

THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE AND INDIA: THE ASIAN NATO TOWARDS AN INDO-PACIFIC ORDER?

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Abstract

Quad, also known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, is a strategic forum formed by the United States, India, Australia, and Japan. The primary objective of the Quad is to promote a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region. Quad countries share democratic values, common interests in maritime security, and a desire to counter China's growing influence in the region. India's participation in the Quad is important for multiple reasons. First, India is strategically located in the Indo-Pacific region, and its inclusion strengthens the forum's reach and influence. As an emerging global power, India brings significant military capabilities and regional influence to the Quad. India's participation also aligns with its own strategic vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, which aims to maintain stability, security, and economic growth in the region.

In recent years, the Quad has gained momentum and expanded its agenda beyond security issues. India's participation in the Quad signifies its growing willingness to actively engage in regional security and cooperate with like-minded countries. It provides India with increased diplomatic leverage, enhances its defense capabilities, and aligns with its vision for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Quad, India, Security, Indo-pacific, NATO, China

Introduction

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD hereafter) is a strategic security dialogue. The United States, India, Japan and Australia are part of the security dialogue.¹ The Diamond dialogue is maintained by talks between the member countries ("The first meeting of the Quad could test Australia's relationship with China" 2021). It began as a coordination structure in response to the humanitarian crisis. In 2004, 227, 898 people lost their lives to the Indian Ocean Tsunami. Approximately two million people were displaced in that catastrophe. The QSD has since become a significant forum in the world, rendering its work quite important for geopolitics and for the future of India ("The first meeting of the Quad could test Australia's relationship with China" 2021).

The rule based order is to keep the strategic routes of the sea clear of any influence of either

¹ The dialogue was initiated in 2007 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, with the support of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The group for the first time met in 2007 on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is considered an alliance of maritime democracies. The forum is maintained through meetings, semi-regular summits, information exchanges, and military drills of all the member countries.

military or political kind (“Whose Rules-Based Order? Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea.” 2021, 20). With such a motive of the QSD, it can be seen as a strategic grouping. It basically aimed at reducing or rather managing Chinese domination. Thus, the core objective of the grouping is to secure a global order. They also wish to work towards freedom of navigation, liberal trading system and offering alternative debt financing for nations in the Indo-Pacific region. In this way it moves beyond just security matters.

Furthermore, the QSD also agrees upon contemporary global issues. These issues are from different areas, some are critical and emerging technologies. They also include infrastructure, connectivity, cyber and maritime security, humanitarian assistance, climate change, disaster relief, pandemic and education (Deshpande 2021). However, the primary focus of the QSD is to promote cooperation internationally and to push transparency in the mechanism of global governance. The principal in the formative years of the framework of QSD were reiterated in the recently held Summit in Washington D.C., USA on 24 September 2021. It was the first in person meeting of the four leaders.² The leaders deliberated on the issues of technology design, development and governance. India’s commitment to the formation and building of the QSD into a global force which is effective and meaningful is essentially in the interest of humanity itself. The interest of the nation was very much evident from PM Modi’s speech at the QUAD Summit in 2021 (ORF 2021).

Things were not this organic in the beginning. There was a pause in the formative years.³ The QSD ceased following the withdrawal of Australia. It was in Kevin Rudd’s tenure the developing tensions between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific was echoed in uncertainty in Australian policy. Improved military collaboration between the United States and Australia was resumed in 2010, following Australian Prime Minister replacement by Julia Gillard. It was during this change that India, Japan, and the United States continued to hold joint naval exercises under Malabar. However it led to the placement of US Marines near Darwin, Australia, overlooking the Timor Sea and Lombok Strait.

