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The Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral: Dissecting the China Factor

JYOTSNA MEHRA



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JYOTSNA MEHRA is a former Research Intern at Observer Research Foundation. She is a Pacific Forum Young Leader. She graduated from the University of Oxford in 2018 with an MSc in Modern South Asian Studies. The views expressed in the paper are her own.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the domestic compulsions in Australia, India, Japan and the US that are influencing their positions on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The paper notes that as the four countries are becoming increasingly aware of the risks posed by China's rise over the last few years, they have sought to converge to the Quad. For Australia, the concerns are over trade dependency on China, and China's sharp power projection and rising influence in the South Pacific. India, for its part, has seen China acquire footing in strategic locations in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Meanwhile, Japan is grappling with the task of reforming its Pacifist Constitution as it faces security challenges from China in the East China Sea. And the US is wrestling with shifting its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific where China is challenging the US-led international order. This analysis weighs the question of whether the Quad 2.0 will emerge as a contributor to stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a forum of four maritime democracies—India, US, Japan and Australia—has resurged, after stalling in 2008. The Quad countries have begun convening high-level dialogues, holding a foreign ministerial-level and several biannual senior official-level meetings^{1,2,3,4,5} since November 2017, when senior officials from the four countries met in Manila in the Philippines.⁶ Australia, India, Japan and the US have also begun burying the ‘Quad-caution’, where the mere mention of the four-way partnership drew concerns about provoking China to view the Quad as a plot to contain its rise. The Quad now features firmly across the four countries’ fiercely-negotiated bilateral and trilateral joint statements. The Australia-India Virtual Summit in June 2020 saw the two reaffirm “their commitment to the ongoing Quad consultations.”⁷ In February, US President Donald Trump remarked that India and the US were working towards “revitalising” their “expanded cooperation” within the Quad.⁸

The grouping has also gained greater strategic importance in recent months. India and Australia finalised the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, a pact that would increase interoperability between their militaries. India already has similar arrangements with the US,⁹ and the two countries have also signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement; the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement; and the Communications, Compatibility and Security Arrangement; and are finalising the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation Agreement. India is also making progress on signing the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement with Japan.¹⁰ In November 2019,

12 years after the Quad plus Singapore MALABAR naval exercise, the Quad countries conducted their second military exercise in the counter-terrorism table-top exercise organised by India's National Investigation Agency.¹¹

However, doubts remain about the Quad's strategic objective and its capability as a robust partnership. Drawing from domestic debates in the four countries, this paper notes that their convergence to the Quad has run parallel to their increasing realisation of the risks posed by China and a new power-based international order that has displaced the Rules-Based Order (RBO), an international order defined by a set of institutions and norms that are crucial to its governance.¹² However, despite this convergence and a shared recognition of the threats posed by Beijing, the partnership faces some challenges, brought on by the need to balance competition and cooperation with China, evident in Australia's trade relationship with the country, and the varying need to adjust competing individual foreign policy outlooks; India's aversion to alliances; Japan's pacifism; and the US' 'America First' policy.

QUAD 2.0: RISING FROM CHOPPY WATERS

Cooperation between the four Quad countries goes back a long way. In 2004, India, Japan, Australia and the US formed the Tsunami Core Group to combine humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities in response to the Boxing Day Tsunami in the Indian Ocean.¹³ A few years later, in 2007, the four countries convened in an unofficial meeting in Manila, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum, guided by their converging geopolitical interests as like-minded democratic states. Debates from the time reveal that officials went to great lengths to distance this new loose

partnership from being seen as a “quadripartite security alliance,” downplaying the meeting as a mere manifestation of a brewing “natural partnership” between countries who share “some” largely undefined values.¹⁴ Such hesitation was because an increasingly suspicious China saw the partnership as an “axis of democracies” bent on containing its rise.¹⁵ This strategic coming-together of the four countries also drew domestic backlash, especially in India, where leftist parties protested New Delhi’s perceived belligerence against Beijing and its developing partnership with Washington.¹⁶ Despite reassurances of the non-security nature of the partnership, the navies of the four countries and of Singapore got together in September 2007 in the Bay of Bengal for their first, week-long MALABAR exercise.^{17,18} In an effort to reject claims that linked the exercise to China, official communication highlighted that the war game was conducted to enhance their joint capabilities to deal with “regional security”¹⁹ issues of terrorism, nuclear proliferation, natural disasters and the spread of pandemics.²⁰ This cautionary approach set the tone for their partnership, eventually causing the Quad 1.0 to fail.

In 2007, when Kevin Rudd took over as Australia’s prime minister, the country adopted a reticent policy vis-à-vis China, which was fast replacing Japan as the biggest buyer of Australian exports.²¹ Canberra’s relations with New Delhi remained underdeveloped, primarily over the latter’s nuclear ambitions, reflected in its refusal to sell uranium to India.²² Despite receiving support from Japan, which had started loosening some of its sharp opposition to India’s nuclear programme, strategic bilateral ties remained nascent.²³ The Manmohan Singh-led Indian government soon found itself in a precarious position over the nuclear deal with the US, with the political elite expressing significant mistrust of that country.²⁴ To

douse any perceptions that the Quad was in conflict with India's non-alignment principles, policymakers clarified that it was improving ties with all "major partners" through overtures with Russia and China, and the "four cornered dialogue" with Australia, Japan and the US.²⁵ Although there was growing support in the US of a partnership with India through the Quad,²⁶ the greater emphasis was on trilateral engagement with Australia and Japan.²⁷ Japan also faced compulsions that limited its engagement in the Quad—Article 9 of its Constitution (which outlaws war) and the pacifist public sentiment constrained its defence partnerships. The resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, a key champion of the Quad, only weakened the project further.²⁸

