

# QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



## **Reconciling the Quad with Autonomy of Action**

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### **Introduction**

Officials from India, Australia, the U.S., and Japan met on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations meeting in November 2017 and discussed issues relating to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, seen as a first move to set up a quadrilateral grouping (Quad) to pursue common interests amidst growing assertiveness by the Chinese military in the strategically key region. The wording was deliberately vague and each country issued its own individual statement. The very fact that there was no joint statement or text assures autonomy of action to each of the Quad countries.

India's External Affairs Ministry said the discussions focused on cooperation based on converging vision and values for promotion of peace, stability, and prosperity in an increasingly interconnected region.

“They agreed that a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large. The officials also exchanged

views on addressing common challenges of terrorism and proliferation linkages impacting the region as well as on enhancing connectivity,” it said in a statement.

The Indian side highlighted India’s Act East Policy as the cornerstone of its engagement in the Indo–Pacific region. India has also said it was open to working with like-minded countries on issues that advance its interests.

Responding to a question at his weekly press conference, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said, “As far as we are concerned, we have an open mind to cooperate with countries with convergence but obviously on an agenda which is relevant to us.” Kumar asserted that India was “not rigid” and that it has already been part of several trilateral initiatives due to its “broad acceptability.” He cited the Russia–India–China meeting on the Asia–Pacific last year, as well as with Sri Lanka and the Maldives on security in the Indian Ocean.

“We have been doing India-US-Japan for many years and recently India-Japan-Australia. We also have India-Afghanistan-Iran and we are looking to hold the India-US-Afghanistan meeting. All these meetings are conducted at various levels,” the spokesperson said.

The Indian statement on the Quad therefore is very clear. It views the group as a forum for exchange of ideas on securing the Indo–Pacific and not as an alliance, in fact neither do the other Quad countries, thereby putting at rest any concerns about the issue of strategic autonomy.

### **The U.S. Response**

In all fairness, the U.S. government has also officially stated its appreciation for India’s position on preserving its strategic autonomy, and denies any expectation that India should establish a formal alliance with it. Both countries look for greater convergence in their foreign policies, which is being realized.

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the U.S. in September 2014, and Barack Obama’s visit to India in January 2015, a strategic understanding on Asia–Pacific and Indian Ocean issues, encapsulated in the joint strategic vision for the Asia–Pacific and the Indian Ocean

emerged. This document suggested a shift in India's strategic thinking, with a more public position against Chinese maritime threat and a willingness to join the U.S. in promoting partnerships in the region.

Earlier, Modi chose a striking formulation in his joint press conference with Obama in September 2014 when he said that the U.S. was intrinsic to our Look East and Link West policies, which would suggest a growing role for the U.S. in our foreign policy thinking. During Obama's January 2015 visit, the joint statement noted that India's Act East policy and the U.S. rebalance to Asia provided opportunities for India, the U.S., and other Asia-Pacific countries to work closely to strengthen regional ties. This was the first time that India implicitly endorsed the U.S. rebalance towards Asia and connected its Act East policy to it.

More recently, the U.S. has continued to favor a larger role for India in the strategically key Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. had said it was looking at a "working-level" quadrilateral meeting in the near term with India, Japan, and Australia. U.S. President Donald Trump praised India's "astounding" growth, saying he has been working successfully to bring the vast country and its people together.

Speaking at a gathering of CEOs on the sidelines of the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in the Vietnamese port city of Danang, Trump cited India as one of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region making strides.

The use of the term Indo-Pacific by President Trump has led to speculation that it may have something to do with Washington preparing the ground for not just a revival of the so-called Quadrilateral strategic alliance between the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India to counter China's rise, but also strengthen cooperation through various channels. This is undoubtedly an initiative whose time has come, but it also raises certain questions and concerns:

1. For all four Quad countries, China is the major trading/economic partner. All four also have a multi-faceted relationship with China and this, therefore, imposes limits on what can be done to rein in China. It is, therefore, natural that each will safeguard its core national interests and respond accordingly.