The revival or the return of QSD is looked upon as a new tension between the members of QSD and China. The fears have led to an understanding of calling the situation a new Cold War. (Junnosuke, 2021). In 2017, four members agreed to revive the QSD. Led by Abe, Australian

²See https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34324/PrimeMinisters_participation_in_the_Quad_Leaders_Summit

³ The Quad was established in 2004 but given new life under Trump in 2017. Since then it has become a driving force that presents an informal challenge to an increasingly powerful China without the overt commitments of an official military alliance. See <https://www.newsweek.com/us-china-geopolitical-battle-asia-shapes-power-dynamics-region-1541509>. Shift in India’s position: In the years following the cessation of the Quad, India was not keen to reinstate the grouping, out of fear it would antagonize China. After several years of growing tensions with China on a range of topics, and particularly after the 2017 border standoff, India started to express renewed interest. See [Lee and Tiezzi 2021](https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/india-the-quads-weakest-link/). <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/india-the-quads-weakest-link/>

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and US President Donald Trump met in ASEAN Summits in Manila. The aim is to counter China. The ways were militarily and diplomatically in the Indo-Pacific region in South China Sea. Many commentaries have highlighted the tensions that emerged with QSD and China (O'Connor et al. 2020).

In the shared vision of the QSD which is needed to counter Chinese maritime claims, the Quad announced, The Spirit of the Quad (Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad" 2021). It is a joint statement made in March 2021. In the vision of free and open Indo-Pacific and the hope for rules based maritime order in the South China Sea, the Quad pledged many things. Although the statement drew criticism from China, where the Foreign Minister of China said the QSD openly incites discord, especially in the power of Regional Asia ("Quad Summit 2021: Why is China Rattled?" 2021)

The QSD pledged to respond to COVID-19 and they held a meeting with New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea. Further the statement talks about openness, democratic values and other environmental issues. The QSD in statements writes,

"We strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion. We recall that our joint efforts toward this positive vision arose out of an international tragedy, the tsunami of 2004. Today, the global devastation wrought by COVID-19, the threat of climate change, and security challenges facing the region summon us with renewed purpose." (Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad" 2021)

In QSD's aim of a free, open, comprehensive, sound Indo-Pacific area that is democratic and unconstrained by intimidation, China has experienced discomfort. China expected the four-country group to not to frame a cohesive force from within. When the group met in 2021 to discuss agendas through three focused working groups, evidently, China saw a significant test to its fantasy of China Centric Asia Pacific ("Quad Summit 2021: Why is China Rattled?" 2021).

With the Quad, India trusted its effective reach or influence which traditionally lies in South Asia would be perceived to be more important and that it could depend on military assistance to fight off China. However, nothing of that sort has yet culminated via the working of the QSD. On top of that India has been rendered inadequate at the hands of the United States and its allies in the post-Cold War era. The QSD, furthermore has not been able to help matters for India other than the Indian Ocean, if at all. As the main concern for security threats in India come from its borders to Pakistan, China and most recently with Tibet.

Moreover, other security pacts such as AUKUS (Australia-UK-US)⁴ reiterates the voice which has always been sceptical that QSD is not a security alliance in any formal way. For India

⁴ AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, announced on 15 September 2021. See. <https://icds.ee/en/why-did-aukus-happen-because-the-world-changed/>

to assume the QSD to be a military alliance is far-fetched as the world is changing faster than it had imagined. It is imperative to understand if India is and will remain the weakest link in the QSD. India, in this state of affairs, has also moved beyond QSD where it has joined Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States in a new quadrilateral forum. This forum largely remains economic. However in the current challenges from the AUKUS, this move seems like a move in the right direction.

The paper is divided into four main areas of study. First, the QSD and its nature of being an Asian NATO. Second, the realities of Indo- Pacific politics in contemporary times as to what impact QSD has in geopolitics. Third, the role of India in QSD and the challenges India faces today with new treaty formations.

QSD: The Asian NATO?

