

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) and its Relevance for India

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Last week, the Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Phil Davidson, stated in Singapore that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD or 'Quad') comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India may be shelved for now. The reason given was the lack of support from other members, especially India. Davidson stated this when he met the Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba at the Raisina Dialogue held in New Delhi in January 2019 along with other members of the Quad. Admiral Lanba had conveyed that "there wasn't an immediate potential" for a Quad as it was touted as a forum against China.

In fact, the Quad is largely a partnership of secondary powers from the Indo-Pacific such as India, Japan and Australia along with the US, as the prevailing superpower, to deal with the emerging challenges, especially to deny one country a dominating position in the region. It was mooted by Japan in 2017 to bring likeminded countries of the region to come together and discuss security issues, and it was then the third time that the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, had proposed the scope for a multilateral security mechanism in Asia. All other multilateral fora such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in the region are known for being talk-shops following inclusive and consensual decision-making processes, with all having equal say. Hence, hard security matters are conspicuously absent in these deliberations or are subtly mentioned. The Quad, on the other hand, is a small grouping of militarily powerful states from the region whose security will be more affected if one country becomes the hegemon in Asia.

The security situation in the Indo-Pacific region is dramatically changing. On the one hand, the United States is no longer an invisible power in the region. On the other, China under

Xi Jinping is on the verge of abandoning the Deng Xiaoping's dictum of 'hide your strength, bide your time' and is becoming more assertive in its foreign policy. In fact, Asian security has for long been secured through a hub and spoke security framework under the US leadership. Accordingly, the US took responsibility of guaranteeing the security of member states. That role conception is now changing in the new US security strategy. President Trump has, since the outset, been demanding that the partners and allies contribute more for their own security, instead of relying on the US. China used this perceptual conflict as an opportunity to undermine the US influence in the region. As a result, the security situation in the Indo-Pacific remains fluid with the regional actors having to increasingly confront a Chinese-led order in the making.

India and the Quad

Ever since Japan has identified India as prominent power in Asia, India has been included in all regional security initiatives launched by Japan. Though India has knocked at the door of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) number of times, this has remained a futile effort. Today, other major powers, both regional well as extra regional countries, have recognized India's position in the emerging security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, sustenance of this recognition is dependent on its cooperation in upholding freedom of navigation along with other partners, in spite of being a resident power in the Indian Ocean region. And for that, India needs to build strong partnership with both major powers across the region. No single country can ensure maritime security alone.

When all the Quad members joined in a Malabar naval exercise in 2007, China sent a demarche to them asking the rationale behind the unprecedented naval exercise. Subsequently, Japan mooted *Security Diamond* in 2012 but had no takers. Though India was initially enthusiastic about the Quad, its approach is now lukewarm, especially after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with the Chinese President at Wuhan. Since then, the Wuhan spirit' has become the guiding principle for India's relationship with China. However, India cannot ignore the power politics emerging in the Indo-Pacific as a result of China's assertiveness.

Indeed, the Quad is a middle-ground between the consensus-based regional multilateralism and a NATO type security alliance. Inherently, Asian countries are averse to a European-model security mechanism where regional countries fought and ruined, instead prefer economic prosperity to competing alliances. They are interested in soft balancing in which like-minded countries engage through summit as well as official-level talks, joint

exercises, sharing naval facilities for mutual benefits and regular interactions at multilateral forums. This soft-balancing approach can be converted into a hard balancing as and when a rising power challenges the status quo and seeks its dominance in the region. In that sense, the combined military strength of the Quad is ideal means to deter the revisionist tendencies of the rising power. In fact, informal consultative mechanism, not meant to take the form of a quasi-alliance, and is therefore, in India's interest.

Importantly, India's inclusion in the Quad is, in fact, a long-cherished recognition of India's power and prestige as a dominant resident power in the Indian Ocean region. During the Cold War, India had consistently demanded the Indian Ocean be kept free from the great power rivalry. At that time, there was no resident power in the region capable enough to manage its security. Today, the India-US relationship is growing strong with the US willing to share responsibility with India in managing the security of IOR. US expects India to become a major power in the Indian Ocean in partnership with the US so that US' interest in the region can be safeguarded. Enabling India's rising power in the Indian Ocean allows the US to focus on the western Pacific in order to deter China's hegemonic ambitions. For the US, its Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be compartmentalized for the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, it expects all the three partners contribute at the same level, though not equally.

Lack of interest by member countries, especially India, may affect strengthening of the Quad but balancing China will remain a major security aspects in the Indo-Pacific in future. And, US will always look for such balancing tactics against China with the support of its allies and partners. The old power UK is now keen to set up a naval base in Southeast Asia, though reluctant to hand over the Chagos island part of the American naval base in Diego Garcia to Mauritius in spite of the International Court of Justice verdict against its control over the islands. If India cannot take its responsibility prudently, then the regional security dynamics might revert to the Cold War type politics in which China and the US will be poised towards competitive power politics with India having to listlessly watch from the sidelines. Participation in the Quad at the highest level is, hence, central to retaining India's pe-eminence in the Indo-Pacific.

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