advanced technologies and specialised skills without compromising strategic decision-making. For instance, India could leverage Japan's expertise in green shipping or Australia's capacity building in public-private partnerships (PPPs). However, managing relationships with multiple Quad partners could complicate decision-making and potentially strain India's relations with countries that have strong economic ties to China.
- **Full integration with the Quad for developmental efforts**: India fully integrates with the Quad on port infrastructure initiatives, pooling resources from all members to enhance connectivity in the BoB. This approach provides India with access to a wealth of resources, including financing, technology, and institutional support, accelerating infrastructure development. However, it may require India to cede some control over project location, planning and execution. It also raises concerns about the perception of the Quad as an anti-China coalition.

India's engagement with the Quad in the BoB is a complex but crucial aspect of its regional strategy. By carefully evaluating its options, India can navigate the geopolitical challenges of the region while promoting sustainable development and enhancing its strategic influence.

About the author

Riya Sinha is a PhD candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. Her research focuses on border management and regional economic connectivity in South Asia, with an emphasis on cross-border infrastructure development, trade and logistics.

Riya brings extensive experience across leading think tanks and policy institutions. Most recently, she was an Associate Fellow in the Foreign Policy and Security Studies vertical at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi (formerly Brookings India). She co-led the Sambandh Initiative focused on mapping India's connectivity with its neighbourhood. She also led the development of the Sambandh Database and Map, which visualises India's physical connectivity linkages with its neighbourhood.

In 2024, Riya was a Maitri Fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, supported by the Centre for Australia-India Relations. She was previously a Visiting Fellow (2022) at the Stimson Centre in Washington D.C. Her research focussed on the role of external players, such as the US and Australia, in infrastructure development in India's neighbourhood. She is also an alumni of the Asian Forum on Global Governance (2022). Riya was a researcher at the Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF), where she conducted research on regional supply chains, cross-Line of Control Trade in Jammu and Kashmir and steered time-release studies across major Indian ports to advance ease of doing business reforms.

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