India and the Quad Plus
Between Pointed-Alignment and Conjectural Alliance

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Abstract

The conjectural alliance of “Quad Plus,” which is yet to find formal acknowledgment in the official discourse among the Indo-Pacific partners, is witnessing increasing traction, as the member countries fend to ensure regional stability, devoid of unilateralism and aggressive posturing. For India, the Quad Plus narrative holds immense strategic significance, since such an open framework exemplifies New Delhi’s evolution as a power in an emerging international order. India's adherence to the Quad Plus framework is a symbolic gesture of New Delhi’s growing global outlook. Its strategic intent of adopting a pointed alignment approach with a more concentrated power structure and indistinct embracing of alliance politics, which sustains India’s foreign policy posture within the framework of “multialignment” rather than “nonalignment,” is becoming aptly clear.

Introduction

Alliances or alignments are the means through which states effectively secure their foreign policy advantages, and India is no different. However, as one of the few major powers that does not overtly endorse an “alliance framework”—which brings the United States, Australia, and Japan together—India has been an active partner in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (hereafter, Quad 2.0) process. More importantly, New Delhi has signaled its perception of the Quad framework more as a “conjectural alliance” of “like-minded” countries in the Indo-Pacific. With conversations on the COVID-19 pandemic occurring both at the foreign secretary-level as well as the foreign ministers-level, there is a general acceptance of mutual commitment, building a consultative channel of understanding, and trying to expand the compass of Quad 2.0 to a “Quad Plus,” among partner states.

While the term Quad Plus is yet to find an official mention in any formal statement or briefing, including those of India, the grouping has lately been gaining strategic traction. The inclusion of New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam in the weekly Quad 2.0 meeting of foreign ministry officials, initiated by the outgoing US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun in March 2020, marked the onset of the Quad Plus mechanism. This was followed by a higher-level
meeting organized by the outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in May 2020, which saw the further addition of Brazil and Israel, indicating a grander global strategic intent. At the recently concluded Quad 2.0 second ministerial meeting in Tokyo under the newly formed leadership of Japan’s Yoshihide Suga, the foreign ministers “affirmed the importance of broadening cooperation with more countries for the realization of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’,” albeit through separate press statements. These measures have implied, though not explicitly stated, the importance attached to the Quad Plus narrative as a significant development for the Indo-Pacific region, especially for India.

This article examines the Indian perspective on the emerging Quad Plus framework, arguing that New Delhi’s adherence to the narrative is indicative of its changing foreign policy outlook, the strategic intent of aligning with a more concentrated power structure, and subtle embrace toward alliance politics, even though India would maintain a steadfast foreign policy posture within the framework of “multialignment” rather than “nonalignment.” India’s official stance is aptly illustrated in Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar’s statement that “India will never be part of an alliance structure.” Still, the subtle nuances shaping India’s post-Galwan outreach are being driven along the lines of alignment building with focused and pointed aims of building national security strengths vis-à-vis China in the Indo-Pacific—hence, a renewed emphasis on the Quad structures within and outside the region. Having a democratic disposition attached to it, a conjectural alliance like Quad Plus, which furthers India’s “pointed-alignment” ambitions of strengthening security, political, and economic partnerships within and outside the Quad framework, allows New Delhi to pursue India’s strategic interests in the complex regional order.

Thus, to comprehend this, the article will seek to understand the nuances attached to India’s active participation and promotion of the Quad Plus mechanism/narrative. The first part will build on the multipolarity-driven “pointed engagement” juxtaposition with pointed-alignment outlook, while analyzing the dynamics within India’s recent foreign policy overtures especially toward Quad partners and the overarching Quad Plus narrative. The next section will seek to explain New Delhi’s build-up of a conjectural alliance with the Quad Plus countries. The final section will highlight the rapidly changing India–China power-partner contention, with a primary focus on how China’s vision of Asia undermines that of India. Here, the Quad Plus framework emerges as India’s response in an attempt to protect India’s identity as an Asian power while building on the Indo-Pacific security alignments. The article concludes with an analysis of the new normal emerging in India–China ties within the framework of the Quad and Quad Plus narratives in a post-COVID order.

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Framing the Quad Plus Narrative

A country’s national policy is often strongly linked to its foreign policy. Yet, foreign policies, unlike national policies, are mostly “static and dynamic,” not prone to radical or revolutionary changes. While the static notion in a foreign policy implies the sustenance of the status quo, thereby reducing risks, the foreign policy dynamism leading to activism is heavily nuanced and has stronger linkages with the external environment, implying revolutionary pathways or orientations that are both inbound (domestic) and outbound (external). Indian foreign policy follows a similar route, just like many other foreign policies in the world. However, what is unique is that New Delhi's foreign policy exhibits a mixture of both domestic and external characteristics that are close to India’s aims and aspirations in a rapidly changing world order that complements the construct of national interests intertwined with India’s international interests. The adherence to the Quad Plus framework is a part of this construct, which exhibits a universal, multilateral driven outlook of India without diverting much from its national interests to connect with a concentrated power structure.

New Delhi’s adherence to a Quad Plus framework is a self-oriented pointed-alignment strategy that strengthens India’s defense, security, and economic partnerships with the Quad (Australia, Japan, and the United States), while enhancing India’s understanding with other associated partners such as Vietnam and South Korea in particular. Such an adherence builds a type of conjectural alliance without really engaging in formal alliance exercises that the United States shares with Japan and Australia in particular. Additionally, a framework of this nature imbibes the national character of universalism, endorsing the “rule of law,” democratic ideals, and free and open maritime domains that India advocates strongly in the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, adhering to such a framework favors India’s national security strategy, explicating its pointed alignment with a set of countries (mainly Quad countries), clarifying New Delhi’s national security–focused character of building military strength or power in foreign policy, primarily to secure foreign policy strengths vis-à-vis adversary powers such as China.

