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Rise of Quad as a ‘Premier Regional Grouping’: Harmonizing the Optics of Balancing and Normativism

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The rise of the Biden Administration in the United States has coincided with the rise of Quad as a ‘premier regional grouping’ in the Indo-Pacific region with a robust agenda of cooperation that spans across strategic, economic, technological, environmental and developmental areas. The Quad’s ambitious agenda underpins the member-states’ deliberate effort to align its two foundational bases – balancing and normative – in the grouping’s outlook. The new Quad aims at achieving three-fold objectives – limiting China’s growing influence and assertive behaviour, augmenting new technological capacity of its member-states and projecting the grouping as a provider of regional good. However, the Quad continues to face various challenges, which relate to both the intent and functional capacity of the member-states and limit the grouping’s effectiveness in achieving its vastly ambitious agenda. The success of the Quad as an informal regional grouping will depend on the member-states’ willingness to overcome differences and navigate across diverse strategic priorities to chart a shared journey.

Introduction

With the rise of the Biden administration in the United States, the Quad, initially known as ‘Australia-India-Japan-U.S. Consultation,’ has transformed from a low-profile initiative centered around the idea of overtly balancing China to a high-profile regional initiative with robust agenda for cooperation among the member states. During the last two years, the Quad members have met at regular intervals and at various levels, including the summit level meetings in March 2021, September 2021, March 2022 and May 2022. These meetings have produced various key policy documents, such as the joint statement of the first in-person Quad summit of March

2021, the White House document of Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit of September 2021, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy of February 2022, the Joint Statement of Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in February 2022 and the Quad Joint Leaders' Statement in May 2022 (The White House 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b). These policy documents underline that the grouping has become ambitious, and the member-states are willing to be heavily invested in the accomplishment of their roles and expectations. More importantly, the mandates and goals of the Quad reflect the statement that the Biden administration made in February 2022 as a part of its Indo-Pacific strategy – it would make the Quad a 'premier regional grouping' that would 'deliver on issues important to the Indo-Pacific region' (The White House 2022c: 16). In other words, the Quad is moving towards an informal permanency, and it aims to do much more than merely balancing China. In fact, the robustness of the agendas, and change in the styles and formats of interactions have prompted some experts to frame the Quad during the Biden era as a 'Quad 3.0' (Koga 2022: 24).

The Quad has brought together four strategic heavyweights with a shared purpose of advancing the member states' strategic interests, countering the Chinese assertiveness and influence in the Indo-Pacific region and 'deliver[ing] on issues that matter to the Indo-Pacific' (The White House 2022c: 16). It represents a formidable force-posture with the combined military strength of the US, Japan, India and Australia, overseeing the vast strategic waters of the two oceans. The four member-states of Quad represent four democracies, two nuclear-weapons states, four maritime powers, one-fourth of the global population, two of the three largest countries, one-third of the global GDP in terms of purchasing power parity, three of the four largest economies in PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) terms, three economically and technologically advanced economies, and states heavily invested in the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, the Quad as a new diplomatic initiative is anchored on an entrenched network of bilateral and trilateral partnerships through which the member-countries have been aligning their broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia, Japan and the US are bound by the commitments of alliance partnerships. India has built strategic partnerships and strong defense ties with other Quad members. Though the trilateral strategic dialogue among the three alliance partners (Australia, Japan and the US) have been going on since 2002, India has forged trilateral strategic dialogues with both Japan and the US since 2008, and with Japan and Australia since 2012. New Delhi does not yet have a trilateral dialogue with the US and Australia.

As the Quad moves towards a robust and an informal outlook without a headquarter and secretarial entourage, it underpins three principal trends. First, there are two foundational bases for the rise of Quad – normative posturing and balancing-China posturing. The normative posturing is rooted in the original humanitarian intervention against the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004. The same normativism drove both India and Australia to be soft footed on projecting the Quad as an ‘Asian NATO’ or an instrument of containing China in 2007. The normativism of the first avatar of the Quad is also manifested in the optics of the Quad 2.0 as a coalition of ‘maritime democracies,’ seeking to build a ‘rules-based order’ in ‘a free, open and stable Indo-Pacific region.’ The balancing-China optics draws its outlook from the adverse nature of China’s relationship with the Quad member-states and the experiences of the Quad during the second decade of the 21st century. Second, the Quad as a premier regional grouping combines the strategic objectives of both balancing and normative posturing. It is seeking to align both of its foundational logics in its policy outlook as it embarks on a more permanent and surefooted journey. The new Quad aims at achieving three-fold objectives – limiting China’s growing influence and assertive behavior, augmenting new technological capacity of its member-states and projecting the grouping as a provider of regional good. In order to achieve these objectives, the grouping has laid out an ambitious agenda for intra-mural cooperation. Finally, the Quad continues to face various challenges that highlights the grouping’s limitations and limit its effectiveness in achieving its vastly ambitious agenda. These challenges relate to both the intent and functional capacity of the member-states to meet the goals of the grouping.