In 2007, Abe spoke before the Indian parliament of the "Confluence of the Two Seas"—the Indian and Pacific oceans—and the need for major democracies to preserve freedom and augment prosperity across a "broader Asia".²⁹ The reverberations of that speech were felt a decade later as the Quad made a comeback in 2017. The strategic concept of the 'Indo-Pacific', which replaced the traditional 'Asia Pacific', now accommodated the revitalised Quad. Importantly, the Indo-Pacific found institutional space across the Quad countries—a 2016 Defence White Paper identified geopolitical shifts in the Indo-Pacific as central to Australia's security,³⁰ the US renamed its Pacific Command to Indo Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM),³¹ Japan identified challenges and opportunities in the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP),³² and India set up a dedicated Indo-Pacific desk at its foreign ministry.³³ The Quad countries have acknowledged, explicitly or in veiled terms, that China's ascent poses a strategic threat to the RBO, which has supported the region's rise.^{34,35,36,37} China has been carrying out large-scale militarisation of the South China Sea and deploying 'grey zone' tactics—actions that fall in the grey area

between outright war and peace, such as building artificial islands, and sending coast guard, maritime militia and survey vessels to contested waterways^{38,39,40,41}—to exert control over vital trade routes in the region. Additionally, it is pursuing strategic interests through economic coercion,⁴² influence operations⁴³ and opaque deals that trap smaller countries in debt and erode their sovereignty.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is no surprise that the Quad countries have stressed their “shared commitment” to the “rules-based system” in the Indo-Pacific and the need to preserve freedom of navigation, democratic values,⁴⁵ stability and openness⁴⁶ in the region.

Relations among individual Quad countries have improved since 2007, facilitating the rebirth of the alliance. Defence ties in bilateral and trilateral relationships have deepened, and security cooperation has become institutionalised over traditional and non-traditional threats.^{47,48} Notably, there has been a ‘reset’ in India’s defence ties with the other Quad countries, with the US, Japan and Australia being the only strategic partners with whom it has established a 2+2 foreign and defence dialogue mechanism.⁴⁹

Although increased Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific might have provided renewed form and meaning to the Quad, China is admittedly the “particular negative subject” that the four countries do not agree on.⁵⁰ India, Australia and Japan do not explicitly identify China as a threat actor in the Indo-Pacific as the US does. Arguing that their conception of the Indo-Pacific is an inclusive one that does not exclude China, these countries often de-hyphenate Indo-Pacific and the Quad, given that critics see the grouping as an “Asian NATO”⁵¹ allied against China. But there are clear inconsistencies here. In laying out his country’s Indo-Pacific vision, for instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously did not make any

reference to the Quad and went as far as saying that India enjoyed a multi-layered relationship with China that was expected to grow.⁵² However, India's foreign ministry links "India-US-Japan-Australia consultations" with security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.^{53,54} These complexities raise difficult questions about the robustness of the Quad and if it is worth a revival.

On robustness, the debate ranges from an alarmist understanding of the Quad as a security alliance that is sharply geared against China⁵⁵ to seeing it as an inconsequential group of misaligned states that has dim chances of full revival.^{56,57} Some have rejected these reductive understandings to argue that underneath the grouping is a robust "matrix of trilateral and bilateral relationships" that have strengthened unprecedentedly over the last few years.⁵⁸ On the normative debate on the Quad, some have hailed it as a partnership that is vital to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region,⁵⁹ whereas others have questioned the wisdom of endangering relations with China at the cost of seeking a US-dominated^{60,61} partnership of the misaligned.^{62,63}

With the Quad and the Quad Plus (South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand)⁶⁴ convening to address challenges brought about by the COVID-19 crisis in the Indo-Pacific region, there is renewed attention on the role the grouping could play in sectors like healthcare, and in restructuring global supply chains and in maintaining the robustness of international institutions in the post-pandemic era.⁶⁵ However, this does not necessarily de-hyphenate the Quad and China, given that the pandemic has brought forth concerns about China's role in covering up the news of the initial spread of the virus⁶⁶ and compromising the World Health Organization,⁶⁷ and has drawn attention on the need to diversify value chains out of China.⁶

CHINA AND THE QUAD

The Quad's single defining characteristic is the democratic set-up of its constituent countries. But this also makes it vulnerable to political shifts and debates in these countries, evident from the fate of Quad 1.0—shaped by opposition from sections of India's political elite, change of prime ministers in Japan and Australia, and waning interest in the US.

Although the Quad has multiple areas of cooperation, including counterterrorism, cybersecurity, HADR and development finance,⁶⁹ this paper focuses on the China factor. Concerns about jeopardising ties with China fueled hesitations in 2007-08, and how best to manage the risks associated with Beijing's assertive rise remains a matter of debate. Yet, it is these risks that have reinvigorated the Quad.