After the 2020 Malabar naval exercises, Mike Pompeo, the American secretary of state and erstwhile CIA director, convened with representatives of the quad to take up the issue of transforming the security arrangement into an “Asian NATO” with “shared security and geopolitical goals” (Taylor 2020). One of the commentators at the *South China Morning Post* defined the concept as “a bulwark against the rise of China,” and a diplomat of China showed their opposition to the concept and defined it as an attempt to “wind back the clock of history” (“Can the Quad rise to be an Asian NATO?” 2020).⁵

The Sri Lankan foreign secretary brought forward concerns in October 2020 regarding the militarization of the Quad in the Indian Ocean. In the meantime, Japan, the US and Canada conducted a joint naval exercise called *Keen Sword* in October, which was one of several naval exercises in the Taiwan straits that year done by Canada, and it was backed by diplomatic meetings in Tokyo. Though no joint statement was produced from the meeting (“The Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting” 2020). A meeting by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Tokyo has resulted in Australia and Japan agreeing in principle to a defense pact which would increase military ties.

Li Jimming, the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, in 2021, admonished Bangladesh not to join the Quad by saying that any attempt to do so would gravely impair relations with China. The ambassador stated that the Quad is “a military alliance aimed against China’s resurgence.” In Bangladesh these comments drew criticism from both the government and otherwise for encroaching on Bangladesh's sovereignty. Li Jimming, following the controversy, withdrew his statement with an explanation that what he expressed was his personal view. Nevertheless, the ambassador was defended by the Chinese Foreign Ministry with Hua Chunying saying that “We all know what kind of mechanism the Quad is. China opposes certain countries’ efforts to form an exclusive clique, portray China as a challenge, and sow discord between regional countries and

⁵ See. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3107469/why-us-led-quad-alliance-wont-realise-its-asian-nato-ambition>

China.” (Bhattacharjee and Strangio 2021)

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’, as of late in trend, portrays an apparently fundamental and immediately crucial field incorporating the eastern Indian and Western Pacific seas. Concomitant to the idea is the thought of a restored association: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, Australia, India and Japan. One of these nations is not similar to the others. India's maritime concerns and approach sit precariously with those of the other Quad powers.

India's vision, rather than an Indo-Pacific vision, is an Indian Ocean vision. Confined by the tactical supremacy of the Indian Ocean and by the imperatives on its maritime-power projection, India's commitment with the Indo-Pacific structure will remain, at least in the short term, mostly economic, diplomatic and rhetoric. India’s key strategic aim is situated to the west of the Strait of Malacca (Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada 2018).

What exactly does it imply to be an Indo-Pacific forum? How might the Quad engage with already constituted territorial organizations, like ASEAN? And how would it better connect the “Indo” with the “Pacific”? That such inquiries create disputation is as of now clear in the Australian discussion. Here, Quad believers will generally see the Indo-Pacific as a rational vital development while Quad sceptics challenge this. For instance, Quad believer Rory Medcalf asserts that the Quad offers a way for dealing with the vulnerabilities of regional contentions by embedding them in the Indo-Pacific region, while Quad sceptic Hugh White perceives the Quad as a "empty gesture masquerading as a policy” in addition debates the intelligibility of the Indo-Pacific as a single international system (Envall 2019, 8).

QSD and India

Prime Minister Modi in his deliberations at the Quad Summit said,

“When the world is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, as QUAD, we have once again joined hands together in the interest of humanity.... Based on its shared democratic values, QUAD has decided to move forward with positive thinking and a positive approach... Our QUAD will work in a way in the role of force for global good.... our cooperation in QUAD will ensure peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and in the world.”⁶

India at the QSD summit asserted the group as a team for global good which it thought will make an impact in the areas of establishing peace and equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific area. Other than talking about shared democratic value, the Prime Minister also iterated “strong determination and resolve in playing a larger and pivotal role in concert with other like-minded democracies while further strengthening the grouping at the global stage in critical areas such as developing viable supply chain architecture, global security, climate crisis and environment safeguards,

⁶See:https://mea.gov.in/SpeechesStatements.htm?dtl/34317/Prime_Ministers_opening_remarks_at_QUAD)

technology and connectivity issues, COVID-19 vaccine deliverables focusing on accessibility, healthcare and infrastructure capacity enhancement, amongst others that are at the forefront in QUAD priorities.” (ORF 2021)