Notably, adhering to the Quad Plus framework is part and parcel of India's competing space of being an emerging power vis-à-vis China. Emerging powers tend to go for an evolutionary yet dynamic foreign policy guideline. For instance, Beijing’s political and diplomatic clout, as well as its international footprint, is a direct result of China's monumental economic growth and prowess; in 2019, China’s gross domestic product (PPP) was the largest in the world,
totaling 22.5 trillion USD.\textsuperscript{6} Hence, Chinese foreign policy has been deriving its direction and power from economic diplomacy and policies, especially post the global financial crisis.\textsuperscript{7} On the contrary, Indian economic growth has not been in tandem with that of China in the past few quarters. Indian foreign policy has always revolved around New Delhi’s goal to secure India’s national interests,\textsuperscript{8} driven by a need to protect itself in a largely rival or unfriendly neighborhood with countries like Pakistan and China threatening India’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. In the post-COVID order, this gap is only expected to widen.

India’s synergy with the Quad partners has grown fundamentally more vital in the economic, security, and defense sectors. With respect to the Indo-Pacific, all four countries are increasingly finding consonance in advancing a “free, open, and rules-based” maritime order, with a focused effort to balance, if not limit or counter China’s aggressiveness in the region. In fact, China’s coercive posture in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) regions, Taiwan Straits, across the Line of Actual Control, and in Hong Kong, through the recently implemented National Security Law, undermine the freedoms in the region and is laying the foundation to the strengthening of strategic partnerships between the Quad member countries.

Further, the ideation of national initiatives by Quad partners has found synergy with India’s own Act East Policy (AEP), Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) doctrine, Neighborhood Policy, and Indo-Pacific initiatives such as Sagarmala, which aims at rejuvenating 7,500 km of India’s coastline in a major boost to its maritime sector;\textsuperscript{9} Project Mausam, which focuses on better connecting Indian Ocean littorals by complementing the monsoon patterns;\textsuperscript{10} and Cotton Route initiative, which emerged as a low-end balancing initiative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by aiming to improve India’s ties with countries around Asia, Eurasia, or the Indo-Pacific at large.\textsuperscript{11}

Meanwhile, under Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) outlook, the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI)\textsuperscript{12} and its synergy with India’s AEP have resulted in extensive India–Japan collaboration, especially in India’s Northeast, and specific cooperation in third countries. A collaboration between Asia and Africa is also being envisioned where India and Japan can take a leadership position to enhance an intercontinental level cooperation through public-private partnerships. Such collaborative efforts, coupled with an Asian geopolitical narrative, geographical closeness, and a mutual and historically cautious approach toward China bring a natural political complementarity between India and Japan. These
ventures, if anything, are crucial to forming a “continental connect” that India and Japan have long envisioned, both officially and unofficially.

With Australia, while India’s regional and bilateral synergy have only just started to develop, Canberra’s action-oriented Pacific Step-up policy, highlighted in its 2017 foreign policy white paper, has arrived as a welcome addition for promoting greater collaborative synergy in the economic, political, and defense domains, wherein India and Australia are looking to indigenize as well as diversify. In the United States, the outgoing Trump administration revealed a foreign policy signifying deeper and active focus on the Indo-Pacific, more than the policy “pivot” of Pres. Barack Obama, with the establishment of multiple initiatives that are more likely to sustain as key projects with bipartisan support as Joe Biden takes office. Further, initiatives like Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP), Infrastructure Transaction and Assistant Network (ITAN), Asia Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy (Asia EDGE), and the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act of 2018 present a conjoined effort by Washington to focus on rebuilding and strengthening the US presence in the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives are focused on not only challenging Chinese adventurism but also improving America’s strategic outreach to Asia, wherein India has emerged as a crucial partner. Among these national initiatives that have transformed into bilateral synergy, it is important also to note two key trilateral ventures: the India–Japan–Australia-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) and the US–Japan–Australia-led Blue Dot Network (BDN).

The implementation of such initiatives by Quad partners has enhanced the sphere of influence the grouping wields in the Indo-Pacific. By way of the Quad Plus narrative, much like how the synergy grew among the Quad partners themselves, an expansion of the outreach of such ventures with nations like Vietnam, New Zealand, Brazil, Israel, and South Korea can be promoted. By advocating for a truly global outlook via multilateral support for such ventures, they can together shape the post-COVID economic future of Asia and the Indo-Pacific sustainably.

For India, the Quad Plus conjectural alliance has received a more proactive thrust, particularly post the Galwan Valley clash with China. Even though the Quad Plus narrative does not imbibe to any military or security nexus, it allows India to stay in touch with a range of countries via the Quad, exemplifying India’s stature as an Indo-Pacific power. In other words, its national security calculus is encouraging India to take a more proactive foreign policy approach: protection of Indian territorial resources, the maritime domain, and enhancing
economic diplomacy are strong variables shaping New Delhi’s changing China policy as well as India’s increasing focus on the Quad framework. The nature of the conjectural alliance of Quad 2.0 is that of a strategic alignment that does not conform entirely to an alliance framework, unlike that of the United States and its partners. Here, it is essential to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a new era of regional flux and power balancing in Asia. India’s post-Galwan foreign policy directive is shaping into a unique pointed-alignment outlook embracing a focus on stronger military, economic, and security ties with Quad 2.0 partners.\(^{17}\) Significantly, this allows New Delhi to move away from China economically to an extent while securing India’s national interests strategically. Hence, the promotion of economic synergy coupled with security understanding in frameworks like Quad Plus is vital for India.