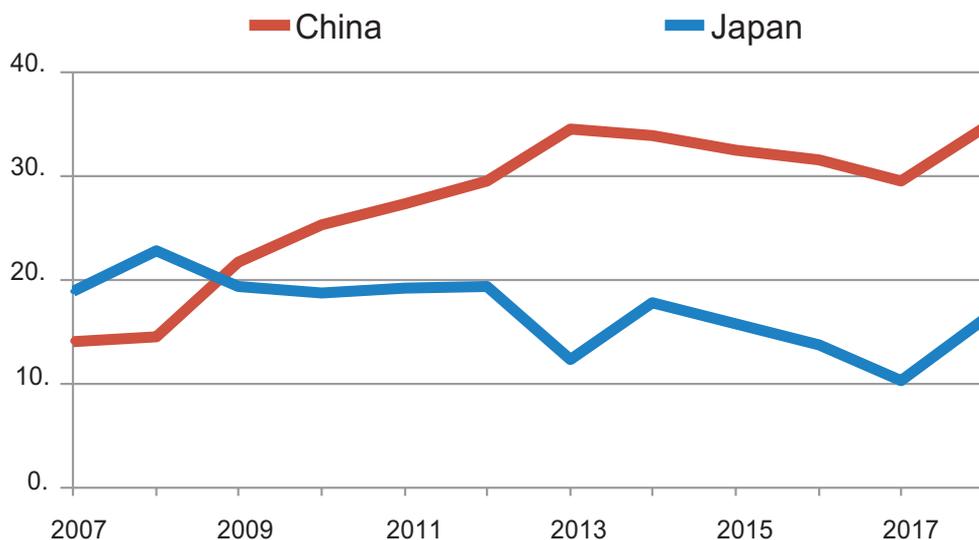
Australia

Seven months after the Quad held its first meeting in Manila in 2007, Rudd, the Mandarin-speaking China scholar and diplomat, was elected prime minister of Australia and soon hit the brakes on the still-nascent grouping. The following year, former Foreign Minister Stephen Smith announced Australia's withdrawal from the Quad during a press briefing with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi, without consulting India, Japan or the US.⁷⁰ Australian hesitance was already apparent when a mere two months after the 2007 Quad meeting, Canberra assured Beijing that it was only pursuing defence engagement with Japan and the US, and not a "quadrilateral partnership with India".⁷¹

In the years leading to the Quad revival in 2017, Australian

policymakers⁷² and the wider strategic community⁷³ had begun talking about seeking a values-based security and foreign policy strategy with their “natural partners” in the grouping. Finally, after the Quad’s first ministerial meeting in 2019, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison expressed his pleasure at “restoring trust” with this “important forum for Australia and the world”.⁷⁴

Figure 1: Top Two Destinations: Share of Australia’s Total Exports (in percentage)



Source (Data): World Bank

Partner of (Bad) Dreams

Ironically, the cause for Australian optimism in the late 2000s⁷⁵ and its decision to withdraw from the Quad in 2008⁷⁶—booming trade with China—is now the reason the country wants back in the grouping. In 2007, China was the second-largest destination for Australian exports, about 15 percent.⁷⁷ By 2017, China became Australia’s top

export destination, at 35 percent, buying a large share of its core exports (iron ore and coal).⁷⁸ This trend has continued through 2019,⁷⁹ pushing Australia into a dangerous economic dependency with China.

Australia has been at the receiving end of China's weaponising of exports to mute criticism abroad to bully its way into achieving its foreign policy objectives. Exporters of Australian wine and agricultural products were "sidelined" by Beijing in 2018 as a result of Canberra enacting laws to check foreign interference in domestic affairs.⁸⁰ More recently, in response to Australia's call for an independent international inquiry over the origins of COVID-19, China banned Australian beef imports and imposed fresh tariffs on barley.⁸¹

China is also dependent on Australia, which supplies it with energy resources and raw materials that feed its industries and infrastructure. However, with Chinese growth delivered by infrastructure development expected to reach its limit and with imports of Australian consumer and luxury goods—pharmaceuticals, agricultural produce, baby formula and wine—rising, Canberra is expected to lose its raw material export leverage over Beijing.⁸² Also, Australia's imports from China have been rising faster than from elsewhere, further integrating the Australian economy with that of China.⁸³

Additionally, Australian universities are heavily reliant on China for a growing number of international fee-paying students,⁸⁴ but the indispensable yuan is costing Australia its academic freedom.⁸⁵ Chinese sharp power⁸⁶—the use of democratic freedoms abroad by authoritarian regimes to advance their influence through distraction

and manipulation—goes beyond universities in Australia, and has been a subject of public and political worry in recent years,⁸⁷ forcing the country to legislate against the “unprecedented”⁸⁸ threat to its sovereignty from foreign interference. Reports suggest China has ‘planted operatives’ in Australia’s parliament by cultivating lucrative financial relationships with several senators and candidates seeking elections across party lines.⁸⁹ China is also said to have launched cyberattacks onto the networks of Australia’s parliament and the three main political parties just before the 2019 parliamentary elections.⁹⁰

Relations with China have also created a new problem—threats to societal cohesion in Australia. Concerns over China’s influence operations allegedly carried out through Chinese students, Chinese-Australian organisations and Australian politicians of Chinese descent have had a polarising effect on the wider society, leading to passionate public debates⁹¹ on “yellow peril alarmism”.⁹²

China in Australia’s Near Abroad

Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper signaled a strategic departure in its defence posturing by defining the “most ambitious plan” to regenerate the Royal Australian Navy since the Second World War, allocating a budget of US\$48.75 billion to meet capability gaps,⁹³ and identifying a role in protecting the maritime order in the wider neighbourhood.⁹⁴ The 2016 document unequivocally called out China’s coercive behaviour in East Asia’s maritime commons, albeit in a restrained tone, signaling that not only had Canberra recognised the threat Beijing posed, but had also given up on hopes of it emerging as a responsible power.

