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Significance of QUAD and the Role of India



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Introduction

The Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S Jaishankar, recently participated in the third India-Australia-Japan-USA or the QUAD Ministerial Meeting held on 18 February 2021, with his counterparts— Foreign Minister Marise Payne of Australia, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan Toshimitsu Motegi and Secretary of State Antony Blinken of the US. The Ministers highlighted their shared attributes as political democracies, market economies and pluralistic societies. They reiterated their commitment to uphold the rules-based international order, territorial integrity and sovereignty, the rule of law, transparency, and peaceful resolution of disputes among the nations. They also shared the vision for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region and the ASEAN region. QUAD is receiving international support, including from

Key Points

- An economical and technological asymmetry exists between India and China. China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a cause of India's concern.
- China's expansionist policy and various territorial and maritime disputes with its neighbouring countries are forcing the affected nations to come together to thwart China's threat.
- After a long time, India has shifted its attention to the maritime domain, where it is believed that India has an edge and can play a crucial role.
- While gearing up to fight its battles with resolve, it is time for India to seek external balance, and QUAD is the best option.
- India's IOR strategy priorities the 'global need' of preserving the ocean as a shared resource. In order to achieve this India requires further investments in capacity, greater transparency, confidence-building measures, and enhanced institutional cooperation.



Europe. Other matters discussed during this conference were COVID-19 and its Vaccination, Climate Change, Maritime Security, Counter-Terrorism, etc.¹

Origin and the history of QUAD

The QUAD Security Dialogue among US, Japan, India, and Australia (the QSD or the QUAD) formally started to function as a group in 2007. The main starting point of the QUAD was the 'Tsunami Core Group', an ad-hoc grouping that was created in response to the devastating 'Boxing Day Tsunami' in 2004. Therefore, the four nations, best equipped to mobilise the tsunami aid swiftly, came together to meet the challenge.² This group however, was disbanded after the rescue, recovery and rehabilitation work, but the QUAD template remained to address the other regional issues.

It assumed an ideological component when the then Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe proposed an 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity' in 2006. The 'arc envisioned a network of states across the Eurasian continent linked by newly expanded Japanese diplomatic efforts to promote freedom and the rule of law. The then Minister of Foreign Minister for Japan Taro Aso also paid significant attention to the democratic, free-market nature of the future QUAD, but comprising a vast area from Vietnam and as far as Ukraine.³ In December 2006, the geographic bounds began to fall into place. On a visit to Tokyo, the then Indian Prime Minister Shri Manmohan Singh announced in a joint statement that both India and Japan were eager to start a dialogue with other "like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific region" to address themes of "mutual interest".⁴ Soon after in early 2007, the US Vice President Dick Cheney highlighted American interest in a QUAD dialogue. After Cheney consulted the then Australian Prime Minister John Howard on QUAD's potential during a visit in February 2007, Howard and then Indian Foreign Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee soon toured to Tokyo to reiterate the impetus of the dialogue group. Also Abe's April visits to India and Washington respectively sealed the deal for the first QUAD meeting.⁵ The first meeting of QUAD was held in Manila as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2007. The 'informal grouping' discussed various regional issues, including disaster relief. In September 2007, the first QUAD military exercise took place which was QUAD-an enlarged version of the US-India MALABAR series. The second MALABAR exercise in 2007 (Malabar 07-02) featured the four navies, together with the Singaporean Navy, exercising in the Bay of Bengal. The exercise highlighted personnel' and drills' interactions in sea control and multi-carrier operations, among other skills; this was the first QUAD group's final act.

However, the QUAD faced certain challenges in its nascent stage. Australia, in 2008, decided to move away from the then nascent QUAD Security Dialogue. The reason was



primarily China.⁶ However, the disintegration of QUAD1.0 did not necessarily mean that the vision of forming a cohesive group involving Australia-US-Japan-India dialogue was a non-starter, but it became apparent that the four countries were not on the same platform with respect to the threats that the region faced or the means of addressing these challenges.

The Revival of QUAD 2.0

The ten years between QUAD 1.0 and 2.0 gave more time to revive ties among the four countries and more time for Asia's strategic balance to become more specific. The promotion of intra-QUAD dialogues to the ministerial level and the evolution of traditionally bilateral exercises into “mini-lateral” arrangements illustrated QUAD Nations' upward configuration between QUAD 1.0 and 2.0.

