**Original Research Article**

**India's Dual-Track Economic Diplomacy: Mini lateral Engagement vs. Bilateral Trade Agreement in the Indo-Pacific**

**ABSTRACT**

This research paper examines India's evolving economic diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, driven by a "dual-track" approach of mini lateral engagements (Quad, I2U2) and bilateral agreements. It analyses the operational and functional differences between these approaches, highlighting how India leverages each to achieve distinct objectives, from addressing comprehensive regional security issues to promoting trade and investment. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating insights from policy documents and trade and investment data from Ministry of Commerce and Industries and the World Trade Organisation. The research paper also assesses the impact and implications of India's engagements leveraging the Bilateral talks, relying on trade-offs from Mini lateral engagements. Findings indicate that mini lateral platforms amplify India's diplomatic influence and provide leverage in bilateral discussions while introducing complexities that require careful management. Geopolitical alignments and economic complementarities condition India's strategic choices. Ultimately, the success of India's economic diplomacy depends on its ability to effectively manage these trade-offs and leverage its mini lateral and bilateral engagements in a complementary manner to navigate the complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

***Keywords:*** *India, Indo-Pacific, Mini lateralism, Bilateralism, Economic Diplomacy*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

India's foreign economic policy in the Indo-Pacific is driven by a fascinating duality, strategically employing mini lateral engagements and bilateral trade agreements to achieve its overarching objectives of boosting exports, increasing global market share and fostering economic growth through destination-based trade diversification. This multifaceted approach reflects a nuanced understanding of the regional geopolitical and economic landscape, allowing India to leverage different arenas for specific purposes [(Panda 2023)](#f70499968bd1d991e704fafe2d2b6fb9). The phenomenal rise of China as a significant economic and military power has stimulated India to re-evaluate its foreign policy and seek partnerships to address its strategic limitations [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). India's Indo-Pacific strategy has emerged as an avenue to broaden its presence and harness partnerships to safeguard its strategic interests [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). This dual-track system allows India to navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific, balancing its relationships with major powers while pursuing its economic and security goals [(Liu and Jamali 2021)](#3faf69d23e96226afcf4032122634907). India's proactive multi-alignment strategy marks a departure from its historical non-alignment stance, as it actively engages with major powers like the United States, Japan, and Australia, alongside other significant global players such as the United Kingdom and France [(Hall 2016)](#6430d02c6fb52b4655e6df42828c541a)

## **2. Mini lateralism and bilateralism**

Mini lateralism, exemplified by groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and India, Israel, USA and UAE (I2U2), serves as a platform for addressing shared concerns and promoting collective interests with like-minded nations [(Pant and Saha 2020)](#95baf1edebe61e7ec2f73d6af31b2f89). These groupings facilitate cooperation on specific issues, such as supply chain resilience, technology development, and infrastructure projects, allowing for targeted and efficient action [(Sullivan 2021)](#a6de7af27a338f836cf5c6c6aaca3b4a). The Quad, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has evolved from a primarily security-focused dialogue to encompass broader economic cooperation, particularly in response to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific [(Paik and Park 2020)](#dffd12f661084e3d54d12b15e8d795f6). The I2U2, which includes India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, promotes economic cooperation in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). The I2U2 was initially formed in October 2021, focusing on infrastructure, transportation, and maritime security in the region. The first official summit was held virtually in July 2022.  This mini lateral approach complements India's bilateral engagements, allowing for a more comprehensive and adaptable approach to regional economic diplomacy. These mini lateral arrangements provide India with a flexible framework to address specific challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific, while simultaneously fostering stronger bilateral ties with key partners. India's strategic navigation of the Indo-Pacific involves a "dual-track" approach, leveraging both minilateral engagements and bilateral agreements to advance its economic and strategic interests (Puślecki 2022). Minilateral platforms like the Quad and I2U2 address broader regional issues such as supply chain resilience and technological cooperation, while bilateral FTAs and CEPAs with countries like Australia and the UAE focus on reducing trade barriers and promoting investment flows (Puślecki 2022).

