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Understanding QUAD and its Implications for India-China Relations

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Abstract

The world is passing through a phase transition since the beginning of 21st century. The epicenter of global activities is shifting away from the West towards Asia. In the last few years we have seen a tangible shift in Asia, more specifically in the Asia-Pacific region, which is now strategically constructed as the Indo-Pacific region. This shift is derived from the rise of two ancient civilizations and sleeping giants- China and India, and their pro-active engagement is influencing global outcomes. Under Trump administration, the anti-China sentiment became more visible and China was seen as a rival and potential threat to US primacy in world affairs. In order to prevent China's growing influence and to counterbalance its position within Asia itself the Quadrilateral grouping comprised of four major countries, India, Australia, Japan and the United States was revived. From the Indian point of view it became even more relevant due to unsettled border issue and recent clashes and tensions in bordering areas. The incessant transgression by the Chinese side often complicates their relation and also affects the delicate balance of power in the region. The evolution of Quad as a strategic arrangement here can also be seen catalyst for peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. Some scholars have argued that it is less likely to affect the bilateral relations between India and China in the near medium term, and the long term relations of these two countries would be largely shaped by their behaviors even if they in realistic terms join any alliance. India still follows the policy non-alignment and hotly pursuing multiple engagements. Hence, pro- Quad scholars argued that this strategic club is to contain China, and is on a mission to achieve global public

goods as seen during the Covid-19 vaccine supply programme. Likewise, China-India relations are guided by multiple historical and contemporary factors that are quite different from the Quad engagement. The present paper would strive to study the impact of Quad on India-China relations in future.

Introduction

The world has seen some major events till the 1990s. These events were the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) into several parts, the early radical economic reforms in the People's Republic of China, and the beginning of globalization. These were watershed moments in the history of global politics which transformed the geopolitics as well. Likewise, the unipolar dominance by the US in several domains precisely shaped the values, norms and rules of liberal international order, which for analysts is now under threat due to rapid changes since the beginning of the 21st century.

Despite differences, there is growing convergence of interest and enhanced cooperation on several human security related issues such as transnational crimes, terrorism, climate change, disarmament, global public health etc. among the states. Often they create groupings based on mutual concerns. The 2004 natural disaster in the Indian Ocean has pushed major countries, such as India, Australia, Japan and the United States, to informally cooperate and assist each other for stability in the region. Experts name it as they are found in number the Quadrilateral organization or the Quad. This was created to tackle mutual security issues not targeting any country as seen in case of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) whose primary task is to handle security threats in Central Asia such as separatism, extremism and terrorism. Although both are different grouping aimed for different purposes, however, they share one element that is a security threat from non-traditional security issues.

The emergence of Quad, given its explicit and implicit purpose for, is an inflection point in the history of Asian security architecture. The importance of Asia cannot be ignored given the rise of several powers and their stakes in the creation a plural and multipolar world. This group encompasses of three major influential powers of Asia (India, Japan and Australia) and one North-Atlantic giant, the United States. Experts argued that the rise of China is behind this mechanism, however, others maintain the purpose of it lies in public good and inclusivity.

This article begins with the investigation of the very purpose and nature of Quad and its sudden rise as a strategic grouping in the last few years, which became assertive during the Trump presidency. It'll also examine how the Quad would affect India-China ties. Their relations though have not been consistent due to unsettled boundary related issues and China's aggressive posturing in the region. Likewise, what sorts of opportunities the Quad present to its members to influence other regional

players. Eventually, it will discuss the Raisina Dialogue led informal panel consists of all four Quad foreign ministers who discuss different facets of Quad and present different perspectives. It would also be pertinent to investigate the potential role of Quad as a forum to deal with present and future challenges in the region. Through its inclusive approach it has kept open the windows for other potential issues and actors to be accommodated.