**New Delhi’s Pointed-alignment and China**

Essentially, India’s partaking in Quad Plus framework explicates a pointed alignment (as seen with Quad partners) and pointed engagement (as seen with Quad Plus partners) evolving strategy. A more robust defense, security, and economic engagement with Australia, Japan, and the United States illustrates New Delhi’s pointed-alignment strategy, while India’s association with Vietnam, South Korea, Israel and other countries such as France and the United Kingdom point to India’s pointed-engagement strategy—even if some of these countries are not involved in fixed foreign-secretary and foreign-ministry level meetings. Such engagement complements New Delhi’s pointed-alignment strategy, helping to build India’s foreign policy strength in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China in a post–COVID-19 period. While pointed engagement is vaster in dimensions and geographical landscape, pointed alignment remains a more specific and focused strategy or outlook.

Over the past two decades—and even more in the months following Galwan—Indian foreign policy has undertaken an active outreach driven by concretization of bilateral partnerships, especially with Quad partners. While the advancement of such bilateral ties (or partnerships) has taken place across a wide spectrum of sectors, defense and military-strategic collaborations indicate how national security has shaped the Indian foreign policy landscape (table 1). In a quick recap, it can be noted that India–Australia ties have been upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with both nations signing a mutual logistics support arrangement.\(^{18}\) Further, India, which was elevated as a Major Defense Partner (MDP) by the
United States in 2018, has now signed the fourth and final foundational military pact with the United States: the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). Similarly, the signing of the much-awaited Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between India and Japan, concluded amid India’s rising tensions with China and domestic changes in Japan, signals the importance of strategic defense ties between the two nations at a time of regional and global uncertainty. These agreements will set the stage for the future of security cooperation between India and the Quad; Japan already shares ACSAs with the United States and Australia, further strengthening the scope of regional, bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral modes of cooperation.

Table 1. India’s key defence/military agreements with Quad countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Name of Agreement</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Signatories/Discussants</th>
<th>Key Features/Remarks</th>
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</table>
| 1.     | Comprehensive Strategic Partnership | JUN 2020 | Indian PM Narendra Modi and Australian PM Scott Morrison | a. Shared values of democracy and rule of law  
b. Shared vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region  
c. Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific  
d. Commitment to a new phase of Australia-India Strategic Research Fund to promote innovative solutions for responding to and treating COVID-19  
e. Commitment towards work in areas of digital economy, cyber security, and critical and emerging technologies under Framework Arrangement on Cyber and Cyber-Enabled Critical Technology Cooperation |
<p>| 2.     | Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA) | JUN 2020 | Indian PM Narendra Modi and Australian PM Scott Morrison | Provides a framework for growing collaboration between the defence science and technology research organizations of both countries.                                                                                                                                              |</p>
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<thead>
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<th>Table 1. India’s key defence/military agreements with Quad countries</th>
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<td><strong>3. Framework on Security Cooperation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>4. Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>UNITED STATES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2. Communications, Compatibility, Security Agreement (COM-CASA)</strong></td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Memorandum of Intent</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>US Defence Innovation Unit (DIU) and Indian Defence Innovation Organisation - Innovations for Defence Excellence (DIO-IDEX)</td>
<td>Coproduction and codevelopment projects through the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), and to pursue other avenues of defense innovation cooperation.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Indian Ministry of Defence and US Department of Defense</td>
<td>LEMOA gives access to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refueling and replenishment. Primarily, LEMOA covers port calls, joint exercises, training and HADR.</td>
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#### JAPAN

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)</td>
<td>SEPT 2020</td>
<td>Indian Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar and Japanese Ambassador Suzuki Satoshi</td>
<td>Allows reciprocal provision of supplies and services between the Armed Forces of India and the Self-Defense Forces of Japan</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Implementing Arrangement for Deeper Cooperation between Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and Indian Navy</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera</td>
<td>Maritime domain awareness (MDA) - greater cooperation and exchange of information</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Agreement concerning Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation</td>
<td>DEC 2015</td>
<td>Indian Foreign Secretary Dr S Jaishankar and Ambassador of Japan to India Kenji Hiramatsu</td>
<td>Enhance defence and security cooperation by making available to each other, defense equipment and technology necessary to implement joint research/development and/or production projects</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Agreement concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information</td>
<td>DEC 2015</td>
<td>Indian Defence Secretary G Mohan Kumar and Ambassador of Japan to India Kenji Hiramatsu</td>
<td>Ensures the reciprocal protection of classified military information transmitted to each other</td>
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</table>
Beyond bilateral synergy, such a pointed alignment by New Delhi is taking shape in multilateral and trilateral forums as well. In this context, India’s active support of and participation in the Quad Plus mechanism in itself is a defining factor of its emerging pointed-alignment strategies. Furthermore, Quad Plus has the potential to deepen other new and emerging initiatives in which India is involved. To export military hardware worth 5 billion USD by 2025, India has begun to move beyond its extensive defense procurement and import sector and to focus on exports by building on its initiatives like “Make in India.” Here, the United Kingdom’s Democratic Ten (D-10) framework and the potential inclusion of India in the same sets a new reference for deeper tech-security collaboration in a multilateral framework driven by like-minded democratic countries. Similarly, the SCRI can seek to gain much broader implementation and success by closer economic integration among the Quad Plus partners.

Furthermore, India’s bilateral ties with all-weather partner France have taken on greater proportions in the post-Galwan environment. France was the first country that offered India support of its troops in the immediate aftermath of the India–China Galwan Valley clash. Furthermore, the accelerated delivery of Rafale jets to India showed the ever-growing alignment between the two nations. The trilateral of India–France–Australia, which aims at creating an inclusive Indo-Pacific by rebalancing China’s assertiveness in the region, is a further testament to India’s pointed alignment.