Bilateral trade agreements, on the other hand, provide a more traditional avenue for fostering economic cooperation, reducing trade barriers, and promoting investment flows. India has actively pursued bilateral trade agreements with countries like Australia and the UAE, and is currently negotiating agreements with the UK and the EU. These agreements aim to enhance market access, promote trade diversification, and strengthen economic partnerships with key trading partners. India's bilateral trade agreements also serve to promote its economic interests and enhance its influence in specific regions. By strategically utilising mini lateral and bilateral approaches, India can optimise its engagement with different partners and adapt to the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

The functional and strategic differences between mini lateral initiatives like the Quad and I2U2 and India's bilateral FTAs/CEPs are significant. Mini lateral arrangements often address specific challenges or promote cooperation in strategic areas, such as supply chain resilience or technology development [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). These initiatives may not always involve binding commitments or legal obligations but rely on voluntary cooperation and shared interests. In contrast, bilateral FTAs/CEPs are legally binding agreements that aim to reduce trade barriers, promote investment, and enhance economic integration between the signatory countries. These agreements typically involve detailed negotiations and specific commitments on tariffs, regulations, and other trade-related issues.

**3. ASSESSING ENGAGEMENTS: METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS**

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively assess the contemporary challenges and Opportunities in India's mini lateral and bilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific. The qualitative strand evolves from the policy paper of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, the Research Paper of academic maven of this field, and think-tank experts from India and its partner countries. These provide nuanced insights to navigate challenges and opportunities associated with these engagements, and some examples of neoteric inconsistency in diplomatic manoeuvring.

The quantitative strand employs a comparative analysis of economic data, trade statistics, and investment flows to assess the economic impact and patterns of cooperation within the Quad, I2U2, and key bilateral relationships. Data sources include statistics from **the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCI&S), Kolkata, under the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India** and the World Trade Organisation. Quantitative data has been presented using statistical techniques to identify significant trends and correlations. This integrated approach ensures a robust and nuanced understanding of the complexities of India's multi-vector economic diplomacy, allowing for informed conclusions regarding its effectiveness and strategic implications in real-world economic interplay.

## **4. GEOPOLITICS AND ECONOMIC COMPLEMENTARITY**

Geopolitical alignments and economic complementarity are crucial in shaping India's choice between mini lateral and bilateral engagement. Mini lateral groupings like the Quad are often driven by shared geopolitical concerns, such as balancing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific [(Kamal and Sahni 2022)](#4fcc340c85f489b7c55c7c21a9c9bb7a). These alignments provide a foundation for cooperation on various issues, including security, trade, and technology. However, pure economic complementarity also plays a significant role in India's decision-making process. Bilateral trade agreements are often pursued with countries that offer complementary economic structures, such as access to resources, markets, or technology. For instance, India's FTA with Australia reflects a desire to secure access to critical minerals and diversify its supply chains, while its ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU aim to enhance market access and promote investment flows. India's ability to leverage both mini lateral and bilateral approaches allows it to pursue a more comprehensive and adaptable foreign economic policy in the Indo-Pacific.

India's strategic calculus involves carefully weighing the geopolitical and economic factors to determine the most appropriate approach for each situation. This multi-vector approach allows India to optimise its engagement with different partners and adapt to the evolving dynamics of the region [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). For example, India's participation in the Quad reflects its desire to work with like-minded democracies to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and counter China's growing assertiveness [(Kamal and Sahni 2022)](#4fcc340c85f489b7c55c7c21a9c9bb7a). At the same time, India's pursuit of bilateral trade agreements demonstrates its commitment to fostering economic partnerships and enhancing its competitiveness in the global market [(Malhotra 2022)](#85f857eb462330f121f4258a2aca2f64) [(Muraviev, Ahlawat, and Hughes 2021)](#48a57f11e1e9ad7dff533f921b9ad7c6). It is worth noting that India's approach is not without its challenges. Structural weaknesses, stemming from inadequate inter-agency collaboration, impede the effective implementation of India's strategic vision into tangible policies [(Malhotra 2022)](#85f857eb462330f121f4258a2aca2f64). India's capacity to effectively navigate the complexities of mini lateral and bilateral engagement will be crucial for shaping its role as a major player in the Indo-Pacific.

