

# Role of QUAD in Asian Balance of Power

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## Abstract

21<sup>st</sup> century is seen as an Asian century not only rhetorically but also practically due to the presence of two important economic and political powers, viz. China and India and two volatile areas which could be a possible nuclear flashpoint at any time, viz., Kashmir and South China Sea. However the implicit presence of extra-regional powers for resisting Chinese influence has complicated the Asian balance of power and security architecture. QUAD, a four member grouping – India, Australia, United States of America and Japan- strengthening military partnerships in Indo-Pacific sea-lanes is the latest and most important reflection of the same. This paper argues that QUAD actually cushions India's presence to counter China and thereby creating unnecessary tension in the region. Ultimately it is the regional players, viz. India and China that are forced to see eye to eye and escalate tension at the behest of extra-regional powers and this paper tries to expose such 'politics' in regional geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Asia, , China, Geopolitics, India, QUAD

## Introduction

Contemporary power-balance scenario in Asian continent is tricky to discuss in the beginning of the third decade of twenty-first century because of two changes not much surfaced in its first two decades–(a) importance of sea-lanes, particularly the increasing importance of Indo-Pacific region in global geopolitics (b) escalation of tension around Indo-China border areas. As a result, if United States was previously seen as the only probable factor in Asian security frame, now Australia and Japan have involved themselves equally. So today QUAD has becomes the most important influential factor in discussing power realignments in Asia. Writing in 2006, Francine Frankel offered an important insight: that India, the United States, and China are not merely adapting to a changing world but also creating a new one. The

long-term structural consequences in Asia of the rise of China and India are only now beginning to be understood (Frankel, 2006). So structurally if the earlier decades since 2005 were seen as a tussle between US-India and China, now it is QUAD vs. China proving that India has accumulated more strategic partners in comparison to China to muscle its influence in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to note that India is not facing China on the frontiers alone. A great game between the two neighbours, with each trying to intrude and undermine each other's interest, runs across geographies of the Indo-Pacific, covering ASEAN in the east and the African coastline in the west. But countering Chinese hard and soft power intrusions, especially through its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is expensive. Given the urgency of the task, India has to quickly build credible financial and military muscle. To accomplish this herculean task against a formidable and implacable rival, New Delhi has no choice but to embrace the Indo-Pacific QUAD. The QUAD once merely symbolised an emerging international effort to establish a discreet check on Chinese power. According to Asian geopolitics expert Brahma Chellany, given the increasing threat of China towards Taiwan under President Xi Jinping leading to military action, a grand international coalition, with the QUAD at its core, will become inevitable (Chellany, 2020). As China calculatively increases its military escalation and engagement in Eastern sector of India-China border at Ladakh, despite India's repeated dialogue efforts, it is time to make China aware of India's autonomous military capability and also strategic capability of teaming with QUAD members vis-a-vis China with India as its face. India has diplomatically allowed QUAD members to accept India as its face against Chinese domination in Asia but QUAD as a group has not demonstrated any stand in support of India in her latest border frictions with China. Therefore QUAD as a grouping has its own autonomy as well and India can't blindly fall back on QUAD support in case of military escalation vis-a-vis China. So this article focuses on this dicey character of QUAD in influencing the direction of balance of power in Asia. Section I discusses the evolution of QUAD while section II contextualises QUAD in face of growing strength of China in Asia., With a third section on India's expectations from QUAD, the article concludes that India and China should not fall prey to extra-regional political interests of other members of QUAD and must balance the power equations in Asia between themselves.

## **Section I**

The QUADrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is an informal strategic forum between the United States, Japan, Australia and India that is

maintained by semi-regular summits, information exchanges and military drills between member countries. The forum was initiated as a dialogue in 2007 by then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, with the support of Vice President Dick Cheney of the US, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India. The dialogue was paralleled by joint military exercises of an unprecedented scale, titled Exercise Malabar. The diplomatic and military arrangement was widely viewed as a response to increased Chinese economic and military power, and the Chinese government responded to the QUAD by issuing formal diplomatic protests to its members. The first iteration of the QUAD ceased to exist following the withdrawal of Australia in February 2008, shortly after Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd took office, after a joint naval exercise between the QUAD and Singapore drew diplomatic protests from China. Other reasons for the discontinuation of the QUAD were that in late 2007, more Beijing-friendly Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda replaced Abe in Japan and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's state visit to China in January 2008, during which he stated that the India-China relationship was a priority. Under Rudd and his successor Julia Gillard, military cooperation between the United States and Australia was enhanced, leading to the placement of US Marines near Darwin, Australia, near the Timor Sea and Lombok Strait. India, Japan, and the United States continued to hold joint naval exercises through Malabar till 2019. In 2020 Australia joined the Malabar exercise after invite from India making it the first time all members of the QUAD will be engaged militarily. This was after negotiations which started during the 2017 ASEAN Summits, with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of Australia, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and President Donald Trump of the United States agreeing in Manila to revive the security pact.