Australia now identifies the defence of maritime South East Asia

and the South Pacific as a vital strategic objective,⁹⁵ second only to domestic security. Australia's "strategic denial instinct" has been roused⁹⁶ to keep other powers away from the Pacific Islands, with the country 'stepping up' its engagement with the South Pacific and Papua New Guinea to forge economic and security integration of the region. This fresh impetus for a South Pacific foreign policy is driven by concerns over the possibility of Beijing developing and acquiring ports, infrastructure facilities and bases across the region, including in Fiji, Vanuatu and on the Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. There is now cross-partisan consensus in Canberra about the "front and centre"⁹⁷ place the "Pacific family"⁹⁸ must enjoy in Australia's foreign policy thinking. The issue has also been covered in the media and has generated wider public debate.⁹⁹

Views on China and the Quad

Despite a broad acknowledgement by Australia's key political parties of the threats posed by China, the political discourse on China remains mired in complexities.^{100,101} At the party level, Chinese foreign interference has hit across the spectrum, allowing parties to draw political mileage from it at their will,¹⁰² blurring distinct 'party-lines' when it comes to viewing China. On a wider public level, however, views on China have changed for the worse, with only 36 percent of Australians seeing China favourably in 2019, down from 48 percent in 2018.¹⁰³ Despite the acknowledgement of the risks associated with China's rise, there is a lack of political consensus on the best approach to manage relations with Beijing.

Australia's views on the Quad have changed considerably over the years, with it now seen as a key forum to exchange views on regional challenges.¹⁰⁴ This has been complemented by the aligning of

perceptions of the other three Quad countries in their assessment of China's assertiveness in the wider region. Despite its 'strategic denial instinct' in the Pacific states, Australia is seeking the cooperation of its Quad partners in providing "economic, diplomatic and security alternatives" in its near abroad in the South Pacific as a counter to China advancing its "debt-trap diplomacy" there.¹⁰⁵

While FOIP has taken centre stage in Australia's strengthened partnership with the US and Japan, it is arguably the upgraded ties with India that have led to the Quad's revival.¹⁰⁶ Now seen as a "natural partner" and a "land of shared values and durable institutions," India could be the solution Australia needs vis-à-vis its dependency on China. Australia welcomes "India's leadership in the Indian Ocean"¹⁰⁷ and has been looking to India as an alternate destination for its exports and source for international students. The establishment of a foreign and defence secretary-level 2+2 dialogue, the codification of the India Economy Strategy to 2035, and enhanced high-level military engagement have provided ballast to their cooperation.¹⁰⁸

Besides, in a bid to appease its South East Asian partners, Australia, like its Quad partners,¹⁰⁹ has been stressing on the centrality of ASEAN to the Indo-Pacific.^{110,111}

India

India's hesitation over its association with the Quad was expressed more loudly than its motivations to convene with the grouping in Manila in 2007. Months after the unofficial meeting, which many saw as being an anti-China partnership,¹¹² Singh firmly doused claims of his country's involvement in such a containment strategy, iterating its "independence of foreign policy"¹¹³ in an address in Beijing. While

it was unclear what had brought the Quad together beyond a vague aligning of their geopolitical trajectories, what was unmistakable was that China's assumed offence at the four countries' coming together was potent enough for Australia and India to disassociate from the grouping.

India's cautious hedging over China has earned it the notoriety of being the "weakest link" in the Quad.¹¹⁴ But where the Indian political elite once shied away from using the term 'Quad' to avoid giving the 'four-way relationship' the appearance of an 'alliance', they now appear comfortable in acknowledging New Delhi's position in the grouping.¹¹⁵ The most recent bilateral joint statements with Quad partners, during the Australia-India Virtual Summit in June and Trump's visit to India, stress on the need to strengthen the "Quadrilateral"^{116,117} partnership. Increasingly aggressive Chinese behaviour has caused India to shed its reticence. There are strategic concerns in New Delhi about Beijing's increased presence in South Asia and the IOR. China has been attempting to thwart India's great power aspirations by complicating its domestic security environment—it has continued to shield Pakistan in its use of terror proxies against India,^{118,119} and has sustained insurgent groups in India's northeast.¹²⁰ Beijing has also continued to cordon off New Delhi from key international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group.^{121,122}

Weaving the String of Pearls

When assessing China's attempts at building influence across strategically located sites in the IOR in the 1990s and the 2000s, Indian scholars admitted to the paucity of "tangible evidence" to prove the "String of Pearls"¹²³ theory in its maritime neighbourhood.

However, over the last few years, especially since the launch of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), not only have these academic concerns materialised, they have also been embraced in public discourse.

In its latest iteration, the Indian Navy's Maritime Strategy emphasised greater focus on the need to preserve trade and energy routes, maintain freedom of navigation, and strengthen the international rules that govern the far seas, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.¹²⁴ It credits this renewed attention to preserving the openness of sea lines of communication in India's maritime neighbourhood to the "developments in its geostrategic environment" that have generated the need to seek cooperation with competition—a veiled reference to Chinese attempts at reshaping the regional order, and the situation states like India are in where they must counter an important economic partner.¹²⁵ There have been deepened concerns over China's impact on the stability of the region since Xi's return to the presidency in 2013, after which it began building artificial islands in the South China Sea and militarising its crucial waterways. Although the South China Sea is important, rising Chinese influence in India's primary area of maritime interest—South Asia and IOR—has enhanced anxieties in New Delhi in recent years.¹²⁶

New Delhi has always been wary of the "all weather friendship" between China and Pakistan, for whom the containment of India is the "strategic glue,"¹²⁷ but concerns intensified with the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013. Given the unfeasibility of this BRI segment and Pakistan's inability to pay for these projects,¹²⁸ it is clear that the US\$62-billion CPEC serves a geostrategic purpose of establishing Chinese presence in the