India's growing naval cooperation with countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia further enhances the dynamics of security cooperation in the region [(Ghosh, Sarkar, and Chaudhury 2022)](#08d67d20dc4a736dd2307ca591ee7cd0). The India-Australia security relationship has strengthened significantly in recent years, with both countries elevating their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020 [(Malhotra 2022)](#85f857eb462330f121f4258a2aca2f64). This closer cooperation reflects shared concerns about maritime security and regional stability. The strategic use of island territories is one such step, maximising its strategic interests while responding to changes in the security environment [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean gives it a unique advantage in promoting regional security and economic cooperation [(Kamal and Sahni 2022)](#4fcc340c85f489b7c55c7c21a9c9bb7a).

India's approach to mini lateralism and bilateralism in the Indo-Pacific reflects its ambition to be more prominent in shaping the regional order [(Palit 2021)](#016ddefd805750b38da06623ab3826fb). By actively engaging in both arrangements, India aims to promote its economic interests, enhance its security, and project its regional influence [(Zhu 2014; Ghosh, Sarkar, and Chaudhury 2022; Mukherjee 2019)](#1b00bc37c72c1a8a148322dda3925f57). However, it is essential to acknowledge that India's approach also faces constraints. For example, some Southeast Asian nations have expressed concerns about the potential direction of the Quad [(Lee 2018)](#b1acdbe3b29a10bde54a2886ba1eb132). Despite these challenges, India remains committed to pursuing a multi-vector approach that combines mini lateral and bilateral engagement, reflecting its belief that this is the most effective way to navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific and advance its strategic goals. India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is also shaped by its historical ties and cultural connections with the region [(Upadhyay 2021)](#d3feb56f8d7f96d90a23f450e4f84f1c) [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074).

## **5. CONTEXTUALIZING INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: LITERATURE AND THEORY**

The existing literature on India's foreign policy has predominantly focused on its bilateral relations with major powers and its role in multilateral institutions. In comparison, India has received relatively limited attention [(Malhotra 2022)](#85f857eb462330f121f4258a2aca2f64). This paper addresses this gap by providing a framework for understanding India's strategic use of mini lateralism alongside its traditional bilateral engagements. [(Pulipaka and Garg 2021)](#a75c4deca9614e342ee2f560e6116dab). Mini lateralism is a tool for India to expand its reach, leveraging collaborative partnerships to surmount capacity limitations while safeguarding its strategic interests [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074). This research contributes to the broader academic discourse on middle-power diplomacy, coalition building, and the evolving dynamics of international relations in the Indo-Pacific [(Baruah 2020)](#d6daf619cfda8f4d1e613fc65eb41074).

# **6. LIMITATIONS OF MINI LATERAL AND BILATERAL APPROACHES**

The initiatives undertaken by Quad distinguish themselves through their emphasis on addressing comprehensive regional issues, thereby diverging from the concentrated approach of bilateral agreements that tend to centre on trade and investment elements. By examining the functional and strategic differences between mini lateral and bilateral engagements, it becomes clear that India strategically employs each approach to achieve distinct objectives. Quad's focus extends to domains such as supply chain resilience, technological cooperation, and infrastructure development, surpassing the narrower scope of traditional trade pacts [(Sharma 2010)](#9d284961a76177762c7cec28bd6de824). The Quad's initiatives aim to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region by providing alternative development and security options. The primary focus of QUAD is on maintaining a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, emphasising a rules-based order and respect for international law. In the Indo-Pacific region, a new security arrangement

**Table - 01 India's bilateral and mini lateral trade for FY 2022-23**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Entity** | **Total Trade (USD Bn)** | **Exports (USD Bn)** | **Imports (USD Bn)** | **Trade Balance (USD Bn)** | **Agreement** | **Type** |
| Philippines | 4.15 | 2.1 | 2.05 | 0.05 | AITIGA | Regional |
| Japan | 22.07 | 5.58 | 16.49 | -10.91 | CEPA | Bilateral |
| Australia | 26.32 | 6.93 | 19.39 | -12.46 | ECTA | Bilateral |
| UAE | 84.5 | 31.6 | 52.9 | -21.3 | CEPA | Bilateral |
| China | 113.83 | 15.32 | 98.51 | -83.19 | None | Bilateral |
| USA | 128.55 | 78.31 | 50.24 | 28.07 | None | None |
| ASEAN | 131.57 | 44 | 87.57 | -43.57 | AITIGA | Regional |
| QUAD | 176.94 | 90.82 | 86.12 | 4.7 | None | Group |
| I2U2 | 223.36 | 117.8 | 105.56 | 12.24 | None | Group |
| APEC | 609.63 | 192.32 | 417.31 | -225 | None | Group |

Sources**: The Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCI&S), Kolkata, under the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India,**

called "The Squad" has emerged. It's a mini lateral grouping comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. This formation in May 2024 is seen as an effort to address regional security concerns through traditional hard power politics, particularly those stemming from China's actions in the South China Sea. However, India is not a member of The Squad, but overlapping membership with Quad, I2U2 and AUKS provides an opportunity to balance China in South Asia and Indo-Pacific.