Factoring China in New Delhi’s foreign policy formulation or managing its relationship with Beijing is not a strategic choice for India; rather, it is a strategic necessity. A complex bilateral and neighborhood environment, competitive foreign policy discourse between the two sides, and China’s rise as an influential economic and political actor in the global decision-making process make these strategic necessities quite critical for India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Shangri-La Dialogue speech in June 2018 reflected this when he stated, “No other relationship of India has as many layers as our relations with China, and both the countries need to work together for a better Asia and the world, being sensitive to each other’s interests.” A similar reference was equally discernible when former Indian prime minister (late) Atal Bihari Vajpayee accorded the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the two nations during his state visit to China in 2003. To this effect, India’s choices of interest in Asia and beyond vis-à-vis China is complex and raises complementarities as well as contradictions that are partly structural and partly systemic.
Additionally, India envisions a multipolar Asia, advocating a regional cooperative framework that is much more exclusive, contradicting the Chinese conception of Asia and regional order. In the Indian formulation, a multipolar Asia is more of a universal proposition than a constricted regional proposition. The Indian contention, as reflected in Prime Minister Modi’s inaugural speech at the Second Raisina Dialogue on 17 January 2017, is that the world has absorbed multipolarity rapidly and a “multipolar Asia is a dominant reality.” India’s choice of a multipolar Asia rests on two critical aspects: (1) the diffusion of power making the notion of Asian security interlinked with global security, rendering the situation advantageous to New Delhi’s security interest regionally and globally; and (2) inclusivity should be the order of Asia, not exclusivity, indicating the possibility of bestowing a space for an external power like the United States to become part and parcel of the evolving regional security architecture.

Such an open framework allows India to stay connected firmly with both the two prime powers in the world, the United States and China. Additionally, in the Asian context, it will enable India to promote a regional paradigm of “shared leadership” among the three major Asian powers—India, China, and Japan—that offers equal opportunities to other emerging or middle powers in Asia to rise and be a part of this leadership framework. Australia, with whom India’s regional and bilateral synergy was not at par as compared to India’s other Quad partners, is also quickly emerging as a major Indo-Pacific partner, encouraged by a “China disconnect” both countries are undertaking.

On the contrary, the Chinese conception of Asia entails an overhaul of the security structure, aimed at reducing the US-led security architecture that has been prevalent in the region since the Cold War. This assertion was evident in Chinese president Xi Jinping’s speech at the fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA) in Asia in May 2014, where he endorsed the rising status of Asia in world affairs but advanced the concept of “Asia for Asians” to articulate a Chinese envisioned order with an exclusive regional character. To China, the “Asia for Asians” proposition provides a context to bestow the security undertaking of the region in the hands of the Asian powers.

In this context, the Quad Plus framework has arrived at a crucial juncture with much to offer. India’s defense and security collaborations with the Quad Plus participating countries such as Israel, South Korea, Vietnam, and, to some extent, Brazil have been progressing over the years (table 2). Among these nations, Vietnam and India’s defense ties have seen the most amount of maturation, with Vietnam’s
strategic importance as a claimant in the SCS and partnering for India's oil exploration activities in the SCS being a resounding factor behind the dedicated focus on bettering ties. Defense ties with New Zealand, however, have seen a very minimal, albeit, incremental, if not absent, growth. Complementarities in defense manufacturing, space, and nanotechnology, as well as defense cooperation, are some of the critical issues that India could pursue.

**Table 2. India's key defense/military agreements with Quad Plus countries**

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>MoU to establish a new center for technical and maintenance support for India’s air defence systems</td>
<td>FEB 2020</td>
<td>Israel Aerospace Institute and India's Bharat Electronics Limited</td>
<td>Collaboration on establishing a new center for providing product life cycle support including repair &amp; maintenance services for the air-defence systems in India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Strategic Collaboration Memorandum on UAVs</td>
<td>FEB 2020</td>
<td>Israel Aerospace Institute and India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and Dynamatic Technologies Limited</td>
<td>That UAVs will be made in India</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Deal for supply of Barak-8 missile defense system by IAI for seven ships of the Indian Navy</td>
<td>OCT 2018</td>
<td>Israel Aerospace Institute (IAI) and India's Bharat Electronics Limited</td>
<td>This deal was a sign of a strong bilateral partnership in defense, which crossed 6 billion USD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Comprehensive Strategic Partnership</td>
<td>SEPT 2016</td>
<td>Indian PM Narendra Modi and Vietnamese PM Nguyễn Xuân Phúc</td>
<td>Included a Line of Credit of 100 million USD for defense industry cooperation</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Relations for the period 2015-20</td>
<td>MAY 2015</td>
<td>Indian Defence Minister (late) Manohar Parrikar and Vietnamese Minister for National Defence Phùng Quang Thanh</td>
<td>This included an MoU on cooperation between Coast Guards of the two countries. This effort was projected as part of India’s Act East Policy, aimed at deepening strategic and economic relations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>MoU for the Establishment of Collaborative Relationship to Combat Transnational Crime and Development Mutual Cooperation</td>
<td>MAY 2015</td>
<td>Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and Vietnam Coast Guard</td>
<td>Following this agreement, the ICGS Sarang conducted a four-day port call to the city of Ho Chi Minh from 27 to 31 August 2015 where the coast guards of both countries had elaborate discussions over antismuggling and antipoaching patrols.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>MoU on USD100 million Line of Credit for Defence Procurement</td>
<td>SEPT 2014</td>
<td>General Manager, EXIM Bank of India Geeta Poojary and Deputy Minister of Finance of Vietnam, Trương Chí Trung</td>
<td>This MoU provides a concessional line of credit for procurement of defense equipment from India. This opens new opportunities in India–Vietnam defense cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>MoU on defense cooperation</td>
<td>NOV 2009</td>
<td>Indian Defence Minister A K Antony and Vietnamese Defence Minister Phùng Quang Thanh</td>
<td>To help build closer interaction between the two nations through regular defense dialogue, training, exercises, Navy and Coast Guard ship visits, along with capacity building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership</td>
<td>JUL 2007</td>
<td>Indian PM Manmohan Singh and Vietnamese PM Nguyễn Tân Dũng</td>
<td>To intensify cooperation in defense supplies, joint projects, training, and intelligence. Also to enhance interaction between their respective defense and security establishments.</td>
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<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Joint Declaration on the Framework of Comprehensive Cooperation</td>
<td>MAY 2003</td>
<td>Indian EAM Yashwant Sinha and Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dy Niên</td>
<td>To enhance defense cooperation. This agreement binds both nations to conduct periodic high-ranking visits including the expansion of cooperation in defense and security spheres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Defence Cooperation Agreement/Defence Protocol</td>
<td>MAR 2000</td>
<td>Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes Vietnamese Defence Minister Phạm Văn Trà</td>
<td>Included sale of advanced military light helicopters, assistance in repairs and overhaul of Vietnam’s MiG-21 aircraft, and training assistance for pilots and technicians. Also included joint military exercises, joint campaigns on antipiracy in South China Sea and counterinsurgency training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>MoUs on Defence Cooperation (military logistics support agreement)</td>
<td>SEPT 2019</td>
<td>Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and South Korea’s Defence Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo</td>
<td>To enhance defense educational exchanges and extend logistical support to each other’s navies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>MoU on Defence Industry Co-operation in Shipbuilding</td>
<td>APR 2017</td>
<td>Indian Defence Secretary Ashok Kumar Gupta and South Korean Minister of Defense Acquisition Program Administration Chang Myoung-jin</td>
<td>This was conceived under the overall umbrella of the Special Strategic Partnership of May 2015. This cooperation was part of the Make in India policy, under which warships will be built at domestic shipyards with South Korea’s help.</td>
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India’s support for the Quad and Quad Plus narrative, considering the post-Galwan security atmosphere, is evident and presents a grander strategic intent.
India and the Quad Plus

