



Research Paper

An overview of India and Quadrilateral as a means to repel China factor and its Strategic Conundrum

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to an upsurge of anti-China rhetoric internationally and India was no exception, this has further accentuated due to continued aggressive posturing by Chinese PLA on land and territorial disputes with India. The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and maritime Silk Road project and its strategic implication further compounded the problem not only in India but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Quad countries led by USA takes number of initiatives to counter sinister Chinese hegemonistic design in this region. The study highlights some of the concern of Quad countries comprising US, Japan, Australia and India, their own inner initial inhibition to make Quad a full-fledged defense and maritime cooperation and to incorporate and address the concern of other Indo-pacific nation, which China sees as detrimental to its ambition to make an alternative Sino-Centric world order. The study primarily focuses on these quad countries concern which may eventually pave the way for institutionalization of Quad not as a concept but as a functional entity, with special emphasis on India. The study specifically focusses on India's unique challenges and aspirations vis-à-vis China, with US being the key player in this group of four nations.

Key word: Quad, Indo-Pacific, BRI, CPEC

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I. Introduction

Recent international phenomenon has been widely transforming the policy framework dynamics in Asia from pacific to greater Indian Ocean region. The US in a major policy framework shift has embraced a new regional order replacing Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. As a pivotal region it has already become the power centre of world geopolitics. The last decade has witnessed China's rhetoric and belligerence on number of issues which not only behedged other countries' sovereignty but also threatened to established world order and virtually claiming entire stretch of South China sea as its backyard and also made disputed territorial claim to a number of neighbouring countries from involving Ladak and Arunachal region in India, Pamir plateau in Tajikistan to Vladivostok city in Russia. The problem gets further compounded with the controversial roll out of its flagship infrastructural project of One Belt One Road (OBOR), later renamed as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This signature project of Xi Jinping estimated to make investment worldwide in order to revive the ancient Silk Route (around 70 countries). BRI is such a huge project which estimated to make roughly from \$1-\$6 trillion-dollar worth of investment that focuses on improving connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe and has win-win cooperation and inter-connectivity within the region. Besides the Chinese aggression and military posturing in the contested region of South China Sea, the world is equally worried about its abysmal human rights violation in its own province in Tibet, Xinjiang and its brutal treatment of Uighur Muslims, its One-China policy by claiming Taiwan as its legitimate territory and so on. So, in the contest to redefine Asia at least conceptually, various countries in this region and beyond felt the need to counter the meteoric rise of China at least strategically. Various leaders have introduced new terminology such as "Act East policy" and confluence of two seas. These leaders pursue a goal of maintaining a maritime super-region with its geographical and long cultural tradition in South East Asia. It serves as the intersection of the interests of at least four major powers as well as other significant middle power. These four powers together form quad comprising US, Japan, Australia and India, though the idea of quad was first mooted by then Japanese PM Shinzo Abe way back in 2007. Though there may be disputes or non-convergence among countries to describe the changing world order especially for the countries forming quad plus group and even for certain quad countries such as India which

till the Galwan valley incident was not in a mood to endorse any move which may offend the Chinese leadership, in fact India is one such country having a larger cooperation with China through various forum such as BRICS and SCO which in all likelihood are Chinese led strategic group. Ever since Xi Jinping assume office in China in 2013 as a way to further cementing its diplomatic and economic engagement across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond. The evolution of India's Look East policy to Act East agenda under the current dispensation gave a new fillip to this idea of quadrilateral more out of reality perspectives than the earlier theoretical alignment. Though the constituent countries of Quad and Quad plus has different objectives & perspectives in some issues but all the constituent nations are eager to engage deeply in order to counterbalance Chinese hegemonistic design in and around Indo-Pacific and some of the nation wants it to form this grouping of Quad plus similar to NATO, which was formed to restrain and counter balance Russian military aggressive postures in eastern Europe. Indo-Pacific is steadily emerging as the single most consequential region for the new world order spanning a vast stretch of globe from the west coast of the United States to the western shore of India, including the entire IOR from Australia to Africa. The Indo-Pacific contributes two-thirds of global growth in terms of GDP and accounts for 60 percent of global GDP. The region houses the world largest economies such as US, China, Japan and India. Among the 10 largest standing armies in the world, 7 are from this region and six countries in the region possess nuclear weapons and 60 percent of global maritime trade transit through this route. All these were made possible due to the free and open trade routes through air, sea, land, space and cyber that form the current global system.