Before beginning to discuss various facets of the Quad, it is imperative to make two clarifications. First, the paper builds on both analytical and descriptive analysis. The descriptive aspect of the paper furnishes details on various aspects of international cooperation under the Quad and documents how the grouping has been expanding its agenda of engagement over time. As the devil lies in detail, it is important to outline the content and scope of the Quad’s agenda to substantiate the claim that it is emerging as a regional grouping that too a premier one. On the other hand, the analytical part of the paper highlights the drivers and directions of the grouping and explain what is unstated in the policy documents and governmental pronouncements. Second, though the paper highlights the roles and priorities of the Biden administration in pushing forth the Quad agenda, it aims to underline the broader strategic agenda of all the member-states in the

grouping. The paper's main goal is to provide a general discussion on the Quad's visions, operations, concerns, and challenges involving all the member-states.

Rise of the Quad: Old and New Avatars

The origin of the Quad lies in a successfully coordinated delivery of humanitarian assistance and disaster reliefs to the Tsunami struck Indonesian province of Aceh in December 2004 by the four maritime democracies – Australia, India, Japan and the United States. The close coordination achieved among the foreign affairs officials in the four capital cities opened the possibility of these four countries working together at a strategic and institutional level on a permanent basis. However, it is not clear whether the idea of the Quad came from then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe or then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Some trace the genesis of the Quad to the idea of 'democratic coalition' of the former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who called for greater coordination among the four maritime democracies (Saran 2017; Garnaut 2014;). On the other hand, some believe that it was the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who proposed to convene a meeting of the Quad and steered the idea of the Quad (Rudd 2021; Smith 2021. One might argue that though the idea of democratic coalition may have come from Secretary Powell, it was Prime Minister Abe who championed and concretized the idea of Quad both in 2007 and ten years later in 2017. The Quad held its first meeting, termed as an 'informal meeting,' on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Manila in May 2007 (Buchan and Rimland 2020).

The Quad made big waves in 2007 when the four member countries took part in the Malabar exercises that was originally a bilateral India-US naval exercise. Singapore joined the second series of Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. Building on their coordination achieved during the Tsunami operations, the four navies took part in various types of maritime maneuvers and sought to take a step further toward augmenting interoperability among the four navies. However, the overtly militaristic waves of the Malabar also produced strong backlash from China that termed the initiative as an expression of 'Asian NATO' and an attempt to contain her (Koga 2022: 24). Both India and Australia found themselves not ready to openly challenge Chinese posture in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean. Unwilling to antagonize Beijing, the then Labor party government of Australia under the leadership of Kevin Rudd, pulled the plug on an infant grouping in 2008. In other words, the Quad was an idea whose time had not come yet.

The grouping resurfaced after a decade with a meeting in Manila on November 11, 2017 (Madan 2017). Much water had flown in the Indian and Pacific Oceans

during the last ten years and China's image and relations with the Quad member-states had plummeted. The two prominent reluctant partners during the first phase of the Quad – India and Australia – had changed leadership and were finding it difficult to keep their relations with the rising and assertive China on an even keel. In addition to the mounting trade deficit, India faced new spate of bilateral tension and a series of cross-border military standoff along the Himalayan border in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017 (Ollapally 2022). Similarly, Australia-China relations deteriorated during the Turnbull era as issues of foreign influence, interference, espionage and extortion began to dominate the discussion on Australia-China Relations (Medcalf 2019; Garnaut 2018). The Australian White Paper of 2017 expressed concern over the 'unprecedented pace and scale' of China's reclamation and construction activities in the South China Sea, and the potential for the Chinese use of force and coercion in the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait (Australian Government 2017). The bilateral tension increased in 2020 when Australia joined the call for an international inquiry into the outbreak of the COVID-19 (Needham 2020). In other words, Modi's India and Turnbull's Australia were less hesitant in 2017 in reviving the initiative and joining the balancing China rhetoric than they were in 2008. China's relations with the other Quad members – Japan and United States – saw deterioration as well during the late 2010s. The US National Security Strategy of 2017 declared, "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" (The White House 2017). It identified Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea as 'endangering the free flow of trade, threatening the sovereignty of other nations and undermining the regional stability' (Ibid.).