In a tweet, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar identified the first Quad Plus consultation as a “broad based virtual meeting” aimed at overcoming the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the Indian External Affairs ministry’s press release titled “Cooperation among select countries of the Indo-Pacific in fighting COVID-19 pandemic” reflected more officially India’s intentions to actively support the Quad Plus narrative. More significantly, the support of a Quad Plus mechanism demonstrates India’s developing grasp and embrace of an American perspective that aims to safeguard and fortify a liberal international order while zeroing in on building an Indo-Pacific narrative that has been undermined by the ascent of a revisionist China. This is at a time when New Delhi has drawn its relationship with China on a “power-partner” contention. To this effect, by seeking a case-by-case module in managing China, India has tried to fortify the multilateral method of relationship with Beijing, desiring to rejuvenate and improve the Bretton Woods institutions to build an agent and result-driven support for developing economies. Such a contention remained in place between the two Asian giants regardless of the developing strains with China over border conflicts and other international complexities: for example, a challenged Indo-Pacific maritime domain. India’s multilateral associations with China in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) under the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) structure and inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are instances of such multilateral overtures by New Delhi.

It is important to note that recognizing the Quad Plus structure does not imply that India will detach itself from these multilateral commitments with China. Likewise, India’s endorsement of the Quad and the Quad Plus narrative equally lends to the fact that New Delhi might be envisioning a pointed purposive alignment with the United States. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that India is completely accepting of a US-led order that would see New Delhi give away its autonomous, independent, and nonaligned frame of foreign policy posturing. What is rather clearly visible is India’s ‘pointed-alignment’ within the rubrics of a multialigned foreign policy framework, which New Delhi has advocated more aptly in recent times. Beijing’s aggressive conduct on the India–China boundary, its efforts to promote friction between India and neighbors like Bhutan and Nepal (through Doklam and Kalapani, respectively), its gradually growing sea claims in the SCS and the ECS, and its forceful policies toward Taiwan and Hong Kong are all further guiding or prompting a case for change or reconsideration in India’s China policies. US president Donald Trump’s invitation to India, alongside Australia and South Korea, to join the Group of 7 (G7) mirrors the developing Indo-Pacific narrative in which a Quad Plus course of action fits well.
Beyond India’s existing and evolving ties with the Quad nations and countries like South Korea via the synergy found between New Delhi’s AEP and Seoul’s New Southern Policy, extensively covered in strategic circles, a Quad Plus framework will further a pointed alignment, which is much needed in defense, economic, and political realms between New Delhi and Israel, Brazil, New Zealand, and Vietnam. Israel is vital to China’s advancement of Xi’s flagship BRI into the Middle East, and US pressure to choose between Washington and Beijing is a strategic problem for Israel. India and Israel are already strong bilateral strategic partners, especially in the defense sector; historically, defense trade has surpassed 1 billion USD annually. In 2020, the two nations began deepening their defense industry ties, with Israel seeking long-term partnerships via India’s “Make in India” ventures. The Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and India’s Bharat Electronics Limited have signed a memorandum to create a new center for Indian air defense systems. Similarly, IAI and Hindustan Aeronautics and Dynamatic Technologies Limited have finalized a collaboration to build unmanned aerial vehicles in India. This synergy must extend into a more profound defense alliance framework, possibly with the United States; while an economic synergy with China grows for Israel, a defense synergy with India must be encouraged at par. Under the Quad Plus framework, such defense synergy can be expanded via closer bilateral ties.

