



FORMALISING THE QUADRILATERAL: INDIA'S EVOLVING INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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South Asia Scan

South Asia Scan

Formalising the Quadrilateral: India's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Issue No. 12
May 2021



NUS
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May be cited as:

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Formalising the Quadrilateral: India's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy

South Asia Scan, Issue No. 12

(Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, May 2021).

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Executive Summary

Coming amidst China's continuing aggression on the Ladakh border, India's invitation to Australia to participate in the 2020 Malabar Naval Exercise marked an important moment in the geopolitics of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) comprising India, the United States (US), Japan and Australia. Established in 2007, the Quad had foundered immediately in the wake of China's strong opposition. Its revival since 2017 has been viewed as a huge challenge to China's growing power and continued ascendance. Among all the Quad countries, India probably has higher stakes in the success of the Quad simply because of its structural weaknesses vis-à-vis China. This puts considerable constraints on the options available to it, undermining its negotiating position on core security issues.

A more resolute security policy is the only path forward for India, whose strategic reorientation will in turn have important consequences for the Quad. From a purely geopolitical perspective, a more active India modifies the structure of the regional geopolitical system by adding another powerful player into the emerging power struggle. India's strategic shift has come amid a profound structural churning in a global political order which the COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified. India seems to have realised that the prospects for promoting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region might be improved considerably by overcoming its hesitation in embracing Australia in its maritime security exercises. The South Asia Scan argues that what has essentially encouraged India to become enthusiastic towards the revived Quad is the emergence of a militarised China threatening its territorial interests.

Building strong bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral networks amongst the four maritime democracies has been a key American strategy, and Australia's participation in the Malabar naval exercise should be seen as an extension of outgoing President Donald Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. If Australia is seriously reviewing its economic dependence on China on account of national security concerns, China's hostile behaviour in the Senkaku islands and militarisation of the South China Sea have forced Japan to review its security policies, eventually bringing both the countries closer to India. At present, India cannot realistically expect the other Quad partners to play any valuable role in the armed defence of Ladakh, but the Quad's formalisation is likely to have a deterrent effect on China to avoid any misadventure.

Coupled with closer diplomatic and security relations with individual Quad countries, India is also seriously rethinking its diplomatic traditions and practices. This Scan recommends that the four countries should be proactive

in making the Quad an institutionalised mechanism for Indo-Pacific security cooperation. One of the important agendas of the Quad should be to focus on preserving and protecting the democratic values of like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific without interfering or allowing others to interfere in their domestic politics.

Introduction

Referring to the maritime space between the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific, the Indo-Pacific region is not yet a single, objective geopolitical construct but rather a contested vision subject to multiple interpretations.¹ Nevertheless, in many practical ways, it has become virtually impossible to separate the Indo-Pacific from the Quad as both constructs bring the like-minded countries of India, the US, Japan and Australia together to uphold a rules-based international order. Using the words of C Raja Mohan, the Quad is not an institutionalised set-up but “a flexible mechanism to coordinate the approaches of like-minded states to promote their shared political objectives in the Indo-Pacific. It is a work in progress and will take time to achieve institutional heft and make a real impact.”² The future of the Quad depends significantly on what role India plays, since the other three powers – the US, Japan and Australia – already have bilateral and trilateral security alliances among themselves. Thus, the Quad should also be seen as the US’ “attempt to seduce India into a western war fighting paradigm and get India off its nebulosity.”³

It is nearly impossible to discuss either the Quad or the Indo-Pacific without mentioning China, whose actions have defined the reactions of many across the world, including in the Himalayas, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Taiwan Strait and Hong Kong. In this sense, the Quad is essentially a non-Chinese formation with an anti-China overtone. Given the growing interest and intent of the quartet of India, the US, Japan and Australia in fulfilling their developmental and security aspirations, the Quad may also be described as the muscular manifestation of a balance of power politics in the Indo-Pacific. With Australia’s inclusion in the Malabar naval exercise, the Quad may have crossed an important milestone towards its formalisation.

India’s decision to invite Australia to join the Malabar 2020 has come in the wake of some important geopolitical developments – a standalone meeting of the four foreign ministers of the Quad in Tokyo in October 2020, the India-Australia agreement on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in June 2020, and the India-China deadly military clashes along the Line of Actual Control

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1. Thomas Wilkins and Jiye Kim, “Adoption, accommodation or opposition? – regional powers respond to American-led Indo-Pacific strategy”, *The Pacific Review*, October 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516>.
 2. C Raja Mohan, “New ripples in the oceans”, *The Indian Express*, 21 November 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indo-pacific-quad-india-maritime-security-cooperation-united-states-japan-australia-france-raja-mandala-new-ripples-in-the-oceans-4946840/>.
 3. Ugo Tramballi and Nicola Missaglia, *India’s Global Challenge: Growth and Leadership in the 21st Century* (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, June 2019), pp. 124-25.

(LAC) in Ladakh. The Quad foreign ministers met in Tokyo on 6 October 2020. That the meeting took place in person in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has been quite significant. Except for US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, no one else made any direct mention of China, but it was the elephant in the room. As has been the norm, the Quad foreign ministers did not release a joint statement. In their separate readouts, each outlined his country's Indo-Pacific vision but all emphasised the importance of working with other like-minded partners. Though no formal announcement on Australia's addition in the Malabar was made in the meeting, sufficient indications were given by India that the decision was coming soon.⁴ While the first phase of the 24th edition of the Malabar Naval Exercise was conducted in the Bay of Bengal from 3 to 6 November 2020, the Arabian Sea witnessed the second phase from 17 to 20 November 2020.⁵ And the formalisation of the Quad received a major boost on 12 March 2021 when the four leaders – Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, American President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison – held the first virtual meeting, reaffirming their commitment to maintain a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

The need to examine why India should promote the institutionalisation of the Quad is twofold. First, the rise of China and the erosion of the so-called unipolar moment have had a lasting impact on global geopolitics. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the global power restructuring is characterised by huge uncertainties; the US remains the dominant power, yet the international system is showing signs of both multipolarity and non-polarity.⁶ One of the consequences of these changes is the rising assertiveness in China's external behaviour, both on the global and regional scale. This has huge implications on the India-China relationship, as reflected in Beijing's continued aggressive posture on the disputed boundary. Second, at the strategic level, India and the US seem to converge in the Indo-Pacific framework, as the Trump administration was supportive of India's desire to be a leading global power. New Delhi has been designated by the US as a major defence partner and is also cooperating with Washington to share logistical

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4. Jesse Johnson and Satoshi Sugiyama, "Quad's meeting in Tokyo prizes symbolism over substance", *Japan Times*, 7 October 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/07/national/quad-japan-symbolism-china/>; and Tanvi Madan, "This week's Quad ministerial meeting, in four charts", Brookings, 8 October 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/08/this-weeks-quad-ministerial-meeting-in-four-charts/>.
 5. Indian Navy, "Exercise MALABAR 2020 Concludes in Arabian Sea". <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-2020-concludes-arabian-sea>.
 6. Multipolarity reflects a near equal distribution of military, cultural and economic influence power between more than two countries while non-polarity represents a world which is dominated by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power.

facilities, high-technology communications infrastructure and geospatial data. Without any doubt, India is key to the US' hopes of counterbalancing China, and, therefore, the future of the Quad depends significantly on what role India plays. The reason is simple: the other three powers – the US, Japan and Australia – already have bilateral and trilateral security alliances among themselves. So, India's willingness to invest in the Quad holds the key to its success. Keeping this background in view, this Scan analyses the prospects of the Quad's resuscitation and institutionalisation, which are also important for the Indo-Pacific's broader geopolitics and India's deterrent requirements against a rampaging China. Seen from this perspective, Australia's participation in last year's Malabar naval exercises is significant as it will give a huge impetus to the Quad.

The Quad's Contested Journey

The origins of the Quad can be found in the December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean when the navies of India, the US, Japan and Australia participated in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. The devastating tsunami that struck a dozen countries across the Indian Ocean and the massive coordinated emergency launched by the global community were a significant turning point. The parallel idea of the Indo-Pacific was further refined by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who provided its conceptual and intellectual underpinnings in a speech to the Indian parliament in 2007. Abe's speech, 'Confluence of the Two Seas', spelt out the birth of the Indo-Pacific narrative for years to come, with the intent to build a "broader Asia" coalition for maritime security.⁷

The Quad had its first informal meeting on the margins of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila in August 2007. The delegates discussed security collaboration among the Quad members with a particular focus on issues such as transnational security, and tackling terrorism and sea piracy. However, China lodged diplomatic protests with each of the four countries as Beijing became apprehensive as it believed that the four countries were ganging up against it.

The Indian navy nonetheless conducted naval exercises with American, Japanese, Australian and Singaporean navies in September 2007. Before the five nations' naval exercise, India tried to assuage China that it was not New Delhi's intention to work against Beijing. However, China felt otherwise, and in early 2008, Australia's new government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd

7. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Confluence of the Two Seas", Speech by H E Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

walked out of the combined naval exercises. At a joint press conference in Canberra on 5 February 2008 with his Chinese counterpart, the Australian foreign minister declared that “Australia would not be proposing to have a dialogue of that nature.”⁸ One of the reasons for the failure of the Quad initiative was the lack of political momentum at the topmost level. With Abe’s resignation, the Quad critic Rudd’s prioritisation of economic ties with China and dominance of the left parties in the United Progressive Alliance government in India, it was not surprising that the Quad went into a long hibernation.

On hindsight, the idea was good but the time was not ripe. After lying dormant for almost a decade, the Quad was revived in late 2017, and was further upgraded to the foreign ministerial level in 2019 in New York.⁹ The world of 2017 differed markedly from that of 2007, and Chinese belligerence made it easier for Trump to embrace the concept as the key driver for America’s vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). China’s exertion of its military posture in many countries had raised their level of vigilance. The dominance of right-wing leaders with the consequent growing irrelevance of left-wing politics may have also contributed to the revival of the Quad. For instance, when the leader of the Communist party in India, Prakash Karat, recently attacked the Quad as a mechanism “driven by the ambition to preserve US hegemony over the region”, which “will prove illusory and ineffective in defending India’s territorial boundaries”,¹⁰ hardly anybody noticed his dissenting voice. Ironically, it was the conglomeration of Communist parties which, in Karat’s own words, had organised a protest march “from Kolkata and Chennai culminating in Visakhapatnam to oppose the US-led multi-national military exercise” [Malabar] in 2007.¹¹ These parties were also against the India-US nuclear deal. No such opposition to engagement with the US either exists or can be imagined in India’s contemporary political landscape.

Until recently, Beijing was not averse to following the rules of the Western-led international order, albeit grudgingly. However, this has progressively changed ever since President Xi Jinping assumed power in China. Therefore, uncertainty about China’s intentions has increased in the wake of its turn towards a

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8. Frank Ching, “‘Asian Arc’ doomed without Australia”, *The Japan Times*, 22 February 2008. <https://www.japan-times.co.jp/opinion/2008/02/22/commentary/asian-arc-doomed-without-australia/>.
 9. Sriram Lakshman, “Quad’s significance rises as Ministers meet”, *The Hindu*, 27 September 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/quads-significance-rises-as-ministers-meet/article29527469.ece>.
 10. Prakash Karat, “Militarising the Quad to suit US geo-political interests”, *National Herald*, 22 October 2020. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/militarising-the-quad-to-suit-us-geo-political-interests>.
 11. Ibid.

muscular foreign policy and disregard for the current international territorial order.¹² Accordingly, the Quad seems to be firming up its response to confront China's challenge. Hence, the 'China factor' is a primary reason behind the revival of the Quad.

