

MP-IDSA *Policy Brief*

Yes, The Quad Will Endure!

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Summary

The future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) will depend on the choices that China makes. The greater China's belligerence, the faster will the Quad's military-security agenda gather steam, perhaps even moving up into a 2+2 dialogue format. While it is not an alliance as yet, it does oppose coercion in any form. Even as there is every reason to strive for an inclusive Indo-Pacific, the Quad cannot, and should not, be hastily expanded, as it could dilute its focus.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) Leaders' Summit held on March 12, 2021, the first of its kind, demonstrated just how quickly the four-nation dialogue involving the US, Japan, Australia and India moved from a reincarnated officials' level dialogue in 2017 to ministerial engagement in 2019 and an apex summit last month, in such rapid succession.

The Quad was born of necessity coordinating relief operations after the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004. Yet, it was subject to prevarication and uncertainty on strategic challenges. The once inchoate group has now coalesced in response to the ominous clouds formed by China's economic and military ascendancy. Its form and substance are beginning to see greater alignment. Japan, for instance, was inducted as a regular partner in the Malabar naval exercise in 2015, followed by Australia last year.

Today, the Quad is complemented by a joint maritime exercise and a willingness to work together to meet the challenges of healthcare, new technologies and climate change. Here, as in the avowed goal of adhering to international law and bedrock principles such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, the binding glue is provided by the antithetical alternatives posed by China. This is reflected in the emphasis on building resilient supply chains in critical and emerging technologies and in healthcare as well.

China's suspicions about both the Indo-Pacific and the Quad run deep. It views the Indo-Pacific concept as a direct threat to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a gargantuan scheme aimed at creating new markets, standards and fresh growth opportunities for the Chinese economy.

Goaded into action, the US offers alternatives to Chinese "debt trap" financing for regional infrastructure and connectivity projects through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) and the energy initiative, Asia EDGE (Enhancing Development and Growth Through Energy).

Japan and Australia, which have their own programmes have joined hands with the US in the Blue Dot Network and the Indo-Pacific Business Forum. India too is promoting its own brand in the region. Over time, these have the potential to ease the BRI's vice-like grip, thus posing a long-term economic challenge to China as well.

China believes that the trilateral and quadrilateral dialogue structures, cross-servicing arrangements and naval exercises involving the US, Japan, India and Australia and others, are aimed at strengthening the Quad. It naturally views the Quad through the lens of its "wei qi" or "encirclement" strategy, of which it has remained an avid practitioner.

In China's view, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad represent a "Cold War mentality" and are attempts to form "cliques" riding the back of a hyped-up "China Threat". China

suspects that the “Indo-Pacific” reduces its salience whereas the “Asia-Pacific” frame of reference acknowledges its centrality.

China’s hopes of a better relationship with the Biden administration appeared to have been quickly dashed, going by the recent testy exchanges between Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and their Chinese counterparts Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi, at Anchorage, on March 18 this year.

Quad Statement: Pointers

The Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement titled “The Spirit of the Quad” not only speaks of “ASEAN centrality” but also of ASEAN’s “unity”, perhaps in recognition of the grouping’s fragility on the question of China. ASEAN centrality is a mirage that no one seems to want to question. The vulnerability of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (the CLM trio) to Beijing’s blandishments is well-recorded. Myanmar too is greatly dependant on China’s support especially under military rule, which is a rather frequent and unfortunate phenomenon in that country.

As such, “ASEAN centrality” is a double-edged sword. China itself would surely see advantage in the use of the term not only because of China’s growing economic sway over the group but also because the ASEAN countries are gradually becoming more dependent on China for their security. After all, China is the only external power involved in negotiating the elusive Code of Conduct with the ASEAN, and can use its clout over them to diffuse any emerging coalition against its interests.

Even though the individual statements of the US, Japan and Australia had eschewed references to “democracy” over the last two years in order to build a broader consensus with non-democracies in the region, the reference to “democratic values”, “democratic resilience” and “universal values” has resurfaced in the Leaders’ statement and is a significant pointer to the looming threat posed by China’s counter narratives in the Indo-Pacific region.

Is the Quad an Alliance?

Many sceptics denigrate the Quad and warn India against getting dragged into a quagmire in areas remote to its interests such as the Pacific or the South China Sea. Others draw attention to its inability to meet China’s economic or military challenge.

India’s much-vaunted “strategic autonomy” is also cited as an impediment. However, in their haste to prematurely write the Quad’s obituary, they are missing some key points.

