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Demystifying India's approach to QUAD

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Two important developments took place recently indicating the deepening of ties and evolving trust among the four democracies in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of common regional security challenges. Firstly, in contrast to the previous assistant level and working level meetings held on the side-lines of other summits, the first standalone meeting of the QUAD took place in Tokyo on October 6.¹ Secondly, on October 19, the Indian Ministry of Defence confirmed Australia's participation in the Malabar exercise—conducted between Indian and U.S. navies since 1992, joined by Japan in 2015— finally operationalising naval coordination among all four QUAD countries.²

Clearly, these developments have irked China, which has quickly changed its official discourse towards QUAD from dismissal to defensive. Speaking in Malaysia, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi recently described QUAD as an “Indo-Pacific NATO”³—this marks a substantial shift in tone from his earlier remark in 2018 comparing it to “sea foam” which would “dissipate soon.”⁴ It is clear that not only has the

QUAD resisted dilution, but has strengthened itself further. QUAD—as a grouping of Indo-Pacific democracies—derives its strength from member countries with a shared belief in rule of law, freedom of navigation, respect for sovereignty and other common values. Correspondingly, it seeks to uphold a rules-based order in this geo-strategically important region, automatically aligning them to adopt a common posture towards countries which disrupt such an order. Therefore, as Beijing attempts to portray QUAD as something it is not— a formalised, rigid collective security organisation originating to contain China— it becomes important to revisit the true nature and objectives of this grouping. Undoubtedly, China's crude aggressiveness towards countries in the region has brought them closer together, but the common posture against Beijing is an outgrowth of the shared principles, rather than vice-versa.

What is QUAD?

Since its revival in 2017, QUAD 2.0 has shown strengthened resolve and moved beyond its predecessors to stand its ground in the face of

Chinese pressure. This has generated misdirected interpretations of QUAD being an exclusionary alliance⁵, which is contradictory to the spirit of a free and open Indo-Pacific which the QUAD represents. It is important to contextualise this revival against the backdrop of the historic origins of the grouping in order to not lose sight of its nature and purpose.

The quadrilateral template emerged from the four countries coming together to promptly respond to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami which devastated the smaller countries in the region. Former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe gave the construct ideological grounding in his “Confluence of Two Seas” address to the Indian Parliament in 2007, where he spoke of the “dynamic coupling” of Pacific and Indian Oceans as seas of freedom and prosperity.⁶ The maritime dimensions of the initiative stood out when the four navies came together with Singapore to conduct naval exercises in September 2007 to enhance mutual interoperability and coordination.⁷

Growing optimism about QUAD 1.0 was, however, tempered by domestic realities in Japan and India, where Abe’s defeat and domestic backlash against the Manmohan Singh government for what was seen as an excessively “pro-U.S.” posture caused anxieties among other members about the future viability of this multilateral initiative. Beijing was vocal from the start about its discomfort with QUAD and launched a global campaign against it, even filing

official demarches against the four countries.⁸ Ultimately, with Australia pulling out of the grouping, the QUAD quickly crumbled. However, that did not prevent bilateral and trilateral cooperation fostering among member countries.

India in QUAD 2.0

Revival of QUAD took place in a very specific geo-strategic context—the rise of India within the Indo-Pacific construct. India was once considered the ‘weakest link’⁹ of the QUAD, primarily because of its earlier hesitations in inviting Australia into Malabar—raising apprehensions among other members about New Delhi’s commitment to the grouping. But, with India embracing its maritime identity and concerted efforts at ensuring it is an active participant in the evolving geopolitical order of the Indo-Pacific, its “leadership in the end of the Pacific region”¹⁰ has been acknowledged even by former sceptics in the United States. India’s renewed prioritisation of QUAD 2.0 stems from the revitalised groupings’ firm foundation on a “free and open Indo-Pacific” emphasising terrorism, proliferation and connectivity, as evident from the statements released by individual countries after the meeting of senior officials from India, Japan, Australia and the U.S. in Manila in 2017.¹¹ On November 21-22, 2019, India hosted the first counter terrorism exercise among QUAD members, indicating a desire to explore newer areas of cooperation. This year, on March 20, issues such as cooperation in vaccine development, repatriation of citizens were

discussed in the virtual meeting of QUAD members, together with senior representatives from South Korea, Vietnam, New Zealand.¹²

QUAD 2.0's expanded activism invited criticism of being a "diplomatic carcass"¹³ on grounds of diverting attention away from hard security issues. However, one must not forget that despite re-prioritisation, it continues to hold an important continuity—it remains a forum for *consultative dialogue* with the main aim of coordination among responsible international actors. However, such dialogue will be hindered if QUAD is thought of only in narrow, limited military terms. The complex regional security dynamics of the region requires sustained strategic partnership and coordinated action beyond the military realm to keep third party aggression at bay.

