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Navigating the Indo-Pacific: QUAD Strategy



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Overview

The Indo-Pacific region is of immense strategic importance as six out of the 10 largest economies in the world are located in this region; one-third of world's exports and half the maritime tonnage passes through this region regularly. The region is home to eight out of the 10 largest armies and five nuclear powers in the world as also oil exports from the Middle East traverses through its waters to reach East Asia.¹ By virtue of its geo-location, approximately 65% of world trade passes through this region, while for India about 90% of its trade passes through these waters. Impacted by the rise of China and India as economic powers and also influenced by the US' 'Pivot to Asia' policy, the Indo-Pacific region is witnessing profound changes— both politically and economically. With

Key Points

- Approximately 65% of world trade traverses the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Straits, thereby, making the Indo-Pacific a strategically important region.
- From 2008, a substantial shift in Chinese foreign policy has been noticed—a shift from disengagement to passive aggression in the South China Sea and the IOR.
- The involvement of EU and UK will shift the Centre of Gravity (CoG) from Trans-Atlantic to Trans-Pacific.
- In order to avoid a 'Nuclear Armageddon' in this region, it is important to maintain levels of engagement below confrontation.
- It is important to transform the QUAD into a Trade Bloc in order to counter chinese economic coercion.



the engine of global economic growth shifting eastwards', it has become increasingly difficult to maintain peaceful ties in the region. Therefore, the region has been termed as one of the most critical regions of the 21st century, affecting the balance of power in the world at large.²

Geopolitics: Indo-Pacific Region

Today's geopolitics world over is mired in strategic brinkmanship—in an environment characterised by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA) which has been further accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Indo-Pacific region is witnessing a number of flashpoints—a new cold war, vicious grey zone conflict, and also nuclear-cyber rattling by some of the countries. There is a continuous alignment and realignment of position by the middle level powers and balancing by smaller powers like ASEAN nations to safeguard their security and economic interests which are intertwined with the main contestants—US and China respectively. China's increasing aggressiveness over in the Indo-Pacific has resulted in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) comprising Japan, Australia, India and US.

QUAD: Birth and Development

The QUAD was initially formed as an ad hoc grouping after the 2004 Tsunami, with an aim to provide humanitarian relief to the effected region—it was an informal Quadrilateral Security Dialogue forum which became a diplomatic dialogue in 2007. However, QUAD 1.0 disintegrated in its nascent stage in the year 2007 due to Australia's reluctance. After a gap of almost 10 years, in 2017, QUAD was revived under the new name of QUAD 2.0.³ Although QUAD 2.0, in principle, maintains that the grouping is not against any country, but on the other hand have made it clear that, China's expansionist designs have manifested the counter-china approach of the QUAD.

A new beginning has been made for the first time in "QUAD" history, with the QUAD Summit held on 12 March 2021 at the highest level witnessing participation of the Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi of India, PM Yoshihide Suga of Japan, President Joe Biden of USA and Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison through a virtual meeting.⁴ Given the current dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, QUAD can emerge as a game changer. In light of the current developments in the Indo-Pacific region, the paper intends to analyse the common interests and objectives of the QUAD states, and suggest ways & means to make QUAD an institutionalised structure.



Convergence of Interests and Analysis : QUAD Members

The QUAD vis. US, Japan, Australia and India shares a deep interest in maintaining a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region and at the same time, preventing a regional state from becoming a hegemon.⁵ *Second*, all four states are committed to the current 'rules-based economic order' in the Indo-Pacific. *Third*, they also agree to the prevention of the use of forceful or coercive practices to resolve political and territorial disputes in the region, which has come to the foremost obviously as a result of China's coercive actions to assert its territorial claims in the South and East China Seas. *Fourth*, as trading nations, all QUAD members are committed to maintaining a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific. How these common interests binds the QUAD states is analysed in the succeeding Paragraphs.