**Limitations in Advancing India's Interests via Dual-Track Diplomacy (Mini lateral & Bilateral Engagement) can be summarised as follows. Firstly, Strategic Overextension:** Simultaneous engagement in mini lateral frameworks (e.g., IPEF, Quad) and bilateral deals (e.g., India-UAE CEPA) risks diluting focus, leading to inconsistent policy implementation and resource strain (Baruah, 2023). For example, IPEF vs. RCEP Dilemma: India joined the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF, 2022)** to counter China but opted out of the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, 2020)** due to concerns over Chinese market dominance. This left Indian exporters at a disadvantage in East Asia. At the same time, IPEF's lack of market access benefits limited gains, and second example is Quad vs. Russia's Oil Imports: While India deepened mini lateral ties with the **Quad (2020–present),** it continued **bilateral oil deals with Russia** post-Ukraine war (2022), drawing criticism from Western allies and complicating its strategic positioning. Secondly, **Divergent Objectives**: Mini laterals prioritise geopolitical alignment (e.g., countering China), while bilateral agreements focus on narrow economic gains. Conflicting goals may weaken India's negotiating leverage (MEA, 2023). For example, IPEF's Climate Goals vs. India-Australia CECA: IPEF's strict **clean energy commitments (Pillar III, 2023)** clashed with India's **Coal-based energy exports to Australia** under the **Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA, 2022),** creating policy contradictions. Thirdly, **Institutional Overlap and Dependency Risks:** Competing mandates between mini lateral blocs (e.g., IPEF's digital trade rules) and bilateral pacts (e.g., rules of origin in CEPA) create regulatory friction, complicating compliance for businesses (Panda, 2024). Over-reliance on mini lateral coalitions (e.g., Quad's supply chain resilience) may constrain India's autonomy in bilateral dealings with non-aligned states like Russia (ORF, 2024). For example, while the **Quad's infrastructure transparency norms (2021)** discouraged BRI-style projects, India's **bilateral Chabahar Port deal with Iran (2023)** faced U.S. potential sanctions scrutiny and delayed implementation. U.S. State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel said. "As it relates to the United States, U.S. sanctions on Iran remain in place and we'll continue to enforce them," he said, adding that all entities considering business deals with Iran "need to be aware of the potential risk that they are opening themselves up to and the potential risk of sanctions" (The Hindu, 2024) and U.S.-Led Chip 4 Alliance vs. India-Russia Tech Ties: India's participation in the **Chip 4 minilateral (2023)** balancing Russia, a key defence tech partner, forcing Delhi to walk a tightrope.

**Figure 1 Composition of India's Trade and Trade Balance in Indo-Pacific FY 2022-23**

The I2U2, the other hand, concentrates on promoting economic cooperation and investment in specific sectors, such as clean energy, water, transportation, space, health, and food security [(Mohan and Govella 2022)](#768a22123462ead6f5bab8b8ddbe44cd). The I2U2 aims to foster innovative solutions to shared challenges and promote sustainable development through joint projects and initiatives.

*Figure* **2- Composition of India's Export and Import in Indo-Pacific FY 2022-23**

India's bilateral FTAs and CEPAs with countries like Australia and the UAE aim to reduce trade barriers, promote investment flows, and enhance economic partnerships.

In contrast, India's bilateral FTAs and CEPAs with countries like Australia and the UAE primarily focus on reducing tariffs, increasing trade volumes, and promoting investment flows. These agreements aim to create more favourable conditions for Indian businesses to access foreign markets and attract foreign investment to India.

## **7. Implications for India's Economic Diplomacy**

The use of mini lateral engagements has the potential to both enhance and constrain India's bargaining power in bilateral negotiations within the Indo-Pacific region. Mini lateral platforms like the Quad and I2U2 can amplify India's diplomatic influence and provide additional leverage in bilateral discussions.