## **Bilateral Trade of Quad Countries with China**

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### Exports and Imports in Goods (2016 Figures in U.S. Dollars)

	<b>India</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
<b>Exports to China</b>	\$10.17 Billion	\$113.87 Billion	\$64.24 Billion	\$115.60 Billion
<b>Imports from China</b>	\$61.28 Billion	\$115.44 Billion	\$45.28 Billion	\$462.61 Billion
<b>Total Trade</b>	\$71.45 Billion	\$229.31 Billion	\$109.52 Billion	\$578.21 Billion

2. Unlike the other Quad countries that are separated from China by a vast expanse of the ocean, China is India's direct neighbor, which places a huge security challenge on our land border. In case of another Doklam-like incident, will the Quad take a tough stance against Chinese assertiveness on our land borders? To what extent will others support in case of Chinese aggression? How can there be practical cooperation under the circumstances?
3. The Quad is a maritime construct, whereas India faces greater challenges on its land borders, thereby compelling us to maintain autonomy of action because of the different nature of threat.
4. For example, the political instability in the Maldives, and Chinese presence there, has serious implications for India's security in the Indian Ocean. Strategically located, the Maldives has traditionally maintained friendly links with India. But in recent months we have witnessed an assertive China playing an active role in the Maldives' political upheaval. China's veiled threats to India to keep away from the Maldives have emboldened President Abdulla Yameen to defy Indian efforts to diffuse the situation through constitutional means.
5. India's options are limited because strictly speaking what is happening in the Maldives is an internal matter. But because of the strategic location of the Maldives, the Quad countries need to shift their focus beyond the Pacific. If India were to assume a leadership

role in carrying out maritime maneuvers in the IOR to curb Chinese activities, what kind of support can India expect or get from the Quad members? Would there be a strong diplomatic signaling from our partners?

6. Fortunately, there is a lot that also binds the Quad countries together. The realization of China's threat has created a common set of priorities in foreign and defense policies, especially in Maritime Domain Awareness, an understanding of China's ambition in the Maritime Silk Road where it has declared its intention to develop 16 maritime bases in the IOR—some of which already exist. But we find that the Quad focuses only on PACOM and not CENTCOM—thereby ignoring India's concerns and interests. Specific steps are also required to include the AAGC and INSTC into the Quad mechanism. Working groups is a suggested option.

But there exists a healthy mechanism of naval exercises at the bilateral and trilateral level. A Quadrilateral exercise would be an extension of existing mechanisms. In the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi some months ago, a whole panel was dedicated on the topic “Unchartered Waters: In Search for Order in the Indo-Pacific” to discuss the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region. The navy chiefs of all four Quad countries came together on a platform to discuss the challenges of a new emerging global order, especially in the domain of maritime security that would in turn impact global trade and consequently the global order. It made a great impact.

### **India and Strategic Autonomy**

In India, the debate on strategic autonomy began with a conceptual dilemma about how India as an emerging power should forge a partnership with the United States at the end of the Cold War. The Indian imperative has been to maintain a sufficient degree of autonomy in its security and military relationship with the United States. India's concept of strategic autonomy, which is a combination of realism and India's traditional non-aligned posture, can be described as a “dependence control strategy aimed at safeguarding its independence in both foreign policy decision making and protecting strategic assets against American pressure.” Pragmatism also necessitates that India must accept some compromises to advance larger foreign policy goals and its deeply held notions of autonomy must move towards responsibility.

The necessity to pursue a multifaceted foreign policy and engage all major power centers is recognized by all Indian analysts. This is considered the surest and best way to maintain strategic autonomy. The Indian dilemma pertains to balance: the rapprochement with the U.S. is improving faster than the partnerships with other countries such as China and Russia. India's relations with other great or medium powers do not balance the intensity and the "global" ambition of the Indo-U.S. relations.

Given the complexity and diversity of its international and security agendas, India pursues multifaceted diplomacy, especially vis-à-vis Russia, China, and Iran. Energy supply, membership to the U.N. Security Council, and quest to become a major player in Central Asia are among India's priorities that potentially collide with U.S. interests and require relations with alternative powers.

By virtue of its demographic, geographic, economic, and military size, India desires to lead, but does not have yet the comprehensive national power to do so. It cannot subordinate itself to the policies and interests of another country, however powerful, as its political tradition and the functioning of its democracy will not allow this. Hence, while India may not be strong enough to lead, it is sufficiently strong not to be led.

In practical terms, this means that India can improve relations with the United States of America and China while maintaining close ties with Russia. It can forge stronger ties with Japan and still seek a more stable relationship with China. It can forge strong ties with Israel and maintain very productive ties with the Arab world, including backing the Palestinians in the United Nations. It means that India can have strategic partnerships with several countries, as is the case at present with the U.S., France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Russia, China, Japan, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Canada, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Iran, etc.

Fortunately, India has embarked on a vigorous foreign policy under the present government. Today a resurgent and outward-looking India plays an important role in select international groupings, striking strategic deals to safeguard its core national interests. Indian interests converge with those of the other Quad partners, and we have no doubt that the U.S. is here to stay in the region despite Chinese propaganda to the contrary. But what is needed is a deeper

U.S. commitment to nurture emerging regional partnerships by facilitating capacity building through transfer of technologies, including digital technologies that will promote greater information sharing and create a more robust strategic regional architecture.