US. It has been observed that Pax Americana lost some of its sheen during the Trump administration. The strong stance of USA against China as a strategic rival is very well received. Although, the new Biden administration has been keen in taking the concept of QUAD forward, but there is a high possibility that US will be distracted by other regions like Iran and Russia. The revived role of US in the region will create more opportunities for balancing against a rising China and protect the interests of the smaller states. Since, India is one of the key players in the Indo-Pacific, therefore, US-India bilateral cooperation holds great significance as it is broad based and multi-sectoral—from 2+2 to signing of MOUs like COMCASA, LEMOA, BECA and DTTI. These MOUs signify a new era of collaboration and co-operation and will have a constructive effect on the QUAD grouping. The economic and strategic ties between the two are now deeper than ever before, and the Biden administration has clearly shown its commitment to enhance this relationship further. From climate change to technology, the Indo-US partnership have significant potential that benefits both the countries.

Japan. Since 1990, Japan's security activities in the IOR commenced with Japan counter terrorism activity. During the Gulf War (1991), Japan had sent minesweepers to the Persian Gulf. Post-war, Japan gradually built-up on its activities in IOR. The IOR has always been important for Japan especially for its Middle East diplomacy as Japan is equally dependent on the Middle East for energy resources. Japan also has an additional responsibility of maintaining a balance between its alliance with the US and Japan's own diplomatic relations in the Middle East. The PM of Japan had earlier brought up this concept with the then US President Donald Trump which led to the adoption of the terminology of 'Free and open Indo-Pacific' by the US. Initially it was a strategy but then the word 'strategy' was replaced



with word 'vision'—this indicated Japan's somewhat cautious stand not to be viewed as adopting the same kind of 'containment policy' that is strongly led by the US Department of Defense. Japan and China are involved in a 'cold war situation' with respect to the control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, so much so that, after the Japanese Government nationalised the Senkaku Islands in 2012⁶, China unilaterally declared an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over a large section of the East China Sea in 2013. This was enough to prove that, China is not likely to step back from its claims in the East China Sea.

Australia. With the evolving geopolitical scenario and its subsequent impact on 'peace and stability' in the Indo-Pacific region, there are three crucial areas of challenge that Australia primarily faces—great power contestation, looming environmental catastrophe and a spectrum of governance. Australia is also facing certain security challenges due to China's unprecedented trade campaign against Australia. Its aim is twofold — to bend Canberra to Beijing's will and to decouple it from the US alliance system. Australia has withstood such pressure to date, but however needs American support.⁷

Professor John Blaxland of Australian National University have pointed out that, the QUAD should not be confused with NATO. There are no mutual defence clauses related to the QUAD arrangement as it exists for NATO. But QUAD is important for increasing interoperability, levels of mutual understanding, trust and familiarity, to have a deterrent effect.⁸ Recently, the federal government of Australia, cancelled two deals with China related to the BRI, and justified the move by stating that it was essential to save Australia's national interest. China responded by stating that, the action by Canberra was bound to bring further damage to bilateral relations, and that Australia will only end up hurting itself.⁹ However, Australia is more secure in its immediate environment than either Japan or India, as it has no direct territorial disputes with China or with any of its neighbours; its alliance with the United States adds another layer of relative comfort.¹⁰

India. In 2019, the Prime Minister of India reinforced the idea of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok and announced the 'Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative' (IPOI) as the implementing framework for India's vision of the Indo-Pacific and highlighted seven areas of cooperation—Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building & Resource Sharing, Disaster Risk Reduction & Management, Science, Technology & Academic Cooperation and Trade Connectivity & Maritime Transport. As per the External Affairs Minister— S Jaishankar, the Indo-Pacific construct reflects a more contemporary world, mirroring the overcoming of Cold War but not



reinforcing it. The Indo-Pacific refers to a seamless world that was historically present in the form of Indian-Arab economic trading ties and cultural influences from ASEAN nations like Vietnam and the east coast of China.¹¹