The formation of the QUAD would allow like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific to counter China without formally creating an open military alliance. It would permit India, Japan, Australia, and the United States—four countries with varying strategic priorities, security objectives, and perceptions on alliances—to employ a soft balancing strategy against Chinese hegemony. In this regard, the QUAD would be largely based on internal balancing, meaning that it would allow each nation to emerge as a strong regional power in their respective corners of Asia: Japan in the western Pacific, Australia in Southeast Asia, and India in the Indian Ocean, with active support from the United States. In recent times, India, Japan, and Australia have increased their military

capabilities to protect their interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Though its constitution has historically constrained Japan from spending more than one percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, Tokyo is acquiring advanced defence systems and gradually shedding the pacifist nature of its security policy. Recently, Japan decided to purchase 42 F-35 joint strike fighters from Lockheed Martin and commissioned an indigenously built 24,000-ton helicopter carrier *JS Kaga*, which can also carry F-35s. With a formidable naval force, Japan could independently protect its interests in the East China Sea dispute with China. The QUAD, a loose strategic coalition of the Indo-Pacific region's four leading democracies, is rapidly solidifying this year in response to China's aggressive foreign policy. Following a meeting of their foreign ministers in Tokyo, Australia, India, Japan and the United States are now actively working toward establishing a new multilateral security structure for the region. The idea is not to create an Asian version of NATO, but rather to develop a close security partnership founded on shared values and interests, including the rule of law, freedom of navigation, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, free markets, and free trade. Of course, the QUAD's focus also extends beyond China, with the goal being to ensure a stable balance of power within a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. That concept was first articulated in 2016 by then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and has quickly become the linchpin of America's regional strategy. After lying dormant for nine years, the QUAD was resurrected in late 2017, but has really only gained momentum over the last year, when its consultations were elevated to the foreign-minister level. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that, 'once we've institutionalised what we're doing, the four of us together, we can begin to build out a true security framework, a fabric that can counter the challenge that the Chinese Communist Party presents to all of us.' (Chellany, 2020)

QUAD is an important beginning in regional geopolitics in Asia reflecting the dominance of naval security partnership having India at its core and China as its adversary. This is an apt diplomatic manoeuvre of India to counter the long standing building of 'string of pearls' by China to encircle India. However although for strategic and geopolitical analysis, QUAD's presence is a feather in India's diplomatic cap but it has not yet documented support to India in case of Indo-China confrontational milieu. This is because of India's proximity in Indian Ocean region and India and China's similarity in civilisational context which needs to be analysed in detail.

## Section II

Although India is the world's largest democracy and China has emerged as the world's most powerful non-democracy, their approaches to conflicts within the developing world seem broadly similar. Both of them are deeply wary of the doctrines of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. They are unwilling, at the moment, to endorse these as necessary principles to deal with contemporary international security challenges. Given their interests in cultivating ruling regimes for access to raw materials, China and India seem to prefer the virtues of 'regime stability' and are reluctant to confront the risks of 'regime change'. (Raja Mohan and Ayers, 2006:324) At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, India's interests demand bonding with powerful friends, which can change the economic and military balance of power vis-a-vis China. That is where Japan, Australia and the United States, which together with India form the Indo-Pacific QUAD, come in. China must also patiently absorb the skills and achievements of humanity as a whole, and especially those employed by Western civilization to construct world empire," says Jiang as quoted in Reading the China Dream, a website that translates works by Chinese intellectuals. The revival of the Middle Kingdom imagination, the kernel of China's exceptionalism, has now become a threat to international peace and security. Resorting to exercise of raw military, economic and diplomatic power, China has threatened India, potentially a rival civilisational state, with the war in Ladakh. It has also challenged India's regional heft in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Its Belt and Road Initiative has become the vehicle for exporting China's influence in India's immediate and extended neighbourhood, which includes Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka Maldives and the Gulf countries.