In light of India’s lined up presidency in 2023 for the G-20 group, and being a strategic member of the QSD, India’s role has increased many folds. Its diplomatic engagement in the spheres of ocean security has been revamped with being a member of the QSD. One of the initiatives is the Indo-Pacific Initiative (IPOI) is one of India’s strategic to achieve regional geopolitical equilibrium and “stability alongside addressing effectively new complex challenges and revitalising diplomatic efforts to enable infrastructure, connectivity, trade, and capacity enhancement, which will in turn propel shared economic progress and provide credibility to India’s role as a global power in the global geopolitical architecture” (ORF 2021). These initiatives perfectly fall under the umbrella of QSD’s “force for global good”. It also showcases India’s strength and credibility to secure the region. Its power as well as political inclination to expand strategic collaboration is evident.

The formation of SAGAR(Security and Growth for All in the Region) is one of the most important and effective first responder in preserving security in the greater Indian Ocean Region.⁷ India’s engagement in the multilateral cooperation which is a strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) clearly shows its potential. It is also beneficial for the United States that India gains ascendance in the major Indo-Pacific power.⁸

The larger effects and benefits of the QSD are hopeful in the future given the inclinations of the member leaders in the diverse aims of the group. “The transcendental effect of QUAD is expected to be reflected in a more dynamic manner since they are interlinked with the geostrategic, geoeconomics, humanitarian aspirations, needs, and requirements of nations in the Indo-Pacific region, while allowing for preserving peace, security, shared economic progress and international rules-based global governance.” (ORF 2021)

India: The Quad’s Weakest Link?

A genuine assessment of the Quad militarily will feature the way that India is hindering its overall efficacy. India’s conformity to the non-arrangement principle following its freedom in 1947 has gradually developed into a policy where India endeavours to equally associate with the United States and Russia to keep a degree of strategic autonomy. In policy terms, this works out through India building up 2+2 exchanges with both Russia and the United States, offsetting military activities with one country with relating ones with the other, and by following the transfer

⁷See: <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/indian-ocean-rim-diplomacy-with-uae-at-the-helm-india-seeks-deeper-maritime-and-regional-security/1758790/>

⁸ See. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/the-strategic-imperatives-modi%E2%80%99s-indo-pacific-ocean-initiative>

of India's first American-made MH-60R helicopters with Russian S-400 batteries (Lee and Tiezzi 2021). As the expression says, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link - and India's steady acquisition of Russian defence equipment will keep on making it the weakest link in the Quad.

Till recently, three factors could influence India in its decision regarding defence procurement: the capacity of the gear to meet the foreordained prerequisites, the cost, and the degree to which the obtaining would help India's native defence industry. Generally, this has worked. India has had the option to assemble a military that some consider the fourth most dominant on the planet, yet one imagined to work in a non-aligned world. India's support in the Quad requires an extra point in India's decision matrix: the degree of shared characteristic between the defence article being bought and the gear utilized by other Quad partners (Lee and Tiezzi 2021).

Geographically, a Quad versus China possibility will probably be prejudiced to the air and maritime fields. Accomplishment there will depend on secure networks that will permit a prompt flow of critical information. For instance, Japan and Australia have both put resources into Aegis fire control innovation that will empower them to share situational awareness with U.S. ships and to acknowledge weapons prompting information from them as well as the other way around. Russian innovation will never have this degree of interoperability with the United States or some of the other Quad partners, diminishing over the general adequacy of the settlement (Lee and Tiezzi 2021). Indian policymakers have effectively tried not to pick either a close strategic relationship with the United States or Russia. Yet, they have decided to go into a security agreement that is intended to fence against China, and should now choose being a beneficial individual in the Quad or continuing the balancing act with the Russia-United States.

