

India and the Quad: Chinese belligerence and Indian resilience

Edition 9, 2022

Professor Harsh V. Pant

DOI: 10.37839/MAR2652-550X9.19

On September 24, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the first-ever in-person summit of the Quad leaders. The leaders included Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who met President Biden at the White House and discussed a range of global issues. At the summit, Modi emphasised ‘establishing peace in the Indo-Pacific region’ with ‘like-minded countries’ that share democratic values.

Though the Quad dialogue took over a decade to happen in person, the four nations have finally managed to establish a common ground for enhancing maritime cooperation, trade, and security. From addressing climate change to combating terrorism, a plethora of diverse issues was discussed during the summit. Although the wide-ranging discussion went beyond the China challenge, it was evident that the four Quad nations are committed to maintaining peace and the rules-based order which is being disturbed by Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The Quad and its revival

The establishment of the Quad framework can be traced back to 2004 when the Indian Ocean Tsunami—one of the deadliest natural disasters in history—killed more than 200,000 people across 14 countries. The staggering death toll provoked many countries to come together to provide urgent humanitarian assistance. India, Japan, the US, and Australia formed a tsunami ‘core group’ and began sending relief to affected countries by contributing over 40,000 troops, humanitarian responders,

helicopters, cargo ships, and planes. According to the Former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, 'India's full capabilities came as a surprise to the world, highlighting India's strength, leadership abilities and commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

While the humanitarian relief mission ended in mid-January 2005, a new seedling of the Quad framework emerged in the leaders' minds. In 2006, Japan's then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed an 'arc of freedom and prosperity' that promoted freedom, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In the same year, India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Tokyo. Both countries issued a joint statement in which they expressed their eagerness to begin a dialogue with 'like-minded' countries in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2007, US Vice President Dick Cheney signaled America's interest in the Quad dialogue. In the same year, Abe visited India and gave a speech on the 'confluence of the two seas' that backed the Quad with an ideological foundation. A month later, the first meeting of the 'initial Quad' took place on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila.

Chinese belligerence

In 2007, two versions of Malabar naval exercises took place. In April, Japan was brought in for the first time in the US-India exercise, and in September, the exercises became multilateral as it featured four navies and Singapore. However, the grouping fell apart when China started protesting the exercises. Communist parties in India also began protesting against the maritime exercises, further weakening India's position in the Quad. India was also hesitant because it was worried that rivalry with China would keep India out of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Moreover, the key driver, Shinzo Abe, resigned as PM and India also lacked Australian support, primarily due to China.

Nonetheless, growing Chinese belligerence compelled India to accelerate the pace of the Quad. After a hiatus of about eight years, the Quad countries' leaders met in the Philippines in 2017 on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit, thus reviving Quad as

Quad 2.0. Once a reluctant member, India began playing a pro-active role. For example, from 2017 onwards, Australia began requesting India to re-join the Malabar exercises, which India finally accepted in 2020. Moreover, border disputes—the Doklam incident of 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash of 2020—pushed India towards active participation by highlighting India’s expertise in pharmaceuticals, supply chain, technology, production capacity at the Quad virtual and in-person summit in 2021.

The revival of the Quad can be attributed to the events in the period between 2012-2020. In 2012, PM Abe returned to office and called for a ‘democratic security diamond.’ Between 2013-2020, each Quad member experienced Chinese aggression under the reign of Xi Jinping. China jeopardized security by refusing to respect internationally accepted maritime rules, challenging rules-based orders, claiming lands and islands, building artificial islands, and becoming a threat to peace in the Indo-Pacific. Japan experienced Chinese coercive behaviour near the Senkaku Islands in 2012. Tensions between Washington and Beijing also flared over their trade imbalance. As mentioned earlier, in 2017 and 2020, India faced border disputes with China at Doklam and Galwan Valley.

India’s resilience

There has been a significant reorientation of India’s foreign policy due to violent clashes at the India-China disputed border. In 2015 and 2018, India launched the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) concept and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) for maritime security. In 2018, India tried to align the objectives of the Quad with SAGAR and IPOI. These initiatives seek to contain Chinese bellicosity in the oceans.

With India’s partaking, the Quad has been upgraded to a cooperation platform on global issues and has held regular ministerial meetings. For instance, in November 2019, India hosted a Quad ‘CT-TTX’ (counter-terrorism table-top exercise) in Delhi.

Senior military leaders also appeared on Quad-plus panels at India's flagship geopolitical conference the Raisina Dialogue of 2018, 2019, and 2020.

India has also gone beyond the Quad and has deepened its bilateral ties with the Quad members. With Australia, India has signed an information-sharing agreement and a mutual logistics support agreement. Both countries have also participated in bilateral military exercises such as AUSINDEX (Australia India Exercise) and AUSTRALIA HIND and have conducted dialogues on defence policy and maritime security. India and Japan have participated in bilateral military exercises such as JIMEX (Japan-India Maritime Exercise), and Dharma Guardian. Both nations have signed agreements such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and reciprocal provision of supplies and services. With the United States, India has deepened its defence ties with agreements such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). Both countries have undertaken joint training of peacekeepers and bilateral military exercises such as VAJRA PRAHAR, YUSH ABHYAS, COPE INDIA, and Tiger TRIUMPH.

Additionally, the Quad has provided an opportunity for its constituents to participate in different configurations with 'like-minded' nations. For example, Australia, India, and Japan have announced their intention to launch a supply chain resilience initiative. Furthermore, India has participated in COVID-19 related cooperation with the UK, Brazil, Israel, South Korea, and the US.