The revived Quad, which seems to have a "greater sense of purpose, internal coherence and urgency" than its predecessor,¹³ has been termed "a symbolic and substantive addition to an existing network of strategic and defence cooperation among four highly capable Indo-Pacific democracies that are increasingly aligned in their shared concerns on regional security."¹⁴ The argument that the revived Quad will trigger a security dilemma is not entirely unfounded, as China is sure to perceive India's embrace of the Quad as external balancing. However, one may also contend that the Quad is not a trigger but a response to China's rising assertiveness; India has been forced to enhance its military cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia simply because Chinese actions have threatened India's security. However, the shape that India's external balancing assumes would depend on the scale of China's challenge to India's geopolitical interests, and how firmly India commits itself to the other Quad partners.

The Quad members are connected through the US-Japan-Australia trilateral strategic dialogue, as well as the India-Japan-US and India-Australia-Japan trilateral dialogues. All trilaterals, principally promoted by the US, have been successful in nudging the Quad countries to synchronise policy and develop synergies while avoiding the alliance commitments. The Quad's formalisation will depend significantly on how it overtakes all these trilateral forums to become the principal institution for a balance of power coalition in the Indo-Pacific.

Growing doubts about the durability of the international order and regional stability have fostered a much closer institutional security relationship amongst India, Japan and Australia.¹⁵ Security ties among the individual Quad countries have significantly improved over the last decade, facilitating the

12. S Kalyanaraman, "External Balancing in India's China Policy", Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, IDSA Issue Brief, 28 March 2018. <https://idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-indias-china-policy-skalyanaraman.pdf>.

13. Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the New Struggle for Global Mastery* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 235.

14. Jeff M Smith, "Democracy's Squad: India's Change of Heart and the Future of the Quad", *War on the Rocks*, 8 August 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/democracys-squad-indias-change-of-heart-and-the-future-of-the-quad/>.

15. John Nilsson-Wright, "Creative Minilateralism in a Changing Asia Opportunities for Security Convergence and Cooperation Between Australia, India and Japan", Chatham House, July 2017. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/images/2017-07-28-Minilateralism.pdf>.

rebirth of the Quad. In particular, bilateral and trilateral security relationships have expanded, with cooperation becoming institutionalised.¹⁶ This is reflected in the fact that India enjoys ‘Two-Plus-Two’ foreign and defence dialogue mechanisms only with the US, Japan and Australia.¹⁷ Clearly, security imperatives have brought India, the US, Japan and Australia at the centre of the strategic flux in the Indo-Pacific.

Now, China’s growing clout has forced all the Quad countries to shed their hesitation and come together to counter China’s debt trap diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which Beijing is diversifying its energy import routes by investing in strategic ports in the Indian Ocean. Although there have been some recent scholarly claims that the ‘debt trap’ thesis is just a convenient myth,¹⁸ the BRI is rightly perceived by the Quad countries as a geopolitical strategy to lure developing and needy countries into unsustainable debt. Negotiated through diverse bilateral secret interactions, the BRI projects have often led to vastly negative economic, political and environmental consequences for the recipient countries. When local governments experience financial difficulties, China seizes the opportunity to take control of vital assets (mineral resources or ports), extending its strategic and military influence. Today, the BRI encompasses almost every aspect of China’s diplomatic initiatives and foreign policy. This understanding reinforces the Indian view that the BRI’s expanding footprints near India’s maritime periphery is “either gradualist neo-colonial extraction or predatory lending for dual-use infrastructure”.¹⁹ Germany’s recently-released guidelines on the Indo-Pacific seem to share the Indian perspective, “When developing connectivity, it is important to facilitate fair competition, to avoid over-indebtedness on the part of the recipient countries and to ensure transparency and sustainability.”²⁰

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16. Ryosuke Hanada, “The Role of U.S.-Japan-Australia-India Cooperation, or the ‘Quad’ in FOIP: A Policy Coordination Mechanism for the Rules-Based Order”, Strategic Japan Working Papers 2019, CSIS. http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/FINAL_Working%20Paper_Ryosuke%20Hanada.pdf.
 17. Shubhajit Roy, “India, Japan to engage in 2+2 dialogue today”, *The Indian Express*, 30 November 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-japan-to-engage-in-22-dialogue-today-6143422/>.
 18. Pradumna B Rana and Xianbai Ji, “Belt and Road Stakeholders Don’t Believe China Uses ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’”, *The Diplomat*, 6 November 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/belt-and-road-stakeholders-dont-believe-china-uses-debt-trap-diplomacy/>; and Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’”, Research Paper, Chatham House, August 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>.
 19. Sameer Lalwani, “Reluctant link? India, the Quad, and the free and open Indo-Pacific”, German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 2019, p. 31. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/chinas-territorial-claims-and-infringement-in-bhutan-concerns-for-india/>.
 20. The Federal Government, Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region, “Germany – Europe – Asia: shaping the 21st century together”, September 2020. <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>.

Sensing the growing willingness of countries for collective action to prevent China from either undermining or overturning the regional order, the Quad is keen to seize the moment to enlarge its remit. In order to expand its strategic reach, the Quad held a virtual conference in March 2020 with Vietnam, New Zealand and South Korea to strengthen inter-state coordination amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ New Zealand's participation in the 'Quad Plus' diplomacy is significant as the country has often resisted being seen as targetting China, and this was understandable due to its economic dependence on China. However, New Zealand altered its view in February 2020 by formally adopting the Indo-Pacific vision.²² Another important feature of the rejuvenated Quad is the importance being given to ASEAN in maintaining regional maritime stability. In response to China's threatening military posture, many countries are slowly upping the ante, raising the possibility of defence cooperation with the Quad. Broadening the Quad's network to integrate Vietnam – a Southeast Asian country – would definitely offset China's oft-repeated narrative that the Quad is a grouping of extra-regional powers trying to "contain" China. China has been flexing its military muscles in the maritime territorial disputes with its ASEAN neighbours, including 'land reclamation' activities in the South China Sea.²³ And due to China's unusually assertive behaviour, many countries in Southeast Asia have modified their traditional strategic calculus, leading to the ASEAN's adoption of the 'Indo-Pacific Outlook' in 2019.²⁴

There is credible evidence of British and French interest in becoming more engaged in the Indo-Pacific.²⁵ France has long considered itself an Indo-Pacific nation, given its numerous overseas territories located in both the Indian

21. Indrani Bagchi, "India joins hands with NZ, Vietnam, S Korea to combat pandemic", *The Times of India*, 21 March 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-joins-hands-with-nz-vietnam-s-korea-to-combat-pandemic/articleshow/74740424.cms>.
22. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Towards a quad-plus arrangement", Observer Research Foundation, 7 May 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/towards-a-quad-plus-arrangement-65674/>.
23. Jihyun Kim, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Implications for Security in Asia and Beyond", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 9(2), Summer 2015; Suresh Somu, "Friend or Foe? Asean-China Ties Tested by South China Sea Disputes", *Jakarta Globe*, 19 August 2020. <https://jakartaglobe.id/opinion/friend-or-foe-aseanchina-ties-tested-by-south-china-sea-disputes>; Baladas Ghoshal, "South China Sea: A Dangerous Flashpoint", *The Economic Times*, 13 July 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/south-china-sea-a-dangerous-flashpoint/>.
24. "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", 23 June 2019. <https://asean.org/asean-outlook-indo-pacific/>.
25. Erik Brattberg, Philippe Le Corre and Etienne Soula, "Can France and the UK Pivot to the Pacific?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 July 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/07/05/can-france-and-uk-pivot-to-pacific-pub-76732>; and Vijay Sakhuja, "Commentary: Quad Plus - Time for New Stakeholders", Vivekananda International Foundation, 5 March 2018. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2018/march/05/quad-plus-time-for-new-stakeholders>.

and Pacific oceans. Moreover, it has a permanent naval presence on Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean. France is a major trading partner of China but does not seem hesitant to irk Beijing. In September 2020, India and Australia held their first trilateral dialogue with France on the Indo-Pacific.²⁶ Germany, lacking any significant history in the Indo-Pacific region, has already entered the fray. However, the challenge before 'Quad Plus' will be to maintain the original focus of the Quad: to signal resolve to counter China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.²⁷

The Malabar naval exercise is likely to acquire greater significance with Australia's inclusion as India has conveyed an unmistakable willingness to enhance diplomatic and economic coordination with the three Quad countries. Though we are still some time away from the Quad's formal militarisation, this Scan argues that significant steps toward it would go a long way in addressing each member's strategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China. As explained in the subsequent sections, India's strategic interactions with the Quad partners, particularly the US, has witnessed a stupendous rise in the last decade. Since India has taken a seemingly bold decision, the next step should signify greater commitment if the four countries do not want the Quad rhetoric to get the better of actual policies. Most importantly, the Biden administration's recalibration on the Quad front by way of a reduction of its commitment would have profound consequences for India: it could prompt a Chinese reaction since the Quad is presently not ready for a joint pushback. However, consequences can only be theorised rather than quantified.

26. Pragya Pandey, "India-France-Australia: Emerging Trilateral in the Indo-Pacific", Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 2 October 2020. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=5369&lid=3796.

27. Derek Grossman, "Don't Get Too Excited, 'Quad Plus' Meetings Won't Cover China", *The Diplomat*, 9 April 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dont-get-too-excited-quad-plus-meetings-wont-cover-china/>.

Indo-US Ties: Preparing the Ground for the Quad

From having inadequate defence ties during the Cold War to becoming a major defence partner of the US, India has come a long way in forging one of the most consequential bilateral relationships of the present century. Additionally, Indo-US relations have also influenced the trajectory of India's relations with Japan and Australia, two close American allies and members of the Quad. The US has therefore played a pivotal role in connecting the nodes of the Quad network. Since US power and Indian commitment are pivotal to the success of the Quad, this section argues that the US has indicated its resolve to back the Quad.

During the tumultuous Cold War era, India and the US held conflicting security objectives, both within South Asia and beyond. Things started changing with the disintegration of the USSR and India's historic steps to transform its socialist economy into a vibrant market-based one. Therefore, despite an initial chill in relations following India's nuclear tests in 1998, which attracted American sanctions, it was challenging but not impossible to restore the balance in bilateral ties following an ambitious dialogue between Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott and India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. And there was no turning back after the 1999 Kargil war, when the US fully recognised India's security concerns, with the Bill Clinton administration bluntly refusing to back Pakistan on its military misadventure against India.²⁸ A closer Indo-US partnership developed during the George W Bush Administration. Bush singlehandedly ensured the success of the nuclear deal between India and the US, mainstreaming India's nuclear programme.²⁹ In the subsequent years, the rapprochement has come to be widely seen as the outcome of challenges faced by both countries in the wake of China's unprecedented rise in international politics.

The US is the chief architect of the liberal economic and maritime order in the Indo-Pacific and has been keen to empower India to assume greater responsibilities. As Washington had been eager to counter China's expanding sphere with the incorporation of India into its overarching security architecture, the insufficiency of the 'Asia-Pacific' term had to be overcome to meet America's geopolitical objectives in Asia.³⁰ The use of the term

28. Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

29. Dinshaw Mistry, *The US-India nuclear agreement: Diplomacy and domestic politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Carina Van de Wetering, *Changing US Foreign Policy toward India US-India Relations since the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

30. Mercy A Kuo, "The Origin of 'Indo-Pacific' as Geopolitical Construct: Insights from Gurpreet Khurana", *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>.

