

The Quad Factor in the Indo-Pacific and the Role of India

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While the world has come to a grinding halt under the Covid-19 pandemic, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly called the Quad, took traction under this very crisis. While countering China ranks high on the Quad's agenda, the unfolding security environment makes it appear to have become the *key* agenda. That is to argue, although the Quad has not outright stated this fact, China, undeniably, is the elephant in the room. The fact that Beijing is excluded from the four-member grouping itself quantifies the very logic behind the making of the Quad. In this case, the Quad can be seen as a new kind of twenty-first-century security alliance.

What adds to the complexity of the grouping is the increasing polarization caused by the US–China rift, with both nations calling for others to “join” its side. The growing contingencies are pushing the Quad to take a greater role in fighting against nontraditional and traditional security risks. Here, the key queries remain: Has the Quad adopted a “fire-fighting” mode? If so, does that make China anxious? What is the role of India in the Indo-Pacific?

In Tokyo, Quad Strategically Switched off the Virtual Mode

On 6 October 2020, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia held the second Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo since the organization rebooted in November 2017. It was the second such meeting after the first virtual meeting held in June and marked the first high-level Quad meeting since the 2019 foreign minister-level meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. The Tokyo meeting was definitely not symbolic in orientation, but surely significant in approach, as it was convened as an “in-person” event amid the pandemic—displaying the significance by defying the new norm of virtual meetings.

Furthermore, the timing and circumstance of the meeting, given the rising concerns over Beijing's aggressive behavior and the growing speculations over China's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, gave added significance to the Tokyo meeting. The attendees called for stepping up coordination to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific, taking aim at what Washington called China's “exploitation, corruption, and coercion” of smaller states in the region.¹ Additionally, US

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in addressing the press conference, stated, “Once we’ve institutionalised what we’re doing—the four of us together—we can begin to build out a true security framework.”²

From Beijing’s perspective, the Quad represents a Cold War mentality—a united front against China—hence, Beijing continues to accept the old Asia-Pacific construct rather than subscribing to the new Indo-Pacific nomenclature. Unsurprisingly, China expressed its discontent regarding the Tokyo meeting, railing against “forming exclusive cliques,” “targeting third parties or undermining third parties’ interests” and that such cooperation should “contribute to regional peace, stability and development rather than doing the opposite.”³

With these systemic dynamics at play, one can argue that while the pandemic, on the one hand, has pushed the Quad to further act on nontraditional security objectives—aiming at human security against fighting the virus—on the other hand, the situation has also stretched the security envelope of the Quad, given the need to counter China’s growing adventurism and “wolf warrior” diplomacy.⁴

Undoubtedly, one can argue that the health emergency caused by the pandemic has boosted the strategic alignment of regional and external powers as they seek to expand their influence and counter the threats from others—as exemplified by the active role of the Quad amid COVID-19.

Quad in Action: China Is the Elephant in the Room

The circumstances of the twenty-first century have called for a shift in the security architecture from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, triggered by the rise of China, the growth of India’s economic and strategic clout, and, most importantly, the growing importance of the Indian Ocean as a strategic trade corridor that carries almost two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. These factors have led to the rise of regional stakeholders calling for a free and open Indo-Pacific, which in turn has led to the reestablishment of the Quad. Member states have a shared Indo-Pacific vision based on their commitment to maintaining a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific built on a rules-based international order, underpinned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality, rule of law, sustainable and transparent infrastructure investment, freedom of navigation and overflight, mutual respect for sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes. To note, Australia was one of the first countries to officially adopt the term *Indo-Pacific* in its 2013 *Defence White Paper*,⁵ however, the term gained traction with US President Donald Trump’s call for a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” a region where independent nations could “thrive in freedom and peace” and all states “play by the rules,” in his 2017 trip to Asia.⁶

It was the 2004 Tsunami that provided the initial momentum for the formation of the grouping of the four Indo-Pacific democracies—calling for collaboration in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations. However, over time, the grouping has evolved into one with a strategic outlook centered on the rising concerns over free and open seas and a rules-based order. With formal dialogue resuming in late 2017, after a 10-year hiatus, with the four countries meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit meetings in Manila; since then, the Quad has met twice a year, with the “Quad Plus video-conference” held regularly under the pandemic and bringing other interested states into the dialogue. This confirms the transition of the Indo-Pacific from its initial conception as a geographical construct to that of becoming a political and strategic construct, which is perceived differently by different countries.

Notably, in 2019, the grouping upgraded the dialogue to the level of foreign minister/secretary of state. With COVID-19 becoming a key focus, the group was upgraded to “Quad Plus,” adding three additional Indo-Pacific countries—New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam—and some external stakeholders: Israel and Brazil. This expansion is driven by the logic of convergent security interests under the pandemic and jointly looking at a way forward. Additionally, the China factor has loomed large in the security and political discourse of the Quad—with each member experiencing heightened tensions with China. For instance, Washington has been at loggerheads with Beijing since 2018 over a bilateral trade war and successive diplomatic fallouts. India and China are engaged militarily at the Line of Actual Control since April 2020, with a violent confrontation on 15 June in the Galwan Valley that resulted in the first casualties in more than 45 years. Canberra’s diplomatic fallout with Beijing has escalated sharply, centering on a series of defense, trade, and foreign policy disputes. Likewise, Japan’s growing tensions with China in the East China Sea have worsened in relation to China’s growing aggression in the region.

