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QUAD II: India's Strategic Policy Shift

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India, along with the United States, Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) indicated the commencement of a new quadrilateral economic forum focussed on trade, climate change, energy and maritime security. This happened during the five-day visit of Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar to Israel in October 2021. The aim of this visit was to explore the three decade old India-Israel bilateral relations along with initiating the new partnership(s) at the trilateral and multilateral forums with liked-minded nations from the West Asian region. During the closed-door virtual meeting on October 19, 2021, EAM S. Jaishankar interacted with his counterparts from the United States, Israel and the UAE. One of the crucial outcomes of this virtual meeting was a general agreement to establish an “international forum for economic cooperation.” During this meeting, EAM S. Jaishankar and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid along with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Foreign Minister of the UAE, Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan decided to launch an international forum for economic cooperation to channelize the wide array of capabilities, knowledge and experience of the four nations. Furthermore, the decision was taken that each minister will appoint senior-level professionals to a joint working group that will devise options for cooperation in the areas of transportation, technology, maritime security and trade & economics. The primary aim of this quadrilateral forum remains to combine the core competence of the four nations which include the financial ability of the UAE, the technological prowess of Israel and the labour of India. All these combined can help in creating new supply chains for crucial items like semiconductors or microchips.

Referred to as mini-QUAD or QUAD II, the forum seems favourable to India as it enhances New Delhi's regional salience. Strategically, India's move to join the United States, Israel and the UAE in this QUAD II reflected its interest to harness the benefits of the Abraham Accords signed between Israel and the UAE in August 2020, in order to deepen engagement with Israel without impairing its relations with the UAE. This joint meeting also indicates Washington's tilt to acknowledge India's emerging strategic role in the West Asian region. Unlike the other QUAD between India, the United States, Australia and Japan, QUAD II does not appear to be aimed at any particular country, ideology or group. Another significant aspect of this QUAD II could be maritime security cooperation which requires the freedom of navigation for all littoral and non-littoral states, and ensuring safe passage for oil and non-oil cargo, especially in the Persian Gulf region. This is an important point for India as its maximum energy requirements are fulfilled by this region transiting via Persian Gulf. India-Israel relations have grown over the last three decades with strategic relations being a significant pillar of this bilateral partnership. However, in the past few years, India's policies have shifted to be driven by interest rather than being constrained by intra-regional political equations between Gulf nations and Israel. However, this situation changed with the signing of the Abraham Accords. This opened up new strategic space for India to manoeuvre and this

dimension of Indian policy making was explored during EAM S. Jaishankar's visit to Israel in October 2021.

In case of India, the formation of QUAD II also suggests India's shift from bilateral relations to an integrated regional policy. There are chances that the changing geopolitics of the West Asian region and the emerging new coalitions can help in deepening New Delhi's impact in the region. Furthermore, it can also widen the huge array of upcoming possibilities and opportunities for India due to its strategic cooperation with the United States. So, one of the beneficial factors for India in this quadrilateral forum also becomes the synchronized expansion of New Delhi's cooperation with both Israel and the Arab world. This can be attributed to India's new foreign policy pragmatism which deviates from the past and highlights the need-based engagement with West Asia sans the ideological factor. s United States' partnership in QUAD II allows India to have diplomatic pragmatism and reconsider its strategies vis-à-vis West Asia. The geostrategic placement of India in the subcontinent is one of the noticeable features important for both East and West Asia. India as a regional power located at the fulcrum of the Indian Ocean is well placed and can play a significant role in shaping the geopolitical outcomes in both the regions. All of these factors pave the way for India to pursue other comprehensive strategic partnerships in the West Asian region. So, including all of these factors, QUAD II provides India an opportunity to act as an independent actor in the region against its past policies vis-à-vis West Asia. India's cooperation with the United States is more related to advancing its own interests in the region as well as to build commercial, strategic and security partnerships with the Gulf nations. In these terms, the West Asian Quadrilateral forum can be considered to be an effort to rearrange the regional order and balance of power. And in all of this, India desires to play a significant role which is in sync with its geographical location, economic salience, and political interests.