India made her position very clear, which was articulated during Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's official visit to Mauritius in March 2015, when he spoke on the concept of ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’ (SAGAR). The five significant aspects of SAGAR are: (i) to safeguard India's interests and position; India as a net security provider in the region; (ii) to enable India's contribution to enhance the maritime security capabilities in the region; (iii) to advance peace and security through collective action and cooperation; (iv) to bring about integrated sustainable development of the region including the ocean economy; and (v) to ensure that the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity of the region lies on the countries of the region. Further, the Prime Minister outlined India's Indo-Pacific policy in his inaugural address to a gathering at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018. He said that the Indo-Pacific region spreads from Africa to America, and India supports establishing a free, open and inclusive ASEAN centrality grouping. A ‘rule-based order’ should be created in the region to create an open, steady trade environment. He emphasised India's position by stating that ‘contests must not turn into conflicts’.⁷

In 2017, Japan announced the ‘Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ as a new foreign policy which was the extension of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's policy of “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” (2007) and advocated for a “panoramic perspective of the world”. The main objective of the policy was to have a free and open Indo-Pacific trade to promote stability and prosperity.⁸

Australia rejoined the QUAD in 2020, in order to check the aggressiveness of China. Australia, India, Japan and the US have begun burying the ‘QUAD-caution’, where the mere mention of the four-way partnership drew concerns about provoking China to view the QUAD as a plot to contain its rise. The Australia-India Virtual Summit in June 2020 saw the two

reaffirm their commitment to the QUAD consultations. In February 2020, the then US President Donald Trump remarked that India and the US were working towards “revitalising” their “expanded cooperation” within the QUAD.⁹

Significance for India

Whatever be the navigation map, it is undeniable that the Indo-Pacific is among the 21st century’s political & security concerns and competition, growth & development, and technology incubation & innovation. About 2000 years ago, there was a cohesive maritime trading system reinforced by foreseeable monsoon winds that connected the Indian Ocean by a sea route to East Asia through the Malacca Strait, on one hand, and to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and further to the Roman ports in the Mediterranean, on the other hand. Due to its favourable topographical location and peninsular geography, India has widespread trade and cultural connections with the Indo-Pacific littorals.

India has taken a significant turn in its policy for the Indo-Pacific by joining the QUAD. It provides India with a powerful platform to advance East Asia’s interests and further strengthen its Act East policy. The Indo-Pacific will also offer a chance to the US to influence Afghanistan-Pakistan-Taliban policies in a way that is positive and productive for the Indian subcontinent.

Additionally, it will promote economic growth with a better market adaptation, thereby increasing India's employment opportunities. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, India’s demand for bonding with powerful friends can change the economic and military balance of power in the region that is where Japan, Australia and the US, along with India, can form and function as a formal grouping like QUAD.

Role of India in QUAD. India now plays a crucial role in the Indo-Pacific region; India’s response to this new geo-strategic arena will define India’s role in the QUAD grouping. Globalisation, trade dependence, seamless connectivity of the maritime domain, and the changing nature of the maritime threat becoming more global, have created the physical boundaries and raised the importance of ensuring safe seas for trade and the unhindered movement of trade energy. The timing of these phenomena further coincided with the remarkable rise of China. It’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea as well as its rapid advance into the Indian Ocean through ambitious strategic and economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, have challenged the traditionally international rules based system that respected the oceans as the common heritage of



humankind. Throughout history, the maritime sphere has been a decisive space in establishing new and emerging powers and shaping the regional dynamics.

The incredible power competition today is no different. As India and Australia recently recognised, “many of the future challenges are likely to occur in and emanate from, the maritime domain”, underlining the re-emergence of the maritime space as the theatre for geopolitical competition.¹⁰

In 2019, at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Prime Minister Modi took the idea of SAGAR further and announced the “Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative”. Using this Initiative, India plans to support the building of a rules-based regional architecture resting on seven pillars: maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building & resource sharing; disaster risk reduction & management; science, technology & academic cooperation, trade connectivity & supply chain management. India has acted on these principles through both thematic and geographical initiatives. India is committed to strengthen security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific by becoming a net security provider – for instance, in peacekeeping efforts or anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Sharing what we can, in terms of equipment, training and exercises, we have built relationships with partner countries across the region. Besides the QUAD, we are active in networks such as India-Japan-US, India-France-Australia, India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral arrangements.¹¹

The Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific region reflects its stakes in the prevailing balance-of-power condition where the reckonings with critical powers, including global, have to be taken into account to follow the national interests. These interests are varied, and it would be wrong, in my opinion, to view the Indian outlook on purely balance-of-power relations, since contests to regional/sub-regional constancy and security go far beyond the concept of balance of power. Given the tendency of one ocean's (Pacific's) developments to affect the other (Indian), there arises the demand for fashioning an appropriate formal set-up that presently does not exist or is insufficient to address these challenges flawlessly. There are challenges of lack of strategic trust, institutional inadequacies, and the sheer scale of system weakening threats ranging from climate change, state fragility, the revolution in military affairs & technological change empowering individuals vis-a-vis the state, and shortening time-horizons to mount an effective response. India has to circumnavigate these challenges through careful association with other powers and draw upon its capacities and goodwill in a large part of this gigantic region.