‘Indo-Pacific’ is therefore seen as America’s attempt to include India in the traditional Asia-Pacific formulation. President Barack Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ or ‘Rebalance to Asia-Pacific’ strategy was also premised on dealing with the consequences of China’s rise, but its major difference with Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy lies in the latter’s confrontational zero-sum logic. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had said in 2017 that “increasing convergence of US and Indian interests and values offers the Indo-Pacific the best opportunity to defend the rules-based global system that has benefitted so much of humanity over the past several decades.”³¹ He also remarked that the Malabar exercise is “a clear example of the combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies.”³² Now, the fourth democracy of Australia has the potential to add to this strength.

During his high-profile November 2017 Asia tour, Trump made several references to the term ‘Indo-Pacific’.³³ The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Trump administration declared that Beijing seeks to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region”, while portraying China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence in a negative light.³⁴ As mentioned in the NSS, the US’ pursuit of helping “India’s emergence as a leading global power” and increasing “quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India” mark a convergence of American interests with those of India. With the FOIP phrase replacing ‘Pivot to Asia’, the US has conveyed its intent to play a significant role in the region. It is reasonable to believe that the US “is betting on a larger role for Delhi in stabilising the Indo-Pacific.”³⁵ The renaming of America’s Hawaii-based Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command appears threatening to China.³⁶

The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US has involved bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements to give its military a sharper presence in both the

31. Rex W Tillerson, Secretary of State, “Remarks on ‘Defining Our Relationship With India for the Next Century’”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 18 October 2017. <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/274913.htm>.

32. Ibid.

33. Yashwant Raj, “No such thing as containing China: US on quadrilateral alliance involving India”, *Hindustan Times*, 5 November 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-on-quadrilateral-with-india-no-such-thing-as-containing-china/story-QfdkS03CDprPFPoI9EoFuK.html>.

34. White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, December 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

35. C Raja Mohan, “How India can negotiate Trump’s world”, *The Indian Express*, 25 December 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-india-can-negotiate-donald-trumps-world-narendra-modi-4997456/>.

36. Sumit Ganguly and Andrew Scobell, “The Himalayan Impasse: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Wake of Doklam”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 41 (3), Fall 2018, p. 185.

western Pacific and eastern Indian Oceans.³⁷ US Vice-President Mike Pence, during his speech at the ASEAN summit in Singapore in November 2018, had delivered an oblique warning to Beijing over its rising strength in the Indo-Pacific, asserting “that empire and aggression ha(ve) no place in the Indo-Pacific.”³⁸ The Trump administration believed that the Quad would signal unity among like-minded democracies to counter China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁹

The Trump administration ironed out some policy differences between Indian and American views on the Indo-Pacific. The US’ interests on the Indo-Pacific are served if India’s strategic focus remains eastward. But India’s many interests in the West Asian region have created some hurdles in aligning the respective perspectives. However, during the 2020 Raisina Dialogue, US Deputy National Security Advisor, Matt Pottinger, claimed that Washington no longer looked at the Indo-Pacific region as a “Hollywood-to-Bollywood” geography – as articulated by Admiral Harry Harris, former chief of the newly created Indo-Pacific Command – but rather as one stretching from “California to Kilimanjaro”, implying its reach up to the eastern coast of the African continent.⁴⁰ This aspect was further emphasised a week later. During her regular briefing in the third week of January 2020, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells, praised “India’s broadening strategic horizons” in the Indo-Pacific region, and asserted that “whether it’s in our growing maritime and naval cooperation, the Quad, India’s ‘Act East’ policy, there’s virtually no daylight in our approaches to the Indo-Pacific.”⁴¹ This is a significant acknowledgment of India’s westward security concerns in the Indian Ocean, which will reconfigure the eastward security matrix of the Indo-Pacific.

During his historic February 2020 visit to India, Trump remarked that New Delhi and Washington were keen to “revitali(se) the Quad initiative” for

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37. David Scott, “The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts”, *The Rising Powers Quarterly*, 3 (2), August 2018.
 38. Catherine Wong, “Mike Pence’s message to China: aggression has no place in Indo-Pacific”, *South China Morning Post*, 17 November 2018. <https://beta.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2173308/mike-pences-message-china-aggression-has-no-place-indo-pacific>.
 39. Derek Grossman, “Quad supports US goal to preserve rules-based order”, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Forum, 7 February 2019. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/quad-supports-us-goal-to-preserve-rules-based-order/>.
 40. Indrani Bagchi, “Raisina Dialogue: ‘Indo-Pacific’ a global common, says foreign secy Vijay Gokhale”, *The Times of India*, 17 January 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/raisina-dialogue-indo-pacific-a-global-common-says-foreign-secy-vijay-gokhale/articleshow/73337528.cms>.
 41. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, Special Briefing, Alice G Wells, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, 24 January 2020. <https://translations.state.gov/2020/01/24/principal-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-south-and-central-asian-affairs-alice-wells/>.

“expanded cooperation on counterterrorism, cyber security and maritime security to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.”⁴² And in his virtual speech to the annual ‘India Ideas Summit’ of the US India Business Council in July 2020, Pompeo termed India “America’s key defense and security partner in the Indo-Pacific” while announcing the revival of the Quad.⁴³ Similarly, in the first week of October 2020, Pompeo mentioned the Quad during an interview with *Asia Nikkei* in Tokyo. Stressing the need to institutionalise the Quad in order “to build out a true security framework”, he argued that “when one talks about security, one’s talking about economic capacity and the rule of law, the ability to protect intellectual property, trade agreements, diplomatic relationships, all of the elements that form a security framework. It’s not just military.”⁴⁴ This was a reaffirmation of the Trump administration’s whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach.

Subsequently, US Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Biegun, remarked that “it is our view that in the passage of time, the Quad should become more regularized and at some point formalized as well as we really begin to understand what the parameters of this cooperation are and how we can regularize it.”⁴⁵ Can this statement be interpreted as an American offer to India for a strong alliance against China? Answering this question, C Raja Mohan stated that “one speech does not an alliance make. In fact, the current political discourse in Washington is hostile to alliance-making.”⁴⁶ This assertion has an element of truth since an unconditional security pledge to India would leave the US vulnerable to calculations made in New Delhi, which has vastly different priorities than those of Washington, particularly regarding Pakistan, Russia and Iran.

More than that, the implication of Trump’s transactional foreign policy was that the US would not come to help its allies without a direct military threat to the American homeland. The vast Pacific Ocean protects the US from a

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42. White House, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India in Joint Press Statement”, New Delhi, 25 February 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-modi-india-joint-press-statement-2/>.
 43. Press Trust of India, “India a key partner, pillar of US foreign policy: Pompeo”, *Hindustan Times*, 23 July 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-a-key-partner-pillar-of-us-foreign-policy-pompeo/story-YVE14u6Cur7KTSrip44dKM.html>.
 44. Hiroyuki Akita and Eri Sugiura, “Interview: Pompeo aims to ‘institutionalize’ Quad ties to counter China”, *Nikkei Asia*, 6 October 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Pompeo-aims-to-institutionalize-Quad-ties-to-counter-China>.
 45. Sriram Lakshman, “Quad should eventually become formalised, says top U.S. Official”, *The Hindu*, 20 October 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/quad-should-eventually-become-formalised-says-top-us-official/article32903108.ece>.
 46. C Raja Mohan, “India, Quad & value of coalitions”, *The Indian Express*, 6 October 2020, p. 6. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/quad-ministerial-meeting-indo-pacific-tokyo-india-foreign-policy-jaishankar-6704398/>.

direct attack by China. But this luxury is not available to India, which has faced a direct Chinese threat at the disputed border.⁴⁷ The continued practice of Trump's "America first" in the strategic domain could have allowed China to gamble that aggression along the Sino-Indian border would not incite any military response from the US if the American mainland was not attacked. Moreover, the US-China relationship is more opaque than it appears to be in public, and constructive ties between Washington and Beijing under the Biden administration would be nothing less than a nightmare for India. Another issue worth considering is the nature of domestic polarisation and division in the US, which raises doubts about America's engagement and leadership, both of which are essential for a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific. Trump attacked the existing global order, including various multilateral platforms and international organisations, on the ground that American allies have taken advantage of its largesse. This may have put barriers towards trust building among the Quad partners. Even if the Biden administration shows greater commitment towards existing alliances and partnerships, India's policy elites may not be ready to sign up for a full-fledged military alliance.⁴⁸

There are surely many issues of contention amidst the sharp polarisation between the Republicans and the Democrats in US domestic politics, as reflected in the recently concluded presidential elections and Trump's failed attempts to create hurdles in the smooth transfer of power. However, America's strategic partnership with India is not something where there is any dispute, because there is clarity that the Quad's success hinges on India. That is why India's invitation to Australia on the Malabar received bipartisan support in the US. Senate members from both the Republican and Democratic parties addressed a letter to India's Ambassador in Washington, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, "expressing strong support of India's decision to formally invite Australia to participate in the annual Exercise Malabar." The letter further noted:

"...in the face of China's rising military and economic assertiveness, strengthening the Quad has become increasingly important. As the world addresses the fallout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, China has opportunistically looked to expand its military footprint across the Indo-Pacific. From the South China Sea to the Himalayas, Beijing continues to use

47. Mohamed Zeeshan, "Trump Has Undermined His Own Quad Goals", *The Diplomat*, 16 October 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/trump-has-undermined-his-own-quad-goals/>.

48. Vivek Katju, "Proceed with caution", *The Indian Express*, 29 October 2020, p. 6. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/donald-trump-us-elections-us-india-mechanism-6907686/>.

methods of intimidation and territorial aggression to test the resolve of regional actors.”⁴⁹

Both the Himalayas and the South China Sea are too vast to be controlled by any single power, and any attempt by China to build an exclusive sphere of influence will lead to confrontation. To maintain a stable balance in the region, the US needs India’s help to keep China from expanding its influence.

After converting the trilateral Malabar exercise into the quadrilateral one, the language used in India’s official statement has been significant, as the previous restraint which had characterised India’s formal statements on the Quad and the Indo-Pacific have given way to a bolder declaration of intent. The Ministry of Defence, in particular, has stated that India “seeks to increase cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain”, while clarifying that “participants of Exercise Malabar 2020 are engaging to enhance safety and security in the maritime domain. They collectively support free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific and remain committed to a rules-based international order.”⁵⁰ These words indicate greater convergence with Washington’s FOIP on containing China’s growing geopolitical ambitions.

India’s first major departure from its traditional non-aligned posture was the signing of the 1971 Indo-Soviet treaty, which happened due to the American tilt towards Pakistan as well as the US-China entente. A strong alliance with the US had allowed China to bolster its position. However, the role India played in the creation of Bangladesh also “stoked a deep anxiety in China, and Beijing came to the conclusion that India had to be contained within the subcontinent and kept in a state of extended disequilibrium.”⁵¹ Now, China’s belligerent and hegemonic posture is pushing India and the US closer to each other. With the signing of the long-awaited Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in the last week of October 2020 at the third ‘Two-Plus-Two’ Dialogue at New Delhi, the basic building blocks of Indo-US security partnership have been put in place.

Before that, India and the US had signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in 2016 and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018, following the first ‘Two-Plus-Two’ dialogue between

49. United States Senate, Washington, 19 October 2020. <https://www.perdue.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/10.19.20%20Letter%20to%20Indian%20Ambassador%20re%20Exercise%20Malabar.pdf>.

50. Press Information Bureau, “Malabar 2020 Naval Exercise”, Ministry of Defence, 19 October 2020. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1665830>.

