



THE INDO-PACIFIC QUAD FACTOR AND INDIA'S POSITION

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, gained momentum during this same crisis as the Covid-19 outbreak brought the world to a halt. Although it is a top priority for the Quad, opposing China now seems to be the main agenda due to the changing security landscape. That is to say, even if the Quad has not explicitly acknowledged this, China is unquestionably the major issue. The entire logic for the creation of the Quad is quantified by Beijing's exclusion from the four-member grouping. In this situation, the Quad can be viewed as a novel type of security partnership for the twenty-first century.

The growing polarisation brought on by the US-China conflict, in which each country calls for others to "join" its side, adds to the grouping's complexity. The Quad is being compelled by the expanding contingencies to play a bigger part in battling both conventional and unconventional security challenges. Following are the crucial questions: Is there a "fire-fighting" mode for the Quad? If so, does China become concerned? What part does India play in the Indo-Pacific region?

QUAD STRATEGICALLY TURNED OFF THE VIRTUAL MODE IN TOKYO

Since the group's relaunch in November 2017, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia hosted the second Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo on October 6, 2020. It was the second virtual meeting of its kind following the first one in June and the first high-level Quad gathering since the 2019 foreign minister-level meeting that took place in New York in conjunction with the UN General Assembly meeting. The Tokyo summit was held as a "in-person" event during the epidemic, demonstrating its significance by rejecting the new norm of virtual meetings, while it was undoubtedly not symbolic in orientation.

The time and setting of the meeting—amid mounting worries about Beijing's assertive behaviour and escalating rumours about China's management of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan—added to the significance of the Tokyo gathering. In response to what Washington has referred to as China's "exploitation, corruption, and coercion" of smaller states in the area, the delegates called for intensifying coordination to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific. In addition, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "Once we've institutionalised what we're

doing, the four of us together, we can begin to build out a true security framework." During the news conference.

Beijing continues to accept the outdated Asia-Pacific framework rather than adopting the new Indo-Pacific nomenclature because it views the Quad as a united front against China from a Cold War mentality. China, as was expected, voiced its displeasure with the Tokyo summit, railing against "forming exclusive cliques," "targeting third parties or undermining third parties' interests," and insisting that such cooperation should "contribute to regional peace, stability, and development rather than doing the opposite."

With these systemic dynamics at work, one can argue that while the pandemic has forced the Quad to take additional action on nontraditional security objectives—aiming at human security against fighting the virus—on the other hand, the situation has also stretched the Quad's security envelope, given the need to counter China's growing adventurism and "wolf warrior" diplomacy.

Undoubtedly, one may argue that the pandemic's impact on global health has strengthened regional and external powers' strategic alignment as they work to increase their influence and fend off external threats, as demonstrated by the Quad's active participation in COVID-19.

QUAD IN ACTION: CHINA IS THE ROOM'S UNSEEN ELEPHANT

The rise of China, the expansion of India's economic and strategic clout, and—most importantly—the increasing significance of the Indian Ocean as a strategic trade corridor—which transports nearly two-thirds of the world's oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo—have necessitated a shift in the security architecture from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. These circumstances have caused regional stakeholders to become more vocal about the need for a free and open Indo-Pacific, which has resulted in the Quad's re-establishment. The commitment of member states to uphold a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region based on a rules-based international order, supported by ASEAN centrality, the rule of law, sustainable and transparent infrastructure investment, freedom of navigation and overflight, mutual respect for sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes forms the basis of their shared Indo-Pacific vision. It should be



noted that Australia was one of the first nations to formally adopt the term Indo-Pacific in its 2013 Defence White Paper. Nevertheless, the phrase gained popularity after US President Donald Trump called for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” during his 2017 trip to Asia, a region where independent nations could “thrive in freedom and peace” and all states “play by the rules.”

The tsunami of 2004 gave the grouping of the four Indo-Pacific democracies the initial impetus to urge for cooperation in humanitarian aid and disaster relief activities. The coalition has changed over time, though, becoming one with a strategic vision centred on the escalating worries about free and open seas and a rules-based order. After a 10-year break, the formal dialogue between the four countries was resumed in late 2017 with a meeting in Manila on the fringes of the ASEAN and East Asia Summits. Since then, the Quad has met twice a year, with the “Quad Plus video-conference” being held frequently during the pandemic to include additional interested states in the dialogue. This demonstrates how the Indo-Pacific has evolved from its original idea as a geographical construct to one that is now seen differently by many nations as a political and strategic construct.