The revived Quad's initial gatherings remained somewhat modest, overly cautious and did not go beyond confidence-building exercise among the senior foreign affairs officials. More importantly, during their early meetings. The grouping met on the sidelines of the ASEAN-led summit meetings that generally provided ample opportunities for senior officials and ministers from various countries and dialogue partners to conduct meetings outside the ASEAN-scheduled meetings. This approach continued for nearly two years. It is noteworthy that each member-states produced their own press releases during their early meetings, underlining their own diplomatic language and priorities. While the US press release provided the broadest spectrum of the consultation with specific issues detailed out, the Indian press release did not list any specific agenda and remained the most parsimonious. The Australian and Japanese press releases resonated many of the concerns and agendas raised by the US.

Quad's Balancing China Outlook

The return of the Quad under the Trump administration produced a wide range of debate regarding the intent and scope of the grouping. While some began to view the initiative as an overtly balancing China posture that could, very quickly, metamorphose into an alliance network, critics began to view the grouping as an attempt to create an Asian NATO (Huang 2017). These debates have produced high-octane nicknames for the Quad, such as “democratic security diamond” (Abe 2017), “soft value-based containment of China” (Drysdale 2011), “constellation of democracies” (Chellaney 2017), and a “great game in Asia” (Yarmolinsky 2021). On the other hand, China has termed the Quad as “sea foam,” “group politics” and “selective multilateralism” (Sheng 2021).” At the heart of these debates lies the questions of the Chinese assertiveness, growing China-US rivalry and Beijing’s inimical equations with the other Quad member-states. In fact, the China factor has remained one of the unstated but foundational objectives of the Quad either in the making of the grouping, as epitomized by the military optics of the Malabar exercises or in the unraveling of the grouping exemplified by the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s notice of withdrawal.

One can attribute initial thrust on the China-centric outlook of the grouping to the Trump administration’s deliberate push to convey the balancing outlook of the grouping and the shared heat of the Chinese assertiveness facing the four member-states. As the China-US tariff war intensified, the Trump administration began to push for a more visible, an overtly balancing and a high-profile outlook for the Quad. Mike Pompeo, the then US Secretary of State, sought to rally other Quad member-states behind the idea of balancing China. A senior US State Department official noted in October 2020, “there’s no avoiding the fact that it’s China and its actions in the region that make the Quad actually matter and function this time around” (Griffiths 2020). The Trump administration’s push for balancing-China-outlook for the Quad found resonance in other capitals which also witnessed continued decline in their ties with China. India that had remained shy of pursuing an overt balancing China approach, felt unencumbered by the Chinese aggression along its Himalayan border. Indian and Chinese troops ended their 40-year-old cross-border peace and trust when they clashed along the Himalayan border in June 2020 that led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops (Gokhale 2021). Similarly, The Sino-Japanese tensions in the East China Sea over the Senkaku Islands continued unabated (Gale and Tsuneoka 2020).

The balancing China narrative of the Quad has continued to shape the Quad's international outlook under the Biden administration (Thompson 2021). The 2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy identified China's "harmful behavior" as an important challenge to regional peace and stability, noting that China is "combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might" to build "a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific" and "become the world's most influential power" through coercion and aggression (The White House 2022c). The Chinese grey-zone warfare in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait and the Oceania have threatened the security of both the maritime space and the US allies, such as Australia, Taiwan and the Philippines. The fear of Chinese military base in the Solomon Islands has sounded alarm bells both in Canberra and Washington D.C. While the United States declared that it would 'respond accordingly,' Australia viewed it 'a red line' (Burgess 2022a; Burgess 2022b). In addition, Japan and US, during the visit of the US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, to Japan, agreed 'to closely cooperate in the event of a military clash between China and Taiwan (Nikkei Asia 2021). It is not clear whether it was deliberate or a mere coincidence that the Chinese and Russian bombers, accompanied by surveillance aircraft, flew around Japanese territory on the day of the Quad meeting (Smith 2022).

However, the Quad is not an alliance system, does not promise security guarantee to its members and does not stipulate enhanced military build-up in the region. The security and military agenda of the minilateral grouping has included maritime exercises, development of maritime domain awareness and other activities that aim at interoperability, capacity-building and information sharing. The Quad-based military exercises are different from Australia's nuclear submarine deal under AUKUS since the former aims at improving interoperability and the latter concentrates on augmenting new techno-military capabilities. Moreover, the Quad did not engage in any collective military operation when India was engaged in a deadly border conflict with China in June 2020.

