

## **Let the Quad Die: Towards Greater Indian Leadership in the Indo-Pacific**

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**Date:** 17 July 2019

The Indian invitation to leaders of the BIMSTEC grouping to attend the second swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a number of significant implications. For one, it is a sign that the current Indian establishment thinks that the SAARC framework continues to underperform and is simply not enough to facilitate India's ambitions. For another, the attention to BIMSTEC, with location around the Bay of Bengal as its central organizing principle, can also be read as a sign of the return of a maritime focus in Indian foreign policy.

The challenge, however, is to ensure that any renewed focus on the maritime domain does not go the way of the 'neighbourhood first' approach of the first Modi administration.

To this end, it is important to consider afresh some of the approaches the Indian policy establishment has adopted to maritime concepts and groupings over the past decade and more. In recent years, the Indian government has been part of significant maritime groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) including its earlier iteration as the Quadrilateral Initiative, and begun using concepts like the 'Indo-Pacific'. While these initiatives could form part of New Delhi's 'Act East' Policy, it must be noted that neither the QSD nor the concept of the Indo-Pacific, as currently promoted, have India in a leadership role or even as an enthusiastic partner. Even as large sections of the strategic community in India see great promise in the QSD, there is an equally great reluctance by the government to actually declare any consistent or regular interest in the initiative.

This essay argues that rather than form groupings based only on India's comfort level with certain countries or individuals leading them, as is the case now, New Delhi must push

to create, as well as institutionalise, groupings based on certain clear principles. While membership can be ‘open’, it is only if these principles are accepted that membership should be possible. And the central organising principle of any new grouping in the Indo-Pacific must be that of respect for the idea of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’, which, in turn, must be based on respect for international law, including UNCLOS. The essay uses a Chinese prism – specifically, Chinese views of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad – to argue why such an Indian approach will be more effective in deterring aggressive Chinese behaviour in the region and perhaps, even further afield.

## **Chinese Views on the Indo-Pacific**

Chinese views on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and related concepts such as the Indo-Pacific, which are articulated publicly, must be seen as coming not just from important sections of the Chinese strategic community that deals with India and maritime affairs but also from those embedded within the policymaking structures of China in positions of responsibility and authority. These views therefore, needs to be taken seriously and understood carefully.

Some recent Chinese commentaries on the US emphasis on promoting the idea of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ offer pointers to the thinking and direction of future Chinese actions with respect to the Indian Ocean. In the main, Chinese views are now somewhat uniformly geared towards showing the US in poor light and always at fault.<sup>i</sup> This suggests not just a reaction to the trade war currently underway with the US but also a larger structural transformation of China’s views of itself in global politics and of its belief that the US deliberately obstructs China’s goals both at home and abroad. While the US, under the Trump administration, does not seem to actively promote liberal values abroad, the Chinese still feel American pressure on China to change its economic behaviour – through the trade war - performs the same function, namely of seeking political change and reforms in the country. Abroad, China has – for a variety of reasons also to do with internal pressures – decided to abandon Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of *taoguang yanghui* (keep a low profile, bide your time) and, instead, to actively seek and claim political and economic leadership. This brings the Chinese directly into confrontation with the US, where large sections of the strategic community and government have, after much dithering, correctly interpreted Xi’s moves as a direct challenge to US predominance in global affairs as well as an attack on liberal values everywhere.

From the maritime perspective, meanwhile, Chinese views and actions are an extension of the above framework. China seeks to ensure its dominance in its near and extended waters and to get the US out of Asia altogether to ensure this objective.

### ***Painting the US as the Aggressor***

First, the tone and tenor of Chinese commentary has consistently been about showing the US as an imperialistic, hegemonic power,<sup>ii</sup> and as having differences with countries other than just China.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, the roots of China's decision to abandon the policy of *taoguang yanghui* can be traced to this period. Hiding your capacities and biding your time was only useful if nobody was paying any attention to your actions.

However, once Beijing realised that the Americans had understood China's intentions, as reflected in the US decision to 'pivot to Asia', speed became of the essence. In other words, if the potential adversary has understood its motives then it is important to speed up whatever manoeuvres or plans China had to reach its goals. Such speed, however, also has other consequences.

