

# EXPERT COMMENTARY

## QUAD AND INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT

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As the US-China strategic competition intensifies, structural changes are unfolding in the international system. In pursuit of preserving the liberal international order and keeping the Indo-Pacific free from coercion with open sea-lanes and infrastructure, key policy papers of the Trump administration have argued for a 'networked security architecture'.<sup>1</sup> The quadrilateral framework is considered 'vital to address pressing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific'.<sup>2</sup> Even though the Quad framework has its limits, since India has reservations in projecting it as a military alliance aimed at containment of a 'revisionist' China, there is a school of thought which argues that in case of escalating competition with Beijing, the US would increasingly consider employing Quad, especially the military dimension to uphold a favourable international order.<sup>3</sup> China's maritime assertiveness is a key variable in the revival of the Quad framework.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, as the regional order becomes more fragmented, Japan's strategy is demonstrating internal and external balancing by reorienting the pacifist posture on the one hand and reinforcing its alliance with the US, and building a universal value-based network of allies in the Indo-Pacific on the other. In this regard, the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee is pursuing the common strategic objective of building partnerships within trilateral and quadrilateral frameworks with India.<sup>5</sup> Policies are pushing for constructing 'multi-layered cooperative relationships with allies and partners, with the Japan-US alliance as the cornerstone'.<sup>6</sup> One strand of scholarship in Japan argues that Quad 2.0 has gained traction owing to the momentum in trilateral frameworks Japan engages in on the one hand and Chinese advancement into the Indian Ocean, on the other.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Defense. 'National Defense Strategy', 2018, at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (Accessed on June 16, 2019)..

<sup>2</sup> "Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018", 115th Congress, 2018, at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736/text> (Accessed June 16, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Derek Grossman, "How the US is Thinking about the Quad", RAND Corporation, February 7, 2019 at <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/02/how-the-us-is-thinking-about-the-quad.html> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> David Scott, "The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts", *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 3 (2), 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 19, 2019 at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000470738.pdf> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> "Diplomatic Bluebook 2018", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 20, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Tomohiko Satake, "Will Japan-U.S.-Australia-India Security Cooperation be Realized? Different Perceptions for Order and Implications for Japan", NIDS Briefing Memo, July 2018.

The strategic community in China analyses the quadrilateral consultation through the prism of military alliance constituting the ‘core of the Indo-Pacific strategy’,<sup>8</sup> aimed at containing China.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Quad is evaluated as a Japanese enterprise to ‘marginalise’ and offset China, as Japanese primacy in East Asia is diluted with the arrival of a confident China.<sup>10</sup> There is a discourse suggesting that the quadrilateral ‘alliance’ will not have an impact on Asian economic interdependence and will fail in containing China.<sup>11</sup> Some expect India to ‘take a relatively proactive stance towards the quadrilateral security cooperation and to some extent cooperate with the equally proactive Japan in upgrading the quadrilateral dialogue to a higher level in response to China’s rise’.<sup>12</sup> The existing literature on Quad reflects several schools of thought, labelling it as being an Asian NATO, a military alliance, or just another platform lacking requisite commitments.

The re-emergence of Quad as an informal consultation mechanism is founded on issue-based alignment among the member countries. It is not a military alliance since it is not supported by any formal treaty or does not deliver security guarantees and lacks institutionalisation.<sup>13</sup> Analysing the Quad as an Asian NATO is far-fetched at a time when four member nations have refrained from issuing any joint statements following their meetings in 2017 and 2018.

### Resurrection of the Quad

The revival of the quadrilateral consultation in 2017 after a hiatus of a decade overlapped with the evolving discourse on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific in each of these four countries. This sometimes led to fusing the quad consultation and Indo-Pacific conceptualisation. However, it is imperative to note the difference. The Indo-Pacific construct is a concept underpinned by openness and inclusivity but Quad consultation is a mini-lateral which by its very nature is based on exclusivity and a directed agenda.<sup>14</sup> The strategic environment has altered profoundly since the first Quad meeting in 2007. 2007 neither witnessed Obama’s Pivot to Asia nor the articulation of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream of restoring China’s primacy as a great power by mid-century through the grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>15</sup> Since 2007, China grew from a \$3.5 trillion economy to a \$13 trillion economy. Dependency on the Chinese economy has increased considerably.