It is unlikely that the grouping will metamorphose into an alliance framework if the China threat intensifies. The scope and extent of the Quad's balancing posture is shaped by the willingness/unwillingness of the member-states, especially India, to overtly balance China and the Chinese behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region. Some have argued that the Quad may metamorphose into an alliance network (Tow 2019) or some form of hard balancing posture if the 'US-China relations deteriorate further or Beijing's behaviour towards regional neighbors becomes even more aggressive' (Grossman 2019).' Given India's position and policy responses both during the Ukraine crisis and

the Chinese incursions along the Himalayan border, one can surmise that nothing sort of war with China will force India to cede its autonomy and agree to the Quad's transformation into an alliance framework. Until then, the Quad will continue to operate as an informal, focused and flexible regional grouping in the Indo-Pacific region.

Quad's Rise as a 'Premier Regional Grouping'

The framing of Quad as a 'premier regional grouping' builds on the Biden administration's three principal claims and understandings. First, the United States should act in concert with regional partners, allies and friends to 'firmly anchor itself in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen the region itself' (The White House, 2022c). To achieve this objective, the US must develop a panoply of meaningful areas of cooperation that would reaffirm its regional credibility and trust that the country lost during the Trump administration. In other words, the US must give back in order to win back friends and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The explosion of non-military agendas during the last two years highlights the Quad's normative and developmental focus that would improve both the grouping's regional image and the US image in the region. The Trump Administration's 'America-first' policy proved a partisan and controversial policy, with experts identifying it as "an increasingly zero-sum, unilateralist, protectionist, and nativist" approach, laced with a "mix of nationalism, unilateralism, and xenophobia" (Blinken and Kagan 2019; Dollar, Hass and Bader 2019)." Such an optics undermined America's regional standing and credibility in the region.

Second, the non-military posturing of the Quad has also emerged out of the pushback that the United States received from the region's middle and small powers. The overtly 'balancing China' rhetoric during the Trump era created an optics of the United States pursuing a Cold War mindset and pushing the Indo-Pacific region toward great power rivalry. Such a rhetoric pushed small and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region to avoid buying into the US foreign policy narratives and getting trapped in the great power rivalry. Some have argued that Washington focused too heavily on security relations, and pushed, countries in the region, such as Indonesia, to take positions in the rivalry with China (Kuo 2019).

Similarly, the centrality of the balancing China narrative in the Quad's revival gave the grouping a containment outlook and reinforced exclusive focus on the Quad. Some countries felt that the balancing nature of the Quad was too hot for them to handle in the light of the rising US-China strategic competition. For example, though Indonesia has not taken an official position on the Quad, its Minister for Foreign

Affairs, Retno Marsudi cautioned in 2018 against using the Quad as ‘a containment strategy’ (Marsudi 2018). This is true not just about the non-allied countries but also some alliance partners. For example, while South Korea has shown hesitancy in coming onboard with the Quad+ forum, Thailand has rallied behind the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific, an attempt to find a middle ground between China and the US-led Quad.

Finally, the Quad’s rise as a regional grouping is a decoupling strategy of the Biden administration that aims at developing a parallel regional supply chain and gradually weaning the region away from dependency on China-dominated supply chain that amplifies China’s regional significance. There is growing realization among the US policy makers that as China is “combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might to become the world’s most influential power” (The White House, 2022c), the US must pursue an equally robust and comprehensive agenda of international cooperation to offset China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad with a varied agenda of cooperation aims to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region, position itself as the principal provider of regional good and advance technological, economic and developmental capacity of the member-states.

The Quad, since its return, has developed a comprehensive agenda for cooperation and strategic projection. Their agendas include but are not limited to vaccine diplomacy, development of a system of reliable supply chain, capacity-building of the member-states in the field of critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure development, cyber security, regional maritime security by strengthening maritime domain awareness and transition towards clean and renewable energy. In addition, the Quad has set up various working groups to identify ways to develop robust intra-mural and regional cooperation. The following sub-sections deal with various agendas and achievements of the Quad during the last five years.

Toward Vaccine Diplomacy

An important expression of the Quad’s normative posture is its vaccine diplomacy to address the regional shortage of COVID-19 vaccines. The May 2022 Joint Statement of the Quad declared to have ‘collectively pledged approximately US\$5.2 billion to the COVAX AMC, approximately 40 percent of the total contributions from government donors’ (The White House 2022a). In addition, the joint statement also claimed to have ‘delivered more than 670 million doses, including at least 265 million doses’ to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad Joint Statement of February 2022 had ‘pledged to donate 1.3 billion vaccine doses globally’ (Joint Statement 2021).

