

QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: An Alignment of Policies for Common Benefit

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad” emerged as a consultative regional forum among democracies in 2004 following the Tsunami of 2004 which struck South and Southeast Asia. The naval forces of the U.S., India, Australia, and Japan were the focus because they took the lead, and an ad hoc coordinating mechanism was born to consult on regional challenges, in particular, in dealing with maritime emergencies and security threats like piracy. Together, the four countries contributed over 40,000 troops and humanitarian responders, in addition to planes, helicopters, and ships who assisted victims of the disaster. Three years later, the idea was resurrected when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, addressing the Indian Parliament, brought about a coupling of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and called for an “arc of freedom and prosperity.” The Quad enjoyed a brief revival when the four countries, along with Singapore, held naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. The Quad fell into disuse for a while due to political compulsions which are well known and which it must avoid at all cost, for its own credibility, in the future. The reason for the resurrection of this ad hoc and loose grouping at Manila in September 2017 is the changed geo politics in the Indo–Pacific.

The primary reason is China, which has moved aggressively to enter the geopolitical and economic space vacated by the United States in the Indo–Pacific. Although all partners of the Quad are also cooperating with a rising and powerful China, it is using economic inducements and penalties, influencing operations, and implying military threats to persuade others to agree to its political and economic agenda. Its infrastructure and trade policies reinforce its desire for political dominance. The assertive policy of China in the South China Sea has resulted in the occupation, transformation, militarization, and effective control over a large number of islands in the South China Sea. In the Indian Ocean, China has been aggressively acquiring port assets and potential bases, including in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Djibouti. A

“Joint Observation Station” proposed by the Chinese in the Maldives is likely to have military capabilities along with provisions for a submarine base, identical to the one in Jiwani, near Gwadar, in Pakistan. The Mukunudhoo Island in the Maldives where China is building the observatory is part of the northernmost tip of the archipelago nation. It is close to the northern sea lanes of communication—running between India’s Minicoy Island and the northernmost atolls of the Maldives—as well as to India’s south and southwest coast. The observatory would also allow data collection to deploy submarines in the Indian Ocean region.

A divided Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has had to compromise with the thought of living with a dominant and aggressive China, and trying to develop “rules of the road” in their engagement with China. There is a sense of helplessness and a heightened feeling of the inevitability of Chinese ascendancy in this situation. Chinese aggressiveness is driven by the need to acquire resources of oil, minerals, and other raw materials around the world. The strategic assets are being acquired by China with the enormous trade surpluses. From the Chinese point of view its sea lanes must be protected to ensure the continued flow of raw materials. The Indo–Pacific therefore becomes important as an important supply line. Despite Chinese dominance and use of force vis a vis a number of disputed islands in the South China Sea, its competing claims with Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan on islands and their associated economic zones within the South China Sea will continue, and economics, politics, and nationalism will continue to make this area a potential “hotspot” for conflict. Chinese traditional rivalry with Taiwan, tense relationship with Japan, and the economic rise of Southeast Asia has resulted in an enhancement of the strategic significance of this region. In the northeast region of Asia, the North Korean regime is steadily advancing its nuclear, cyber, and ballistic missile programs.

A free, open, inclusive, transparent, and balanced Indo–Pacific region, where sovereignty and international law are respected and differences are resolved through dialogue, can become a guarantee of enduring security and peace in the region. A revived Quad had its first meeting in the new avatar at the level of middle-level officers in Manila on November 12, 2017, who identified the need to address common challenges of terrorism and proliferation linkages impacting the region. Quad members were supportive of upholding a rules-based order and respect for international law in the Indo–Pacific, ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, maritime security in the Indo–Pacific, peaceful resolution of disputes, and increasing connectivity consistent with international law and standards, based on prudent financing. Discussions will continue on the basis of shared values and principles, but so far, the Quad has only spelt out objectives of different countries and a cautious approach, with Chinese pressure and displeasure in mind.

It is important that the Quad stick to ASEAN centrality as the pivot on which the Indo–Pacific is viewed. Already, there is some unease in ASEAN about the “Indo–Pacific” as a concept, and at the recent India–ASEAN commemorative summit meeting in New Delhi, there was no widespread usage of the term by ASEAN states. It has been indicated by President Jokowi that Indonesia will call for a study to study the concept and its implications for ASEAN. The Quad, therefore, needs to keep ASEAN on its side.

It is understood that while the United States is having to counter the influence of China and use of all means, fair or foul, to shore up influence and resources, India continues to deal with a large and

contested land border with China which has now been complicated by the Chinese building the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor through the disputed area of Kashmir for an outlet into Gwadar port in Pakistan; Japan and Australia also feel the dragon in the room. China today has an interest in Australian assets and infrastructure, and influences its universities and politics. Security concerns about China’s intentions have risen in Japan since a territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands flared up in 2010. The U.S. pivot to Asia and its alliance system is under pressure due to Chinese success in dividing ASEAN by political influence and financial doles for the weaker and poorer countries, in return for a controlling stake in their economies, politics, and foreign policies. Despite a favorable International Court of Justice ruling in The Hague in its favor on China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea, China has managed to convince President Duterte of Philippines to pursue bilateral negotiations to settle outstanding issues.