However, mini lateralism may also introduce complexities and constraints to India's bilateral negotiations. The success of India's economic diplomacy hinges on its ability to effectively manage these trade-offs and leverage its mini lateral and bilateral engagements in a complementary manner [(Juutinen 2018)](#042baf3aaff1c3936fd71cb8d1902282). Combining geopolitical alignments and economic complementarities influences India's strategic choices regarding mini lateral versus bilateral engagement. While geopolitical considerations often drive India's participation in mini lateral groupings like the Quad, pure economic complementarities are the primary drivers of its bilateral trade agreements.

For instance, India's strategic alignment with the U.S., Japan, and Australia in the Quad is primarily motivated by shared concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region [(Kliem 2020)](#be49b4c0ab445793b2b0d27184132e25) [(Paudel 2021)](#c69fa33c7f7ec62fc2a0e24920fe53fe).

## **8. Conclusion: Bridging strategic interplay & economic manoeuvrability.**

India's "dual-track" economic diplomacy, characterised by the simultaneous pursuit of mini lateral engagements and bilateral agreements, reflects a strategic approach to navigating the complex and evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

This multi-vector approach allows India to pursue its economic and strategic interests through multiple channels, leveraging the strengths of each approach while mitigating potential risks and limitations. It also allows India to pursue its objectives through numerous channels, balancing geopolitical considerations with economic complementarities. The success of this approach hinges on India's ability to manage trade-offs and synchronise its engagements effectively, shaping a more favourable regional order and enhancing its global influence (Puślecki 2022). India's ability to effectively manage and synchronise its mini lateral and bilateral engagements will be crucial for maximising its influence and promoting its interests in the Indo-Pacific [(Mukherjee 2019)](#f6ea7d131f9dc136aabbb2864e426477). India's foreign policy demonstrates its ability to simultaneously engage with different countries while standing up for its principles [(Silove 2017)](#6f68dbe2843095194ca3b367f2525038). India's active participation in these mini lateral groupings reflects its commitment to working with like-minded countries to address shared challenges and promote regional stability [(Paudel 2021)](#c69fa33c7f7ec62fc2a0e24920fe53fe).

India's economic diplomacy will play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific and advancing its vision for a more secure, prosperous, and inclusive region [(Mansingh 2010)](#999d7b359ffe2cb7330d8d584647b2e9) [(Kukreja 2020)](#530391084380025e9eb480996a0613d3) [(Palit 2021)](#016ddefd805750b38da06623ab3826fb) [(Paudel 2021)](#c69fa33c7f7ec62fc2a0e24920fe53fe). India has shown the necessary factors to establish a grand strategy: economic resources, defence infrastructure, political intent, geopolitical maturity, policy confidence and administrative competence [(Silove 2017)](#6f68dbe2843095194ca3b367f2525038). By adopting a multi-vector approach that combines mini lateral engagements with bilateral agreements, India can effectively leverage its strengths, mitigate potential risks, and advance its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific [(Panda 2023)](#f70499968bd1d991e704fafe2d2b6fb9). As India's global influence continues to rise, its ability to leverage mini lateralism and bilateralism synergistically will be critical for achieving its long-term strategic objectives and contributing to a more stable and prosperous world [(Sinha and Dorschner 2009)](#6a05c9cbfc1bd53e604b3b7ef0cb5dbe) [(Mohan 2006)](#5322b29fe53e5decb7260b52d74b07a2). India is using such forums to create avenues to deepen cooperation [(Panda 2023)](#f70499968bd1d991e704fafe2d2b6fb9). As India enhances its global engagements, it will dedicate resources to elevate its strategic advantages in the Indian Ocean and South Asia (Baruah 2020). India's vision underlines the broader principles of democracy and the rule of law (Baruah 2020). However, in-depth exploration is required on India's dual-track economic diplomacy by analysing **Strategic Cost-Benefit for** Quantifying trade-offs between mini lateral (e.g., IPEF, Quad) and bilateral (e.g., India-UAE CEPA) engagements to optimise policy coherence and also need an **Institutional Synergy Model** for Assessing regulatory harmonisation to reduce friction between competing frameworks (e.g., digital trade rules under IPEF vs. bilateral data laws).

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