Challenges from AUKUS and Japan-Australia Defence Agreement:

The newly signed Japan-Australia defence,⁹ and the already existing AUKUS bring benefits as well as some concern for India. These new agreements benefit India as China's power to be counterbalanced is always good news and India will always welcome it. However, bad news for India's foreign policy is that other countries are building regional alliances and leaving India out of it. These new treaties sign the worrisome countries and the agreements that they are ready to sign are usually not what they had done before. These additional security cooperation showcases a change in attitudes of countries like Japan who earlier only had treaties with the United States. Japan has also signed an agreement with India; however it is very limited if compared to the Japan and Australia agreement. "The India-Japan agreement is primarily meant to facilitate military exercises rather than routines deep military cooperation. The change in Japanese attitude mirrors the change in Australia, which once saw China as an economic and trade partner but now sees it as a clear security threat, forcing Canberra to look for new security arrangements with both

⁹ See. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-06/australia-japan-sign-security-agreement/100742760>

regional and external powers.” (Rajagopalan 2022)

If the leaders of the QSD continue to build other treaties leaving India, then it will be very important to question the role of the Quad itself. Other agreements will reduce the importance of the Quad. Moreover, another problem is that “India has not entirely escaped its traditional aversion to external security partnerships even when the limitations of its domestic capacities are self-evident. New Delhi continues to harbour the illusion that more partners are better than deeper partnerships. This makes creating a regional balance against China more difficult, to India’s own detriment.” (Rajagopalan 2022)

Moving beyond QSD: India joining another Quad

India joined a new Quad with Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The new Quad is to focus on climate change, trade, energy and maritime security. Interestingly, all these issues are already a matter of great importance in the more established Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. However, the new Quad has nothing to do with China which was the actual reason for the QSD.

Kugeman writes that the new Quad will be important for the United States as it balances multilateral agreements. Although it lacks a common point of reference or a unifying cause, the new Quad’s

“commitment to deep levels of cooperation should enable it to outlast the arrangement among Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and Uzbekistan launched just a month before the Taliban takeover. The new Quad’s trajectory is uncertain, but it has considerable potential because of the warm relations among the parties. It will face two initial tests: sustainability and substance. Is the group prepared to hold regular, high-level meetings, as the original Quad does? And can the new Quad take steps—forming working groups, identifying negotiators—to produce new initiatives? If not, it risks becoming a flash in the pan.” (Kugelman 2021)

The new Quad could serve what Indian foreign policy wishes to achieve¹⁰; expand its role in the world stage and deepen its engagement with the Middle East. It also allows India’s goal to strengthen its ties with the United States. “It expands the geographic scope of the two countries’ cooperation beyond Asia, adding to their pool of multilateral partners. The new arrangement does

¹⁰ India’s joining the new Quad first reflects a desire to play a greater role on the world stage and to respond to criticism from observers—including its own national security advisor—that it punches below its weight. The forum provides New Delhi with an opportunity to move closer to key partners without compromising its policy of strategic autonomy: As with the other Quad, this arrangement is a loose grouping, not an alliance. See: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/people/meet-ajit-doval-indias-real-life-james-bond/india-hits-punches-below-its-weight/slideshow/54405288.cms>

not represent any type of competition to the original Quad: The two groups are distinct entities with different geographical remits, although their areas of cooperation may overlap”(Kugelman 2021). Surely it is a move beyond the QSD.

Conclusion

The QSD is now discussing beyond the traditional security issues. The agendas are becoming broader and broader. “The agenda for this first meeting is broad. According to the White House and India's Foreign Ministry, everything from COVID-19 and financing vaccine production to climate change, supply chains, critical and emerging technologies and maritime security is on the list.” (ABC 2021) The problem with this expansion is that it is like cramming too many issues. It is also an idea that it is being done to not portray the real reason for the QSD that is China. The main issues will always remain security, maritime security. Alongside these reasons, critical technology and supply chains are also the core issues.