The sudden international attention to the quad and quad plus countries is even more pronounced after the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to an upsurge of anti-China rhetoric globally. This has further aggravated tensions due to continued Chinese aggressive posturing on land and maritime territories going unabated even during this pandemic. After the June, 2020 Galwan border clash with China, India is forced to rethink and restructure its China policy which resulted in some concrete steps in the realm of economic and military front by banning Chinese apps and investment in most of the sectors and emergency military acquisition from Russia, France and US. This military aggression by the Chinese has a wide spread negative repercussion in the Indian psyche. However, despite this convergence and a shared recognition of the potential threats posed by Beijing, the partnership of Quad faces some challenges, brought on by the need to balance competition and cooperation with China, evident till recently in Australia's trade relationship with the country, and the varying need to adjust competing individual foreign policy outlooks; India's aversion to join actively in anti-China alliances; Japan's pacifism; and the US' 'America First' policy and its transactional approach to deal with China such as trade deal and the US election and the winning of Joe Biden as president-elect, the uncertainty of the policy of US after the election. All these does not augur well for Quad, a fledgling block yet to fully functional. Recently US, Australia and UK formed another trilateral defence pact known as AUKUS. In particular, AUKUS highlights some of the dilemmas that India faces with regard to the Quad: whether to share or pass the burden to contain China in the Indo-Pacific and whether to commit to even greater reliance on the United States as its defence partner.

II. Objective of the Study

The study focuses on the current security challenges that the Quad countries are facing with reference to China's maritime dominance in the indo-pacific region. the study specifically wishes to address different security and strategic challenges the world is facing given the assertive Chinese hegemony and its future implications. The following objectives are set

1. The study aspires to address the US factor in giving security umbrella to indo-pacific countries
2. The study also aspires to address the other Quad members and their challenges specially, the Australia and Japan
3. Finally, the study wants to arrest the India's unique security challenge with China and its nexus with Pakistan

The Quad and the US

The United States has a long legacy and history with the Indo-Pacific, though as we know the terminology is being coined recently. Its presence in this region dates back to two centuries, based on the pursuit of the shared property that comes from fair and reciprocal trade, open commerce, and freedom of navigation. After the Second World War, US has forged alliance with Japan and South Korea and in the later decades US invested heavily in Singapore, Hong Kong and other south east Asian economies. It has played a pivotal role in establishing institutions like the APEC forum and the ADB, which gave tremendous economic growth and prosperity in this region. At the same time, the US established its formal diplomatic relations with China only in 1979 with the tacit help of Pakistan, the iron brother, an all-weather friend of China. Gradually the Chinese inclusion to various multilateral forum especially the WTO largely happened with the active advocacy of US, with the belief that economic liberalization will lead to openness and better economic cooperation with the United States.

The Indo-Pacific only surfaced in 2017 as a policy framework by then incumbent president Donald Trump at the APEC summit in Vietnam, in order to ensure a safe, prosperous, secure and free region that benefits all. According to the Department of Defence, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, 2019, the following four principles were envisaged, these are 1. Respect for sovereignty and Independence of all nations. 2. Peaceful resolution of disputes. 3. Free, fair and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements and connectivity and finally 4. Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight. The dominant narratives as espoused by James Mattis, the former defence secretary of US made an important observation at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 1, 2018 that “the US offers strategic partnerships not strategic dependence. Alongside our allies and partners, America remains committed to maintaining, the region’s security, its stability, and its economic prosperity.” It is needless to reiterate that the rise of China as an economic powerhouse which led to its diplomatic and military profile in Asia began rising only in 2000s, which not only in congruence with the US pivot in this region but also threatened it. China actually wants to assert its dominance over large part of this Indo-Pacific by brutal and brazen display of its military power and the dominant Chinese led investment which invariably has a strategic dimension and a deep entrenched motive to subjugate the sovereignty of the host countries as has been seen in many countries including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Tajikistan etc.