The physical proximity in Asia and its geographical location has been used by China to convince ASEAN countries that it is the force to deal with in this part of the world rather than the United States. Many countries in ASEAN are increasingly coming under the influence of China due to economic dependence—especially projects under the One Belt One Road Initiative—and countries like Laos and Thailand are building high-speed railways from Kunming in China to Malaysia and Singapore. China is offering an alternative over the U.S. for military hardware and joint training exercises. In this scenario, constructive and mutually beneficial ties between Quad members and ASEAN would benefit the Indo–Pacific as a whole and provide benefits to each nation.

The idea of cooperation in the Indo–Pacific, however, cannot just be centered on China. The Quad should have a practical agenda of cooperation. There are differing perceptions among the partners on what the Indo–Pacific encompasses geographically. The National Security Strategy of the United States, for example, identifies the Indo–Pacific as stretching from the “West coast of India to the western shores of the United States.” Others may have a different perception. The Quad needs to build confidence and cooperation within the partners, including through:

- Maritime security and collaboration, addressing issues related to maritime challenges in the Indo–Pacific region, anti-piracy operations, joint escorts of international shipping, countering emerging maritime threats, force structuring, maritime domain awareness, intelligence sharing, and exchange of information on white shipping (brief definition of white shipping in parentheses?).
- Improving infrastructure and connectivity in the wider Indo–Pacific region. China’s Belt and Road Initiative is a means to have a greater say in international economic engagements by funding and building global transport and trade links with Asia and Europe. China has pledged U.S. \$ 124 billion for funding the plan. This January, China announced extending the initiative to the Arctic by developing shipping lanes opened up by global warming to form a “Polar Silk Road.” The idea of an alternative infrastructure plan was discussed recently between Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and President Trump, and Japan has already let it be known that it will use its ODA to promote a “Free and Open Indo–Pacific Strategy,” including “high quality infrastructure” with the Asian Development Bank. India, under its “Look East Policy,” is funding the Trilateral highway connecting its northeast with Thailand via Myanmar by road, and Thailand and Myanmar

are also chipping into this project. India has announced plans to align the project with the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity and to extend the trilateral to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam later. It is building the Kaladan Multi Modal transport system which will again link India's northeast with Myanmar and provide connectivity avenues to Bangladesh. The two policies can be aligned to create synergies for supply chains in ASEAN. At the Africa Development Bank meeting in May 2017, there has been an attempt to spell out a strategy called the "Asia Africa Growth Corridor," which will link economies, industries, and institutions of Africa and Asia in an inclusive fashion. This will not be a state-funded enterprise, but will be led by the private sector drawing on existing links that both countries have with the region. A vision document has also been prepared by three leading think tanks of India, Japan, and ASEAN. Also Japan has emerged as a major partner in India's efforts for the development of the northeast and connectivity to ASEAN. Towards this end the "Japan India Act East Forum" has been set up, which will seek synergies between India's "Act East Policy" and Japan's "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" located in the ADB and link it with Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy."

- Strengthening cooperation with ASEAN, and promoting discussions between strategists and experts.
- Security cooperation and dialogues, including joint exercises (some analysts have identified the Malabar exercises as a platform for defense engagement in the Indo-Pacific as a whole), defense equipment, and technology cooperation in such areas as surveillance and unmanned system technologies.
- Collaboration in cybersecurity, information and communications technology, countering proliferation of WMDs, and terrorism.
- Coast Guard collaboration and mine-sweeping technologies, anti-piracy operations, joint communications, deep-sea mining, and pollution control.
- Developing the blue economy, collaborating and working together in maritime security capacity-building for ASEAN and Pacific countries between themselves through groupings like the India Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, and Western Pacific Naval Symposium to avoid overlaps and duplication of efforts.
- Jointly countering non-traditional threats to security like pandemics, help and rescue at sea, humanitarian and disaster relief. Quad partners are already collaborating in these areas under the rubric of the East Asia Summit.

In addition to shared concerns about China, uncertainty about U.S. actions and staying power also motivates India, Japan, and Australia to keep the United States engaged via this framework. The countries of the Quad have professed that it is not a military alliance, nor is it directed against anyone even though China and Russia today see it in a different light. There will, obviously, be a pushback which must be resisted. As has been the norm in the recent past, especially regarding India, China will threaten, raise objections, and use the leverages at hand to scuttle joint action. A payoff or deference to commercial terms or political diktat must be rebuffed, and maritime ties strengthened amongst the partners for mutual benefit. The object must remain the creation of a multi-polar and increasingly connected Indo-Pacific, with processes to assure the mutual security of all stake holders. This process can be consolidated if the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue can

be converted into a formal process, with regular meetings to coordinate cooperation in the security, economic, and political fields with an agreed road map.