IOR against India.¹²⁹ Key to this strategic ambition is the Chinese-operated Gwadar port off the Arabian Sea in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Touted as an important trading hub, the port holds little economic viability.¹³⁰ However, it can be used by the Chinese navy to establish a submarine presence in the region.¹³¹ This would give Beijing the option of overcoming its 'Malacca Dilemma'—the acute reliance on the narrow Malacca Strait through which a bulk of Chinese trade passes—by ensuring the safety of its energy supplies by preempting a maritime blockade in the event of a limited naval war. This will also amplify Pakistan's Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities in a naval war with India, potentially endangering major ports along India's western coast.¹³²

Another area of deep unease for India is China's acquisition of a majority stake in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, with a 99-year operational leasing right.^{133,134} Although the Chinese navy does not have a basing agreement with Colombo to station its forces at Hambantota, the port's weak commercial viability continues to raise questions about China's intentions.¹³⁵ Similar 'debt trap' concerns have also been raised over Kyaukphyu, a deep seaport in Myanmar's troubled Rakhine state, in which a consortium led by Chinese state-owned firm CITIC have a majority stake.¹³⁶ Fear of a repayment crisis has also been looming large over the Maldives, which, according to former President Mohammed Nasheed, owes a staggering US\$3.4 billion in debt to China.¹³⁷ Under the Abdullah Yameen regime, when the country accumulated most of this debt, Malé not only 'negotiated' a skewed free trade deal and several exorbitantly-priced infrastructure projects to Beijing's advantage, it also leased the Feydhoo Finolhu Island to Chinese developers,¹³⁸ raising suspicions in the India.¹³⁹

Long Shadow of China at Home and Abroad

Beyond its strategic investments in the country, China's nexus with Pakistan also has domestic security implications for India, which have revealed themselves in the battle against terrorism in Kashmir.

Following the Pulwama terrorist attack by Pakistan-backed Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in February 2019, China, a veto-wielding UNSC member, used its diplomatic prowess to absolve Islamabad of any responsibility.^{140,141} China also shielded JeM chief Masood Azhar from being listed as a UNSC-designated global terrorist for nearly a decade before capitulating to international pressure against heightened terror concerns in South Asia¹⁴² in the aftermath of the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings.¹⁴³

Besides its “dual policy on terrorism”—shielding terrorists that harm India over Kashmir and justifying Xinjiang internment camps as a counter-radicalisation move—China has used the Kashmir conflict and its alliance with Pakistan as an impediment to India's great power aspirations by augmenting its internal security concerns.¹⁴⁴ China has inserted itself, in collusion with Pakistan, in a part of Kashmir claimed by India as integral. The CPEC, which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, not only violates India's sovereignty but also allows Beijing to build vital infrastructure that could mobilise Chinese troops to assist Islamabad if a conflict were to break out between India and Pakistan.¹⁴⁵ China has also widely internationalised the Kashmir issue following the abolition of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status.^{146,147,148}

India's intelligence agencies allege that Beijing has also been offering clandestine support to militant insurgent groups operating

in India's North East, such as the United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia and People's Liberation Army (of Manipur).¹⁴⁹ Indian insurgent leaders like Paresh Barua of the United Liberation Front of Assam operate from Chinese territory, and groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland receive Chinese arms.¹⁵⁰

Views on China and the Quad

India's relationship with China has always been complex. The 1962 conflict broke any misconceptions about bilateral bonhomie and inserted China in India's strategic calculus, allowing the relationship to be defined by mistrust. Over the years, influenced by diverse aspects—enhanced political and trade ties, ongoing border disputes, China's ties with Pakistan and other South Asian countries, and ups and downs in ties with the US—India and China oscillated between being “foes” and “friends,” becoming “frenemies”.^{151,152}

Media¹⁵³ and public perceptions¹⁵⁴ of China remain largely unfavourable,¹⁵⁵ and India is now showing greater willingness to manage its neighbour. This was especially evident during the 2017 Doklam face-off when India successfully forced China to abandon the construction of a controversial highway through the Doklam plateau, undeterred by Beijing's use of psychological warfare tactics.¹⁵⁶

It is undoubtedly a more aggressive China—and New Delhi's willing to manage it—that has driven India back to more robust Quad. Any remaining inhibitions over the Quad—the glaring exclusion of the ‘Quad’ from Modi's outline of India's Indo-Pacific vision¹⁵⁷ and the MALABAR snub to Canberra¹⁵⁸—have been seen as a product of the country's “historical aversion” to multilateral arrangements seen as alliances.¹⁵⁹ However, there are calls to let go

of dogmatic ideological diktats of foreign policy positioning¹⁶⁰ by pursuing multiple “issue-based” partnerships.¹⁶¹

After years of mutual distrust, the US now competes with India’s traditional ally Russia as an important defence partner. India and the US identify each other as “natural allies”¹⁶² in the Indo-Pacific, establishing a high-level 2+2 strategic dialogue, and enhancing their interoperability through bilateral exercises and the culmination of logistics supply and communications agreements. The two countries have also been trying to achieve greater congruence in their understanding of the Indo-Pacific by enhancing cooperating in the Western Indian Ocean, a region not covered in the US’s Indo-Pacific definition but included in India’s Maritime Security Strategy as an area of primary responsibility.¹⁶³ India has enhanced cooperation with the US’s Indo-Pacific, Central and African commands.¹⁶⁴ US Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger has also claimed that the US’s expanded “California to Kilimanjaro” definition of the Indo-Pacific now closely resembles that of India.¹⁶⁵ However, the maritime zones westwards of India’s western coast have still not been included in the USINDOPACOM’s Area of Responsibility.¹⁶⁶ Concerns persist over trade and the Trump administration’s detour to Pakistan regarding the Taliban deal ahead of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.^{167,168} Doubts over the US’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific are also hinged on its continued involvement in an increasingly volatile West Asia.¹⁶⁹