One of the goal of US now has been to Check China’s revisionist challenge to the international world order. US is deeply worried about the BRI which has been designed to make a Sino centric world order where all roads lead to China only. Therefore, US needs to confront China and the idea of Quad comes to its fruition. In an interview, Mike Pompeo, emphasises the need to institutionalise the Quad from its current state of an informal grouping. Therefore, it may easily be inferred that US has vested interest to initiate and form such organisation in order to undercut Chinese sphere of influence not only in South China Sea but beyond. US also has deep interest and engagement either directly or through proxies in middle east and Afghanistan while US’s antagonism towards Iran still plays an important role in this region. At the same time the Wuhan virus and its aftermath global mayhem particularly in the US, which has witnessed the largest casualty and play havoc economic damage to US and most of the nations around the globe only embolden the collective wrath against China. With the abrupt retreat from Afghanistan and allow the region to the hostile Taliban regimes at the mercy of Pakistan’s deep state actors. The US has also made another strategic defence pact with Australia and UK bypassing France and other Quad members like India on the other, a new strategic initiative is also being seen which is also Quad but with different combination involving US, India, Israel and UAE. However, in this study we will focus only on Quad as envisioned and strategized to counter Chinese aggression and to fulfil other geo-political goals.

Japan’s dilemma

The idea of Quad was first mooted by Shinzo Abe in 2007, he was the first to identify the need for collective responsibility as guardians of navigational freedom across, Indo-pacific in order to check and counter Chinese hegemony and the design to turn south China sea into “Lake Beijing” which seriously challenge Japanese sovereignty by claiming Senkaku Islands, which is under Japanese administered Islands for long. It is needless to mention that Japan grapples with maritime concerns advanced by a power with whom Tokyo shares a chequered history, so Japan is not able to withstand the reality of new Sino-centric world order at least in its backyard. This can be grasped from the statement made by Shinzo Abe in 2018 in a policy speech to the 196th session of National Diet of Japan, “We must ensure that these waters are a public good that bring peace and prosperity to all people without discrimination into the future.”

“Therefore, Japan is seriously re-visiting and debating its pacifist identity. Which is the biggest concern for Japan to join Quad. Japan views the South China Sea as key to its security because it houses crucial sea lanes vital to its trade and economic wellbeing at the same time Japan is equally concern with the US’s foreign policy’s unpredictability. Therefore, by joining quad it can address and arrest many strategic issues which is crippling Japan’s in this region. Japan is also contemplating to shed its half a century policy which proscribe it from waging a war and maintaining a military force, its over dependence to US in defence matters, which recently seek hike in budget for providing security umbrella. These issues puzzled the nationalistic dispensation at Tokyo, the constitutional obligation has crippled seriously. However, recently, the controversial clause of Article 9 of its constitution is under serious scrutiny from the nationalist leaders like Shinzo Abe and his successor, the current Japanese Prime Minister, Y. Suga. It should be noted that it has not able to get the adequate number for its amendment, it can only reinterpret the Article.

India’s policy shift

The Chinese appeasement policy or at least pursuing the policy of stoic reticent in matters related to China, was practiced diligently and considered India’s’ foreign policy priority until recently, till the Galwan incident happened in June, 2020. India and China had a very decent and respectable commencement of bilateral relations based on the principles of Paanch Sheel. The post-1962, the relations between two neighbours became

estranged and one of the immediate fallouts of that war was the ignominious defeat of India at the hand of Red Army has cost India to cede Aksai-chin, a vast land mass to China. That war has created deep furore in the psyche of Indian establishment about China. Before that India which always held high moral ground in every aspect of international issues but was oblivious to the imminent sinister design of its neighbour who it considers its old friend.

The recent decade has seen the Chinese rise and might in economic and military front which only exacerbate the India's long term as well as immediate security concern by engaging into two front wars in the western and northern border. The massive disparity in defence spending in the two Himalayan neighbours only widens despite the fact that India is the world largest exporter of Arms.