Like India, Vietnam has not shown much interest in alliance structures in the past; however, Hanoi is now looking to change its foreign policy rhetoric along realistic lines. In 2016, the two sides upgraded their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership after almost a decade of Strategic Partnership. As per its latest defense white paper, Hanoi has shown a clear indication that it is willing, even aiming, to pursue stronger military ties abroad. This comes amid increasing Chinese sovereignty claims in the SCS, which Vietnam contests along with countries like the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei, and Malaysia. China’s military and technological lead in the SCS, especially maritime control of the Paracel Islands, which are claimed by Vietnam, has become a major concern for Hanoi. Looking for stronger Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) engagement, Vietnam and India can indeed create a robust maritime alliance with a potential US trilateral base. Furthermore, via Quad Plus engagements, a more active thrust on the India–Japan–Vietnam trilateral could be encouraged.

The inclusion of Brazil and New Zealand was surprising; but the motive behind the move comes from Washington and its alliance partners’ attempts to disengage countries from Beijing that are extremely dependent on China. For India, Brazil is its most important trading partner in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, with total bilateral trade worth 7.02 billion USD in
Furthermore, the two nations are part of multiple plurilateral frameworks such as BRICS, IBSA (a dialogue forum bringing together India, Brazil, and South Africa), the International Solar Alliance, UN, BASIC (a bloc of four large newly industrialized countries—Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), and G-20. Nonetheless, India–Brazil economic ties fall short of those shared between Brazil and China, while Beijing continues to be the leading trading partner for Brazil, with total trade worth 98 billion USD in 2019. However, Brazil–China ties took a sour turn during the pandemic, with President Bolsonaro’s son Eduardo (who is also a federal legislator and an advisor to the president) drawing a rebuke from China for comparing Chinese handling of the virus to the erstwhile Soviet Union’s handling of the Chernobyl disaster. Further, Brazil’s Education Minister Abraham Weintraub, in a now-deleted tweet, said that China is using the pandemic to dominate the world. Eduardo Bolsonaro, Weintraub, and Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo are among President Bolsonaro’s high-profile advisors who advocate for less reliance on China and deeper convergence with the United States. Hence, even though it is a member of BRICS and BASIC and a close trading partner of China, Brazil chose to be a part of the Quad Plus grouping, signaling a major potential shift in its commercial and political foreign policy in a post-COVID period.

With China being an indispensable trading partner to New Zealand, the inclusion of Wellington in the Quad Plus grouping was one of the more surprising ones. New Zealand has maintained a stringent policy of not appearing to target Beijing, despite being one of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing nations. By formally adopting the Indo-Pacific construct in February 2020, New Zealand’s gradual pull away from China can be noticed. India has been classified as a “priority for New Zealand.” Hence, the mutual “interest in the prosperity and stability of the Indo-Pacific region” makes ties between the two nations poised for greater pointed-alignment. New Zealand has highlighted in its *Strategic Defence Policy Statement* of 2018 that its “Indo-Pacific partners”—the Quad 2.0 nations of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India—are “reinforcing the rules-based order.” For India, which is now also actively working on improving ties with Australia, a New Zealand–Australia–India trilateral, focused on the Pacific Ocean and maritime economy as well as security, can be a bold yet prudent step forward. This will allow India to not only improve economic synergy, especially within the Quad Plus framework but also expand its active maritime presence in the Pacific Ocean region—not limiting itself to the SCS or the Indian Ocean.
A “Conjectural” Alliance

With New Delhi endeavoring to put preemptive pressure on China to address security concerns in the region, Beijing has been simultaneously and steadily promoting its maritime influence, mainly in the SCS and ECS zones. Beijing’s gray-zone strategy, being largely inoffensive, offers it an adequate advantage to stake claims of its sovereignty over land, sea, and air. However, with the strategy gradually turning coercive, many are now finding it difficult to challenge. In fact, no one country can act as a balancer to China’s coercive maritime influence.

Contrastingly, India’s vision for the region stands at the significant intersection of partnerships and cooperation through shared goals. A multipolar maritime Asia facilitates a flexible strategic environment for India to operate with a range of countries, including the US, Japan, and other like-minded nations, through trilateral (India–Australia–Japan; India–Japan–United States) and quadrilateral formats—such as the Quad—stressing freedom of navigation and overflight. A multipolar Asia, thus, complements a conjoined and concerted maritime effort across the Indo-Pacific to balance out China’s adventurism. Nevertheless, India realizes the Chinese prowess as well as the concerns in the American Cold War-style containment strategy, which is far from effective, and perhaps challenging to implement in today’s world.

The Quad Plus narrative is an evolving concept; its potential, limitations, and aspirations are at present only conjectural. With India’s pointed alignments and engagements emerging over the past decade with Indo-Pacific partners, the creation of Quad Plus and India’s participation in the same create an actively engaged and strategically aligned like-minded framework that does not completely conform to an alliance. Such a multilateral and universalist proposition promotes India’s active growth on global forums, while not departing from New Delhi’s age-old policy of eschewing an alliance framework. Allowing deeper engagement with nations like South Korea, Vietnam, and, potentially, France and the United Kingdom in a possible future, the Quad Plus is a crucial platform for the emerging international order.

If a multialigned policy strategy with a thrust toward strategic autonomy has emerged as the defining feature of Indian foreign policy, it is to find a balance or to accommodate China as a strategic partner, in the Asian and global frameworks. Strategic autonomy offers the space to better position India’s strategic interests in a systemic calculus, whereas the multialigned policy framework provides a multifold engagement structurally covering regional and global institutions, and across major, minor, immediate, and extended neighbors. Interestingly, this allows New Delhi to position India’s interests both in China-centered and
US-centered institutions or envisioned architecture without wholly subscribing to their respective regional visions. India’s growing strategic outreach through its AEP, Link West Policy, Connect Central Asia Policy, and SAGAR in the Indian Ocean Region builds a strategic context in India’s favor to back a multipolar Asian proposition where New Delhi can envision a greater role for itself in the regional decision-making process.