The grouping launched a Quad Vaccine Partnership in March 2021 and declared that they would be supplying a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Indo-Pacific region by the end of 2022. These doses would be supplied by an Indian company Biological E. At the summit, the US agreed to expand the production capacity of the firm, Japan agreed to provide the financial assistance and Australia promised to assist with the supplies (Upadhyay 2021). Following up on its commitments, the Japanese government provided a financial assistance of US\$100 million to support the vaccine production in India. By mid-2022, the Quad had supplied 200,000 COVID-19 vaccines, highlighting ‘the Quad member’s contributions to ensure equitable access to vaccines and to combat COVID-19 in the Indo-Pacific region and the world’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). The idea of Quad vaccine production in India came from India’s own program of the Vaccine Maitri initiative that aimed at providing COVID-19 vaccines to the developing world.

In addition, Quad member-states have taken individual responsibilities to support regional attempts to vaccinate people and end COVID-19. For example, Australia has agreed to provide financial and technical assistance to ASEAN countries to ‘strengthen “last-mile vaccination’ (The White House 2021b). Japan will provide financial and technical assistance to the developing countries in purchasing the vaccines and cold-chain support (The White House 2021b).

The Quad’s campaign against the COVID-19 has served three-fold objectives – bolstering regional health security, projecting the grouping as an important provider of regional goods and limiting the importance of the Chinese vaccine diplomacy. Both India and the United States suffered considerably due to COVID-19. In the pursuit of these objectives, the Quad member-states have concentrated on providing COVID-19 vaccines, funding the regional campaign against the COVID-19 and supporting the member-state’s efforts in developing the necessary medical infrastructure.

Focus on Critical and Emerging Technologies

The Quad members have identified critical and emerging technologies as an important area of cooperation. They set up a Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group during the first ever leader-level summit in March 2021. The Working Group was assigned five key areas of cooperation – development of technology, coordination on technology standards, cooperation in the field of telecommunications, identification of new areas of tech development including biotechnology and the convening of dialogues on critical technology supply chain (Australian Government 2021). By May 2022, the Quad members had launched a ‘Common Statement of Principles on Critical

Technology Supply Chains,' Quad Investors Network and Memorandum of Cooperation on 5G tech diversification (The White House 2022b). These initiatives have produced various specific areas of cooperation, such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity, space, geospatial and data handling (Laskar and Bhardwaj 2022).

The Quad focus on emerging and critical technology underlines two principal goals of the grouping. First, the quad members are trying to reduce their dependence on China-led supply chains in the high-end technology sectors, such as semiconductors and microchips by developing an alternate and reliable supply chain both in terms of raw-materials and final products. The Quad discussion on 5G and its support for the Prague proposal on 5G diversifications point towards creating an independent and reliable supply chains. In other words, the Quad focus on emerging technologies is also a decoupling strategy. Second, the Quad members aim to forge ahead in leading the regional discussion on emerging technologies. Their discussion on quantum technologies and Artificial Intelligence are attempts toward setting the standards and rules of the road. On the other hand, the quad members seek to establish a competitive edge against the Chinese advances in quantum computing and cryptography (Shekhar 2021). Finally, the focus on emerging technologies drives the member states' shared goal of developing their technological capabilities.

However, the Quad member-states have differential scale of competence in advanced technologies. Therefore, the effectiveness of cooperation would depend on the ability and willingness of the members to harmonize their work infrastructure and technology sharing that would also require highest level of strategic trust among the partners. Also, the member-states have not yet developed a harmonized policy positions on these technologies.

Development of Regional Infrastructure and Clean Energy

In its efforts to drum up the regional support, the Quad members have identified infrastructure development as an important area of cooperation. The grouping has set up a Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group that would provide high standards infrastructure in various sectors, such as rural development, health infrastructure, renewable energy, and telecommunications. The Quad Fact Sheet released by the US White House in May 2022 noted that the grouping had already invested nearly US\$48 billion in the development of infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region since 2015. These projects involved various essential sectors, such as road transport, water supply,

renewable energy, rural development and health infrastructure (The White House 2022b).