The gathering upgraded the dialogue to that of a foreign minister or secretary of state in 2019, which is noteworthy. The group was elevated to “Quad Plus,” adding three new Indo-Pacific nations—New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam—as well as some overseas stakeholders—Israel and Brazil—as COVID-19 became a major priority. The logic of convergent security interests under the pandemic and working together to determine a course of action is what motivates this expansion. Additionally, the Quad’s security and political discourse has been heavily influenced by the China factor, since each member is currently experiencing heightened tensions with China. For instance, a bilateral trade war and subsequent diplomatic repercussions have put Washington and Beijing at odds since 2018. Since April 2020, India and China have been fighting militarily along the Line of Actual Control. On June 15, 2020, a violent clash in the Galwan Valley caused the first casualties in more than 45 years. Canberra and Beijing are at odds diplomatically as a result of a number of defence, trade, and foreign policy disagreements. Similarly, as China’s assertiveness in the area has increased, tensions between Japan and China in the East China Sea have gotten worse.

The goal of the gambit was to show symptoms of conflict with China while battling a forceful and aggressive China that was characterised by unilateral behavioural tendencies. This is evident in China’s increased island-building activities and militarization of the South China Sea, the establishment of the Senkaku Islands’ air defence identification zone in the East China Sea, the Belt and Road Initiative’s (BRI) debt-trap lending, the military standoffs in Doklam in 2017 and eastern Ladakh in 2020, and China’s expanding footprints in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

Despite these unilateral Chinese actions, the Quad has consistently insisted that it is not hostile to any nation, but rather that the expansionist tendencies of China are a manifestation of the Quad’s growing anti-China stance. As was mentioned, China

is no longer the unknown menace. This was made clear at the Tokyo meeting, where participants sharply criticised Beijing for COVID-19 and its increasing adventurism in the Indo-Pacific. The implications of this new anti-China stance are significant, making the security of the Indo-Pacific region a top priority. The South China Sea, Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the Himalayan border are poised to be the most likely catalysts for a direct conflict with China.

THE QUAD WORRIES CHINA

China’s once-fantasy worries about the Quad are now valid. The Quad’s rising power is what fuels this. The Quad’s key political and strategic dimensions are also becoming more important and gaining momentum. Australia’s participation in the India-led 24th Malabar Naval Exercise in November 2020, alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, created a precedent, making it the grouping’s first-ever joint military exercise and demonstrating their commitment to cooperating for common security objectives. Australia had been excluded from the exercise since 2007, when the first iteration of the Quad had collapsed. Previously, Malabar exercises were held with the United States since 1992 and with Japan since 2015. Australia’s involvement in the 2020 exercise thus seemed to put to rest concerns about the members’ dedication to the reorganised grouping.

Given that China’s great-power aspirations in the Indo-Pacific fall short because it is not a major participant in the IOR, this display of force in the Indian Ocean heightens Beijing’s concerns in the area, particularly in the maritime domain. Beijing has taken a number of proactive initiatives to increase China’s presence in the IOR. First, China has stationed ships and submarines from the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the western Indian Ocean and conducted live-fire drills there as part of anti-piracy operations. Beijing’s intention to defend its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean is reflected in these actions. Second, China claims that it has constructed its first overseas permanent naval military facility in Djibouti as a support base for executing its escorting, peacekeeping, and humanitarian relief missions in Africa and West Asia. Third, the expansive “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” a component of the BRI, has improved China’s maritime connectivity to the IOR and essentially filled the gap left by its “offshore” status. Under this initiative, China has a hand in developing ports in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, including Gwadar, Hambantota, and Kyaukpyu. The current situation is being drastically altered, and more importantly, the new Indo-Pacific security architecture is being shaped as a result.

Given these factors, one can convincingly claim that COVID-19 has strengthened the Indo-Pacific security architecture, as evidenced by the Quad’s increasing activism, which is indeed giving China more cause for concern than ever. The supporters of a free and open Indo-Pacific are more motivated than ever to band together in order to combat shared dangers, both conventional and unconventional, since the global tide is shifting against China.



INDIA'S GREATER CONTRIBUTION TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean is tempered by India's geographic and geopolitical importance in the Indo-Pacific. The need for such a counterbalance is primarily motivated by India's security concerns, which are primarily focused on China's encirclement policy through port facilities in India's neighbourhood, particularly Gwadar and Hambantota, as well as the desire to maintain and protect open and free sea lanes of communications against concerns regarding China's chokepoint in the South China Sea and increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean under the guise of antipiracy operations.