In a gambit showing signs of discord with China, the bottom line being fighting an aggressive and assertive China defined by unilateral behavioral dispositions. This is well-witnessed in China’s ramped-up island-building activities and militarization of the South China Sea, establishment of the air defense identification zone in the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, the debt-trap lending of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the military standoffs in Doklam in 2017 and eastern Ladakh in 2020 and growing Chinese footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Notwithstanding these unilateral Chinese behaviors, the Quad has, in principle, maintained that the grouping is not against any country, but China’s increasing expansionist designs are manifesting the increasingly anti-China approach of

the Quad. As noted, China is no more the unidentified threat. This was apparent at the Tokyo meeting, where members leveled direct criticism of China regarding COVID-19 and Beijing's growing adventurism in the Indo-Pacific. The implications of this new anti-China position are profound, with the South China Sea, Taiwan, East China Sea, and the Himalayan border poised as the likeliest triggers of direct conflict with China and rendering the security of the Indo-Pacific region a top priority.

The Quad Makes China Worry

China's once phantom concerns regarding the Quad are quickly becoming a reality. This is fueled by the increasing potency of the Quad. Arguably, adding to the political aspect, the strategic dimension that forms the core of the Quad is also finding a greater relevance and boost. Australia joining the United States and Japan in the India-led 24th Malabar Naval Exercise,⁷ in November 2020, set a precedent, marking the grouping's first such joint military exercise and illustrating their commitment to work together toward shared security interests.⁸ Previously, Malabar exercises were held with the United States since 1992 and with Japan since 2015; however, Australia had been excluded from the exercise since 2007, when the first iteration of the Quad had collapsed. Thus, Australia's participation in the 2020 exercise seemed to put to rest questions of the members' commitments to the revamped grouping.

This show of force in the Indian Ocean adds to Beijing's anxiety in the region, particularly in the maritime domain, as China's great-power aspirations in the Indo-Pacific fall short given that it is not a primary player in the IOR. To build China's foothold in the IOR, Beijing has adopted several proactive measures.⁹ First, China has deployed the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in anti-piracy operations in the western Indian Ocean, docking PLAN ships and submarines in the IOR and conducting of live-fire drills in the region. These actions reflect Beijing's intention to safeguard China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Second, China has established its first overseas permanent naval military base in Djibouti, claiming it to be a support base meant to supply missions for implementing China's escorting, peacekeeping, and humanitarian aid missions in Africa and West Asia.¹⁰ Third, the grand "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," part of the BRI, under which China has a hand in developing ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, has boosted China's maritime connectivity to the IOR and essentially filled the void of its "offshore" status. This is significantly changing the status quo and, most importantly, shaping the new Indo-Pacific security architecture.¹¹

With these dynamics at play, one can strongly argue that COVID-19 has provided a much-needed boost to the Indo-Pacific security framework, as evident from the growing activism of the Quad, which indeed is making China anxious, more than ever. With the international tide turning against China, the proponents of a free and open Indo-Pacific are gaining greater incentive to rally together in fighting common threats—traditional and nontraditional.

India's Bigger Role in the Indo-Pacific

India's geographic and geopolitical centrality in Indo-Pacific provides a counterbalance to China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean. The need for such a counterbalance is primarily driven by India's security concerns, focused largely on China's encirclement policy through port facilities in India's neighborhood—particularly, Gwadar and Hambantota—and 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.

One can observe India's strategic weight in the Indo-Pacific as a fourfold framework. First, unlike the Asia-Pacific architecture, the Indo-Pacific construct provides New Delhi with an opportunity to rise above its long-labeled middle-power status. This is reinforced by India joining the league of great powers—particularly, the United States and Japan—and fostering close strategic relationships with Washington and its allies in the region. This significantly advances India's great-power aspirations and ability for power projection in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Second, New Delhi's active engagement in the Indo-Pacific automatically boosts India's Act East Policy and Extended Neighbourhood Policy. This boost is reinforced by New Delhi's closer ties with the member states of ASEAN, including Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar.

Third, the strengthening of the India-US Strategic partnership, mainly through defense ties, acts as a strong counterweight to India's rivals. This is exemplified by increased engagements between New Delhi and Washington as noted in terms of the four foundational agreements signed between the two countries, comprising the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA, 2002); Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA, 2016); and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA, 2018); and finally, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA, 2020)—promoting interoperability between the two militaries and making provision for sale and transfer of high-end technologies. Most importantly, the enhanced relationship provides a significant boost to India's military capability, especially in striking targets with pinpoint accuracy—an imperative need for India to keep close watch on

Chinese movements along the Himalayan border and in mapping China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, in terms of arms transfer, American arms exports to India have risen from negligible to 15 billion USD. Moreover, increased military exercises between India and the United States—such as Tiger Triumph, the first bilateral triservice amphibious military exercise between the two nations—have greatly enhanced interoperability and comradery. Additionally, being party to the Blue Dot Network provides New Delhi with an attractive alternative to counter China's BRI.