The Quad members have also agreed to invest an additional US\$50 billion for the development of regional infrastructure during the next five years. More importantly, the grouping aims to counter the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative by strengthening the capacity of the countries that are 'in need to cope with debt issues' and promoting those infrastructure projects which promise debt sustainability and transparency (The White House 2022a). The member-states have launched a 'Quad Debt Management Resource Portal' that consists of various bilateral and multilateral capacity-building assistance. It is noteworthy that some of the smaller countries in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives have come under severe financial pressure after incurring heavy debt burden from the international infrastructure projects (Ammar et al. 2021; Rana and Xianbai 2020).

As a part of its infrastructure program, the Quad is putting in place a series of initiatives to facilitate the transition of both its member-states and countries in the region towards clean energy. Such an approach serves the Biden administration's climate agenda and frames the grouping in a non-China-balancing context. Working along their decarbonization goals for 2030, the grouping has launched two initiatives – green shipping network and clean hydrogen partnership. As a part of the green shipping network, the Quad is planning to set up a Quad Shipping Task Force that will facilitate decarbonization of major shipping value chains and the setting up of 'two to three Quad low-emission or zero-emission shipping corridors by 2030' (The White House 2021a).

Toward Maritime Interoperability and Policing

The origin of the Quad lies in the celebration of the member-states' successful execution of maritime cooperation against an overwhelming natural disaster in 2004 and the grouping has continued to strengthen their maritime agendas. Two areas have gained prominence during the last seven years – improving the member-states' naval interoperability through joint exercises and strengthening the member-states' maritime domain awareness. The two initiatives aim at building the maritime capacity of the member-states and develop a powerful coalition of maritime democracies that could act as a deterrence against the Chinese grey-zone warfare in the Indo-Pacific region (Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups 2018: 15-19).

The Quad has sought to achieve the first objective through what is known as the Malabar exercises that started off as a bilateral naval exercise between India and the United States three decades ago in 1992. Japan and Australia joined the exercise in 2015 and 2020 respectively. The US navy defines the Malabar exercise as ‘an India-led multinational exercise designed to enhance cooperation between Indian Navy (IN), Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and U.S. maritime forces’ (Commander 2020). Since 2020, the Quad member-states have conducted the Malabar exercise every year in different maritime space of the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Bay of Bengal, East China Sea, off the coast of Guam and Arabian Sea. These exercises have seen high-end naval operations, involved highly sophisticated naval fleet and entailed intense maneuvering and training at sea. The Quad member-states conducted their latest Malabar exercise in November 2022 that included ‘a variety of high-end tactical training events, submarine integration, anti-submarine warfare training, air defense exercises, multinational replenishment-at-sea operations, communications drills, joint warfighting planning scenarios, gunnery exercise, and maritime interdiction operations’ (Commander 2022). A senior Japanese maritime official noted, “Through this high-end tactical exercise, we were able to improve our tactical capabilities and strengthen cooperation with the U.S., India, and Australian navies, thereby contributing to the creation of a desirable security environment for Japan” (Ibid.).

The Quad has sought to achieve the second goal by setting up an Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Partnership (IPMDA) in May 2022 during the Quad summit in Tokyo. The IPMDA targets strengthening ‘the ability of partners in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region to fully monitor the waters on their shores’ (The White House 2022b). The IPMDA will facilitate real-time information-sharing among the Quad member-states harnessing commercially available data through four information fusion centers located in India, Singapore, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The Biden administration aims to keep IPMDA ‘a cutting-edge partnership’ as the Quad will keep abreast of new technologies (The White House 2022b). Some believe that the IPMDA is one of the most promising Quad initiatives till date that will enable the Indo-Pacific littoral partners to transition from legacy technologies, such as coastal radars, aerial and surface patrols, and AIS broadcasts to more relevant and up-to-date technologies (Cooper and Poling 2022). The Indo-Pacific region remains prone to illegal fishing operations by a large number of unidentifiable ships and therefore unaccountable to international maritime rules and norms. As per a

news report, fishing ships remain unlocatable for nearly 80% of their maritime operations (Sidel 2022). Moreover, they are ‘under no obligation’ to stay locatable (Cooper and Poling 2022).

The IPMDA gains strategic significance for its unstated objective of countering China’s dark shipping networks in the Indo-Pacific waters. China not only owns both the largest fishing fleet and the largest Distant Water Fleet (DWF) in the world but also has remained the biggest violator of fishing norms since 2019 with its first ranking in the IUU Fishing Index (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime 2021: 10)). Many Chinese ships engage in what is referred to as dark shipping operations whereby they turn off their automatic identification system while operating in the seas (Vaughn and Dolven 2022). These unlocatable ships then engage in illegal fishing activities in other countries’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). In an attempt to shame China, the United States has claimed that China is responsible for the 95% of illegal fishing operations in the Indo-Pacific region (Sevastopulo 2022).