China's actions, particularly its provocations on the undemarcated border with India, as well as its attempts at military coercion and the so-called 'salami slicing' tactics that it has undertaken in eastern Ladakh since May 2020, has negatively impacted bilateral India-China ties. While India was battling Covid-19, China was quietly reinforcing its presence in depth areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to support its troops deployed at friction points such as Gogra and Hot Springs—even after 11 rounds of commander level talks, PLA showed no intention of disengagement from the area. China's ability to inflict damages on India along its long land border (3,488 kms) as well as its relationship with Pakistan, poses a serious challenge to India.¹² Given the asymmetry in power relations between India and China, such crude actions by China will not merely agitate the Indian public opinion but will also push the Government of India to undertake rigorous actions against China.¹³

By studying the common interests of the QUAD, it emerges that the QUAD partners are committed to uphold a rules-based international order, underpinned by the rule of law, transparency, freedom & navigation in the international seas, respect for territorial integrity & sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Their consultations with any group of partners is not directed against any other country/group. This shared commitment is for maintaining a 'free, open and inclusive' Indo-Pacific. The QUAD aims to cooperate in areas of maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) as well as maritime domains, supply chain resilience, and counter-terrorism operations in the Indo-Pacific region. However, at the same time, the existence of power competition in the region cannot be ruled out.

Key Challenges: China's Belligerence

There is a significant shift in China's foreign policy and strategic outlook from 2008—there is a substantial shift from disengagement to passive aggression in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean Region. China is a rising economic and political power and it's pointless to talk about preventing that from happening. But how China rises can certainly be managed so that it causes least disruption in the existent global order.¹⁴

China has retaliated economically against countries that have opposed China's claims on the South China Sea—for example, the 2012 ban on banana exports from the Philippines;



China was also quick to resume its coercive behaviour towards Taiwan and against rival claimant states in the South China Sea as the domestic coronavirus crisis started to stabilise within China.

If China's ambiguous nine-dash line claim to the South China Sea is to be enforced, then jurisdictional claim over the maritime commons would severely impede access to what is now considered international waters under international law. This would affect not only free trade, but also US' ability to militarily support its allies and partners in a balancing role. Beijing have legitimate interests in the Indian Ocean. However, Indian strategists are of the view that China's activities are part of a larger strategy aimed at the 'strategic encirclement' of India and "a desire to dominate the Indian Ocean's critical maritime spaces and lines of communication".¹⁵

- **China's Assertiveness.** There are three countries which are facing China's belligerence on a day to day basis viz. India, Japan and Taiwan. During the trade war between US and China, the relationship got strained to an extent that they were actually on the verge of closing their embassies in each other's country. Some of the behaviour of China in the recent past can be termed as unilateral and bullying particularly when it comes to smaller countries in the South China Sea.
- **China's Debt Trap Diplomacy.** China has been indicted of pursuing a strategy of 'debt-trap' diplomacy to achieve broader political and strategic ends, by deliberately offering infrastructure lending facilities for strategically important but commercially unfeasible projects to countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia, thereafter occupy the area citing the 'inability of the countries to repay'.¹⁶

In a big power competition, since the middle powers will be seriously impacted, therefore there is a need to safeguard the middle powers from a belligerent China, so that they does not get entangled in any friction or a war kind of scenario. Both China and Russia does not favour QUAD and addresses it as 'Asian NATO'. Russia also criticises the Indo-Pacific strategy of the western countries, and describe it as 'dangerous and an effort to revive the cold war mentality'.¹⁷

Way Forward: QUAD

Having analysed the common factors on which QUAD 2.0 can work and the key challenges faced by the QUAD states, it is time for unity if it has to resist or restraint. There is a need to collaborate and concentrate on capabilities and capacity building. To formalise the QUAD as



an Institutionalised structure and to enable decision making, various frameworks, where QUAD members can cooperate and can understand the perspective of each side, have to commence on a 'war footing'.

During the QUAD summit held in March 2021, the countries agreed to enhance their capacity building measures to address some of the non-traditional challenges such as oil spills and other environment disasters, drug trafficking, Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) fishing, etc.¹⁸; the contemporary challenges includes economic and health impacts of Covid-19 and shared challenges included cyberspace, critical technologies, counter-terrorism, quality infrastructure investment, HADR as well as maritime domains. The QUAD strategy is to leverage successful trade alliances for other collaborations like QUAD Vaccine Group, QUAD Climate Action Working Group, QUAD Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group etc. The ways and means to take it forward are deliberated in the subsequent Paragraphs.