India is the only country in south Asia other than Bhutan which is not been participating the BRI projects of President Xi Jinping as it has undermined India's sensitivity by making infrastructure to the disputed territory of PoK and Gilgit Baltistan in Pakistan administered region. The flagship BRI project (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) in India's backyard and the relations between these two hostile neighbours has posed multiple challenges for India which is designed to seriously cripple India's strategic choice by not only investing in CPEC but also in other projects to encircle India from all corners. It is needless to mention that India cannot match the check book diplomacy of China, as has been pursued diligently by the Chinese establishment in India's periphery, in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. This investment has both economic and strategic component which has provision to make inroad to the host countries defence, if need be and in most of the cases the terms and conditions of investment (or loan as expressed by experts in Pakistan, they even compared CPEC with East India Company) are not made public as has been seen in CPEC, one of the flagship projects of BRI. The BRI has added burden to the country as it has its military and sovereign interest. It seems that China is eager to demonstrate its assertiveness in many countries' internal politics (recently seen in Nepal) and emerging as a revisionist maritime colonial power with massive military-maritime infrastructure build up so as to alter the existing status quo. The BRI maritime Silk Road like string of pearls in India's backyard in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is yet another concern for India's policy makers. India's balancing act with China by engaging deeply in economic front and by joining in BRICS and SCO has failed to quell China's aggression in Ladakh.

China Pakistan Nexus

Historically, Pakistan is one of the first country to accept Peoples Republic of China in 1950, though initially China was given more emphasis on friendly relationship with India compared to Pakistan but the bonhomie was growing rapidly after the Sino-India war in 1962. Since then both the countries maintain deep cooperation till today. China played instrumental role in building Pakistan's nuclear program during the 1990s, then provided ballistic missiles technology that directly threatened India. As Pakistan's leading defence supplier, China accounts for 39 percent of purchases, followed by the United States with 24 percent. The latter arrangement allows Pakistan to funnel US military equipment to China for reverse-engineering.

Diplomatically, Pakistan serves as ambassador between China and the Muslim world. This has proven especially beneficial with regard to the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Despite China's oppression of this Muslim population, none of the major terrorist organizations have retaliated unlike in many countries in the world. In this regard it should be remembered that once a Chinese diplomat said that "Pakistan is our Israel". The role played by Israel in Middle East at the behest of US is played by Pakistan in South Asian region or more specifically to counter India.

India's Indo-Pacific outreach

In many ways, the successive governments in India including the incumbent one has been guilty of being almost indulgent of Chinese frequent intrusion in the name of patrolling into Indian side of the border and grabbing of little pieces of land, is an old Chinese strategy infamously known as Salami Slicing Strategy. All the policy initiative that China pursue so diligently in South China sea, the string of pearl in IOR as well its territorial disputes with almost all its neighbours are manifestation of this old tactics developed by ancient Chinese military strategist. Under the aegis of its "Act East" policy from its earlier "Look East" policy India has revamped and restructure its strategic ties and engagement (both economic and military) with host of ASEAN nations and has made steady efforts to its Indo-pacific outreach. India's recent Initiative like SAGARMALA project address many of such concern by creating infrastructure project not only in India but also in some other countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The recent decision to make transshipment port in the Great Nicobar Island can be a game changer for India similarly the investment made by India at Chabahar port in Iran not only has its economic importance but also has a strategic dimension to counter balance massive Chinese investment at Gwadar port in Pakistan, some 100 miles away. Gwadar has been handed over like Hambantota in Sri Lanka to China for 40 years. It will be the southern exit point and terminal for China, which can partly solve its 'Malacca Dilemma'.

Therefore, it's amply clear that India cannot tackle China simply on its own at the same time the world has also realized of late, the urgency to hinder Chinese led world order of domination and lack of reciprocity in

every aspect. The quad gave that opportunity to answer most of this Indian sensitivity discussed above. India is now very much shifted its posture towards Quad. In terms of engagement with Quad India holds regular naval exercise known as Malabar Exercise. In 2020, the Quad group Navies, have started the second phase of Malabar exercise. Though the Malabar exercise began in 1992 as bilateral exercise between US and Indian Navy. Later, in 2015 Japan became a permanent member. The following depiction can give us an idea about the India's engagement with Quad countries.