To this effect, the Quad Plus is instrumental in creating a channel of communication, with the strategic framework of the grouping highlighting the rapid creation of alignment structures toward a conjectural alliance. The recently concluded ministerial Quad meeting has been dubbed as an “exclusive clique” by China, focused on “harming third party’s interests.” The current uncertainties in the geopolitical order present the right time for the Quad Plus and Quad 2.0 to rise as a functioning political collective or conjectural alliance. With India regularly being attributed as the most vulnerable connection of Quad 2.0, New Delhi’s post-Galwan international strategy indications have crucially demonstrated a more dynamic turn toward pointed-alignment and a more profound commitment with conjectural alliances like the Quad framework.

By supporting the Quad Plus ambit, India is seemingly becoming more accepting of the US perspective, with Washington having reciprocated by suggesting to include India in the recently expanded G7 aims. Likely to evolve as one of the most unique and vital Indo-Pacific networks of the post-COVID period, it is important that the Quad Plus framework focuses on recuperation from COVID-incited financial mishaps while defining ways toward accomplishing monetary independence. For instance, participating countries must consider removing barriers to trade and putting resources into vital activities like the SCRI.

In view of the BRI drawing focus for its alleged debt-trap setups, coupled with COVID-driven financial strains on small economies, Xi’s China is undergoing a thorough worldwide examination in the post-COVID period. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia must, therefore, leverage this context to reinforce the Quad 2.0 grouping. They should cautiously actuate India to join initiatives like the BDN and expand solicitation efforts vis-à-vis the new Quad Plus countries. As an expansion of the Quad 2.0, Quad Plus seems to be allowing New Delhi to make a continental connect and “corridor of communication,” which must further grow toward seeking a commitment from nations not aligned with China within the grouping. Prime Minister Modi’s clarion call for self-reliance (Aatmanirbhar Bharat) requires India to become less dependent on China-driven worldwide supply chain systems. Joining the BDN and using the Quad Plus framework to promote SCRI stands as a positive effort toward making stable
supply chains and ensuring the public interest in the wake of a resurgent and hyperantagonistic China.

**Quad Plus in the Wake of China’s Assertive Rise**

China’s vision for Asia, its planned military and economic rise within the region, and the inception of the Community with a Shared Future for Humankind (CSFH) implicitly underpinning the goal to attain the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation are crucial determinants pushing India toward the Quad 2.0. President Xi’s efforts to present a universalist image of China via the CSFH framework, especially with its Asia-focused approach, have eroded over time, due to Chinese revisionist initiatives. Beijing’s “charm offensive” strategy, shadowed by its simultaneous implementation of “wolf warrior” diplomacy, has only disenchanted Asia.

Countries like India have long been actively pushing against the BRI narrative and highlighting how China’s hypocritical actions do not put its CSFH rhetoric to practice. Adding to this argument, Beijing has now sought to create its quadrilateral grouping in the South Asian trans-Himalayan region, which could be termed as the “Himalayan Quad,” composed of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal, under the premise of combating COVID-19. This endeavor envisions several connectivity initiatives geared toward the overall objectives of procuring economic leverage and consolidating Beijing’s normative power by spreading its influence — ultimately to cement Beijing’s bid for global governance leadership. Unlike the Quad 2.0 or Quad Plus, the chances of the rapid securitization or institutionalization of a Chinese Quad are plentiful. Hence, these developments will continuously act as a backgrounder to remind and encourage India to accord increasing seriousness to the Quad process in times to come.

New Delhi, for its part, has implemented a power-partner balancing approach toward China in the different approaches India has taken vis-à-vis AIIB and BRI. While India has welcomed most of the China-led multilateral institutions such as the AIIB and NDB, New Delhi has also opposed Chinese unilateral schemes such as the BRI. From the beginning, New Delhi has perceived the AIIB as a striking multilateral proposition coming from Asia that would benefit the country’s resource accession in national and cross-border infrastructure projects. As a result, India is its second-largest shareholder in this bank.

In contrast, New Delhi has had strong reservations about the BRI from the very beginning. Its response to the Chinese invitation on the BRI was diplomatically stout and resolute. An explicit Indian stance on the BRI, which is rather dismissive, is seen in an official statement released on 13 May 2017. The fundamental difference between the AIIB and the BRI, according to India, is the contested norms
of universalism and unilateralism, respectively. To India, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a BRI project, comes as a first-scale strategic hindrance since it ignores New Delhi’s sensitivities on territorial integrity.

Reciprocity has been an iron principle in foreign policy that India swears by; however, this principle is not visible when it comes to India–China relations, especially referring to the One China Policy. China has been consistently undermining New Delhi’s territorial sovereignty, vital interests in international organizations, border conflict, expanded maritime interests in the Indian Ocean, and the SCS, all while India nurses a huge trade deficit with Beijing. In particular, lack of reciprocity in bilateral relations is reaffirmed as India shares China’s sensitivities over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, but the same is not reciprocated by Beijing with regards to India’s sensitivities over Ladakh, Kashmir, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Striking power parity with China in global decision-making bodies, particularly in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), has always been India's ambition. As reflected in Prime Minister Modi’s speech at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in November 2015, more representation at the UNSC will only enhance its “credibility” and “legitimacy.” In other words, a multipolar Asia corroborates India’s structural vision to reform the UNSC, with Asia having a better and bigger voice or representation in world affairs. Instead, the Indian proposition of a multipolar Asia looks to build India’s strength globally, and support from China at the UNSC is a strategic necessity for India. Keeping such examples in mind, India’s ties with China have been driven along a finely balanced line dividing competition and cooperation.