Understanding QUAD as a Strategic Arrangement

To begin with, Indo-Pacific region has taken a firm geopolitical space in global politics in last two decades. This is because of its geostrategic importance and geographic location connecting major trade routes from Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. In between it also connects South China Sea, a major zone that is disputed among various countries ranging from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. Among others, China makes whole of claims in South China Sea as others do have overlapping claims making it a maritime conflict over ocean resources, territories and balance of powers. The astonishing rise of China in last couple of decades have changed the behavior and psychology of countries in the region, showcasing less trust towards China due its hegemonic intentions. All Quad partners have had not so well, infect, even bitter experiences with China and consider it a foe and a potential threat.

The roots of Quad could be found back to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami which has disrupted the region and people across nationalities suffered badly due to it. In response to that “a regional core group” consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the United States was established “to coordinate relief efforts” (CNN.com - Bush Announces Tsunami Aid Coalition - Dec 29, 2004). This international coalition for ‘maritime cooperation’ was seen as the first step in the direction of forming the four nation’s squared group. From 2004 to the first quarter of 2023 the Quad has witnessed several ups and downs, yet it survived and now moving forward. The then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s efforts in 2006 by proposing an ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’ followed by Indian PM Dr. Manmohan Singh’s Tokyo visit (2006) and the famous ‘confluence of the two seas’ speech by Abe set the foundation for future arrangement in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, there was a period (2007-2017) when the Quad lost its identity or largely remained irrelevant. However, from 2017 to 2021 it got revived due to the fast changing geopolitical positions of states. It was also witnessed in the renewed vigor and frequent meetings from undersecretary to foreign ministers and now heads of the state level. The March 2023 Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting in New Delhi is itself a testimony of their increasing engagement and shared ‘practical cooperation’ in functional areas, which is apprising as per the needs.

Scholars still have different viewpoints regarding the purpose and nature of Quad, and they view it from different vantage points. Going beyond for or against, each arrangement is created for some purpose in a limited scope. The Quad is said to be a grouping of like-minded nations. It is also seen as

“a loose grouping than a formal alliance”, for each member the identity of Quad is different as a “democratic” group”, and “functional cooperation” (Smith, 2021). It is also interpreted as an effort and shared concerns on “China’s rise” as a competitor and potential threat. As a strategic arrangement, it did not disclose all that it has ‘to counter China in the region’. This will largely depend on China’s behavior towards these countries or others in South or East China Sea. To state clearly, the four countries have upgraded their engagement by participating in the first maritime ‘Malabar’ joint exercise in November 2020. Likewise, the group is driven by the common concern over China’s advancement (Panda, 2021). The working areas of Quad have deepened from 2004 to 2023. Moreover, it was initially created as a response to the Indian Ocean natural disaster in 2004, which now cover several untouched areas including blue economy, energy security, maritime cooperation, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance etc. The 2023 Quad Foreign Minister’s joint statement quotes that their core areas in practical cooperation are: “health, climate change, clear energy, critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure and connectivity, addressing debt crisis, cyber and maritime security, etc.” (Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi - United States Department of State, 2023)

QUAD Foreign Ministers’ Meet and Raisina Dialogue

Amidst the ongoing Russia Ukraine war in Europe that completed its one year in February 2023 the foreign ministers of Quad countries met in New Delhi. Some of the member countries use this as an opportunity to blame Russia for the conflict and called it ‘Russian invasion’ of Ukraine. But, it was all anticipated. The western powers have raised this issue on almost every international forum. This meeting was also significant due to India’s presidency of the G-20. It has been a positive and constructive meeting as all the member countries have agreed on some new areas of mutual concerns and cooperation. The Quad FMM was successful because unlike the G20 Bali summit it released its joint statement based on consensus and mutual security issues. The joint statement released after the meeting read “We strongly support the principles of freedom, rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes without resorting to threat or use of force and freedom of navigation and overflight, and oppose any unilateral attempt to change the status quo, all of which are essential to the peace, stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and beyond”. They have also decided to enhance cooperation practical cooperation on contemporary challenges such as health security, climate change and the clean energy transition, critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure and connectivity, addressing the debt crisis through sustainable, transparent and fair lending and financing practices, space cooperation, cyber-security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security and counterterrorism (Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi - United States Department of State, 2023). After this joint statement, analysts claim that the group is now regaining its security salience on political and hard security issues,

including maritime, cyber, counter-terrorism and the HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief). (Rajagopalan, 2023)