<p>Australia 2+2 Ministerial agreement, Mutual Logistics Support agreement, Information Sharing Agreement, Dialogue: defence policy, defence research & Material, maritime security (+ Indonesia, Staff talks: all 3 services & Bilateral military exercise like AUSINEDX, PITCH BLACK</p>	<p>Japan 2+2 Ministerial Agreements, GSOMIA, Reciprocal Provision of Supplies & Services, Dialogue: defence policy, joint research on UGVs & robotics technology, staff talks: all 3 services, Bilateral military exercise like JIMEX, DHARMA GUARDIAN etc.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">United States</p> <p>2+2 Ministerial Agreements, GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA, ISA etc. Joint training of Peacekeepers, Dialogues: defence policy, defence technology & trade, maritime security, etc. Indian liaison at NAVCENT, Bilateral military exercise VAJRA PRAHAR, YUDH ABHYAS, TIGER TRIUMPH, COPE INDIA, defence deals: C17, C130J, P-8I, M777, AH-64E, MH-60R etc., Strategic Trade Authorization -1 for India</p>	

Source: India & Its Quad Partner, Tanvi Madan, Brookings

It is indeed a serious question why China undertook this intrusion into Indian territory, many are giving various guess estimates ranging from domestic compulsion to deflect tension from unprecedented slow down owing to its virus to invoke punishing India for its greater involvement with 'anti-China' alliance like Quad. The other reason being to cut India to size for its western leaning policy and to restrict India to south Asian block by raising anti-India tension in Nepal, Pakistan etc. It is also important to note that India is quietly tilting its policy from Russian block to steadily moving towards US based western lobby as a measure to counter China by signing defence and military ties such as LEMOA, COMCASA and recently concluded BECA agreement which gives India direct access to military intelligence and real time raw data from maritime to space, which angered the China, who rather wanted to hyphenated India with Pakistan, not at par with China.

III. Concluding Observation

It is needless to mention that the rise of China as an economic superpower gave it immense heft in both strategic and military capabilities and his ambition to alter the present status quo and forming a Sino-centric world order. China today is the world's largest economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) with foreign exchange reserve of over three trillion dollars and second highest military budget in the world. China's aggressive stance on domestic politics and territorial disputes leave little evidence to suggest that it will settle for being a benign hegemon. Instead, China under the authoritarian leadership of Xi will continue to pursue its nationalistic agenda. With Russia's tacit support due to latter's isolation in western led world order it has initiated massive operation in and around South China sea almost threatening and jeopardising the freedom of navigation and even fishing rights of its neighbour and not to mention spratly islands in that block. India is at the crossroad of economic prosperity but the Chinese are not yet ready to accept this reality that why they wanted India to be in the same bracket as Pakistan. India's dilemma is that if it falls on the western block led by US then it has to forego Russian all out support, which is an important all-weather friend of India. This has partially weakened India's open support for Quadrilateral. At the same time the US threat of imposing sanction under CAATSA act looming large as it has committed to purchase sophisticated S400 defence deal with Russia. India still cannot afford to lose Russia simply because India still uses bulk of its defence equipment of Russian origin. On the other hand, China manifests its regional military and economic dominance, bilateral US defence partnerships are insufficient for safeguarding the sovereignty of other countries in China's path. This has necessitated the immediate modernisation of its entire fleet and replace the Russian technology (China extensively uses Russian technology platform) with Western technology. A modern IAF and Indian participation in a quadrilateral alliance with the United States, Australia, and Japan provides a key opportunity to deter Chinese aggression and help restore peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. With the change in the guard in USA, in 2021 how the policy of Indo-Pacific will be pursued given the fact that recently the Trump administration decision to declassify Indo-Pacific policy during its regime and the declassified report reveal broad and tough measure to contain China and most importantly, "accelerating India's rise, through diplomatic, military, and intelligence support" as suggested by Robert O' Brien. It is really surprising how such sensitive foreign policy discourse relating to Indo-Pacific and Quad was made declassified in most inopportune time, which was scheduled for 2042, may impact its efficacy both in long as well as short term. Though in terms of its relevance and significance Quad can prove to be a boon for India if it can play its China card properly with other members of the group especially Japan and USA.

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