Way Forward for QUAD and India

The QUAD will need to have a clearer vision for itself. It is essential for members of the QUAD not to be reactive. It is also important to exhibit openness and ensure that all talk of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is more than just a mere slogan. India, Japan, and Australia can take the lead in infrastructural projects, while the US needs to be more proactive in pushing ahead the vision of connectivity.

Threats perceived in 2007 were not wrong, but these were grossly underestimated. The actions of China in the past decade or so have confirmed and accelerated collective fears. The trade war between US and China; cyber warfare and economic coercion on Australia; questioning Japan's sovereignty over its islands; and locked in a face-to-face standoff at various points on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India, are few examples of Chinese expansionist policy. Some ways forward for QUAD and India can be summarised as below:

- **Collective action.** QUAD needs to have collectiveness like that of NATO, which safeguards the member nations' freedom and security through political and military actions. The US, India, Japan or Australia, alone will not be able to counter China's aggressiveness. Collective security among the QUAD nations has to be worked out globally. China hiked its defence budget for the first time to more than USD 200 billion, maintaining a single-digit growth for the sixth consecutive year with a 6.8 percent increase in 2021. QUAD grouping with a combined pre-pandemic GDP of USD 30 trillion and a combined defence budget of USD 800 billion can counter China easily.
- **The formalisation of QUAD more definitely.** The QUAD leaders agreed to continue close cooperation to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region, including freedom of navigation, territorial integrity and to establish a more robust regional structure. There is a need to formalise QUAD, but it may not be strictly in a military sense like NATO.
- **Joint posturing of an alliance.** The prevailing situation demands a Cold War era action in the form of a strong and empowered QUAD to counter China's growing influence in the region. At least diplomatic ties could be strengthened at this stage. QUAD can be used to check the nations working against the member nations' interests. Enhanced QUAD will lay the foundation for Indo-Pacific stability.
- **Need for clear vision.** The QUAD nations need to explain the Indo-Pacific Vision in an overarching framework to advance everyone's economic and security interests. This will reassure the littoral States that the presence of QUAD benefits the region.



The forthcoming Ministerial meetings can be an opportunity to define the idea and chart a future path.

- **Expanding the QUAD.** India has many other partners in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, India should pitch for countries like Indonesia, Singapore to be invited to join the QUAD in the future.
- **Need for a Maritime Doctrine.** India should develop a comprehensive vision on the Indo-Pacific, which would ideate on the current and future maritime challenges, consolidate its military and non-military tools; and, engage its strategic partners.

“We are united by our democratic values and our commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Our agenda today-covering areas like vaccines, climate change, and emerging technologies makes the QUAD a force for global good. I see this positive vision as an extension of India’s ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which regards the world as one family. We will work together, closer than ever before, to advance our shared values and promote a secure, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Today’s summit meeting shows that QUAD has come of age. It will now remain an important pillar of stability in the region”.¹²

—Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Conclusion

Shifting of global economic power from the West to the East, especially Asia and the growing geo-strategic and geo-political importance of the Indo-Pacific region has generated cooperation and competition among the developed and developing economies of the world. It is a reality that the Indo-Pacific is evolving new trends and issues that offer unique opportunities and intimidating challenges to the nations, including India. To make the Indo-Pacific a free, stable and secured zone is not the job of one nation only; cooperation among all the stakeholders is a must. India has been developing a multidirectional engagement with the regional and extra-regional powers to protect and promote its national interests. India’s strategic relationship with the ASEAN and the US has dramatically developed over the last decade. Over the years, it has emerged as a key regional player and created an important strategic space. One cannot help recounting what KM Panikkar said way back in 1945—“While to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, it is the vital sea to India.... No industrial development, no commercial growth, and stable political structure are possible for her unless the Indian Ocean is free and her own shores are fully protected. The Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian”.¹³



End Notes

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