51. Chitrapu Uday Bhaskar, “How will India contend with China’s growing power?”, *East Asia Forum*, 6 February 2018. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/02/06/how-will-india-contend-with-chinas-growing-power/>.

the external affairs and defence ministers of both countries. With the BECA providing India with access to the US' advanced geospatial intelligence, India's limitations in satellite imagery – as recognised during the June 2020 standoff in Ladakh – is likely to be minimised.⁵² Whether on logistics or secure communications, all the agreements for military cooperation and coordination have now been signed between the two countries. Although there is no need to over-hype these agreements, their real significance lies in “building trust and setting the trajectory for future relations.”⁵³ The ‘Two-Plus-Two’ dialogue has already been institutionalised to ensure regular bilateral consultations on all aspects covering space, cyber, defence technology and maritime security. In addition to three military services conducting regular bilateral exercises, India and the US have taken another leap by initiating a tri-service exercise.⁵⁴

When ties between India and China were under “severe stress” due to the tensions at eastern Ladakh with no resolution in sight,⁵⁵ the US displayed its solidarity with India in order to deepen strategic trust. Despite Trump's rash attempts at undermining America's traditional alliances, he may have achieved making the Quad a capable coalition. During the latest ‘Two-Plus-Two Dialogue’, Pompeo explicitly assured New Delhi that the US “will stand with the people of India as they face threats to their sovereignty and their liberty.” As expected, reacting strongly to Pompeo's remarks targetting the Chinese government, a statement from Beijing underlined that the boundary issue was a “bilateral matter between China and India”, and America's Indo-Pacific strategy was only meant to propagate “an outdated Cold War mentality and preaching confrontation and geopolitical games”.⁵⁶ Speaking his mind about the Quad following his meeting with Malaysian Foreign Minister

52. Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd), “2+2 2020 could be a game changer”, 28 October 2020. <https://www.rediff.com/news/column/-general-hasnain-2-plus-2-india-us-dialogue-2020-could-be-a-game-changer/20201028.htm>.

53. Manoj Joshi, “Building upon the American connection”, Observer Research Foundation, 28 October 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/building-upon-the-american-connection/>.

54. Press Trust of India, “India, US begin first tri-services exercise”, *The Economic Times*, 13 November 2019. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-us-begin-first-tri-services-exercise/articleshow/72045207.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

55. Rezaul H Laskar, “India-China ties under ‘severe stress’, LAC changes unacceptable: Jaishankar”, *Hindustan Times*, 31 October 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-china-ties-under-severe-stress-lac-changes-unacceptable-jaishankar/story-qfMigdT9DRMFV0VFCEkO.html>.

56. Rezaul H Laskar, “China says border standoff is bilateral issue, criticises Mike Pompeo's remarks”, *Hindustan Times*, 28 October 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-says-border-standoff-is-bilateral-issue-criticises-mike-pompeo-s-remarks/story-D22Xc7OoWEVPpGigjUnVAM.html>; and Ananth Krishnan, “Boundary issue with India is ‘bilateral’, China tells Mike Pompeo”, *The Hindu*, 28 October 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/boundary-issue-with-india-is-bilateral-china-tells-mike-pompeo/article32961137.ece>.

Hishammuddin Hussein in Kuala Lumpur on 13 October 2020, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, asserted that American strategy constituted a "huge underlying security risk" that would fuel a geopolitical competition with the Cold War mentality.⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, Beijing does not describe the Quad as a "headline grabbing" idea any longer.

However, some scholars believe that Trump may have raised expectations on the Quad without factoring in India's reluctance to join military alliances. Although the US has realised that China poses a generational problem that would need to be handled through a coalition, India's commitments remain doubtful, despite greater readiness from Japan and Australia. Criticising the Trump administration of investing the Quad with "mythical powers" and having "extravagant expectations" of alliance-averse India, Ashley J Tellis recently warned against making the Quad appear more than a forum for consultations and a mechanism for signalling to Beijing their China consensus.⁵⁸ But it would be naive to ignore the significance of some of the steps taken by both India and the US to minimise the chasm in their perceptions. And a demonstration of convergence on how to manage China is itself not a small achievement. The present situation certainly calls for adept handling, since there are rising expectations. Rather than feel cornered, New Delhi must seize the moment. The military advantage gained by India in the standoff with China will go far in enhancing its worth to the Quad partners and its future standing in the Indo-Pacific. On the US side, there are good intentions. During his election campaign, Biden may have refrained from using the term 'Indo-Pacific', but the appointment of Kurt M Campbell as the 'Indo-Pacific Coordinator'⁵⁹ aims at dispelling reservations in the minds of America's allies, including India, about the China policy of the Biden administration. Campbell was appointed a day after the White House declassified a key document outlining the Trump administration's appraisal of the Indo-Pacific region and India's role as a 'counterbalance' to China.⁶⁰ Biden had shown further commitment to the Quad by holding the first summit of its leaders in

57. The Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Kolkata, "Wang Yi: U.S. 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' Undermines Peace and Development Prospects in East Asia", 13 October 2020. <http://kolkata.china-consulate.org/eng/zgbd/t1824140.htm>.

58. Seema Sirohi, "China Tensions: Can the US or the Quad Come to India's Help?", *The Wire*, 12 December 2020. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-tensions-us-quad-military-help>.

59. *Reuters*, "Obama-era veteran Kurt Campbell to be White House Indo-Pacific coordinator", *The Economic Times*, 13 January 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/obama-era-veteran-kurt-campbell-to-be-white-house-indo-pacific-coordinator/articleshow/80255157.cms>.

60. Sriram Lakshman, "A strong India would act as 'counterbalance' to China, says declassified U.S. document", *The Hindu*, 13 January 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/a-strong-india-would-act-as-counterbalance-to-china-says-declassified-white-house-document/article33565659.ece>.

March 2021. Therefore, there are reasons aplenty for a further convergence of interests. India's public rhetoric on the Quad needs sharper focus, and its diplomatic outreach needs deft alliance-building, starting with Modi's characteristic bear hug with Biden when they first meet.

With the changing shape of regional geopolitics and a new leadership at the helm in the US, India's role in the emerging world order is likely to be pivotal, which Beijing would like to see diluted with the help of Pakistan. India's vulnerabilities are dictated by its geographical contiguity with Pakistan and China. Moreover, Pakistan has since the 1970s maintained a strategically close and well-aligned relationship with China, with both states having come even closer with the rolling out of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a key regional component of the BRI. The frequent Sino-Indian border standoffs and the more recent clashes at the Galwan Valley in June 2020 are due to China's growing power more than the zero-sum logic in China's strategic conception about the Sino-Indian relationship. Beijing's intentions were earlier equally revisionist but were not backed by military and economic power. But the power gap between India and China has grown to an extent that allows the latter to spend almost four times on its military as compared to the former. Xi's China does not seem interested in accepting India's core interests as a pre-condition for building the new model in bilateral relations. China's astounding economic development, coupled with its remarkable military modernisation, has only widened the gap between India and China. The Chinese economy, which was roughly similar to that of India four decades ago, is now almost five times that size in US dollar terms, with its scientific and technological power outranking India's many times.⁶¹ Reelected with the intent to signal India's strong resolve on sovereignty and territorial claims, Modi has been signalling that core interests, as the bottom line of national vision, are essentially non-negotiable.

India's obsession with 'strategic autonomy' has often shaped the manner in which it views American policies on its periphery. There has been a fundamental mismatch between India's global ambitions and the nature of the American alliance system. While the Malabar naval exercises could create a template for the Quad, what merits particular attention is India's willingness to reorient its strategic culture towards greater alignment. Whatever the level of military coordination amongst the four Quad members might be like, one cannot deny the fact that all of them are opposed to Xi's key geopolitical

61. Sanjaya Baru, "A long way from 1962", *The Indian Express*, 20 October 2020, p. 6. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/china-galwan-ladakh-army-xi-jinping-narendra-modi-economy-1962-6793143/>.

initiatives. In many ways, what sets the Quad apart is the willingness of its members to resist Beijing's coercion tactics and territorial aggression.

The next two sections, therefore, focus on Japan and Australia's enhanced cooperation with India, not only to deal with the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific but also to make the Quad a key mechanism for policy coordination.

Japan's Persistent Push

Having captured the strategic imagination with his landmark speech in the Indian Parliament, Abe has been the real brain behind the emergence of the Quad and its subsequent revival. China's coercive behaviour, particularly in the Senkaku islands, has decisively shaped Japan's policy discourse on the Quad and the Indo-Pacific, allowing Abe to create an enabling domestic environment to revisit Japan's post-war security posture while forging high-powered strategic partnerships. Just before becoming prime minister again in January 2013, he wrote an article in which China stood accused of attempting to make the South China Sea a "Lake Beijing", which would allow "the People's Liberation Army's navy to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads." Abe asked Japan not to "yield to the Chinese government's daily exercises in coercion around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea", since that would only help China "to establish its jurisdiction in the waters surrounding the islands as a fait accompli."⁶² This warning sounds eerily similar to those concerning China's recent unilateral attempts to change the territorial status quo in Ladakh.

Japan's alliance with the US is key to the latter's military role in Asia, including its forward military presence. Japan is also considered a model American ally, for it not only hosts a large number of US troops but also pays for their upkeep on its soil. Washington has a clear interest in reforming Japan's security and constitutional arrangements because it would further strengthen the US-Japan alliance.⁶³ The threat of China continues to drive the US and Japan closer together in pursuit of shared interests.⁶⁴ Incidentally, Japan's remilitarisation, which is expected, will also serve Indian interests.

Among others, the establishment of a National Security Council in December 2013 has rectified a key anomaly in that the absence of a centralised body until then was seen as a symbol of Japan's apathy in strategic and security matters.⁶⁵ Abe has helped boost Tokyo's security cooperation with both New Delhi and Canberra, bilaterally as well as trilaterally. In Japan's conceptualisation, India would be a key factor driving the success of a FOIP. On

62. Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?barrier=accesspaylog>.

63. David Vergun, "U.S.-Japan Alliance Increasingly Strengthened Since End of WWII", US Department of Defence, 14 August 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Features/Story/Article/2306658/us-japan-alliance-increasingly-strengthened-since-end-of-wwii/>.

64. Lindsay Maizland and Beina Xu, "The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance", Council on Foreign Relations, 22 August 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-japan-security-alliance>.

65. Lionel P Fatton, "'Japan is back': Autonomy and balancing amidst an unstable China-U.S.-Japan triangle", *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5 (2), May 2018.

the other hand, deepening engagement with Japan is one of the key pillars of India's 'Act East' policy.⁶⁶

Despite several attempts by Tokyo to seek engagement with China to improve crisis prevention in the East China Sea, China has refused to scale down its coercive posturing. By deploying various military and non-military instruments of statecraft, Beijing's overall aim is to change the regional balance of power with a view to achieving greater strategic ambitions over the East China Sea.⁶⁷ Given "Beijing's three-pronged attrition strategy towards the Senkakus: normalising Chinese presence; exercising law-enforcement rights; and taking over exclusive control",⁶⁸ the Japanese push on the Quad is quite understandable. Japan's policymakers may be averse to using blunt language to describe the challenges China poses to Japan's territorial interests, but there is much clarity in Tokyo regarding Beijing's revisionist tendencies and its persistent attempts to gain regional preeminence. When Tillerson met with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono in late October 2017, revival of the Quad dominated the agenda. Alice Wells, who accompanied Tillerson, had said that the Quad which "the Japanese foreign minister discussed would be building on a very productive trilateral we have with India and Japan", and would also include Australia to offer alternatives to countries in need of infrastructure and development without "predatory financing or unsustainable debt". She termed the Quad "a natural progression and convergence of interests between democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region."⁶⁹

For all its flaws, the American-led system remains the most attractive to Tokyo simply because it is more effective than the one being offered by authoritarian China. If America's engagement vanishes, so will the regional order. In fact, by taking a lead in regional initiatives aimed at countering China's growing influence, Japan has been working hard to convince the US of the need to pay more attention to East Asia.⁷⁰ From Tokyo's perspective, it is believed that institutionalisation of the Quad could serve an important purpose of

66. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Launch of India-Japan Act East Forum", 5 December 2017. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29154/Launch_of_IndiaJapan_Act_East_Forum.

67. Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Coercive Posturing in the Senkakus: A Quest for Dominance", *Japan Forward*, 23 August 2019. <https://japan-forward.com/chinas-coercive-posturing-in-the-senkaku-a-quest-for-dominance/>.

68. Alessio Patalano, "What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?", *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>.

69. David Brunnstrom, "U.S. seeks meeting soon to revive Asia-Pacific 'Quad' security forum", *Reuters*, 28 October 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asia-quad-idUSKBN1CW2O1>.

70. Tomohiko Satake and Ryo Sahashi, "The Rise of China and Japan's 'Vision' for Free and Open Indo-Pacific", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2020. DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2020.1766907.

keeping the US fully engaged in the region. A recent editorial in a Japanese daily mentioned that the “Quad provides a window on US decision-making and offers partner governments the opportunity to influence Washington’s thinking on issues that are of vital concern to them.”⁷¹

The changing geopolitics and geo-economics of the post COVID-19 world will bring Japan closer to India. Several recent developments have indisputably underscored the growing convergence of interests between India and Japan. The two countries joined hands to launch a development project, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), to increase connectivity and cooperation between the Asian and African continents. The AAGC seeks to provide a mechanism for India and Japan to invest in infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region from East Asia to Africa, and this is seen as a response to China’s BRI. Although the AAGC is way behind the BRI in many respects because of India’s own infrastructural needs, the lack of financing capacity and the exclusive investment focus of the AAGC in only maritime regions, it is nevertheless a significant step towards providing infrastructure finance to a region critical to the Indo-Pacific.⁷² The infrastructure cooperation by the Quad sates in the context of economic competition between the US and China has not escaped Beijing’s attention. China has come to recognise that the Quad, which understands “the urgency of limiting China’s dominance in infrastructure investment in the region, [has] been making efforts to constrain China’s economic development inside and outside of its territory.” In order to counter the potentially negative impact of these efforts on China’s overall trade strategy, its decision-makers are responding by partially fixing the debt trap of the BRI.⁷³

Tokyo has taken the lead in launching the India-Japan-Australia trilateral initiative to ensure the resilience of supply chains in the Indo-Pacific, and this is likely to accelerate economic and diplomatic de-coupling from China by the Quad governments. During their first virtual meeting on the issue in early September 2020, ministers from the three countries expressed their determination to “take a lead in delivering a free, fair, inclusive, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and stable trade and investment

71. Editorial, “The ‘Quad’ offers hope for a free and open Indo-Pacific”, *The Japan Times*, 8 October 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/10/08/editorials/quad-offers-hope-free-open-indo-pacific/>.

72. Emre Demir, “Competing regional visions China’s Belt and Road Initiative versus the Indo-Pacific Partnership”, in Ash Rossiter and Brendon J Cannon (Eds.), *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific New Geopolitical Realities* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

73. Wooyeal Paik and Jae Jeok Park, “The Quad’s Search for Non-Military Roles and China’s Strategic Response: Minilateralism, Infrastructure Investment, and Regional Balancing”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2020.1766908.

environment”, while asking other countries in the region with similar views to join the resilient supply chain initiative, which has been viewed as adding an economic pillar to the existing political and strategic pillars of the Quad.⁷⁴

Japan has recently signed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with India, which is seen as a sign of growing convergence of interests between the two sides. During their phone conversation, Modi and Abe agreed that a strong partnership between their countries would play a “critical role in charting the course for the global community in the post-COVID world”, while reaffirming that the leadership change in Japan would not affect the upward trajectory in bilateral ties.⁷⁵ Since Abe was the most important proponent of the Quad, one might ask following his exit in September 2020 whether or not the Quad will survive. But these doubts seem entirely misplaced as Abe’s successor and leaders of the other Quad countries have been supportive of the framework.⁷⁶ India and Japan have the potential to play a greater role in concretising the Quad, should some of the domestic challenges be sorted out and their respective diplomatic strengths be exercised to the fullest.

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74. “India, Australia and Japan to launch resilient supply chains for Indo-Pacific”, *Hindustan Times*, 1 September 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-australia-and-japan-to-launch-resilient-supply-chains-for-indo-pacific/story-0e4j7CfG9kz0AmH0tK1ndL.html>.
 75. Rezaul H Laskar, “India, Japan ink pact to bolster defence forces”, *Hindustan Times*, 10 September 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-japan-ink-pact-to-bolster-defence-forces/story-xOCacyTP5OIAOqruteQBI.html>.
 76. Rajaram Panda, “Rethinking the ‘Quad’ Security Concept in the Face of a Rising China”, Jamestown Foundation, China Brief 20 (19), 30 October 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/rethinking-the-quad-security-concept-in-the-face-of-a-rising-china/>.

Australia's Enthusiastic Embrace

Canberra's active role in advocating the Indo-Pacific vision, coupled with its vocal expression of reservations regarding Chinese investment in Australia, has rattled Beijing. As a middle power, Australia has been attempting to build partnerships through a variety of mechanisms to minimise its vulnerabilities. When China's economy began to surround the entire globe, the Australian economy was also allowed to become unsustainably dependent upon the Chinese market. But recent years have witnessed Australian leaders trying to rectify this anomaly by getting rid of strategic Chinese investments through a comprehensive review of their impact on Australia's national interests. Australia is one of the first Western democracies to impose a ban on Huawei, the Chinese telecommunication giant, from installing a 5G network in the country.⁷⁷ Going beyond smartphones, 5G is more about smart cities, internet of things, financial markets and more, for which the Chinese company provides the necessary infrastructure, giving them access to sensitive information that will ultimately be shared with the Chinese government. National security concerns are behind Australia's decision in this regard.

Being an important ally of the US, Australia has been keen to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Being a strong advocate of the Quad, Australia has participated with Japan in the US-led 'Blue Dot Network' for quality infrastructure against the backdrop of China's unsustainable investments in many countries.⁷⁸ Canberra has also become less conciliatory towards China in the wake of some controversial domestic issues and diplomatic spats with Beijing.⁷⁹ Despite pursuing decades of positive policy towards China, there is much evidence suggesting that Australia has become entangled in a strategic competition with it, frequently criticising Chinese policy and expressing solidarity with the other Quad partners, including India. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has further resulted in a significant downward trend in Sino-Australian relations, with Canberra leading calls for a thorough investigation into the origins of the virus. When China imposed the National

77. Jamie Smyth, "Australia banned Huawei over risks to key infrastructure", *Financial Times*, 27 March 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/543621ce-504f-11e9-b401-8d9ef1626294>.

78. Peter Mccawley, "Connecting the dots on the Blue Dot Network", *The Interpreter*, 12 November 2019. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/connecting-dots-blue-dot-network>.

79. Shaimaa Khalil, "How Australia-China relations have hit 'lowest ebb in decades'", *BBC*, 11 October 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54458638>; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The deterioration of Australia-China relations", *Strategic Comments*, Volume 26, Comment 11, 11 June 2020. <https://www.iiss.org/~publication/5e912bc8-b623-41b5-9ce2-0fbd003e95aa/the-deterioration-of-australiachina-relations.pdf>.

Security Law in Hong Kong, Australia responded by suspending its extradition treaty there.⁸⁰

Canberra had regularly discussed with New Delhi the issue of Australia's participation in the Malabar naval exercise since 2015, but India continued to decline the request due to fears of Chinese backlash. In the 22nd version of the Malabar exercise held off Guam in June 2018, India decided to go ahead trilaterally, without including the Australian Navy. Similarly, the 23rd edition of the Malabar exercise, held off the coast of Japan from 26 September through 4 October 2019 was also without Australian participation.⁸¹

Due to bitter memories of the 2007 fiasco,⁸² Australia was long regarded in India's strategic circles as the least reliable member of the Quad. However, Australia's frequent demonstration of resolve in the face of Chinese coercion seems to have moderated Indian apprehensions. It should be noted that Australia is the only country besides the US which has its own version of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.⁸³ As India adopts a more ambitious diplomatic framework for the Indo-Pacific, increasing its military ties with various regional stakeholders, Australia's exclusion from the Malabar naval exercises was an abnormality waiting to be removed. The India-Australia interlocking defence agreements and dialogues have already resulted in deeper defence cooperation. And after elevating the relations to 'comprehensive strategic partnership', it was a mere formality for India to invite Australia to the 2020 edition of the Malabar exercise.⁸⁴ In a virtual summit in the first week of June 2020, Modi and Morrison signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement which would allow the use of each other's military bases for logistic support.⁸⁵ The two countries also agreed to increase

80. Aashi Sadana, "Why Australia-China ties have gone down under", *The Indian Express*, 9 October 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-why-australia-china-ties-have-gone-down-under-6707112/>.

81. Indian Navy, "Exercise Malabar 2019". <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-malabar-2019>.

82. After participating in the Malabar 2007, Australia hastily pulled out from the Quad 1.0 after the Chinese protested bitterly, leaving India, the US and Japan in the lurch. Australia's Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was not as enthusiastic about the Quad as his predecessor, and in order to engineer a thaw with China, he decided to withdraw his country from the Quad in February 2008.

83. *Reuters*, "Australia to continue to support freedom of navigation in South China sea, PM says", *The Jakarta Post*, 16 July 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/07/16/australia-to-continue-to-support-freedom-of-navigation-in-south-china-sea-pm-says.html>.

84. Stephen Dziedzic and James Oaten, "Australia likely to join Malabar naval exercises with India, US, Japan as part of China 'containment' strategy", *ABC News*, 16 July 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-15/australia-set-join-india-us-japan-malabar-naval-exercise-china/12455576>.

85. Ministry of External Affairs, "Joint declaration on a shared vision for maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between the Republic of India and the Government of Australia", 4 June 2020.

the frequency of prime ministerial meetings while raising the 'Two-Plus-Two' format to the level of foreign and defence ministers.⁸⁶ The following month, Morrison held a virtual summit with his Japanese counterpart, where he criticised "coercive and unilateral actions" in the East China Sea and South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic while reaffirming the Quad's importance.⁸⁷ And the first foreign leader that Japan's new leader, Suga, spoke to after his inauguration was Morrison, implying close cooperation between Tokyo and Canberra.

Concurrently, deterioration in both India and Australia's ties with China has inevitably brought the two together. Just like the US and Japan, Australia has also supported India in its military standoff with China. When Australian High Commissioner to India, Barry O'Farrell, met with India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, on 30 July 2020, he said that "Australia opposes any attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo (on the India-China border), which only serve to increase tension and the risk of instability."⁸⁸ He also expressed Australia's deep concern with the Chinese action in the South China Sea region that is "destabilising and could provoke escalation." This led to his heated verbal spat with China's envoy to India, Sun Weidong, who blamed Australia for provoking unnecessary tensions in the South China Sea region.⁸⁹

Japan and Australia already enjoy America's security umbrella under existing alliances, leaving India as the only country in the Quad that is potentially vulnerable to Chinese aggression. Clearly, India can no longer afford strategic ambivalence as it faces an enormous Chinese military mobilisation on its borders, accompanied by provocative territorial claims. Though India's decision to invite Australia may seem a symbolic move, it will have huge geopolitical implications for the current India-China military tensions as well as for the larger context of the Quad. This could well be observed through growing Russian unease over India's tightening embrace of the Quad. Moscow has been the most vocal critic of the Quad, claiming that the US is trying to draw India into its embrace while steering it away from Russia. Though not directly related, after Australia's participation in the Malabar exercise, Russian

86. Nayanima Basu, "India, Australia sign defence pact, upgrade ties to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'", *The Print*, 4 June 2020. <https://theprint.in/world/pm-modi-discusses-healthcare-trade-defence-with-australia-pm-morrison-in-online-summit/435346/>.