Beijing's recent aggressive posturing—whether in the Himalayas, South China Sea, East China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan—directly affects the strategic interests of QUAD countries, therefore, it is not surprising that this was discussed in the latest QUAD meeting held on October 6.¹⁴ Yet it was only U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who explicitly referred to the "authoritarian nature" of the Chinese Communist Party¹⁵, while other countries chose to define it more positively in terms of promotion of a rules-based order in the region with only veiled references to China. The common thread remained the need for a "free", "open" and "resilient" Indo-Pacific, and need to coordinate

responses to the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Reiteration of support for ASEAN centrality by the member countries further brings out the groupings' commitment to inclusivity, discrediting apprehensions about it being an exclusionary grouping, instead chose to focus on Many view India's position on QUAD to be confusing, but that is far from the truth; it is actually a continuation of the fundamental principles driving Indian foreign policy, i.e. ensuring self-sufficiency and independence. India's aversion towards alliance politics has been—and still remains—an enduring feature of its foreign policy, stemming from its own historical experiences. However, the focus on sovereignty does not preclude India from exercising foreign policy choices which ensures its national interests are met. India's vision of multi-polarity shapes its strategic choices, including its participation in the QUAD. Diplomatic manoeuvrability is especially important in a region like the Indo-Pacific where the balance of power is constantly changing and the flexibility offered by QUAD works in favour of all countries. Overall, QUAD is defined more in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is. It is not a formal grouping, it is not an organisation which solicits membership, it does not involve reciprocal obligations which automatically discredit false narratives that it is a rigid security "alliance."

Part of the problem in narratives which criticise India's limited approach to QUAD is a

fundamental misreading of the purpose of QUAD. In the words of Mr. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, QUAD "was meant as a diplomatic consultation and coordination forum of countries who have convergences, who do not agree on every issue but have substantial common ground."¹⁶ India has made full use of the malleability inherent in the very design of QUAD which supplants existing strategic and defence cooperation mechanisms. The lack of a formal alliance structure is not its weakness, but its strength.

Future of QUAD: Expanding areas of cooperation

It is worth recalling the successful coordination by the QUAD countries in providing prompt humanitarian assistance to countries devastated by the 2004 Tsunami, while delineating its possible future contours. By moving rapidly, it sent out the message that the Indo-Pacific countries had the naval capabilities —especially India, which provided naval helicopters to Colombo with relief material in merely 12 hours – to ensure security of the region.¹⁷ Its evolution since has followed a bumpy trajectory, but it has been one of gradual convergence. Although military strength is a core aspect in achieving this, there are other options which can and should be explored. The similar mindset and attitudes towards democracy and strong resolve to uphold the liberal order provides fertile ground to foster coordination of regional economic and development assistance.

Successful efforts in providing public goods in the region will further strengthen the narrative of a free and open Indo-Pacific shared by all nations. Cooperation in building infrastructure projects in the region will not only foster connectivity, but as a by-product, undercut the influence Chinese are trying to exert in the region through BRI projects.

As QUAD 2.0 embraces inclusivity as a central pillar, the most daunting challenge before it would be exploring beneficial forms of cooperation with ASEAN countries. This can be achieved by identifying potential areas of convergence of interests and the assurance that QUAD complements the existing regional architecture for the region instead of being an exclusionary alliance. It is imperative to ensure that QUAD 2.0 does not face the same fate as QUAD 1.0. To achieve this, it must be recognised that maintaining its flexible structure is a blessing in disguise.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

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⁹ Derek Grossman, "India Is the Weakest Link in the Quad," Foreign Policy, July 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/23/india-is-the-weakest-link-in-the-quad/>.

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