However, the response of China to the Quad has always been consistent and this time also it has criticized its “exclusionary” nature. (Krishnan, 2023) The very existence of Quad is analyzed by an expert as concerted effort “to counter and exclude China” and to divide the world between “pro-Quad” and “pro-China” states (Shidore, 2023). In addition, Russia also took a sharp note on the arrangement in a session of Raisina dialogue where the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov mentioned the grouping stands “for playing one country against another...using Quad not for economic purpose but trying to militarize it”. (Krishnan, 2023) Contrary to these observations the Quad countries in their joint statement contend that this group is “acting as a force for regional and global good through its positive and constructive agenda” (Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi - United States Department of State, 2023). The US Secretary of State Blinken said that the aim of Quad is not of military alliance, but “a force for good (positive and constructive) in the world which also agreed by others.

For India, as India’s EAM Jaishankar says in the Raisina dialogue the Quad now has “greater strategic clarity” after seen different phases in its life. He listed new things the Quad members agreed on including counter-terrorism working group, coordination on the UN reform, SDGs, counter-terrorism and others (SOS U.S March 2023).

Quad: Implications on China-India Equation

The Quadrilateral or Quad security group is an inter-governmental security dialogue between one North-American country and three Asian countries. Each country has its own requirements and expectations to achieve its national interests. All four countries viewed China not just as a competitor; but also as a potential threat for the peace and stability of the entire Asia-Pacific. Despite clarity of purpose member Quad countries have never proclaimed it as an anti-China arrangement rather it has been projected as a forum of like-minded democratic countries with an inclusive policy. The US under Trump administration had adopted a very hard stand on China, which continued under Biden administration with some modifications, given its economic rise and the US has launched a “tariff war” with China. Japan is also sharing a troubled relationship China due to their historical animosity and maritime dispute in the East China Sea. The Australian foreign policy towards China has been consistent; but it is also quite wary about China’s hegemonic tendencies, aggressive posturing and unpredictable policy moves. These equations also affect India-China relations as they are having one of longest pending boundary dispute and the recent Chinese adventurism, infrastructure build-up and heavy deployment in bordering areas have further deteriorated the bilateral ties between the two.

The perception effect is first and foremost connected with the behavior and action, and it has larger consequences on the relation between two states. Both China and India are cautious about each

other's moves and intentions. Despite commonality of interest vis-à-vis developed nations, shared membership of various organizations including the SCO, BRICS etc. both the states have deep distrust about each other's real intentions. Both endorse the peaceful neighbourhood policy and in principle comply with the 'Panchsheel' yet China's actions and continuous incursions in bordering areas creates roadblock in 'practical cooperation' as highlighted by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit: "this is not an era of war" (ANI, 2022). He correctly underlines the complex interdependence nature of global economy. Each action has ripple effects on others across borders.

India as an ancient civilization and soft power has got independence from the British Empire in 1947. Since then, it has adopted a balanced and principled approach and now a pro-active, some define it in the crisis "pro-active neutrality" approach (Singh, 2022). India's foreign policy engagement is guided by its policy doctrine called "Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam", which means world is a family. It bears an imprint of India's deep philosophical and dharmik traditions where the traditional territorial boundaries become irrelevant. Likewise, India has not completely given up the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was its guiding policy doctrine in foreign policy. Like during the Cold War it did not align with any of the two superpower blocs, similarly in the war in Europe it did not choose any sides, but focus on the UN charter and the principles international law. India at the onset has insisted countries to follow peaceful means to settle their conflicts.