India has also been strengthening its ties with Japan by establishing a 2+2 ministerial-level dialogue, increasing the number of bilateral military exercises, and cooperating in infrastructure development. Australia’s lack of “strategic clarity” regarding China in the Quad’s early days had a significant impact on India’s own

decision to step back from the grouping.¹⁷⁰ But, as Australia's High Commissioner to India has admitted, Canberra's commitment to the Quad is no longer in doubt.¹⁷¹

Japan

Abe has been at the helm of affairs in Japan during both outings of the Quad (in 2007 and 2017). He was also the chief proponent of the Quad and the Indo-Pacific, and proposed, as early as 2012, that the latter be the theatre of operation of the former.¹⁷² Abe identified the collective need to “shoulder more responsibility as guardians of navigational freedom across the Pacific and Indian oceans” in light of the Chinese navy turning the South China Sea into “Lake Beijing” and upping the ante around the Senkaku Islands.¹⁷³ The enthusiasm for the Quad in the *Kantei* (Prime Minister's Office) waned after Yasuo Fukuda, an advocate for better relations with China, took over as prime minister following Abe's resignation in 2007. Fukuda abandoned the developing values-oriented foreign policy concept of the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, seen as “too provocative” for Beijing by pro-China groups in Japan's foreign ministry.¹⁷⁴ But China has remained part of Japan's strategic lexicon. Japan's 2019 Defence White Paper has noted with underlined urgency the expansion of China's defence capabilities in space, cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum, and increased military activities in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷⁵ Japan's Official Development Assistance policy has also decisively embraced the Indo-Pacific as a priority region,¹⁷⁶ with Tokyo offering development assistance, “quality” infrastructure, and trading and investment opportunities to countries “in a way that respects their ownership, not by forcing upon or intervening in them,”¹⁷⁷ referring to China's BRI.

As Japan grapples with maritime concerns advanced by a power with whom Tokyo shares a difficult history and one that is shaping the Asian order to its advantage, the country is re-visiting and debating its Pacifist identity.¹⁷⁸ It is in this environment that Japan is upgrading ties with the Quad countries.

Grey Zoned: East China Sea and South China Sea

China has been attempting to change the status of the East China Sea since enacting the Territorial Sea law in 1992, in which it included the Japanese-administered uninhabited Senkaku Islands as its “affiliated” islands.¹⁷⁹ Tensions in this maritime zone have been on the rise since 2008 when Chinese surveillance ships first intruded into the waters around the Senkaku island. In 2013, China included the airspace over the Senkaku in its demarcation of its Air Defence Identification Zone.¹⁸⁰ Since then, China’s use of grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare in the East China Sea—intrusions by the coast guard, naval ships and air force, and military exercises well beyond the Second Island Chain—have raised Japanese concerns of a “one-sided escalation”.¹⁸¹ Tokyo has expressed worries that with the rapidly rising joint A2/AD capabilities of its navy and air force, China is trying to normalise its advance on the East China Sea, Sea of Japan and Pacific Ocean,¹⁸² effectively encircling Japan.

Over the last few years, the situation in the South China Sea has also worsened with China’s land reclamation activities and militarisation of islands. Japan sees the South China Sea as key to its security because it houses crucial sea lanes vital to its trade and economic health. Also, there are concerns that China’s militarised assertions in the region could lead to a clash in South East Asia.¹⁸³ Concerns over US foreign policy unpredictability and

the commitment to the contested region are worrisome for Japan as a less-than-committed US would allow the military balance in the important waterway to tip in China's favour.¹⁸⁴ By being an "anchor" of continued US engagement in the region, the Quad holds significant value for Tokyo.¹⁸⁵

Revisiting Japan's Selfhood

Japan is in an increasingly tense external environment, but it is bound by Article 9 of its Constitution, which prohibits it from waging a war and maintaining a military force.¹⁸⁶ This constitutional clause has prevented Japan from developing any offensive capabilities and acting as a reciprocal and full ally of the US.

However, the 2019 Defence White Paper recognised the extraordinary threats emerging from an increasingly challenging security environment, presumably a reference to Chinese aggression. It stressed on the need to deal with this handicap, arguing for sharpening the country's defence capability as it is "the most important strength for Japan in retaining self-sustained existence as a sovereign nation".¹⁸⁷ The defence ministry's stance matches Abe's push to revise Article 9 to adjust the country's defence posture to face contemporary realities. Article 9 is a provision of the US-Japan Security Treaty that guarantees Japan's security by granting the US the right to use Japanese territory for military purposes,¹⁸⁸ the US is now trying to change the status quo. The Trump administration has criticised the arrangement, arguing that it allows Tokyo a free ride at Washington's expense.¹⁸⁹

Abe, who considers the constitutional amendment vital for "nation-building for a new era,"¹⁹⁰ has only secured support for the re-interpretation of the Article and not its full amendment, and

policymakers risk losing public support over the issue.

With a leadership committed to the difficult job of readjusting Japan's security architecture to the new threat environment, the Quad allows the country to skirt the Article 9 limitations and the uncertainties around its amendment. The Quad's ambiguous intended purpose could be advantageous as a means of deterrence while still allowing Japan to stay within the terms of Article 9.