Maritime Strategy. While China can rely only on its own capabilities to project power across the Indo-Pacific, the QUAD countries together can maintain a more beneficial multi-polar order by bolstering each other's maritime capabilities in their own respective geographical area of interests and advantage. The Indo-Pacific region can be divided into three distinct sections—the IOR, the South China Sea and the East China Sea followed by the Western Pacific; each of these sections need to have a regional leader as far as the economy and military power is concerned—the US has to be omnipresent in all these three sections as an Anchor. For example, in the US backed Indian Ocean region, India is both economically and militarily strong. Similarly, in the South China Sea or the East China Sea, Japan, US and Indonesia—which is possibly still coming up—have the potentiality to come together and prevent the 'lawlessness approach' of China in the region and in the Western Pacific, Australia and the US can take up the role of the leader. These three key players will have to play a major role in ensuring the maritime security, but maintaining security alone is not good enough.¹⁹

Enhancing Joint Capabilities. The countries can strengthen their synergy by participating in joint military exercises to counter-balance China's "two ocean strategy", thereby improving interoperability—enhancing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, share logistics for power projection and capability development. The same will help in keeping the trade corridor open and operating freely and ensuring 'peace and stability' in the region. However, in the area of security cooperation, QUAD countries still



needs a more coherent policy and explore other ways to strengthen capacity and capability building through joint exercises such as the Malabar Exercise.

Military Cooperation with other Countries. In order to tackle a belligerent China, besides QUAD, other countries are also actively upping their strategic activity in the region. The US have bases in Hawaii, Guam, Okinawa, Diego Garcia and Djibouti. Japan have a base in Djibouti and is increasingly seen patrolling in various Indo-Pacific sites. Australia has its outposts in Cocos and Christmas islands—it undertakes surveillance operations from Butterworth base in Malaysia and also have a fully operational facility in Manus island of Papua New Guinea. France has its bases in Reunion and New Caledonia. Britain have its base in Diego Garcia. India too is building ports in Chabahar, Chittagong, Colombo and Sittwe; it also has an agreement with Japan for accessing Japan's facility in Djibouti. India is also building a military base on the North Agalega Island in Mauritius.

Military activity, thus, is very much in the air in the Indo-Pacific. China have deployed dozens of nuclear submarines under the ocean. India have deployed Arihants. The US and others have their own too. Therefore, 'Nuclear Armageddon' in this region is not an impossible reality. Avoiding it requires keeping the levels of engagement below confrontation. The two big powers in the region vis. India and China have thus so far avoided any military alliances. It is important to keep the competition non-militaristic. As suggested by the Australian scholar Rory Medcalf, "development, deterrence and diplomacy" should be the way forward for QUAD.²⁰

Counter Economic Coercion. The BRI has started facing challenges at a time when the Indo-Pacific narrative is getting ingrained across the world. The BRI is confronted with multiple fault lines; the Indo-Pacific geography is now more well-established than ever before; the QUAD has been resurrected, and various regional players are beginning to engage with each other much more cohesively. The QUAD in this regard could act together to counter China's economic coercion and statecraft that undermines the rules-based order. The four countries are reportedly considering the establishment of a joint infrastructure funding scheme as an 'alternative' to the BRI.²¹

Trade Cooperation. While the security framework of the group is well understood, there is also an enormous opportunity here for QUAD countries to dramatically alter the global economic landscape. This could go a long way and benefit all the participating nations, at a time when job creation is paramount for their economies. A study using 'econometric



modelling’ of the likely impact of tariff reduction and trade facilitation in a scenario of Indo-Pacific regional integration on various macroeconomic and trade variables, was carried out in July 2020.²² The modelling showed that if QUAD countries were to sign a trade agreement where bilateral tariffs are scrapped, then India’s real GDP could increase by 0.2% or US\$2.7 billion a year, while exports could rise by 2.5% or US\$5.7 billion. Sectors where India’s exports are competitive such as clothing, textiles, and light manufacturing, would benefit the most. On the other hand, US could see an increase of 0.01% or US\$3.7 billion a year in real GDP, while its exports could rise by 0.6% with heavy manufacturing being the major gainer. If the countries also managed to reduce non-tariff barriers by 25%, then India’s real GDP could increase by nearly 2% a year, while US’s real GDP could increase by 0.42%.