It is interesting these reasons which are core to QSD centre around China only. If the group is talking about peace, freedom or stability in the region, they are essentially talking about China. They aim at military, cyber security and intelligence and the momentum will be greater if these sessions of meetings of the Quad go on successfully. This success will lead to greater benefit to India or not is something that only time will tell.

However, these issues will infuriate China and retaliation from it makes the scenario a very high risk. Tactics of bullying, intimidation or economic coercion from China has obviously driven the QSD to regroup and take the issues very seriously. Further intimidation will only lead to strengthening of the ties between the members of the QSD. However commentators believe that the group has a long way to go. To become a sort of anchor in geopolitics, there are many such hurdles. The Quad is a long way from becoming any sort of “anchor” just yet and its short it performs under as it has performed in the previous time. In a way it becomes an important coalition (ABC 2021).

Other than India, many other countries are keen to join the QSD. The future of the organization can be that it incorporates like-minded countries. However, the quad has never signaled the idea of expansion in the near future. Why the QSD remains important is “because the Indo-Pacific region is becoming the economic centre of gravity and manufacturing hub of the world. Support of other navies like France, UK, Germany and other NATO members will be good deterrence to peace spoilers. Quad in its present form may not be structured to check Chinese adventurism, but it certainly has potential to become one of the most effective instruments to do so. Chinese reactions indicate that it certainly has put China on notice, without even naming it” (“Quad Summit 2021: Why is China Rattled?” 2021). The Chinese and other countries are clearly having a close watch on the quad.

With respect to Quad’s relationship with India is still under heavy expectations. During the

recent second wave in the country, the quad's promise to deliver the vaccine production goal was closely watched. In a similar vein, the climate action plan has come into question as the group has to add to the already existing frameworks which are multilateral. In the contemporary world, the climate crisis remains the greatest challenge to humanity.

Moving beyond, technology remains an important area where the QSD has to come to an agreement. There lies a number of disagreements, one such issue is data localization.

“The Biden Administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan, which may spawn the rise of terror networks in the troubled nation, may undercut the Quad's joint commitment to combating terror besides raising questions about America's willingness to recommit resources to the grim task of dismantling the terror networks it believed had been already defeated. Further, in the absence of a cohesive economic strategy that seeks to build cohesive and secure supply chains, the Quad risks standing on only one leg in a region that cares deeply about economic integration and statecraft. Most importantly, the Quad must convince deeply ambivalent nations, especially in Southeast Asia, that it offers partners more than just military power and security.”

India and QSD's engagement in the Ocean will be very useful for the idea of formation of a habit of cooperation between the members. The friendly relations between the naval powers will be beneficial to all. “Indian navy must seek to deepen engagement with navies of Japan, Australia, Britain, France and the United States—not only to enhance interoperability, but also to acquire critical strategic technology” (“The Rise and Rise of the 'Quad': Setting an Agenda for India” 2021). However, with the deep engagement, India's leadership of the Navy will also have to realise the maritime diplomacy and its virtues. There should not be any invitation to conflict in the areas especially with China. Also it remains important that the signaling to China should not invite conflict in the time of negotiations over the Ladakh border.

Quite naturally, the discussion about aggressiveness of China over the strategic Indo Pacific region and its coercive nature has become frequent between the QSD members. “Deshpande writes, “it is believed that the forum strategically counters China's economic and military rise. As a member of the Quad, in the event of rise in the Chinese hostilities on its borders, India can take the support of the other Quad nations to counter it. In addition, India can even take the help of its naval front and conduct strategic explorations in the Indo-Pacific region.” (Deshpande 2021) In the September session in 2021, President Joe Biden vowed to work on an Indo-Pacific region which is free, open and inclusive which clearly sends a message to China. The Quad arrangement gives India an opportunity to work multilaterally on all kinds of initiatives that can help create a free and open Indo Pacific region. (Deshpande 2021) India is now on the positive side with respect to the QSD. In recent times, the positivity has come as a direct result of China's behaviour in Ladakh. The QSD is definitely a step towards an Asian balance essential to India's interest.

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