Committing to the ASEAN Centrality

The significance of Quad members comes not only from their size and material power but also the depth of their engagements in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad member-states have been historically engaged in the regional affairs and are deeply embedded in the region’s current security and cooperative architecture. They are strategic partners of the region’s most-representative regional grouping – Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and members of various ASEAN-led forums, such as East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Defense Ministerial Meetings (ADMM Plus). Barring India, the Quad members are also members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

In order to assuage the fear of the smaller ASEAN countries that the Quad would undermine the efforts of ASEAN, the Quad member-states have declared their commitment to ASEAN centrality. The February 2022 Joint Statement of the Quad declared that they were “unwavering supporters of ASEAN unity and centrality, and the ASEAN-led architecture,” and expressed faith that the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) “will be key to guiding the region’s economic and political future” (Joint Statement 2022). The Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement of May 2022 reiterated this promise and reaffirmed their ‘support for ASEAN-led efforts to seek a solution in Myanmar and called ‘for the urgent implementation of the ASEAN Five Point Consensus’ (The White House 2022a).

The Quad's shared commitment stems from the individual member-state's own commitment to the principle of ASEAN centrality. The Biden administration in the United States has sought to reengage the ASEAN forum and recenter its ASEAN policy. The United States convened a special summit, inviting all the ten ASEAN member-states to Washington D.C in May 2022. The special summit aimed to rebuild the Obama-era chemistry with ASEAN and reinforce the agency of ASEAN as a regional actor (Campbell 2022). Similarly, India, Japan and Australia have long affirmed the principle of ASEAN centrality.

There is a general sense of apprehension in the ASEAN region that the Quad can adversely affect ASEAN's centrality in the region (Dermawan 2021; Sulaiman 2019: 19; Laksamana 2020: 107). The same concerns were also reflected in the two surveys conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (Thu 2018, Mun et al. 2020: 33). Echoing similar sentiments of competitiveness between ASEAN and the Quad, a prominent Southeast Asian expert argues that 'ASEAN will live competitively with Quad and AUKUS' (Chongkittavorn 2021).

Challenges before the Quad

While moving forward as a premier regional grouping, the Quad has exhibited various challenges. These challenges relate to historical baggage, divergent strategic philosophy and concerns that the member states bring to the grouping. These burdens of the past have imposed both structural and behavioral limitations on the discussions within the Quad. For example, though it has been argued that the fate of the Quad has always hung on India (Grossman 2022), one needs to consider not just India's strategic choices but also the dynamic of India's equations with the West, especially, with the US. In addition, the Quad members have also shown differential capacity and levels of development that are likely to inhibit the grouping from achieving its goals.

The US Primacy in the Quad and Fiercely Autonomous India

The Quad is today largely an US-led initiative and, therefore, prone to be pushed to follow the US strategic choices and directions. Such a situation may not always be comfortable for other Quad members, especially India that is not a treaty ally of the US and takes pride in its long-standing autonomous strategic thinking. The Ukraine War has exposed this weakness of the grouping. While the US wanted to rally the Quad against Russia during the Ukraine War, India wanted to keep Quad focused to the Indo-Pacific region. Insisting on maintaining agency and autonomy in exercising its

foreign policy, India refused to sanction Russia, continued to import Russian oil and abstained from voting on the UN resolutions for censuring Russia.

On the other hand, the Indian position on Russia has not gone down well in the United States. The US policymakers have found India's Russia policy 'maddening' and 'frustrating' (Ibid.). A recent US Congressional Research Service report has termed India an 'outlier,' a 'weak link' in the Quad, skeptical about the US strategic intent in Asia and with 'questionable commitment to the core Quad values' (Chanlett-Avery, Kronstadt, Vaughn 2022) During his visit to India in March 2022, the US Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA), Daleep Singh, to India in March 2022. The Deputy NSA cautioned India against relying on trade with Russia and remarked that 'there are consequences to countries that actively attempt to circumvent or backfill the sanctions' (Haider 2022). His remarks invited strong reactions both within and outside the Modi government. India's Minister for Finance, Nirmala Sitharaman, declared that the country's interest came first, and it would buy products from the cheapest source (Lakshaman 2022).