Indeed, the Quad is far from being an alliance and should not be judged by such a yardstick. At the same time, one must keep in mind that all the enabling arrangements for deeper military cooperation between the four nations are slowly and steadily coming into place. The US already has treaty alliances with Japan and Australia.

The US now has all the foundational agreements in place with India such as the Industrial Security Annex (ISA) to the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA).

Yet, many on the US side believe that India's reticence is a factor that holds up progress in furthering military cooperation. India now also has cross-servicing agreements with Japan and Australia as well, as do Japan and Australia with one another since 2017.

One can concede that the focus of each member is nuanced. India's main concerns are challenges to its land boundaries and to maritime frontiers in the Indian Ocean. The other three nations have a Pacific/South China Sea-centric approach. The Quad may have started out as the proverbial blind men feeling an elephant, but there is much greater congruence among them today on the nature, shape and size of the elephant in the room that is China.

China's Rise and Expansionism

The fundamental issue today is the rise of China. As its economic power aggregates over the decades into military muscle, it is increasingly pursuing unilateral policies and projecting its power in the broader region. The management of China's rise, let alone containment, is a huge challenge. This can only be done in two ways: on the basis of an existing "open rules-based order rooted in international law" as the Quad Leaders aver, or, on the basis of a new one.

China bristles at suggestions that it abide by the existing rules-based order on grounds others have no right to unilaterally define it. It is an anti-status quo power that seeks to forge a new international order keeping intact the elements of the old order that suit it, yet redefining aspects that limit its choices on interpretation of its "core issues" and sphere of influence.

Like some of the old colonial powers, China increasingly pursues a "*mare clausum*" (closed seas) strategy especially across the South and East China Seas. It has also adopted the "island development" strategies of the colonials, stringing together several basing arrangements to facilitate further expansion.

The Maritime Challenge

Accretion in naval power has permitted China to significantly ramp up its presence in the Indian Ocean, where it has rotated about three dozen task forces over the last decade, including submarines, ostensibly for anti-piracy operations.

History reveals that attempts by major powers to upend the existing international order are met with determined resistance. Both Wilhelmine Germany and Imperial Japan suffered the consequences of a major backlash during WWI and WWII, respectively. Wilhelmine Germany's naval build-up was so rapid that it threatened to upset the equilibrium. It led to an arms race and contributed to the defeat of Germany/Central Powers by the Entente Powers. What is more interesting is that the Alliance was not a pre-existing one. Japan joined in 1914, Italy in 1915 and the US as late as 1917.

Even the military alliances of WWII were arrangements of convenience, with different major powers coming on board at different times. The US entered WWII in 1941, two years after France and Britain declared war on Germany, following its invasion of Poland. The Soviet Union entered the fray only after the German Wehrmacht launched an invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, their Non-aggression Pact of 1939 notwithstanding.

Despite the lessons of the rapid rise and fall of the Kaiser Wilhelm II's navy, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 unravelled rapidly and could not control the naval arms race that contributed to the second Great War. Ominous from the contemporary viewpoint is the fact that no such treaty has evolved in a century since then to try and cap the disruptive build-up of the Chinese navy currently in progress. As in the case of its nuclear arsenal, there appears no compelling reason either for China to agree to any restrictions on expansion of its naval power.

Today, China's surface combatants outnumber those of the US navy but that is not entirely a fair comparison. The Chinese navy's growth in numbers has come largely from smaller vessels such as cruisers, frigates, fast attack craft and some destroyers, with one operational carrier (Liaoning) which is half the size of any one of the US' eleven carriers (three of which - USS Theodore Roosevelt, USS Nimitz and USS Ronald Reagan - operate in the region) and far less potent. The Japanese navy still remains ahead of the Chinese navy in sophistication.

China may not yet be a peer of the US in naval power, but it has certainly sought to bridge the gap through asymmetrical means, by developing anti-access area-denial strategies, anti-ship and carrier-killer missiles and by developing capacities to target space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets of the adversary.

Despite regular Chinese muscle-flexing off Taiwan, the US has not sent a carrier strike group through the Taiwan Strait since the USS Kitty Hawk last steamed through in 2007. Earlier, President Clinton had ordered two carrier strike groups to sail through in 1996. Recently, the US despatched the USS Theodore Roosevelt-led carrier strike group to the South China Sea through the Bashi Strait between Taiwan and the Philippines in January 2021. Neither that nor the occasional transit of a guided-missile destroyer through the Taiwan Strait, as was the case of the USS Barry in April 2020, the same as sending a carrier strike group through the Taiwan Strait.