Views on China and the Quad

Although Abe's attempts to revise the Constitution have been met with public scepticism,¹⁹¹ he still garners significant support on wider security and foreign policy issues.¹⁹² Japan has hiked defence spending and is proactively promoting its FOIP vision, developments that have occurred alongside deepening anti-China sentiments among the Japanese.¹⁹³

Conciliatory foreign policy approaches to China, especially on Taiwan, have historically drawn strength from the pro-China wings of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. However, recently, the influence of the pro-China camps has waned¹⁹⁴ alongside decreased factional politics in the party.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, individual politicians within the party continue to enjoy cozy personal relations with the Chinese elite.¹⁹⁶

Despite Beijing's reduced influence in the *Diet* (Japan's legislature), Japan has in recent years experienced a rapprochement in its ties with China. Abe set a historic 'reset' in bilateral ties in 2018 when he visited Beijing, Japan's first prime ministerial visit since 2011. Japan now cooperates conditionally with the BRI. It has also reduced the FOIP from being a "strategy" to a "vision," confusing Japan-watchers

about Tokyo's commitment to the concept.¹⁹⁷

However, Japan has continued to strengthen its security cooperation with its Quad partners and other Indo-Pacific countries. This is a reflection of a delinking of Japan's economic and security concerns—pursuing regional economic inclusivity with China while simultaneously engaging in strategic competition with it in the Indo-Pacific¹⁹⁸—or what some scholars have referred to as Japan's paradoxical China policy.^{199,200} Despite the unpredictability and transactionalism of the Trump administration, which has not only demanded more from Japan in their alliance but has also pursued protectionist economic policies that impact Tokyo, Japan's strategic alignment with the US remains unambiguous.²⁰¹

Increased tensions in East China Sea and fear of encirclement by China has driven Japan back to the Quad. A developed Quad would not only check China's expansionism but also US uncertainties about the region, quelling Japan's concerns about it.

The US

As China's economic, diplomatic and military profile in Asia began rising in the 2000s, strategic thinkers in Washington spotted a challenge to the US's "hub and spoke" system of regional alliances that threatened to shrink its clout in the region and make way for China-led regional formations.²⁰² This energised interest in democratic values-based diplomacy, with former US President George W. Bush proposing the creation of a new Asian Pacific Democracy Partnership.²⁰³ The Quad also generated enthusiasm in Washington's policy circles—from former Vice President Dick Cheney calling for India's inclusion in the US-Australia-Japan trilateral and the late John McCain, an advocate of the "League of Democracies,"²⁰⁴

suggesting that the Quad be “institutionalised”.²⁰⁵ However, beyond enthusiastic rhetoric, and with increasingly hesitant partners, interest in the Quad began withering in the US, with “priority emphasis” being placed on the trilateral with Australia and Japan.²⁰⁶ The US was wary of appearing to lead a containment strategy against China. When asked about the implications of the US’s reinvigorated relationship with India, former Under Secretary of State R. Nicholas Burns said it did not have a bearing on the relationship with China, with whom ties were “as good in the political realm” as any time since 1949.²⁰⁷

In 2011, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed on the need for the US to shift resources and priorities away from the Middle East to the increasingly important emerging geography of the Asia Pacific, which she described as stretching from the “Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas” and spanning two linked oceans—what would later be known as the ‘Indo-Pacific’.²⁰⁸ This ‘pivot’ to Asia led to deepened alliances with Japan, Australia, Thailand and South Korea, and enhanced ties with emerging partners like India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam.²⁰⁹ But US-China mutual hedging—simultaneously balancing security competition and economic engagement—was the defining characteristic of the US’s policy in Asia before the ‘pivot’.²¹⁰

Now, as Trump’s first term draws to a close, it is clear that rhetoric and policy on China has become more confrontational—the National Defence Strategy 2018²¹¹ and the National Security Strategy 2017²¹² identify revisionist China as presenting the greatest strategic threat to the US. The Indo-Pacific—roughly geographically bordered by the Quad countries—is where the US fears displacement by China, and a risk to its values and interests.

Wither the US?

The US Department of Defence (DoD) has identified several trends that have shaped China's efforts for influence abroad following the end of its two-decades-long "period of strategic opportunity" where it focused on domestic growth and kept a lower international profile.²¹³ Unlike the US's Quad partners who face a direct challenge of China seizing influence in their near-abroad, the US finds itself in strategic competition with China, who is challenging the US's global hegemony. China has amassed greater clout by deploying grey zone tactics and flexing its economic and diplomatic heft through the BRI to achieve strategic goals. The Chinese military's growing capabilities, the pursuit of interests abroad and Beijing's civil-military initiative for defence technology production will advance its goals of build a unipolar Asia and challenge the US globally. The DoD also sees policies such as 'Made in China 2025' as unfair protectionist practices to amass wealth.²¹⁴ Large scale influence operations support these strategic and foreign policy initiatives by undermining the dominant narrative in democracies.²¹⁵ Nowhere else are these tools to advance influence more pointedly used than in the Indo-Pacific, which the DoD sees as most inevitably tied to the US's future, given that it houses the largest share of global GDP, its busiest trade routes, largest population and is home to several countries with the world's most powerful militaries and nuclear weapons supplies.²¹⁶ The two key goals identified in the US's 2018 National Defence Strategy aim to check China's revisionist challenge to the world order.²¹⁷

Underlining the threat posed by China to US preeminence is the challenge it presents to the RBO. The RBO was established in the post-war period, largely as a result of a US-led effort to create a set of governing institutions and mechanisms to stabilise the international

order.²¹⁸ Arguably, it sets norms that manage interstate relations in matters such as sovereignty and trade practices, which have now started to experience a power-based re-ordering at the hands of a rising authoritarian China. While the RBO undoubtedly benefited everyone, it helped sustain US hegemony.