The experts have attributed Indian hesitancy in a public reprimand of Russia to its long-term partnership with Russia, payback moments for the past Russian vetoes at the United Nations, or to the country's dependence on Russia for defense equipment (). However, these explanations only partially explain India's behaviour on the Ukraine crisis. India's refusal has more to do with its emphasis on strategic autonomy, its unwillingness to get involved in other countries' wars and maintain agency in the conduct of foreign policy while navigating the great power politics in the regional and global arena. What went somewhat unnoticed was the bipartisan manner, in which India debated the issue and the Modi government known for its anti-communist sentiments, continued to abstain from public and harsh criticism of Russian attack.

In addition to the Ukraine crisis, India has also exhibited an autonomous position while dealing with the China challenge. Though New Delhi has shown an alignment of interest in balancing China, it has avoided the Quad involvement in its dispute with China. It is argued that India, driven by its own logic of security and vulnerability, has sought to 'minimize perceptions of the Quad as a U.S.-led containment coalition, both to limit the damage to China-India relations and to enhance the Quad's broader regionwide appeal' (Smith 2021). India's request to keep under wraps the US military assistance during the Galwan border conflict in May 2020 underlines the country's policy to prevent the great power politics from dominating its bilateral conflict with China. The principal takeaway here is that India is likely to weigh

its foreign policy choices before it gets involved in the US-led foreign policy initiatives even within the Indo-Pacific region.

Is India the weakest link in the Quad? Though some experts have sought to argue and identify India as the weakest link in the Quad, it is important to note that every member-state has proven that they hold the key to the survival and growth of the grouping. India brings significant material and strategic value to the grouping as without India, the Quad is merely another trilateral mechanism among the three long-standing alliance partners. Australia proved in 2008 by pulling the plug on Quad that it can also be the weakest link in the Quad. Japan's conceptualization of the Quad both in 2007 and 2017 imply that the grouping will have no future without Japan. Similarly, the United States has shown that it can be both a shaky and solid partner in shouldering the responsibility of addressing the regional security and developmental challenges. The US commitment to the regional security remains a troubling question even for its Asian allies. In other words, the Quad, standing on four legs, will struggle to survive if a single member decides to opt out.

Differential Capacity of Quad Members: Challenge of Accomplishing the Ambition

It is argued that the Quad initiatives build upon the member-states' complementary strengths as evident in the grouping's vaccine diplomacy that involved 'US technology, Japanese financing, Indian production capacity and Australian logistics' (Jaishankar and Madan 2021). However, the Quad vaccine diplomacy has shown marginal results as India has lagged far behind in delivering a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2022 (Nagar and Imperato 2022). It is not clear whether the failure of the Quad in delivering the vaccines in time is largely India's fault or the failure of the grouping in coordinating the multiple parts of collaboration.

The differential capacity of the Quad members is likely to be more problematic in the areas of emerging technologies, supply chains, cyber security and infrastructure development. They will require deeper and sustained coordination among the members along multiple moving parts whether in terms of conceptualizing designs, developing and assembling the necessary parts, or passing the enabling laws and regulatory frameworks. In fact, the challenge of differential capacity and level of sophistication in these areas is further complicated by divergent policy positions and regulatory frameworks of the Quad member-states on various issues, such as data localization and cybersecurity. It is argued that 'regulatory barriers such as differences on national data sharing laws can hinder the implementation of joint initiatives' (Luong and Chahal

2022). Interestingly, it is argued that each Quad member has more research partnerships with China than they do with one another (Chahal et al.: 2)

Moreover, the Quad cooperation in the high-end tech areas would require a high-level of trust and confidentiality while working. It is not clear as to what level of information, technology and intelligence the Quad members will be comfortable sharing with each other. While Australia is a member of Five Eyes and shares a very high level of trust with the US, India is neither a member of Five Eyes nor an alliance partner. Also, India shares a different worldview when it comes to data sharing with its emphasis on data localization.

Conclusion

The Quad is here to stay and is likely to carry on with both the balancing and normative posturing as the member-countries continue to gauge each other's priorities and strategic environment in the future consultations. There is a general recognition among the Quad member-states that the balancing of China, though a foundational logic of Quad's origin, is likely to be a somewhat narrow and partial expression of their strategic standing in the Indo-Pacific region. The grouping must retain its original normative character in order to validate the claim that it aims to develop a 'rules-based regional order.' More importantly, the grouping must reflect the roles that these four member-states have already been playing in the region as markets, investors, security providers, development facilitators and important players for regional cooperation. The Quad has amassed a vast agenda of cooperation and accomplishing them is likely to be an uphill task. The member-states will have to grapple with strategic, conceptual, financial, logistical and other challenges that will require ingenuity, deeper trust and broader commitment while they keep working to achieve the grouping's objectives in line with their own strategic interests.

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