87. Anthony Galloway Taiwan, "'Quad' alliance top of agenda as Morrison and Abe hold virtual meeting", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 July 2020. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/taiwan-quad-alliance-top-of-agenda-as-morrison-and-abe-hold-virtual-meeting-20200709-p55aq2.html>.

88. Elizabeth Roche, "China envoy to India, Australia counterpart in war of words on border standoff", *Livemint*, 31 July 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/china-envoy-to-india-australia-counterpart-in-war-of-words-on-border-standoff-11596193849988.html>.

89. Ibid.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov vehemently criticised the West for pushing India into playing a prominent anti-China role by getting involved in the Quad. Speaking at an event in early December 2020, he argued that “India is currently an object of the Western countries’ persistent, aggressive and devious policy as they are trying to engage it in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies, the so-called Quad while at the same time the West is attempting to undermine our close partnership and privileged relations with India.”⁹⁰

There were reports of fresh clashes in Naku La in north Sikkim on 20 January 2021, which the Indian side termed a “minor faceoff”. While India claimed that it was resolved after “insignificant and minor” injuries to soldiers on both sides, China plainly “denied anything happened”, with *Global Times* charging that reports of the clash in the Indian media was “fake news”.⁹¹ Demanding status quo ante along the LAC in Ladakh, India is keen for a clear roadmap for disengagement and de-escalation at all the points of friction. However, there has been no progress. Expressing his frustration at Beijing’s attitude during his speech at a virtual dialogue in early May 2021, Jaishankar remarked that India’s relationship with China is going through a very difficult phase as China has deployed a large part of the military on or close to the LAC without offering any plausible explanation. He said that Chinese soldiers “continue to be there now for a year. And, their actions have disturbed peace and tranquility in the border areas” further terming it unrealistic to have “friction, coercion, intimidation and bloodshed on the border” and maintain “a good relationship in other domains.”⁹² A week earlier, Jaishankar had a phone conversation with his Chinese counterpart, during which, according to a statement issued by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Jaishankar “conveyed that while the process of disengagement had commenced earlier this year, it remained unfinished. He emphasised that this process needed to be completed at the earliest. Full restoration of peace and tranquillity in the border areas would enable progress in the bilateral relationship.”⁹³

90. Elizabeth Roche, “West is engaging India in anti-China games, says Russia”, *Livemint*, 10 December 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/west-is-engaging-india-in-anti-china-games-says-russia-11607569256383.html>.

91. “Latest China-India border clash fake news: source”, *Global Times*, 25 January 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1213844.shtml>.

92. Press Trust of India, “India-China relations going through a ‘very difficult phase’: Jaishankar”, *Business Standard*, 5 May 2021. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-china-relations-going-through-a-very-difficult-phase-jaishankar-121050500854_1.html.

93. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Telephone conversation between External Affairs Minister and State Councilor & Foreign Minister of China, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi”, 30 April 2021. https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33831/Telephone_conversation_between_External_Affairs_Minister_and_State_Councilor__Foreign_Minister_of_China_HE_Mr_Wang_Yi.

Against the backdrop of China's continued belligerence on the border, it is important to ask whether inviting Australia has proved counterproductive to India's diplomatic juggling. This would not be an easy question to answer, but one can surely argue that India is willing to pay the consequences of its move and does not feel hindered by an abstract need to maintain balance.

Australia's Defence Minister, Linda Reynolds, felt that the Malabar military exercises "are key to enhancing Australia's maritime capabilities, building interoperability with our close partners and demonstrating our collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific."⁹⁴ After expressing delight over India's invitation, Australian High Commissioner to India, in an interview, termed the Australian government's announcement in 2008 of not participating in the Malabar exercises as "a mistake", further arguing that it "became a stumbling block, and that was not forgotten in terms of reassembling Australia as part of that exercise."⁹⁵

As Beijing is threatening to dial back its economic engagement with Australia, public opinion in Australia seems to be in favour of increasing its engagement with India, as both countries are democratic and share British traditions of rule of law. Despite India's democratic credentials, any negative coverage of India on its human rights record in Australia is seen as driven by differing perceptions of liberal democracy. As argued by Salvatore Babones, an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, despite grinding poverty and mass illiteracy, India is still the shining democratic star in its South Asian neighbourhood, where "Pakistan struggles to overcome military rule, Bangladesh is essentially a one-party state and Sri Lanka still hasn't come to terms with the legacy of a brutal civil war."⁹⁶ He further argues that recent controversies on Muslim minority rights, the citizenship law, censorship in Kashmir and riots in Delhi, though totally avoidable, could also be seen as "signs of democratic inefficiency, not totalitarian repression", because "public administration in India is often chaotic, and the government's public relations look shockingly politically incorrect when seen from an Australian perspective."⁹⁷ As both countries are facing varying security challenges from

94. Dinakar Peri, "Australia to join Malabar naval exercise next month", *The Hindu*, 19 October 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/australia-to-join-malabar-naval-exercise-next-month/article32892277.ece>.

95. Suhasini Haidar, "Interview: A 'mistake' to have walked out of Quad, Malabar exercise in 2008: Australian envoy Barry O'Farrell", *The Hindu*, 23 October 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/a-mistake-to-have-walked-out-of-quad-malabar-exercise-in-2008-australian-envoy-barry-ofarrell/article32931294.ece>.

96. Salvatore Babones, "Australia should embrace closer defence links with India", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 2020. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/australia-should-embrace-closer-defence-links-with-india-20201020-p566oe.html>.

97. Ibid.

China, there is an urgent need to develop much-needed depth to their strategic partnership through maritime burden-sharing and increased defence cooperation. This would also reduce some policy divergences, help India's capacity-building in the naval domain and reinforce each other's positions in the Indo-Pacific.

The surge of global distrust, which began with China's COVID-19 cover-up, has only coincided with Beijing's intensified efforts to intimidate other countries. China's revisionism has alarmed many countries that would have preferred to turn a blind eye and continue to accept Chinese investment. The US has been the most vocal in calling out China's increasing aggression, but many countries, including India and Australia, seem to have comprehended the challenge and have organised accordingly to Beijing's bullying tactics. Some Chinese strategic thinkers have noticed the global backlash. Regarded in academic circles, the Dean of Tsinghua University's Institute of Modern International Relations, Yan Xuetong, has argued that it is counterproductive for China to pick unnecessary ideological fights with other countries. Aware of the consequences of proxy wars based on ideological differences, he has said that Beijing "should have the awareness to respect other people's political systems and suppress their arrogance of demeaning their political systems."⁹⁸ But there are no signs yet that China plans to halt or roll back its push with its revisionist policies.

98. Jun Mai, "US-China rivalry: Beijing should stop picking ideological battles with Washington, academic says", *South China Morning Post*, 7 October 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3104567/us-china-rivalry-beijing-should-stop-picking-ideological>.

Getting the Indian Response Right

Shifts in power do not necessarily lead to war when countries can capably negotiate the determinants of their power. Fundamentally, war is a negotiation or bargaining over power and resolve. War occurs only when negotiation and bargaining become impossible or too costly.⁹⁹ The Quad is likely to play an active role in India's great power diplomacy, notwithstanding the lack of clarity at present regarding the specific contours of that role. Since the Quad is in the process of being formalised, its deterrent value cannot be underestimated. While the protracted nature of the Ladakh tensions is an indication of India's stiffening posture, one could also interpret it as New Delhi's signal to other Quad partners of its growing willingness to stand up to China's assertiveness. India still remains interested in de-escalating the crisis at Ladakh, but the primary logic in not acquiescing to China's bullying tactics seems to be to demonstrate India's red lines in the Himalayas. Even though India is far behind China in terms of power projection, it seems ahead in showing resolve.

China's consistent anti-India stance, including its growing nexus with Pakistan and territorial assertiveness, are probably the reasons why India has embraced the logic of external balancing, and this might also be behind China's aggressive stance at Ladakh. China seems convinced that India has begun to balance it with the Quad's help. Logically, it would be in China's interests to demonstrate its willingness to accommodate India's border interests in lieu of India's return to its earlier evasiveness on the Quad. India would be closely looking at the Biden administration's China policy before it makes up its mind regarding the prospects of a separate peace with China. Theoretically speaking, it would not be difficult for India to quickly reverse its course of action if either China offers unambiguous benefits or America signals abandonment of the Quad. But India's problem is much bigger: it is far easier for other Quad members to make a separate peace, as many do not have such complex territorial issues at stake. Nevertheless, the rise of China has profoundly affected India's economic and security environment due to its geographic proximity. Though consistent official rhetoric on 'strategic autonomy' has allowed India to retain a huge global significance as a swing state unwilling to commit to any alliance, this exercise may yet prove difficult to sustain in future, requiring a more realist exercise of power balancing. It is imperative for India to counter China, which may not be possible without

99. Thomas Chadeaux, "Bargaining over power: when do shifts in power lead to war?" *International Theory*, 3 (2), 2011. http://www.thomaschadeaux.com/files/InternationalTheory_PowerShifts.pdf.

American support. The reasons are not too difficult to understand. First, the US would shield India from China's power, which has been growing at a pace faster than that of India. Since China has been spending almost four times on its military in comparison to India, this gap will affect military balance at the India-China border. Underlining the significance of American help, Rajesh Rajagopalan asserts that "even if India's large military precludes any need for the US or anyone else to send military forces to bolster Indian defences, New Delhi will still need American assistance to ensure that a rapidly modernising People's Liberation Army does not gain advantage at the LAC. In addition, US intelligence assistance can bolster Indian efforts, and US diplomatic help will be necessary to hold China off in multilateral forums."¹⁰⁰

The existence of the Quad signifies collective resolve in the power corridors of New Delhi, Washington, Tokyo and Canberra to ensure security through credibility. However, it is rightly observed that the deterrent aspect of the Quad is not through credibility but the uncertainty of its one day becoming a formal alliance system. In other words, the Quad seems to be playing the game of manipulating Chinese perceptions of the risks associated with an anti-China security alliance. Actually, the Quad is not yet a deterrent; it is just a deterrent-in-being.

Since much of China's revisionist behaviour involves conscious efforts to probe the defences of the rules-based international order, further tolerance of China's incremental expansionism would only undermine the credibility of all the maritime democracies. Lack of resolve to formalise and institutionalise the Quad would only mean loss of credibility, resulting in further encouragement to aggressive behaviour. Certainly, there are diplomatic, economic and military costs involved in taking appropriate measures to counter Chinese expansionism in the initial phase, but the costs to postponing these measures until Beijing's juggernaut acquires unstoppable momentum could be enormous.