While the idea of Quad germinated as these four countries worked in the Tsunami Core Group in 2004-05 to facilitate a coordinated effort to deal with the disaster in the Indian Ocean, the concept is largely shaped by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. But the narrative for the collapse of Quad in 2007 stresses on the then

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<sup>8</sup> Liu Zongyi, “China-India Relations in The Future”, SIIS Comment, May 15 2019 at <http://www.sis.org.cn/Research/EnInfo/4711> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Li Li, “India’s Advance East Strategy and its Indo-Pacific Diplomacy”, *Contemporary International Relations*, 28 (3), May-June 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Yan Wei, “A Broader Asia without China?”, *Beijing Review*, September 26, 2007 at [www.bjreview.com.cn](http://www.bjreview.com.cn) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Cui Shoufeng, “‘Indo-Pacific’ an ‘America First’ ploy”, *China Daily*, November 15, 2017 at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-11/15/content\\_34550177.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-11/15/content_34550177.htm) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Yang Rui and Wang Shida, “India and the Indo-Pacific Strategy Vision: Orientation, Involvement and Limits”, *Contemporary International Relations*, 28 (3), May-June 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Hall, “Meeting the Challenge: The Case for the Quad, Debating the Quad”, The Centre of Gravity Series, March 2018, at [http://bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2018-03/cog\\_39\\_web\\_-\\_debating\\_the\\_quad.pdf](http://bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2018-03/cog_39_web_-_debating_the_quad.pdf) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Quad 2.0: New Perspectives for the Revived Concept”, *Strategic Insights*, February 2019, at [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2019-02/SI134%20Quad%202.0%20New%20perspectives\\_0.pdf?MI2ECFvmUJTTFzK.RsBIsskCRRAqEmfP](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2019-02/SI134%20Quad%202.0%20New%20perspectives_0.pdf?MI2ECFvmUJTTFzK.RsBIsskCRRAqEmfP) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Ian Hall, no. 13.

Australian administration's China appeasement policy.<sup>16</sup> Critiquing this discourse, Kevin Rudd argued that it was not 'wise' to make Australia's long-term national interests contingent on 'the future health of the China-Japan relationship' which was beyond Canberra's control.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the China factor, domestic and electoral politics<sup>18</sup> in Japan and India considerably shaped the future of Quad a decade ago.

With his return in 2012, Shinzo Abe further built on his 'Confluence of the Two Seas' founded on the dynamic coupling of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He pushed for the revival of the quadrilateral security dialogue underpinned by his idea of framing Asia's Democratic Security Diamond. Subsequently, as President Trump designed US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, Washington coordinated with allies and partners to revive the Quad.

### Situating Quad in India's Multi-alignment

Quad should not be analysed exclusively through the prism of alliance politics. Even though three of the four Quad members are weaved in decades-old hub-and-spoke alliance framework, India does not approach Quad as a military alliance. For India, Quad is one of the numerous consultative mechanisms created on issue-based alignments. Irrefutably, the relative standing of each country in the gambit of the others has advanced since the 2007 Quad meeting, but each nation in the matrix is exclusively directed by its respective national interest. Thus, India is likely to pragmatically engage and leverage its strategic partnerships with regional actors in its pursuit of economic development, seeking markets, resources, capital and technology, but not form traditional alliances. Balance of interest is motivating India since this is not a zero-sum game.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there are some differences regarding respective outlooks on order. As US allies, Japan and Australia support a US-led liberal international order underpinned by a strong US military presence, which has served their respective national interests in the post-War era. However, India despite its growing strategic depth with the US, supports a multi-polar world order, with New Delhi being one of the key poles.<sup>20</sup>