Among the QUAD countries, India needs investment, attractive financing for infrastructure, technology, and access to key raw materials, particularly rare earth elements. The other members of the QUAD are looking for market access and reliable destinations for investment. US-India cooperation on energy and infrastructure can serve as an effective platform to enable greater job creation in India, which is currently on a multi-dimensional energy transition journey towards increasing its renewable capacity. Japan is already a large investor in India, particularly supporting key infrastructural projects in the country. At the same time, Australia and India are also seeking to grow their trade relationship. Raw materials, investments, and access to the Pacific nations are aspects India can benefit from.²³

Entry of European Union (EU) and UK: Shifting Focus. The concept of the Indo-Pacific is being embraced in Europe as well, with many countries enunciating their strategies and outlook for the region. After ignoring the Indo-Pacific construct for years, the EU released its Indo-Pacific strategy that calls upon the 27 nation grouping to work together with its partners in the Indo-Pacific on issues of common interest. The commitment will encourage a ‘rules-based international order’, a ‘level playing field’ as well as an ‘open and fair environment’ for trade and investment, reciprocity, the strengthening of resilience and tackling climate change. France, Germany and even the Netherlands have already taken the plunge. How the QUAD process evolves and how the other stakeholders in the region vis. China, South Korea and ASEAN react to this grouping remains to be seen. Even UK’s ‘tilt’ towards the Indo-Pacific is based on reasons of economy, security and values —UK seeks to ‘deepen’



engagement in the Indo-Pacific, accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and become an ASEAN Dialogue Partner.²⁴

Concluding Remarks

The QUAD 2.0 has gained traction and is more resilient than QUAD 1.0, since there is a shift that has taken place that is from a merely security dialogue to a more broad based cooperation on a free and open Indo-Pacific. From Europe and US all the way to ASEAN and Oceania, Indo-Pacific is the new geostrategic reality which cannot be ignored. Like minded countries must cooperate and have a Indo-Pacific strategy or a system like QUAD backed Malabar Exercise.

The leaders from QUAD have agreed to meet in person before 2021 ends.²⁵ However, need of the hour is to take bold steps and renew & strengthen the QUAD in Southeast Asia, starting with the ASEAN, work with the Pacific Islands, and engage the Indian Ocean region. India on its part, have to revise its foreign policy from 'being conscious to being proactive'. China as part of its 'wolf warrior diplomacy' also tried to warn Bangladesh against joining the QUAD, by stating that, the action by the latter would bring substantial damage to the bilateral relations. However, the same did not go down well with Bangladesh authorities who responded by stating that as a sovereign country, Bangladesh will determine the course of its foreign policy in the interest of its people. It is clearly evident from this episode that QUAD is no more a concept, as it is sending a very strong message to China which now feels isolated and cornered in the region.²⁶

Indo-Pacific is very important for trade relations as it may help reduce the differences between the countries while reshaping the globalisation process. The private sector, civil society and government will have important roles to play in building Indo-Pacific partnership. As the Indo-Pacific region is becoming the focus of worldwide strategic and commercial interests, therefore, it is time for the region to rebalance itself to tackle a new kind of strategic competition—both through collaboration and confrontation; which may impact the social, political, economic, and the geographic gambit in this region.²⁷

There is definitely a need to adopt measures with robust strategic response in order to maintain 'peace and prosperity' in the region. The more the QUAD and like-minded partners speak with a united voice, the more clearly they articulate their core interests and the costlier it becomes for China to test or cross them. The goal is to 'win without fighting'. The success of the QUAD makes that more likely.²⁸



End Notes

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