One consequence has been the aggressiveness of Chinese foreign policy. On the one hand, this aggressiveness might well result from the need to get things done before the US brought the full spectrum of its capabilities to bear on China. On the other, the US, too, would need time to drawdown from its commitments elsewhere in the world and redeploy its assets in a China-oriented role.

Apart from now being forced to put its growing military and economic capacities, built-up over decades, to some use — as it eventually did in slowly gaining control over features it claimed for its own in the South China Sea — China also needs to start deploying these capacities in more visible roles farther from its shores. On the one hand, this helps to coerce or persuade other countries into accepting that China has arrived and that it has the capacity to act militarily. On the other, however, it also encourages the same countries to do exactly what the Chinese are doing vis-à-vis the United States — arm and consolidate before the Chinese get too strong or are in a position to actually change facts on the ground. Or, if they lacked the capacity, to get closer to China's rivals.

Thus, it becomes extremely important for China to keep portraying the US as the aggressor so that China's actions in its neighbourhood seem justified or a matter of self-

defence. Alongside all this, Beijing likes to keep reminding India that ‘The essence of the Indo-Pacific strategy is to promote China-India confrontation [and that] India should remain vigilant against the strategy rather than making use of it’.<sup>iv</sup> This is typical of a pattern wherein the Chinese focus their attention on the US while infantilising other powers and refusing to acknowledge that they are capable of acting against China because of their own reasons and in their own self-interest rather than as mere extensions of US interests.

### ***Accepting the Indo-Pacific as Reality***

Second, the Chinese no longer distinguish between the concept of the ‘pivot to Asia’ articulated early in the Barack Obama administration and the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’, which was adopted later in his tenure but which has also been forcefully promoted by the Donald Trump administration. Chinese scholars have noted how quickly the idea has moved from concept to implementation in the US, with former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s proposal of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) in 2017 and mentions in several of Trump’s speeches in Asia to official US documents such as the “National Security Strategy”<sup>v</sup> and “National Defense Strategy”.<sup>vi</sup> To add to this, there has also been the change of the name of the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command.<sup>vii</sup>

The Chinese read all of these as a sign that in addition to blocking them in the Pacific Ocean, the Americans are also trying to block them in the Indian Ocean. This ‘strong geopolitical flavour’ that the Americans assign to the Indian Ocean, as one Chinese scholar put it, also indicates that the Americans see India as important.<sup>viii</sup> Another Chinese scholar points out that ‘the fundamental motive of the US government is to unite the alliance forces to jointly shape a so-called “free and open Indo-Pacific order” that is conducive to the United States and its allies, [and] conforms to the will and interests of the US’.<sup>ix</sup>

This, then, also means that the Chinese will increasingly see the IOR as an area in which they need to establish presence and operate. Indeed, as one Indian analyst has already pointed out China has “embraced the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic entity and done more than all other countries put together.”<sup>x</sup> While New Delhi might see this as being directed against India, it is, perhaps, more the case that the Chinese are directing their actions against the Americans. While this may well be galling to India, it can and must respond to China all the same. However, the Chinese blindness to India also affords the possibility for India to get the best of both worlds – enticing Chinese investments and

courting Beijing on issues of common interest in international forums, while simultaneously countering China by being a part of broader coalitions.

It is the second issue that New Delhi needs to think carefully through. Currently, the favoured mode, or at least the one most in the news, is the QSD. However, there are costs to not having stayed the course the first time around, with China having expanded its military options and into the South China Sea in the interregnum between the first and second iterations of the Quad.

This said, India's partnering too closely with the United States – either bilaterally or with Japan and Australia, as part of the Quad – allows China to believe that India, the United States, and the Quad itself, are targeting China and to therefore directly challenge and criticise these countries. The side-effect of such Chinese criticism in Asia is that the other countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly the Southeast Asian countries, will also be reluctant to want to do anything with obvious security-related or military identities such as the Quad, or even anything at the bilateral India-US, India-Japan, or India-Australia level. Instead, the ASEAN nations are themselves floundering trying to come up with a response to China, which then suffers from the usual problem of infighting and mutual suspicion. A case in point is the trouble that Indonesia has had trying to get other members to agree to its concept and leadership of an Indo-Pacific initiative.<sup>xi</sup> An Indian push or involvement – distinct from either US or Chinese involvement – might be the sort of fillip the region needs.