India's attitude concerning geopolitical dynamics is shaped by an equilibrium between engagement and autonomy. Undeniably, under Modi's leadership, India has professed deeper strategic coordination within trilateral and mini-lateral arrangements, including the US-India-Japan, India-Australia-Japan, Quad consultation in addition to the India-China-Russia, SCO and BRICS framework. As India aims to modernise, 'both the United States and China—and indeed the ASEAN, Japan, Republic of Korea and Europe—can contribute to this transformation. The centrality of this commitment ensures that India will set a positive and inter-active agenda with other major powers and groupings.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Joint Press Conference with Chinese Foreign Minister", 5 February 2008 at [https://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2008/080205\\_jpc.html](https://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2008/080205_jpc.html) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Rudd, "The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the 'Quad'", *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 26, 2019 at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-Convenient-Rewriting-of-the-History-of-the-Quad> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Tanvi Madan, "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Quad", *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017 at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Titli Basu, "India's Approach towards Indo-Pacific Triangularity", *The Asian Forum*, May 18, 2016 at [http://www.theasianforum.org/category/alternative-scenarios/?post\\_id=7243](http://www.theasianforum.org/category/alternative-scenarios/?post_id=7243) (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Narendra Modi, "Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World", World Economic Forum, Ministry of External Affairs, January 23, 2018 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29378/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Speech+at+Plenary+Session+of+World+Economic+Forum+Davos+January+23+2018> (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> S. Jaishankar, "India, the United States and China", IISS-Fullerton Lecture, Singapore, July 20, 2015 at <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/events/archive/2015-f463/july-636f/fullerton-lecture-jaishankar-f64e>. (Accessed on June 16, 2019).

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Managing geostrategic and geo-economic interests as India navigates the US-China strategic competition is critical. Prime Minister Modi has positively engaged in deeper strategic coordination with Japan and the US on some particular regional concerns, but India has at the same time invested in building a closer developmental partnership with China. There are structural tensions between the US and China as an established power and the rising challenger, but the economic footprint of China in each of these Quad economies has significantly complicated the strategic paradigm. Undeniably, all four actors have some polarity with Beijing, but each is engaging China given its standing in the Asian calculus. Managing relations with China is imperative for each of the four Quad members. For example, Abe's administration worked tirelessly for a 'tactical detente' with China given President Trump's unconventional approach towards alliance management and implications of the trade war. Moreover, even before the advent of the Trump presidency, Japan has pursued a 'dual hedge' policy, protecting security interests by means of its alliance with the US and economic objectives through trade with China.<sup>22</sup>

### The Way Forward

Going forward, Quad needs to bring in strategic clarity. It is important to keep realistic expectations from the Quad framework. Reflecting on the Quad in May 2018, Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba has diluted the military dimension arguing that 'India is the only country in the Quad with a land border with China. In case of conflict...nobody will come and hold your hand.'<sup>23</sup> While Japan and Australia are maritime countries, India's primary focus continues to be continental borders and Indian Ocean. Moreover, the South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean, and their littoral regions are considered as secondary areas in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy. India is the only country in this Quad framework having a land-boundary dispute with Beijing. Additionally, unlike other members, India does not enjoy any formal security guarantees from the US. However, this does not inhibit the ability of the Quad members to cooperate on HADR operations and capacity-building. In this regard, the increasing geographical and operational latitude in the trilateral Malabar exercises are noteworthy. Australia has yet not joined Japan and the US in the annual Malabar exercises. The popular yet misrepresented rationale behind India's continued reservation in this regard is that India does not intend to upset China. Malabar exercise in its current form is already a concern for China, irrespective of Australia.<sup>24</sup> India's hesitation in incorporating Australia draws from its previous experience of desertion by Canberra together with the disparity in the strategic depth of New Delhi's bilateral relations with Canberra vis-a-vis Tokyo and Washington. For Quad 2.0 to sustain, it is important to manage expectations, develop strategic clarity and engage in practical cooperation beyond the logic of counter-balancing China.

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Japan's Dual Hedge", *Foreign Affairs*, 81(5), September/October 2002.

<sup>23</sup> "Indian Navy Chief Says No Need to Give Military Angle to the Quad", *The Hindustan Times*, May 23, 2018 at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-navy-chief-says-no-need-to-give-military-angle-to-the-quad/story-VZVrnkwhvVRICt5UwXB9tN.html> (Accessed on 16 June 16, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Ramesh Thakur, "Australia and the Quad", *Strategic Insights*, July 5, 2018.