India alone is not the victim of Beijing's visible expansionism. Chinese warplanes and naval ships also continue to threaten Taiwan, which has become another major flashpoint primed for a military conflict. Traditional rivals, China and Japan are at loggerheads over the Senkaku islands, and with Indonesia, Beijing is feuding over the Natuna Islands. Other ASEAN countries including Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines and Brunei are quite literally on China's radar on account of rival claims over maritime boundaries in the resource-rich South China Sea. After the COVID-19 outbreak, China's relations with Australia have gone precipitously south. China's rise on a global level as well. India and Japan are already taking the initiative to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa. Both countries are focusing on the development of industrial corridors and networks between Asia and Africa through

the India-Japan dialogue on Africa. They have proposed creating an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), for which Tokyo has pledged \$200 billion. The AAGC aims to ensure that African countries in need of financial investments will not succumb to China to join the BRI out of economic necessity and to counter China's increasing influence in Africa by means of constructing infrastructure facilities, particularly in littoral countries. (Paul, 2018) The analysis of geopolitical trends in the Indian Ocean has always constituted a uniquely challenging undertaking. For decades, strategic pundits have cyclically recognized the region's growing importance, yet struggled to define both its boundaries and its precise geopolitical significance. Part of the difficulty lies, no doubt, in the very conceptualization of the region. favorable geopolitical conditions opened up a new era of opportunity— or *maritime peace dividend*— during which India could focus its growing naval capabilities first and foremost on projecting soft power throughout the Indo-Pacific maritime sphere. The Indian navy's embrace of its role in soft power projection became apparent via its involvement in a seemingly exponential array of plurilateral maritime efforts. On the multilateral front, India displayed a growing proclivity to shape both its maritime environment and the law of the sea. India's era of maritime opportunity in the Indian Ocean is rapidly drawing to a close. Various evolutions in India's tactical and strategic environment will compel New Delhi to adopt a more utilitarian attitude in the practice of its maritime diplomacy. This will express itself through a stronger emphasis on bilateralism, most notably with the United States, and through a reprioritization of the harder components of India's growing maritime power. (Rehman, 2015:132) The Indo-Pacific QUAD essentially represents a partnership of Middle Powers bonding with one superpower, but which has experienced a relative decline in its power. As it stands, the QUAD, on account of its internal power configuration, demonstrates a high degree of economic and military inter-dependence, rather than a slavish hierarchy lorded over by Washington.

Overall it can be said that QUAD is a context specific alignment for India in Indo-Pacific region but the member-countries of QUAD has their own interests which goes as per their own national interest and sometime may mismatch with expectations of India to help her in getting a competitive posture vis-a-vis China in Asia.

### **Section III**

The regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific are shifting. The United States' unipolarity is diminishing as China's rise as a formidable naval power

is rising. In today's world, with Beijing's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, China may even be able to prevent the U.S. navy's advance to its shores during a maritime crisis. At the same time, given U.S. President Trump's America first policy, U.S. allies in Asia are apprehensive about the country's leadership to the region. In the context of increasing Chinese influence and a noncommittal United States, Indo-Pacific countries must turn to regional balancing mechanisms like the QUAD to contain Beijing collectively and hinder the emergence of Chinese regional and global hegemony.

As an emerging economic giant and military power, India is slated to play a crucial role in the security of the Indian Ocean. India is the world's fifth largest military spender, having spent \$55.9 billion in 2016, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). With its ongoing naval build-up, India is seeking to become a preeminent power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), specifically to counter China's naval expansion into the Indian Ocean. It has set a goal of maintaining a fleet of 212 warships and 458 aircraft by 2027, up from the Indian Navy's current 138-warship and 235-aircraft force. The Indian Navy's most recent Maritime Security Strategy emphasized New Delhi's focus on maritime security challenges emanating from within the IOR. Upon the 2015 release of this strategy, analysts had remarked on the apparent shift in Delhi's strategic approach to IOR, including its newfound willingness to become a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. In 2017, India operationalized this concept by creating a plan for the deployment of mission-ready ships and aircrafts across the Indian Ocean along critical sea lines of communication (SLOCS). The navy reportedly enacted this plan to counter China's pattern of sending submarines and warships into the IOR in recent years. Thus, this naval expansion indicates New Delhi's increasing assertiveness to contain China in the Indian Ocean. Although Australia has not traditionally shared the same concerns as Japan and India on the threat posed by China's rise, in recent years, it seems as though Australia is becoming less sensitive about upsetting China and may be willing to become an assertive maritime power in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. It has been taking steps to revitalize its navy and signed a \$41 billion deal with DCNS of France to purchase 12 conventional submarines in 2016. Despite having less at stake than Tokyo and New Delhi, Canberra is strengthening its defense partnerships with Japan, India, and other major Asian countries to protect its interests in the region. Furthermore, its close diplomatic relations with the ASEAN countries will help to curb Chinese economic influence in Southeast Asia. The fourth member of the QUAD, the United