India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific can be seen as having four components. The Indo-Pacific architecture, in contrast to the Asia-Pacific architecture, offers New Delhi the chance to transcend its long-described middle-power status. This is supported by India's entry into the club of superpowers, specifically that of the United States and Japan, and by the development of close strategic ties with Washington and its regional allies. This greatly strengthens India's desire to become a great power and its capacity to project power throughout the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Second, India's Act East Policy and Extended Neighborhood Policy are automatically strengthened by New Delhi's active participation in the Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi's improved ties with ASEAN members like Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar serve to support this development.

Third, the growing defence relationship between India and the US serves as a potent counterweight to India's adversaries. The four foundational agreements signed by New Delhi and Washington, including the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA, 2002), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA, 2016), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA, 2018), and finally, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA, 2020), which encourages interoperability, serve as an example of this. Most crucially, the improved ties give India's military a considerable boost, especially when it comes to hitting targets with pin-point precision, which is crucial for India to monitor Chinese operations along the Himalayan border and gauge its expanding presence in the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, American weaponry exports to India have increased from being insignificant to 15 billion USD. Additionally, more frequent military drills between India and the US, such as Tiger Triumph, the first bilateral triservice amphibious drill between the two countries, have significantly improved interoperability and camaraderie. Being a member of the Blue Dot Network also gives New Delhi a compelling alternative to China's BRI.

Fourth, the India-Australia relations, which were upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020,

significantly strengthen India's strategic importance. In addition, Canberra and New Delhi inked nine agreements, two of which—the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement and the Australia-India Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement—provide a foundation for further defence collaboration between the two nations.

Fifthly, and most critically, India demonstrated its ability to act quickly in a crisis by giving medical assistance to its close neighbours, including the Seychelles, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, during COVID-19. Indeed, such aid was given on a larger international basis, with New Delhi helping Iran and Italy, two of the nations most severely affected by the pandemic. In order to improve their readiness for combating the epidemic, India also sent medical fast response teams to Comoros and Kuwait. Nine citizens of the Maldives were also evacuated by India from Wuhan, China, the location of the coronavirus outbreak.

Additionally, India promoted virtual summits such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) web conference (15 March 2020) and the "Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit" in order to create a worldwide reaction to combat the pandemic (26 March 2020). A SAARC Emergency Response Fund was also established in New Delhi for COVID-19, with an initial donation of 10 million USD from India. The Indian Armed Forces have also been actively involved in advancing India's mission abroad. A relief aircraft from the Indian Air Force (IAF) evacuated 76 Indians and 36 other persons from Wuhan in February. The Indian Navy's warship INS Khatri (5,600-ton landing ship) deployed under Mission Sagar, carrying medical teams, consignments of essential medicines, and food supplies to Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, and Seychelles. In collaboration with the Indian Army, the IAF launched the 18-hour Operation Sanjeevani to deliver 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines and hospital consumables to the Maldives.

In addition, as nations want to move production away from China, India is considered as one of the new "preferred" investment destinations in the world. India is a popular option because of the vastness of its market and, most crucially, the low cost of labour. Notably, Samsung of South Korea closed its operations in China and moved its manufacturing facilities to India, while Apple created a manufacturing facility in conjunction with Foxconn in that country. India is looking for land parcels all around the nation to facilitate these anticipated investments in response to these changes. This strengthens India's position in the system of supply chains around the world.

There is little debate about India's rising role in the Indo-Pacific, both as a significant participant and a responsible actor. India has already taken on more responsibility in the area with its active engagement, which calls for a bigger and more significant role in the post-COVID era. As a result, India will likely have more room to manoeuvre in the post-COVID international system, where it is thought to be one of the major forces in setting policy and safeguarding allies' interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad framework has in fact been expanded by



COVID-19, enabling important stakeholders to actively participate in addressing urgent traditional and nontraditional regional concerns.

CONCLUSION

The Quad is undoubtedly becoming one of the most important multilateral for a devoted to an increased security collaboration in the post-COVID-19 world order, given the escalating pace and scope of the group's operations. An active Quad also helps eliminate the long-held myth that the Indo-Pacific region is essentially inactive. Each of the Quad's four members must take on larger roles in balancing the dangers and power struggles in the Indo-Pacific because the stakes are higher than ever. Each step the Quad takes will make it more difficult for Beijing to realise China's aspirations to become a big power. China would undoubtedly become uneasy if the Quad emerges as a united front that supports a free and open Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, if China keeps pushing the boundaries of security and tests the commitment of the Quad members, the alliance will develop into precisely the kind of anti-China unit that Beijing fears.

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