Some would suggest that this has given China extra confidence, perhaps even misplaced, in its own capacities. Chinese warplanes have increasingly entered Taiwan's self-declared Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in recent days and the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning and its escorts have also staged exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan.

China has ramped up its submarine programme, comprising nuclear attack submarines (SSN), including the futuristic guided missile version (SSGN), along with its fleet of nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and conventional diesel submarines (including the rapidly growing AIP attack submarines-SSKs). These assets can enter the Indian Ocean through the Malacca, Sunda (where they would be spotted due to shallow depth) or sneak in undetected through the deeper Lombok and very deep Ombai-Weitar straits.

That should be a cause of worry for India. Our response has been rather good, focussed on improving our ISR through the P8i Sea Guardian Drones and the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS), which now also covers Seychelles, Mauritius, Maldives and Sri Lanka. India has enhanced its cooperation with others through anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and cross-servicing logistics pacts.

The Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, and participation in the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar, the European Maritime Awareness in the Straits of Hormuz (EMASOH) in Abu Dhabi and the IFC in Singapore, will add to India's maritime domain awareness (MDA).

The Malabar exercises are growing in sophistication with each iteration, but nowhere near what can be described as joint operational activity as yet. As a so-called net security provider, India is working on closer cooperation with island and littoral nations of the Western Indian Ocean.

While Chinese belligerence has certainly goaded the Quad into greater activity, yet it is not the only factor driving alignments in the Indo-Pacific. However, it represents a dominant geo-political impulse across the region.

‘An Idea Whose Time Has Come’?

Unlike the archaic “Asia-Pacific”, the Indo-Pacific more closely reflects the contemporary reality of the spread of commercial and economic progress beyond East and Southeast Asia to encompass South Asia and the east coast of Africa as well.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) process which acknowledges ASEAN centrality, and includes the US as well as China and Russia, offers a good platform to explore a more inclusive architecture for the Indo-Pacific.

Prime Minister Modi’s advocacy of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IOPO) at the EAS Summit in Bangkok in 2019 complements his Shangri-La address delivered in Singapore the previous year. India has been advocating the use of the EAS forum to promote its vision of an inclusive Indo-Pacific through the seven pillars for cooperation, itself taking the lead in two areas - Maritime Security and Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (DRI). It is understandable, though, that China and Russia, the outliers, are loath to countenance the term “Indo-Pacific” in the context of the EAS.

Contemporary Contradictions

The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, is more of an organic regional process that seeks the broadest possible common denominators on evolving geo-strategic and geo-economic issues. Yet, it is not bereft of contradictions. The US proposes a free and open Indo-Pacific without having acceded to the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Treaty although it helped shape the Convention from the very beginning. The US is a torch bearer for freedoms of navigation, innocent passage, free trade and much else. Yet, US positions are not based on UNCLOS but on customary international law.

In a sense, the US is like the modern-day Hugo Grotius, the famous 16th century Dutch lawyer who was commissioned by the Dutch East India Company to write a legal brief, justifying why Holland rejected the Portuguese definition of “*mare clausum*” in the Strait of Malacca. Grotius had claimed that the seas, like the air one breathes, could not be appropriated and that the seas were international territory that all nations were free to use. Grotius’ legacy of “*mare liberum*” (open seas) is reflected in the concept of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” against the challenge of China’s arbitrary ADIZ and its unilateral definitions of territory in the South China Sea.

But, as part of its exceptionalism, the US regularly conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) against friend and foe alike. On April 7, 2021, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer of the Seventh Fleet, the USS John Paul Jones,

carried out a FONOP near India's Lakshadweep Islands. The official statement of the Seventh Fleet stated that it "asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India's exclusive economic zone, without requesting India's prior consent, consistent with international law".

The US also rejects Part XI of UNCLOS which defines areas beyond national jurisdiction (including their sea-bed resources) as the common heritage of the global community to be regulated through the International Seabed Authority (ISA). The US rejects what it regards as excessive claims of others in relation to their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In this context, it treats the Chinese injunction against foreign military exercises in its EEZ and the Indian requirement of advance notification with equal disdain.

As a great power, the US is capable of the duality of engagement, with trade friction, human rights preaching and deeper military engagement proceeding parallelly. China too increasingly pursues "exceptionalism with Chinese characteristics", seeking to rewrite the rules of existing and prospective global structures to accommodate its rising economic and military power. However, China also focuses on strategies to woo individual countries and constituencies in order to shape outcomes. Its actions may run contrary to the "rules-based order" but are not without a degree of success.