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States, will continue to be a preeminent naval power across the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis recently announced that a primary challenge for the United States will be the great power competition with China. Given this announcement, it is likely that the United States will focus on countering China's active defense posture militarily, providing defense systems and technologies to Japan and India, and promoting joint naval drills such as the trilateral Malabar naval exercises. Diplomatic outreach from the United States can also go a long way in uniting Japan, India, and Australia—three countries that have not always seen eye to eye on Chinese assertiveness in the past. This emergence of an aligned quadrilateral grouping is demonstrative of the extent to which bilateral ties among these four democracies have been deepening in recent times. Much is still to be done to improve quadrilateral coordination and bilateral relationships at various levels, including naval exercises, 2+2 talks, and regular summit meetings. However, as these relationships develop over time, the QUAD has the potential to transform from a soft balancing mechanism into an open military alliance. For now, however, the effectiveness of the QUAD in countering Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific region and the world is dependent on how well each country can assert its diplomatic capital and maritime capabilities within their respective areas of Asia. (Website 1) US foreign policy has always been most effective when it leverages cooperation with other countries to advance shared strategic objectives. Despite President Donald Trump's undermining of US alliances, his administration has built the QUAD into a promising coalition and has upgraded security ties with key Indo-Pacific partners, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and India.

While all of the QUAD partners agree in principle on the need for a free and open Indo-Pacific, it is Chinese expansionism that has catalysed their recent actions. China is forcing even distant powers like the United Kingdom, France and Germany to view a rules-based Indo-Pacific as central to international peace and security. The QUAD's future, however, hinges on India, because the other three powers in the group are already tied by bilateral and trilateral security alliances among themselves. Australia and Japan are both under the US security (and nuclear) umbrella, whereas India not only shares a large land border with China, but also must confront Chinese territorial aggression on its own, as it is currently doing. China's stealth land grabs in the northernmost Indian borderlands of Ladakh earlier this year have led to a major military standoff, raising the risks of further localised battles or another 1962-style frontier war. (Chellaney, 2020)



The divergent interests of QUAD members converges on their respective problems with China but ultimately it depends on the two Asian giants – India and China on the roadmap of balance of power and security architecture of the continent itself.

## **Conclusion**

According to Rajamohan and Ayers, “as power shifts to the East, China and India are becoming architects of new kinds of engagements. The rise of China and India is not merely about redefining the balance of power. It is about devising\ the new rules for international governance across a whole range of issues: economic institutions, regional and global security, values and international law, energy regimes, and environmental management. The coming years promise an exciting adventure in thinking about and managing the triangular relationship.” (Rajamohan and Ayers, 2006:327) At the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi in 2018, Japan Self-Defense Forces Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, warned of China’s “powerful and expanding” military power and called upon India, the United States, Australia, and Japan to cooperate with one another to “deter Chinese provocations.” The naval chiefs of the four nations constituting the QUAD—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—convened at Raisina to discuss the search for order in the Indo-Pacific region. The first official meeting of this quadrilateral grouping took place in Manila in November 2017 on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Summits. Given China’s recent assertiveness on regional security issues, the QUAD has the potential to become an effective balancing mechanism to counter China in Asia. Chinese President Xi Jinping’s authorisation of People’s Liberation Army incursions into the Himalayas has forced India itself to take a more confrontational position. It is now more likely than ever that the QUAD will shift gears from consultation and coordination to become a de facto strategic alliance that plays a central role in a new multilateral security arrangement for the region. This new architecture will bear little resemblance to America’s Cold War- era system, which rested on a patron–client framework, with the US as the ‘hub’ and its allies as the ‘spokes’. No such arrangement would work nowadays, for the simple reason that a country as large as India cannot become just another Japan to the US. That’s why the US is working to coax India into a ‘soft alliance’ devoid of any treaty obligations.

In way of conclusion it is better that good wisdom dawns on Indian and Chinese officials to architect security, geopolitics and politics of

the continent in their own hands and not allow extra-regional powers to play with their tensed confronts. This will require de-escalation and disengagement of military presence across Indo-China borders which requires India to resist from manifesting its presence in anti-China groupings like QUAD. So India must try to create India-China naval and military partnerships to protect Asian sea-lanes like that of Indo-Pacific and keep intact Asian balance of power.

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