In fact, as the various (and expanding) combined exercises of India's armed forces with countries in Southeast Asia show, there is belief in and interest in India's role as a counterbalance to China. Attitudes towards the US are much more narrowly defined precisely because the Southeast Asians understand the sensitivity that ties with the US generate in Beijing.

While the US will remain the dominant power in Asia for a while yet, it might be in its own interests to step back from a visible and proactive role in much of the region, except where its military assets are directly of use in challenging Chinese authority, as in its freedom of navigation operations through Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea. At the moment, there are few regional countries, which despite their opposition to China's 9-Dash Line, are willing or able to directly challenge the Chinese through such freedom of navigation operations.

There is, nevertheless, a case to be made for other countries interested in upholding international law in the region to come together on a platform that does not include China, but that can nevertheless form the basis of an eventual pan Indo-Pacific initiative. Such a grouping will not have to suffer the slow decline into irrelevance of ASEAN and its multiple institutions, or of SAARC, all of which try to accommodate differences by adopting a consensus-based approach and then only go through the ritual of regular meetings with little to show except maintaining an uneasy peace, and usually not even that.

## **Letting Go of the Quad**

To achieve this outcome however, it might be necessary to first let the Quad die a gradual death, or, if there is concern that this once again encourages the Chinese,<sup>xii</sup> to let it continue its current underwhelming performance of middle-level officials and naval chiefs sitting together once a year. There is, at present, much criticism of the Quad and even confusion over its intent, from within. For instance, the Quad has only ever met at the relatively low-level of joint secretaries equivalent,<sup>xiii</sup> which fact has also been blamed for its lack of cohesion.<sup>xiv</sup> At the 2018 Raisina Dialogue, Australian naval chief, Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, suggested that a multiplicity of forums should not substitute for concrete action.<sup>xv</sup> Adm Harry Harris, then head of the US Pacific Command, speaking at the same event, also called for action, saying, ‘China is a disruptive transitional force in the Indo-Pacific’.<sup>xvi</sup> His successor, Adm John Davidson, in the following year’s edition of the same event, stated that, ‘the capability set that I think must be displayed and put in the battlespace is the alliances and partnerships that we are all capable of... We have proved time and time again that a strategic partnership and set of alliances will triumph for the good of global stability.’<sup>xvii</sup>

Nevertheless, the participating naval chiefs have also stated that the partnership did not constitute an Indo-Pacific NATO. Indeed, the four militaries have not quite operated regularly together, even in the annual Malabar series of naval exercises. The Quad could have been a very useful military pressure-point, but, since the members have not been able to get their act together for over a decade, it needs to be transformed into something more flexible while retaining the basic ability to consult and act cohesively on issues of common concern, including those pertaining to China’s assertiveness and bad behaviour in the region. Indian Prime Minister Modi himself has equivocated – or perhaps more accurately tried to play all sides. At Singapore’s Shangri La Dialogue in 2018, he carefully avoided any mention of the Quad and appeared indeed to have toned down India’s criticism of China’s

regional and global activities that it had engaged in over the past several years.<sup>xviii</sup> Similarly, at the June 2019 G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, not only was Modi part of an ‘informal summit’ with the Russian and Chinese leaders but also part of a trilateral summit with the American and Japanese heads of government.

As useful or necessary as this balancing might be for India, its long-term usefulness is also doubtful if it is not based on a clear articulation of more universal principles rather than of only interests. On balance, therefore, the adoption of a principle that appears less parochial than ‘strategic autonomy’ and more universally acceptable is called for.

Thus, former Indian naval chief, Adm. Sunil Lanba’s declaration, at the 2019 Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, that the Quad comprised nations that were committed to honouring international rules and agreements and that the Quad would grow with time,<sup>xix</sup> might be an opportunity to create a new grouping wider in ambit than the Quad but rigid in its criterion for membership.