One of the weaknesses of the Indo-Pacific is the absence of an over-arching trading bloc in which all like-minded countries can harmonise their fundamental economic interests. India is absent from both the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The US too is absent but may reconsider joining the CPTPP. China rules the roost in the RCEP, ironically, in tandem with a key Quad member, Japan.

Meanwhile, China has also cut a deal with the EU in the dying days of the Trump administration - the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), pushed through by an over-zealous Germany. Of course, the European Council and the European Parliament have yet to approve it and ratification may take years.

The other tough reality is that economic disengagement from China is not much of an option for any country. However, "less of China" in one's economy is achievable and that is precisely what the Quad countries are trying to achieve, especially in critical technologies such as 5G and Artificial Intelligence (AI), key supply chains, connectivity and infrastructure financing.

Another stress point is the colonial legacy or territorial possessions of the US, Britain and France, which no doubt are all resident powers of the Indo-Pacific. Britain, the erstwhile colonial power, is embroiled in a dispute with Mauritius over the return of

Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, with India fully supporting Mauritius. Two years before Mauritius achieved independence from Britain in 1968, the latter had leased Diego Garcia to the US for fifty years for use as a military base and thereafter unilaterally extended the lease for another twenty years in 2016 despite Mauritius' protests.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has since ruled in favour of Mauritius, and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has also passed a resolution endorsing Mauritius' stand, again with India's support. Some argue that there is a moral deficit in the US demand that China should respect the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in favour of the Philippines in 2016 in the South China Sea when it is not prepared to follow the same example.

France too is not without its own legacy issues. The people of Comoros have been protesting to reclaim Mayotte from France in the Indian Ocean. All this can potentially weaken support for the presence of the US, Britain and France in the Indian Ocean, to offset the growing Chinese footprint.

The Return of the Prodigals

The Biden Administration appears as determined as its predecessor to make up for the lost decade of this century, when the global war on terror and the global economic and financial crises absorbed the US to such an extent that China opportunistically sprang into action to occupy the vacuum. The return of the US is increasingly predicated on the notion of the Indo-Pacific, with multiple partnerships throughout the region, including with India.

France, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, all ex-colonial powers in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the EU as a whole, have developed their own Indo-Pacific vision statements. France is a potent power, but tends to plough an independent furrow. It sits uneasily with the US. It is best for India to engage France bilaterally to shore up its own position in the Western Indian Ocean on maritime security, counter-terrorism, etc.

Germany, the Netherlands and the EU have all pegged their Indo-Pacific vision statements on mercantilist goals. Their primary objective is to sustain their economic and commercial interests in the region, especially with China.

A post-BREXIT Britain is keen to return to greater engagement with Asia, a region with which it has great familiarity. Under the rubric of "Global Britain", it is now also demonstrating willingness to recommit its naval power to the Indo-Pacific as evident in the planned despatch of the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier to Japan later this year. On its part, Japan is perhaps the only one among the former colonial powers

to have successfully recast its image as a pacifist power committed to economic growth and development.

The Quad's Uniqueness

In contrast to the, as yet, more diffused concept of the Indo-Pacific, the Quad is already a well-defined grouping. Its main focus is on developing a habit of cooperation as a response to common concerns and challenges.

While there is every reason to strive for an inclusive Indo-Pacific, the Quad cannot, and should not, be hastily expanded. A premature expansion could dilute its focus. This should not rule out engagement with diverse countries such as Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam, in the 'Quad Plus' format.

An ontological approach will not provide an accurate understanding of the Quad. Just because it exists does not mean that it is against China. At the same time, it is definitely for an open, rules-based order rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity, and is committed to countering threats in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, just as the Quad Leaders have stated in their Joint Statement.

And the Quad does oppose coercion in any form. It is not an alliance as yet. As the Latin phrase goes, "*a posse ad esse non valet consequentia*". One cannot conjecture from the mere possibility of an alliance that it does exist, or even that it must exist. Nor should the lack of a full-fledged alliance in the Quad lead one to summarily disparage its potential role in influencing the processes of peace and security in the 21st century. After all, the two great wars of the last century reveal that alliances can emerge quite easily in particular situations.

The fact is that, all said, the Quad is definitely here to stay. It is no longer "ocean foam that will soon dissipate", as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi once put it.

The Quad's future will depend on the choices that China makes. The greater China's belligerence, the faster will the Quad's military-security agenda gather steam, perhaps even moving up into a 2+2 dialogue format.

The future of the Indo-Pacific concept, on the other hand, will depend on whether others can offer attractive alternatives to China's economic and financial loans and assistance for developmental purposes.

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