China and India are two close neighbors. They share common civilizational connect in the form of Buddhism, cultural and intellectual exchange and trade relations. Despite having territorial issues both knew it quite well that real potential can't be realized without cooperation. Scholars have argued that the 21st century is going to be the "Asian Century" but it has rightly been observed by Deng Xiaoping that it wouldn't be possible without cooperation between India and China.

The Quad drastically changes the perception of both countries in strategic terms. During his first press conference at the 14th National People's Congress, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang maintains that the United States is trying through Quad "to encircle China through creating an exclusive bloc that undermine regional integration" through unfolding an Asian version of NATO (The Hindu, 2023). Similar allegations were levelled against China's growing proximity and developmental projects in Pakistan and POJK. Although, Quad including India in its various official addresses, disapproved the concerns raised by China. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar nullifies the notion of claims made on the Quad as "Asian NATO" by referring that as reported by the Economic Times, "don't slip into the lazy analogy of referring Quad as Asian NATO". He made this comment in the 2022 Munich Security Conference (MSC) (Economic Times, 2022).

For India, the Quad grouping presents both benefits and setbacks when it comes to its engagement with China. By joining Quad India has diversified its options to check Chinese rising 'assertiveness'

in its border. This group provides India a strategic deterrence against China. International relations expert note that India through Quad can ‘counterbalance’ the growing Chinese presence in broader Indo-Pacific region, and also its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) seeking encirclement of India (Pant, 2022). Without naming China, Quad Foreign Ministers in amidst of increasing Chinese activities in South and East China Sea takes note by quoting that they “oppose any unilateral actions that change the status quo or increase tensions in the area” with reference to these disputed seas. They also express concerns over some contentious issues including “militarization of disputed features, the dangerous use of coast guard vessels and maritime militia”. (Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi - United States Department of State, 2023)

Likewise, Quad has its own boundaries. Lavina Lee underlines major limitations among the Quad members as they still carry differences given in the changing balance of power, these limitations are: threat perceptions, military capability, strategic priority, capacity to bear the costs of potential retaliation, strategic culture and constitutional imperatives (Lee, 2020). China is calmly observing Quad’s activities and opposes its initiatives as and when required.

Conclusion

After this detailed analysis of Quad grouping and its impacts on India-China relation, this can be said that Quad is an organization for practical cooperation among the four leading countries, which through dialogue and consensus approach unfolds a new set of regime to foster cooperation and to address transnational security issues. It is also a strategic arrangement of different sort that enhances confidence building and deploy assets to deal with non-traditional security threats and future challenges. In recent years, the scope of Quad has enhanced. In addition, most of the Quad’s facets were discussed during the three days Raisina Dialogue in collaboration with the Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs. The US Secretary of State, Blinken affirms that the Quad is a sort of “a force for good, positive and affirmative action and its engagement is deep and comprehensive for global common good.” Japanese representative says this is “not excluding anyone, abide by laws and institutions and act like under international institutions”. Whereas Indian Foreign Minister says since 2017 onwards the Quad has seen a “greater strategic clarity”.

India-China relation has undergone a rapid change in last decade; the one is seen in continuous Chinese assertiveness on border intending to change the status quo. The troop’s mobilization by India in response to China’s activities on border signal a very realist response and forced China to halt its activities that disturb peace and stability on border. The Quad presents India a greater advantage to assert its position and send a message across that it’s new India, which is quite different both in its capabilities and approach from the India of 1970s. Now, it has bigger stakes in shaping geopolitics in international relations. At the same time, India is cautious not to take any direct position on China in the Quad statements that hurt its ties with the PRC. Currently, India is having a consistent, diverse and

firm approach towards China. It is widely believed that the way India is handling and playing the balancing act between Quad and China, it'll not negatively affect the bilateral ties between the two. India's shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment and from being a reactive to proactive power hold the key to India's approach towards other countries, including China.

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