India, the US, Japan, and Australia met virtually at the March 12 Summit in 2021 and discussed development, cooperation on the Indo-Pacific, vaccines, technology, climate change, and supply chain management. The Quad leaders also released a Joint Statement that has come to be known as 'The Spirit of the Quad'. Without mentioning China, the document points towards quadrilateral cooperation against the activities of China in the Indo-Pacific region. The document by no means signaled that the Quad is a military coalition—instead, it emphasised its core agenda

to make the Indo-Pacific an inclusive, free, and open region, in which the rule of law is upheld. At the first in-person Quad summit in September 2021, the Quad leaders agreed to distribute one billion vaccines in Asia. The leaders developed a new partnership on regional infrastructure, and STEM fellowships in US institutions. They also created new working groups on vaccines, climate change, and technology.

Is the Quad good for India?

Joining the Quad has both advantages and disadvantages for India. As mentioned above, through the Quad, India can counterbalance China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific region, including its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) which has led to it building port facilities in countries neighbouring India, giving rise to a sense of encirclement in New Delhi. With the Quad, India can rise above its middle-power status and project its influence beyond the Indo-Pacific. Also, India's Act East Policy and Extended Neighbour policy boost India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, India's bilateral relations with 'like-minded' countries with the backdrop of the Quad can be strengthened further through information sharing agreements, arms exchange agreements, defence ties, and much more. Economically, the Quad will also make India a preferred destination for investment, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak. In the post-pandemic international order, India is seen as a significant player due to its 'Vaccine Maitri', the Indian government's efforts to provide COVID-19 vaccines to other nations. The Quad is crucial for India because it has the potential to boost its pharmaceutical prowess and to assert its leadership in the post-pandemic world through economic cooperation, shared democratic values, and strong defence ties.

But the Quad also poses some challenges for India. Firstly, there is the possibility of reactivating tensions with China on different fronts, making it imperative for New Delhi to ensure that the Quad is not reduced to an anti-China grouping. Since India and China are members of international organisations such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia,

India, China, and South Africa) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), managing China through the Quad would undermine India's involvement in other organisations. Secondly, India's involvement in the Quad could risk alienating two important Indian allies, Iran and Myanmar. Iran is a crucial partner for India to secure energy and conduct trade with Central Asian countries, but China's 2021 USD 400-billion economic deal with Iran may become a headache for India. Simultaneously, China is also active in Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Thirdly, India is the only country among the Quad members that shares its borders with China. If India engages militarily in the Quad, there emerges a risk of Chinese aggression at the India borders. Lastly, the problem of India's delivery deficit coupled with the increase of BRI projects in the area could create severe issues in the Quad initiatives. Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane has stated that India's failure to deliver on promised infrastructure projects has plagued India's effort to improve regional connectivity through the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway. India's neighbours such as Nepal and Bangladesh are already experiencing Chinese interventions, further disturbing Indian dominance in the region. If not solved, the problem of delivery deficit could hamper the Quad projects in which India would be playing a leading role in the future.

Conclusion

At the in-person summit in November 2021, the Quad decided to take on China's vaccine diplomacy by pledging to distribute one billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine across the Indo-Pacific. India's production capacity, Japanese finance, Australian logistics, and American technology will be utilised to distribute vaccines. Moreover, the Quad is also focusing on new technology, particularly 5G, to challenge China's 'digital Sinosphere'. Australia, Japan, and the US have already banned Chinese information and communications provider, Huawei, and India has banned more than 200 Chinese apps including TikTok, Helo, UC Browser, Shein, Club Factory, and Cam Scanner. These are all examples of Quad members collectively challenging

Chinese influence.

China, of course, has taken note and has accused those nations of trying to form 'enclosed small cliques', describing their actions as 'the sure way to destroy the international order'. It was not long ago, in March 2018, that China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, had referred to the Quad grouping as nothing more than 'sea foam on the Pacific and Indian oceans' that would eventually dissipate.

But dissipate it did not; instead, as China's foreign policy became more concerning for Quad members, the once shaky foundations of the Quad gained strength to a point where it became the preferred option for the first multilateral engagement of a new US Biden administration within two months in office. When the Chinese foreign policy establishment looks back at recent history, it will see how it has sowed the seeds of a new regional security architecture. The Indo-Pacific would have remained a concept in think-tank reports and the Quad would have been nothing more than a trial balloon of 2007 had it not been for China's belligerence and aggression towards its neighbours over the last decade.

China claims it cannot be contained and it is right. Its rise and fall will be determined by its own actions. China's recent actions have generated a backlash in the region and beyond, which the Communist Party of China will find rather difficult to navigate. What other powers are trying to do now is to set the terms of engagement so that a rising China does not remain inimical to their interests. All states, major and minor, will continue to remain engaged with China, but the battle is over who sets the terms of this engagement.

And it is here that India's role has been central in galvanising this response. Even before the ongoing border crisis ushered in a paradigm shift in India's China policy, New Delhi was not shy of walking alone, if need be, in challenging China on the predatory aspects of its BRI and other policies. It walked a lonely path, with even its friends advising that shunning BRI could have negative consequences. But New Delhi was eventually successful in making its critique of China's infrastructure plans

widely accepted and mainstream. The concept of the Indo-Pacific and its viability was also sold to the world by India's insistence that only when the two oceans are viewed as part of a single unified maritime space, can a coherent regional balance of power be envisioned. Most significant, perhaps, was India standing up to China on border issues underscoring to the wider region, which has been suffering under the onslaught of Chinese aggression, that giving in to a bullying power is not the only option available.

*Image: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, India's Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs **Yoshimasa Hayashi** at the Quad Ministerial Meeting in Melbourne, Australia, on February 10, 2022. Credit: US Department of State/Flickr.*