Amidst Washington's assertive counter China strategy, India has three strategic choices in terms of dealing with China: hedging, balancing and bandwagoning. In mainstream international relations theory, hedging is the third choice in the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum. In this sense, hedging should be understood as an umbrella concept, open to multiple interpretations. However, it is generally viewed as a response to the shortcomings of 'balance of power'. Evelyn Goh defines the term as "a set of strategies aimed

100. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Countering China is now a priority for both India and US. But only one needs the other", *The Print*, 28 October 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/countering-china-is-now-a-priority-for-both-india-and-us-but-only-one-needs-the-other/532106/>.

at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another.”¹⁰¹ Since hedging is a mix of balancing and bandwagoning, it seeks to avoid the risks of each, thereby “either gaining the benefit of buying time to determine whether the state should balance or bandwagon until the strategic landscape’s future direction is clarified, or attaining a strategic benefit to maintain the state’s neutral position in a manner that maximises autonomy.”¹⁰² By leaving strategic options open, hedging has been India’s standard approach as its complex engagement of China at the political, economic and strategic levels has taken place with the hope that Beijing may be persuaded into behaviour that minimises bilateral tensions. Understood as a foreign policy approach that either avoids pure balancing and bandwagoning or an ambiguous security alignment due to prohibitive costs, hedging also offers India the prospects of tactical cooperation with China on economic matters while confronting it when required to defend core security interests.

Balancing is driven by the need to avoid losses. Bandwagoning assumes that a weaker state can partner with the stronger power to seek security guarantees. There is also an opportunistic aspect of bandwagoning, since states often bandwagon for gains.¹⁰³ However, bandwagoning would involve losing autonomy due to the dominant status of the stronger power. Understood in this sense, how should we define India’s strategic partnership with the US? Is it a watered-down version of an alliance or bandwagoning? A state will ally with the power it believes is least dangerous. Since the end of the Cold War, India has been trying to deepen its strategic partnership with the US. Therefore, New Delhi has no valid reason to view Washington as a threatening power trying to constrain its strategic choices. Most scholars tend to support the view that India and the US are building a partnership to balance China’s emergence in the post-Cold War geopolitical order. One could therefore argue that India’s strategic behaviour vis-à-vis China should be sufficient to designate it as a balancing state. At first glance, this designation may appear reasonable, as it is rooted in the common security threat from China. But this ignores

101. Evelyn Goh, “Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies”, *Policy Studies*, 16, Washington: East-West Center, 2005, p. viii. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS016.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32053>.

102. Kei Koga, “The Concept of ‘Hedging’ Revisited: The Case of Japan’s Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia’s Power Shift”, *International Studies Review*, 20 (4), 2017. <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article/20/4/633/4781685>.

103. Randall L Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back”, *International Security*, 19 (1), 1994.

the complexities of the relationship, particularly the fact that India has been determined to use largely non-coercive means to induce cooperation so long as China remains non-belligerent. In the Indian context, bandwagoning should be viewed a pessimistic option entailing capitulation to Chinese hegemony while excluding the US from its strategic options.

The most challenging yet viable option is balancing. India has so far followed hedging. However, being a short-term strategy, hedging works best in an uncertain environment. Since China's continued aggressive behaviour seems to have removed the uncertainty element, the need to hedge has disappeared. In these circumstances, balancing may prove to be the preferred choice for India in the future. China's military capabilities have increased rapidly, and India's defence resources remain constrained. Since India alone cannot balance China, recent measures taken by New Delhi point to coalition-building efforts with the US and other partners. Recognising that overreliance on the US may not be a good option either, India seems to have modified its security posture by also nurturing security networks with regional states, including Japan and Australia, against the risk of an abrupt reduction of American commitment. In this sense, India's strategic posture is likely to be based on balancing against the Chinese threat.

Domestic political calculations and perceptions of national security threats are playing an important role in how India should respond. After the Galwan Valley clashes, Indian policymakers seem to have realised that further indecisiveness in standing up to China's coercion has incalculable consequences in terms of both territory and credibility. Surely, the 2017 Doklam crisis was a moment when India perceived a threat to its interests. But there is a qualitative difference: Doklam was not an Indian territory and New Delhi's actions stemmed from its treaty obligation with Bhutan which stood threatened because of China's maligned moves. On the other hand, Ladakh has been an indisputable Indian territory, and New Delhi's failure to act decisively has consequences. For India, the rationale and objectives of the revived Quad represent promise in the defence and furtherance of India's national interests. Therefore, gone are the days when India's commitment to the Quad was believed to be complicated by its traditional attachment to 'non-alignment' as well as the need to reassure China to preserve the ill-fated 'Wuhan spirit'.

Due to its cautious hedging, India was previously considered the weakest link in the Quad as New Delhi was reluctant to be seen as embracing an alliance-type relationship. Indian scholars were critical of this avoidable ambivalence. As argued by Rajesh Rajagopalan not long ago, India's "reluctance to engage positively with the Quad is potentially dangerous because it hurts India's

security interests and thus represents a 'costly signal' that increases India's security vulnerability. Although the Quad is generally seen as an effort to balance China, India's tardiness in moving forward with it can also be seen as an effort to reassure China."¹⁰⁴ This seems to be coming to an end. China's belligerent behaviour appears to have forced India to overcome this hesitation as it is gradually becoming more comfortable in acknowledging the Quad's rationale.

According to Jaishankar, the emergence of the Quad is a reflection of the contemporary multipolar world which has been witnessing ad-hoc groups of countries. Giving example of the Russia-India-China triangle working together to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis the Western countries two decades ago, much before the idea of the Quad germinated, Jaishankar has contended that "... (i)ndependent India will express itself very differently and that is today in an example like [the] Quad. [The] Quad is not the only example where four countries have found it useful to consult on issues which are in their common interest."¹⁰⁵ The Quad remains an example of issue-based alignment which is not backed by any formal security treaty or an institutional structure. Yet, in whatever language Jaishankar rationalises India's participation in the Quad, he is probably trying to convey a crucial message that as a geopolitical construct, the Quad is about establishing spheres of influence that would inevitably involve competition between Washington and Beijing as well as between India and China. According to Derek Grossman, it is Jaishankar's insistence that ultimately convinced Modi to agree to Abe's proposal for all four Quad country leaders to be seated together across the table from Xi at the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, in 2019.¹⁰⁶

There is nothing sacrosanct about alliances, and India's views on them need to evolve. An India that refuses to adapt its national security policies and foreign policy approaches to the new geopolitical realities of the Indo-Pacific could only create a power vacuum that invites conflict. However, as stated by Harsh V Pant, "[I]deological discourse about alliances matter more to us [Indians] than any operational reality on the ground. As a result, our adversaries find it easy to play with our minds. It's not without reason that Chinese policy makers and their mouthpieces continue to ask India to maintain distance from the

104. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Affairs* 96 (1), 2020, p. 91.

105. "India building 'Asian NATO' through Quad?", S. Jaishankar answers', *Hindustan Times*, 23 October 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-building-asian-nato-through-quad-s-jaishankar-answers/story-zBVAmTRleXhnuKecHb8DbJ.html>.

106. Derek Grossman, "The Quad Is Poised to Become Openly Anti-China Soon", *The Wire*, 28 July 2020. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/quad-india-australia-japan-usa-anti-china>.

US even as China continues to work against Indian interests at every level.”¹⁰⁷ What we need to remember is that after India had become independent, non-alignment was conceptualised as the foundational principle of India’s foreign policy in order to expand, not to limit, India’s diplomatic maneuvering space. India’s lack of success in making China follow bilateral agreements on border management may have led Beijing to feel that it has got more room to challenge India without having to worry as much about the consequences. Since the primary aim of any policy should be “to enhance India’s strategic space and capability”, it would be suicidal to continue to remain “prisoners of labels”.¹⁰⁸

All security partnerships are made in a specific context and against a particular threat. When the circumstances change, the priorities are also bound to change. Due to China’s antagonistic posture along the disputed border, India does not have the luxury of intellectual or philosophical debates. Even if it is not a full-fledged military alliance, the Quad is likely to “shift gears from consultation and coordination to become a de facto strategic alliance” that will shape a new security arrangement.¹⁰⁹ However, there are serious questions on how to address the problems regarding entrapment and abandonment, because these are central to the Quad’s collective action. Glenn Snyder has argued that “when the balance of dependence is asymmetrical, perhaps because one ally is more directly threatened by an opponent, the more dependent ally will fear abandonment more than entrapment, while the less dependent partner will worry more about entrapment.”¹¹⁰ Due to India’s asymmetrical dependence upon the US, what makes New Delhi worried is the fear of abandonment whereas Washington’s major concern is entrapment. In other words, the US has many allies, but India may not have one, as recently exemplified in Russian foreign minister’s illogical assertion, in favour of China, that India is being ensnared into the Quad by the US. Those critical of the Quad and Indo-US relations argue that India’s problem is not abandonment but getting entrapped into America’s impending conflicts with China. It is feared that close cooperation with Washington will trap New Delhi into the emerging Sino-US conflict and bring unnecessary Chinese attention to India.

107. Harsh V Pant, “Time to move on”, *The Times of India*, 28 October 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/time-to-move-on-beijings-aggression-has-made-indias-diffidence-about-alignment-obsolete/>.

108. Rakesh Sood, “The India-U.S. defence partnership is deepening”, *The Hindu*, 30 October 2020, p. 6. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-india-us-defence-partnership-is-deepening/article32975949.ece>.

109. Brahma Chellaney, “The Quad Sharpens Its Edges”, *Project Syndicate*, 16 October 2020. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-quad-india-us-japan-australia-united-front-vs-china-by-brahma-chellaney-2020-10>.

110. Glenn H Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 188.

And this may be one of the major reasons why China is trying to put India in its place through limited offensives along the Himalayas. This logic may have been true in the past before China's assertiveness on the disputed borders. But ever since China's intentions became clear, India has more to fear from abandonment than entrapment. Since Beijing seems to have become convinced that New Delhi is part of the anti-China coalition, India's attempts at accommodation with China have clearly not worked. Presently, India needs US support more than at any time in the past. And if India could manage the disputed land border and the Indian Ocean well, it would give a tremendous boost in restraining the Chinese juggernaut. Moreover, if all Quad partners continue to demonstrate credible commitment by way of visible actions, China would get the right message and could become less confrontational.

In the context of growing alignment of Indian and American interests in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi has also become amenable to the idea of greater American presence in South Asia. Immediately after his high-profile 'Two-Plus-Two' India visit, Pompeo went to Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia – countries that are geo-strategically part of the Indo-Pacific, but are also crucial for China's intensive regional push to preclude the US from the Asian theatre. India has traditionally been averse to attempts by extra-regional powers (including the USSR during the Cold War years) to gain a foothold along its periphery, as it feared disturbances from larger geopolitical rivalries. But New Delhi has become increasingly alarmed by Beijing's financial and infrastructure assistance to Sri Lanka and the Maldives in recent years. Hence, to reduce China's influence in the Indian Ocean, India seeks enhanced American engagement in the region. Shared identities often build shared interests, which lead to shared actions. Since America's growing involvement in Sri Lanka and the Maldives would inevitably facilitate greater American military presence and commitment in the Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi has welcomed this move. This may help India save some of its resources in the Indian Ocean.

Beijing believes that the Indo-Pacific and the Quad are nothing but barely-disguised platforms to lay the foundation for a military alliance aimed at containing its rise as well as undermining its politico-economic system. As part of a counter alliance-building strategy and through various multilateral institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa); and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China has been seeking to keep India away from a full commitment to

the Quad and the US-led alliance network.¹¹¹ But China's coercive economic tactics and territorial expansionism will force India to shed its reticence in securing its core interests. In a sense, India may now be the real anchor in making the Indo-Pacific region a strategic reality. As argued by Pant:

“While Japan may have given the idea its original push, Australia may have given it intellectual ballast and Washington may have led the way in its operationalisation, it is New Delhi's proactive foreign policy outlook that made it possible for others to buy into the concept and incorporate it in their security outlooks. No other country has done more than India in making the regional stakeholders believe that there is an alternative to just acquiescing to a China-led Asian order.”¹¹²

111. Wooyeal Paik and Jae Jeok Park, “The Quad's Search for Non-Military Roles and China's Strategic Response: Minilateralism, Infrastructure Investment, and Regional Balancing”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2020.1766908.