Hence, India’s present China strategy is one of pragmatism, especially through promoting economic collaboration despite security differences. Amid this pragmatism, Prime Minister Modi planned to achieve equality of power in the bilateral and regional realm to situate India as a peer partner, rather than just a partner, of China. The signing of their “developmental partnership” in 2014, at the very onset of both Modi’s and Xi’s national leadership roles, was a key example of the expectations both held vis-à-vis bilateral ties. Modi’s China strategy has hence imbued a particular portrayal of advancing commitment with balance or “engagement with equilibrium.” Nonetheless, over the years, Chinese revisionist tendencies—coming to a head at Galwan—have left a lasting impact on China–India ties, with the same changing along with the realist paradigms in the emerging security order.

The Galwan contention has embedded itself as a dark spot within the India–China ties and signals a developing distrust, regardless of diplomatic and military redressals, in the relations between the two countries. India now appears to be ready to exploit the power distribution, reaching out past the Quad Plus nations.
Such a cycle permits India to have more military, economic, and diplomatic engagement with nations that are vital to India’s emerging fortune in the Indo-Pacific. As such, Quad Plus enhancements provide a corridor of communication for India past the Quad nations, particularly with Brazil, Israel, Vietnam, and South Korea, and permits New Delhi to speed up a continental connect paradigm that India’s comprehensive Indo-Pacific standpoint has been pitching for quite a while.

Quad Plus is still in its nascence; admittedly, it does not have an institutional system, nor is it clear how it is going to proceed in the future. It is only natural that countries like Brazil, New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam are wary of taking part in an anti-China discussion, as every one of them shares large-scale economic ties with Beijing. Despite such limitations, the Quad Plus serves New Delhi’s enthusiasm for gaining power multilaterally, by reinforcing India’s relations with nations that are key stakeholders of the emerging order. The methodology of dealing with China under a power-partner parity is seemingly becoming outdated and is poised to undergo a lasting, rather concrete, change: China is now seen as a much stronger force that compromises Indian security, sovereignty, and sway.

The “New Normal” in India–China Ties

Conclusively, it is important to note that India’s stake in a multipolar Asia comes more as a politico-security statement, visualizing a greater role for itself in this diffusion and distribution of power. This is primarily because it provides multiple choices to New Delhi’s rising power status and helps position India’s security interests better vis-à-vis China. This complements India’s multaligned foreign policy framework. It must be ascertained that pointed engagement refers to the broader narrative of India’s engagement with key partners across the world such as the United Kingdom, France, and the Quad Plus countries. Meanwhile, pointed alignment refers to the systematic economic, political, and military connection with Quad nations that have like-minded outlooks toward the security landscape of Asia and the Indo-Pacific. By merging these two foreign policy overtures, the creation of a conjectural alliance allows India’s foreign policy to gain much more adherence to alliance power structure and politics that nations like the United States espouse, without having to break away from the uniqueness of its own foreign policy commitment to non-alliance. The opportunities for multilateral and bilateral synergy under such a policy are vast, allowing New Delhi to more systematically plan its post-Galwan emerging China Policy.

In this context, the Quad 2.0 and Quad Plus groupings have taken on a grander strategic significance for New Delhi, with a move away from strategic autonomy and toward defense cooperation emerging steadily. With India having recently invited Australia to the India–Japan–US trilateral Malabar naval
exercise, the potential of a militarized Quad cannot really be discounted, though India will not overtly support such a grouping to emerge as a NATO-like body. In fact, India’s hesitance to engage in a direct military-centric negotiation aimed against China will persist; a commitment to non-alliance remains vital to New Delhi’s foreign policy directions. China’s apprehensions of Quad 2.0 emerging as an “Asian NATO” have held steady since the revitalization of the dialogue, with recent comments by the outgoing US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun at the US–India Strategic Partnership Forum discussing an “Indo-Pacific NATO” only accentuating such concerns.

In the post-Galwan and the post-COVID period, anti-China rhetoric in India will progressively rise. The current times present an ideal opportunity for an administration-wide push to move supply chain reliance away from China, mainly under the aegis of Modi’s “Aatmanirbhar Bharat” and “Make in India” initiatives. Choosing to accept a more grounded approach to Chinese tech goliath Huawei’s incorporation in India’s 5G preliminaries is another area of reevaluation post-Galwan. It is currently an ideal opportunity for India to complete reforming and modernizing its military, especially in high-tech surveillance and defense technology and indigenization. Post-Galwan, the story of China as a partner will assume a lower priority in an official speech. The utopian goals of the India–China partnership will be supplanted by a more realistic view of their ties that puts India’s national security above any economic interests. Confrontation will no longer be an extreme reaction.

To India, China’s threat is not just military- or land-centric, it is primarily ideological, confronting normative ethics of the region, like-minded partners that seek to preserve a “free and open,” inclusive, and liberal rules-based international order. For India, to that effect, Quad 2.0 and Quad Plus are opportunities to create a lasting democratic security alignment, with pointed goals in economic, security, and defense terms. In the changing post-COVID order, enhanced synergy with Quad Plus nations, in an attempt to sway their own “China connect” policies and gradually break away from Chinese economic dependence, is crucial to New Delhi. ☠

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Notes

1. This paper is drawn and built upon the author’s published commentary at RUSI. Please see, Jagannath Panda, “India and the Quad Plus Dialogue,” RUSI, 12 June 2020, https://rusi.org/.
India and the Quad Plus

32. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease among Foreign Ministers of Interested Countries.”


41. “Media Releases,” Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, 5 February 2020, https://hal-india.co.in/.


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