Indo-Pacific connectivity and dynamism is a result of the RBO, which is central to the Quad countries' interests and cooperation in the region. So when US officials claim that China is the conspicuous point of disagreement among the four while also highlighting that “values that undergird a free and open Indo-Pacific”²¹⁹ are the uniting factor, it is clear that while there may be disagreements on *how* to manage China's rise, there is agreement on the *need* to do it.

In addition to the US's first line of effort—maintaining a strong force posture and modernising forces under the USINDOPACOM—alliances with likeminded partners, such as those in the Quad, act as a “force multiplier,” increasing deterrence and interoperability.²²⁰ This is important not only because cooperation with a greater number of regional allies has been a key decisive factor in geopolitical competition, but also because it offers the US—a Pacific power with stakes in the Indo-Pacific—a chance to diminish the advantage China enjoys in the region, and gain legitimacy for its presence there. The geographical arrangement of the Quad countries is important to the US since it creates a “natural perimeter” for the US as a Pacific power that is heavily reliant on its sea power and engaged in strategic competition with China, a Western Pacific power.²²¹

Shifting Priorities vs. Unfinished Business

Observers of the Trump administration argue that US foreign policy has now returned to its classical isolationist form that defined its

relations with the world in the 1930s.^{222,223} This is primarily based on the US's decision to recede from the wars in the Middle East, notably in Syria and Afghanistan. However, far from retreating to the pursuit of domestic objectives, the US is experiencing an unprecedented but unsurprising shift in its strategic priorities abroad—from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. But talk of the US's shifting strategic focus has been on since the Pivot to Asia.

Recent tensions in the region has renewed debate on the US's withdrawal from the volatile region.²²⁴ The US's interest in the Middle East are no longer at risk given that it has achieved energy self-sufficiency, ISIS has been territorially defeated there, and US ally Israel remains the preeminent military power in the region.²²⁵ However, the US's antagonism towards Iran, its lack of strategic insight vis-à-vis Syria and the Pakistan-backed Afghan Taliban, and its continued involvement in Yemen and Libya continues to draw the country firmly back in the region. This could contribute to the US's relative global decline if China fills a potential vacuum in the Indo-Pacific. This has overstretched US defence resources and dealt a blow to the kind of high-intensity deterrence capabilities that are required in its competition with China.²²⁶

For advocates of US presence in the Indo-Pacific, Trump's 'America First' policy damages trade relations with allies and partners such as Japan, India and South Korea. But by supporting pulling US troops out of wars in the Middle East, 'America First' also allows the US to subsequently shift its attention towards the Indo-Pacific strategic arena.

Views on China and the Quad

China is now openly seen as the “central threat” to the US and the RBO, which has preserved and advanced US dominance.²²⁷ There is bipartisan support in the US for aggressive policies against China’s mercantilism,²²⁸ human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet,^{229,230} erosion of democracy in Hong Kong,²³¹ attempts to stifle the free speech of US businesses,²³² and its military posturing in the Indo-Pacific.²³³ Although the public perception of China as a threat to the US has deepened over the years, the American public prefers a cooperative approach in dealing with this threat.²³⁴

While China is now seen as “attempting to erode American security and prosperity,”²³⁵ the US has been more restrained in its framing of the Quad 2.0 to ensure that it being perceived as a containment alliance against China does not kill the group again. On being asked whether their enhanced cooperation was creating an “Asian version of the NATO alliance,” US officials said that viewing it in terms of a security alliance will not advance the grouping and that the Quad reflects “just a natural sharing of interest”.²³⁶ Arguably, while the fear of appearing as a containment strategy against China might have killed the Quad in 2008, attempts to avoid being perceived as a containment alliance are now directed at making the grouping more acceptable among member countries and others to save it.

The US has been tweaking its understanding of the Quad, bringing it in line with that of its partners with its inclusion of “India-friendly language” of ASEAN centrality.²³⁷ The US will likely participate in a “diplomatic Quad,” shelving the idea of the Quad as a “security grouping” to accommodate India’s reservations.²³⁸

Views on the US's management of alliances remain divided, with Trumpian transactionalism driven by an 'America First' approach drawing the country into smaller 'trade wars' with critical Indo-Pacific partners and allies.²³⁹ However, while it may revisit bilateral trade disputes and cause occasional dents in relations with key Indo-Pacific countries, 'America First' may not be in long-term conflict with the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy, because the strategic interests of the US and its partners have come to converge in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, if troops withdrawal from the Middle East results in greater US commitment and resources towards preserving the RBO that it helped establish, then America First would, in fact, complement the US' Indo-Pacific strategy.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the Quad has been a subject of intense scrutiny by policymakers and analysts who have debated both its intentions and capabilities. As the Quad reappeared in Manila in 2017, those doubts also returned. By analysing the debates in Australia, India, Japan and the US on the Quad, it is clear that with Xi's ascendancy in China, the threat posed by that country to the RBO has become more pronounced, and has brought the Quad countries closer. China's large-scale misinformation campaigns and aggressive posturing in the Taiwan Strait, the South and the East China Seas, and the Line of Actual Control during the COVID-19 crisis²⁴⁰ have again revealed that Beijing's intent is to alter the rules of the game.

Increased cooperation across a range of sectors will be important not only to deal with the wide array of challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, but also to make the Quad a more robust mechanism for policy coordination. The Quad could play a role in

financing projects for the growth of the region's blue economy. To become more politically palatable and to deliver coordinated, regionally-focused results across various policy areas, the Quad should cooperate with other regional partners, including ASEAN, East African littoral nations, France, the UK, Pacific Island nations, New Zealand and South Korea, and forums such as the BIMSTEC, Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. 

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org