Fourth, India's strategic role is further boosted under India–Australia relations, which were upgraded to of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020. Additionally, Canberra and New Delhi signed nine arrangements, key among these being the Australia-India Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement providing a framework to deepen defense cooperation between the two countries.

Fifth, and most importantly, under COVID-19, India also proved itself as a first responder to a regional crisis, providing its immediate neighbors—such as Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles—with medical aid. Indeed, such assistance was provided on a more global scale, with New Delhi providing assistance to Italy and Iran, two of the countries hit hardest by the pandemic. Comoros and Kuwait also received medical rapid response teams from India to augment their preparedness in tackling the pandemic. Additionally, India evacuated nine Maldives nationals from Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak.

In addition, India championed the idea of building a global response to fight the pandemic, championing virtual summits: i.e., the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) web conference (15 March 2020) and the “Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit” (26 March 2020). Moreover, New Delhi established a SAARC Emergency Response Fund for COVID-19, with an initial 10 million USD contribution from India. Additionally, India's Armed Forces have been actively engaged in carrying forward India's mission abroad. In February, an Indian Air Force (IAF) relief aircraft evacuated 76 Indians and 36 foreign nationals from Wuhan. In cooperation with the Indian Army, the IAF launched the 18-hour Operation Sanjeevani to deliver 6.2 tons of essential medicines and hospital consumables to the Maldives, and 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 addition, India is seen as one of the world's new “preferred” destination for investment, as countries seek to shift production out of China. What makes India

a preferred choice is the large size of its market and, most importantly, cheap cost of labor. Notably, Apple established a manufacturing base in collaboration with Foxconn in India, and South Korea's Samsung has closed operations in China and relocated manufacturing units to India. In response to these developments, India is identifying land parcels across the country to support these anticipated investments. This further adds to India's role in the global supply chain system.

There is little doubt regarding the emerging role of India not just as a key player but also as a responsible actor in the Indo-Pacific. With New Delhi's active role, India has already assumed greater responsibility in the region, calling for a bigger and more influential role in the post-COVID world. Thus, the post-COVID international order is likely to witness greater maneuvering space for India, wherein India is deemed to be one of the key drivers in steering policy and defending allied interests in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, COVID-19 has enlarged the Quad framework, allowing key players to take active roles in tackling pressing traditional and nontraditional regional challenges.

Conclusion

Given the increasing pace and scope of the group's activity, the Quad indeed is emerging as one of the key multilateral fora committed to an enhanced security partnership in the post-COVID-19 world order. Moreover, an active Quad helps dispel the long-held speculation over the Indo-Pacific being a largely dormant construct. With the stakes higher than ever, each of the Quad's four members must play more significant roles in balancing the threats and power plays in the Indo-Pacific. Every step forward by the Quad will put Beijing in a challenging position in fulfilling China's great-power ambitions. Thus, the Quad's emergence as a unified front that champions a free and open Indo-Pacific will definitely unsettle China. Moreover, if China continues to push the security envelope and test the Quad members' resolve, the grouping will turn into exactly the sort of anti-China squad that Beijing fears. 🌟

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Notes

1. “Japan, U.S. India, Australia vow to create free, open Indo-Pacific,” *Kyodo News*, 6 October 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/>.
2. Quoted in Joshua Park, “Why the US-led Quad alliance won’t realise its ‘Asian Nato’ ambition against China,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/>.
3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on September 29, 2020,” 29 September 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.
4. Derived from title of a popular Chinese series of patriotic action films, featuring Rambo-like protagonists who fight enemies at home and abroad to defend Chinese interests, *wolf warrior diplomacy* refers to the transition of Chinese diplomacy from conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, jingoistic, proactive, and high-profile.
5. Department of Defence, Australian Government, *Defence White Paper 2013*, <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.
6. Peter Martin et al., “Trump Discovers ‘Indo-Pacific’ on Asia Tour in Boost for India,” *Bloomberg*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.
7. The Malabar naval exercise began in 1992 as a training event between the United States and India. Japan joined it in 2015, but Australia has not participated since 2007. The exercise was conducted off the coast of Guam in the Philippine Sea in 2018 and off the coast of Japan in 2019. The 2020 Malabar exercise was divided into two phases: Phase I held in Bay of Bengal; and Phase II, conducted in the Arabian Sea.
8. “Watch: India, US, Japan and Australia come together for Malabar 2020 Naval Exercise,” *Economic Times*, 6 October 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.
9. Amrita Jash, “India in the Indo-Pacific: Reining in China in the new theatre of great power rivalry,” *ThinkChina*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/>.
10. Jash, “India in the Indo-Pacific.”
11. Jash, “India in the Indo-Pacific.”

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