112. Harsh V Pant, “The real anchor of the Indo-Pacific plan”, *Hindustan Times*, 21 October 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-real-anchor-of-the-indo-pacific-plan/story-NozmhGHBi6Zo4jluICQFIL.html>.

Firming up the Quad's Agenda

In terms of coalition building, the biggest debate about the revived Quad and its militarisation is its undefined ability to assist member states if China escalates the conflict with anyone. Particularly following America's growing isolationist tendency during the last few years and the Trump administration's tactless demands from regional allies to shoulder more security responsibilities, policymakers in India, Japan and Australia will be looking for clearer signalling from the Biden administration (by way of enhanced military coordination and technology cooperation) that America remains invested in the Quad's success. Visible geopolitical and geo-economic actions, accompanied by forceful US rhetoric, would be effective in firming up the Quad. However, this argument also has sound merit that the Quad would benefit from greater security cooperation among non-US members – India, Australia and Japan – because of the positive dimensions of mini-laterals; it would lead to “greater synergies, inter-operability and capabilities of the three countries, boosting the Quad's resilience to Chinese interference. It also opens space for the three non-US Quad members to collaborate on security issues outside the shadow of US-China competition. Beijing would have less room to manoeuvre against the Quad if the US were seen as supporting Japanese, Australian and Indian cooperation rather than co-opting them for its own interests in the region.”¹¹³

There remain vibrant debates in India about the wisdom and practicality of close alignment with the US. India's diplomatic repositioning is being driven to a great extent by China's aggressive drive across the Indo-Pacific. Only by bringing India closer into the US strategic network to help constrain China can the Quad justify the revival of the Indo-Pacific's strategic formulation. The public backlash after the Chinese aggression at Galwan would weaken the charm of even more useful aspects of 'strategic autonomy'. But it does not mean that India has outsourced its strategic thinking to the US.

India's present ability to shape events outside its territorial and maritime borders remains limited. This is arguably where the Quad's importance lies. As India proceeds with its shift to the Indo-Pacific, cooperation among the Quad partners seems a logical measure to cope with the rise of China. Arun Prakash, India's former navy chief, has underlined the significance of Australia's inclusion in the Malabar exercise, yet has also pointed out “two conundrums”.

113. Mason Richey, “The right angle of the Quadrilatera”, *East Asia Forum*, 12 May, 2021. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/12/the-right-angle-of-the-quadrilateral/>.

“Firstly, given the same composition, what is the distinction now between [the] “Malabar” and the “Quad”? Secondly, if Malabar 1992 was emblematic of India’s emergence from its chrysalis of non-alignment, does Malabar 2020 mark the release of Australia from China’s thralldom?”¹¹⁴ The answer, perhaps, is the creation of a broad-based “Indo-Pacific Concord” that would not act as an “Asian NATO” but a grouping of democracies having a clear maritime security charter. Prakash argues that “using the Quad and Malabar templates, a shore-based secretariat can be established in a central location like Port Blair, in the Andaman Islands, which would schedule and conduct periodic multinational naval exercises.”¹¹⁵

If the present momentum continues unabated, the Quad could soon emerge as a critical element of India’s foreign and security policy as well as “a definitive moment in the evolution of post-War Asian economic and security architectures.”¹¹⁶ Beijing is currently dominated by forces hostile to the Quad countries’ growing footprints in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, being at the core of the Indo-Pacific vision, the Quad needs to be equipped with a definitive blueprint if India, the US, Japan and Australia want it to have a meaningful impact. As former Indian diplomat and the Director General of India’s Ministry of Defence-run Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Sujan Chinoy, writes that the Quad “should have a tough security-oriented core with a softer and inclusive exoskeleton that prioritises the developmental agenda.”¹¹⁷ Elsewhere, Chinoy argues that three other Quad countries should “address legacy cartographic anomalies” in their respective maps of India’s international boundaries with both Pakistan and China, as projection of New Delhi’s territorial claims would lead to more convergence of geo-strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹⁸ The Quad should also cooperate on supporting those regional infrastructure projects that would better integrate the Indo-Pacific as a coherent maritime order.¹¹⁹ Another priority should be to issue a

114. Arun Prakash, “Riders to the Sea”, *The Indian Express*, 24 October 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/quad-malabar-navy-exercise-china-india-6854350/>.

115. Ibid.

116. C Raja Mohan, “India, Quad & value of coalitions”, *The Indian Express*, 6 October 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/quad-ministerial-meeting-indo-pacific-tokyo-india-forrign-policy-jaishankar-6704398/>.

117. Sujan R Chinoy, “The rise of the Quad”, *The Indian Express*, 21 October 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/quad-countries-china-navy-malabar-exercise-ladakh-australia-6825430/>.

118. Sujan R Chinoy, “The Cartographic Route to Deeper Strategic Partnerships”, Policy Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 3 July 2020. <https://idsa.in/policybrief/cartographic-route-to-strategic-partnerships-srchinoy-030720>.

119. H D P Envall, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Towards An Indo-Pacific Order?”, Policy Report, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, September 2019. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PR190909_The-Quadrilateral-Security-Dialogue.pdf.

joint statement by the four Quad members at the next ministerial meeting, which will further consolidate the group.

The Quad countries would need to develop more lucidity about the issue of ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN is essentially an economic grouping which does not have a unified voice on security issues. For the purpose of dispelling initial apprehensions, it was imperative to emphasise ASEAN centrality in maintaining a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Due to China's growing regional influence coupled with its aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, the ASEAN countries cannot be expected to have a consensus on what role they would play when the US-China strategic competition is intensified. In their recent talks in Tokyo, the Quad countries have again emphasised ASEAN centrality. While ASEAN centrality is emphasised in all public statements, the reiteration gives the impression that the centrality of ASEAN is under threat.¹²⁰

China prefers to deal with the ASEAN states individually rather than as a bloc. Thus, the time may have come for the Quad to seriously consider moving beyond ASEAN centrality, without giving the impression of controlling the Indo-Pacific region by ignoring the interests of the Southeast Asian countries. It should communicate with interested ASEAN countries on an individual basis. This would deny China an opportunity to dilute the core narratives of the Indo-Pacific. In fact, the process may already have begun with discussions on 'Quad Plus' and attempts by the Quad countries to attract many ASEAN countries to become actively involved in the Indo-Pacific.¹²¹ It is important to remember that it is their collective credibility to counter China's aggression which should remain the central aspect of the Quad countries' Indo-Pacific approach, although their leaders may have tended to downplay this publicly, depending on the forum in which they speak.

Besides focusing on issues like secure communications, defence technology collaboration and improved economic and trade linkages, the scope of the Quad's consultative agenda needs to be broadened further to include cooperation on both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Although it is true that political transformation in illiberal societies is not the job the Quad should undertake, its four members must however utilise the 'Malabar moment' to stake out an agenda on how to strengthen the existing

120. Gurjit Singh, "Partnership in progress", *The Indian Express*, 20 November 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/asean-summit-india-jaishankar-east-asia-summit-7057811/>.

121. K Yhome, "'ASEAN centrality' and the emerging great power competition", Observer Research Foundation, 30 October 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/asean-centrality-and-the-emerging-great-power-competition/>.

democratic systems in the Indo-Pacific region. A clear vision on how to counter disinformation campaigns by authoritarian states against democratic states would advance the real promise of the Quad.

Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted societies across the world, it has also brought greater clarity for policymakers in democratic states. India and Australia are two such examples, as reflected in the former's strategically bold decision to invite the latter in the Malabar naval exercise. This will inevitably impact the geopolitics of the Quad. Since its inception in 2007, the Quad has been the subject of intense debate among policymakers and scholars. As the Quad was revived in Manila in 2017, the debate has acquired a multifaceted dimension. As the analysis shows, India, the US, Japan and Australia are concerned about Xi's ascendancy in China and are willing to counter the Chinese threat by strengthening the Quad. China's misinformation campaigns and aggressive territorial expansionism in multiple theatres during the COVID-19 pandemic clearly reveal Beijing's determination to change the global status quo.

The Quad may have originated from Abe's vision, but in the current geostrategic context of 2021, it is truly a US-led initiative. If India had no credible partners, it would have preferred to bandwagon with China to ensure its basic security. However, since India has a burgeoning relationship with the US, it is likely that its primary concern revolves around abandonment. Despite this dilemma, it seems that India is doomed to adopt a more assertive and resolute posture since uncertainty about Chinese behaviour will continue to grow, irrespective of the future shape of America's approach toward China. India has often dilly-dallied on the Quad, balancing its position between the US and China. Ever since Modi's famous declaration at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 that India's Indo-Pacific strategy is not "directed against any country", India's foreign policy establishment has lost no opportunity to emphasise India's tradition of 'strategic autonomy' in its engagement with the Quad. But the Galwan Valley incident seems to have brought more strategic clarity to New Delhi: it is not sufficient to maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region without taking concrete actions. Therefore, India's move to discard its military isolationism by turning the Malabar naval exercise into a de-facto Quad exercise should be seen as a display of commitment, howsoever symbolic, towards militarising the Quad. It also shows New Delhi's political will in using the Quad for strategic leverage, as India has acquired sufficient evidence that Beijing only respects power and strength.

China has understandably reacted angrily to the growing trajectory of the Quad toward formalisation, and potential militarisation. And this requires India to continue elevating its security cooperation with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad members seem convinced that business as

usual with an assertive Beijing is no longer possible; yet in the fast-changing international environment, it is equally important to realise that aggression cannot be answered by aggression alone. Both sides – the Quad and China – need to constantly communicate their mutual red lines and be ready for economic exchange where possible. Cooperation across a range of sectors in the Indo-Pacific is also important to deal with many other problems and challenges such as terrorism, natural disasters, illegal fishing and transactional crimes.

How the revived Quad will evolve depends largely on the US' role. The sooner Biden articulates his clear China policy, the better it would be for India and the Quad. On the other hand, to minimise the alliance dilemma, there is a need for institutionalised policy coordination to manage the perception gap among the Quad partners. A shift to the maritime sphere, in particular, is long overdue. Modi's progress in taking the idea of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) further with the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative notwithstanding,¹²² concrete steps need to be taken by India to strengthen maritime security by becoming a net security provider.

By making the Quad a more robust mechanism for coordination, the four countries need to emphasise a framework for financing sustainable projects that promote green growth. India has not played a major role in macroeconomic and financial stability efforts either. The more commercial opportunities that are created, the more the dynamism of the Quad will increase, thus increasing the complementarities between their economies in the digital era. The Quad should also step up digital partnerships with other key regional partners, including ASEAN, South Korea, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom and Pacific Island nations, as it is imperative for supporting a FOIP region.

Though not formally allied to the other Quad countries, India seems ready to institutionalise its defence ties. What the Quad needs now is a serious turnaround plan, with regional and global angles worked out, in ways that can lead to greater military interoperability and intelligence sharing. Moreover, India's armed forces would achieve a superior mode of interoperability with their Quad counterparts when these efforts are combined with a serious and systematic restructuring of India's own military commands and joint operations.

122. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, "The Indo-Pacific journey", *The Indian Express*, 7 November 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pacific-relations-quad-exercise-6982086/>.

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