The simple criterion for membership would be of respect for and adherence to international law represented by the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This principle would only be a reflection of the fact that the region’s prosperity, until now, has been founded on respect for international law and related norms of open markets, the free flow of trade, capital, technology, and ideas, as Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson puts it.<sup>xx</sup>

The grouping, thus, would be ‘by invitation only’, just as the Quad is, but needs to be considerably wider in its ambit of activities. One option could be to return to the origins of the Quad itself in the form of the *Tsunami* Core Group that had emerged in response to the massive 2004 disaster in the Indian Ocean. Such focus on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), on building economic linkages in the form of sustainable infrastructure development, fair trade, technology-transfers, and the like, would also help manage and ameliorate adverse perceptions leading to wariness or plain opposition of the sort that the Quad runs into from several of ASEAN members, for example.<sup>xxi</sup> While the Quad does discuss issues of connectivity, sustainable development, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, and, maritime and cyber security, the focus seems to lie rather heavily on the security side of things. Further, the infrequency of meetings of the Quad does not

lend itself to sustained focus on achieving these objectives. It must also be noted that the US itself appears less and less generous in its relations with the developing world, including India, as exemplified by its termination of preferential trade access for Indian products.<sup>xxii</sup>

However, US absence from the initiative might also work to the advantage of the grouping.

As China becomes increasingly powerful and capable, it will have greater problems accepting or emulating ideas, views or leadership from other countries that it deems weaker or less capable than itself. For this very reason, it is China's response to organisations initiated or led by powers that it perceives to be weaker than itself that will be the truest sign of its intentions.

An initiative led not by the US but by India, and one based on clear principles that countries less powerful than China are willing to accept – Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and South Korea are potential members – will be harder for the Chinese to justify rejecting out of hand, given that it has talked much of the 'Wuhan Spirit' with India and about standing up for smaller, weaker countries against US hegemony. If, then, China refuses to join such a grouping, the rest of the world need not remain in any doubt about its intentions.

The new initiative could start on a low-key, perhaps in the form of semi-formal meetings on the sidelines of other major international conferences or events such as the annual Shangri La Dialogue at Singapore, as, indeed, the Quad, too, has done so far. It would be logistically easier to organise and to project as a sideshow, while involving more than just the members of the Quad. At the very least, it would remove a self-imposed restraint of nomenclature represented by the word 'Quadrilateral' and allow for expansion of membership to more than just four members.<sup>xxiii</sup> Finally, of course, none of this is to suggest that such a grouping will not have a military dimension – clearly such a dimension will eventually be required for purposes of deterrence and credibility. But this is a role that is organically developed from more solid foundations of commonality of principles and not just of interests. It would also be based deeper political, economic, and people-to-people contacts that would support sustainable engagement. The Quad presently falls short in one respect or the other in each of these dimensions, at least as far as India is concerned, and its current identity as something of a military- or security-based grouping is a case of putting the cart before the horse.



Finally, no initiative or organisation is quite successful without a name to go with it. ‘Samudra’ – the Sanskrit word for ‘ocean’ – is one that not only has a ring to it but also speaks to a unity across the Indo-Pacific geography with its resonance in cultures from India to Indonesia and beyond.<sup>xxiv</sup> A ‘Samudra – Concert on the Oceans’ offers both a philosophical grounding and practical orientation for the new initiative suggesting not the never-ending rounds of dialogue and conversations that Asian organisations are known for but a degree of agreement on principles right at the beginning. It works on the principle that agreement on principles leads to clarity of intentions, which in turn is the best form of deterrence and a guarantee for peace.

## **Conclusion**

Whether or not the US is a participant, a grouping or an organisation larger in ambit and more representative than the Quad, as well as one that goes beyond the military dimension, is an idea whose time has come. This must be an initiative where India takes and stays in the lead and one which meets a fine balance between not being perceived as an Asian NATO, not so limited or specific in its objectives as say, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, and not being so all encompassing and generous with its membership that it is able to achieve nothing. India represents not just the concerns that the developed nations of the US, Japan and Australia have in terms of freedom of navigation and free trade, but also the definitive concerns of weaker, developing Asian nations for equitable economic growth, transparency and financial accountability in economic projects and transfers of technology, among others.

The Chinese have tried to ignore the former concerns while attempting to meet the latter ones partially through their Belt and Road Initiative. It is time, however, to challenge Chinese advantages accruing out of this policy of convenience. Meanwhile, China’s belief that it always faces international pressure is based on an exaggerated sense of victimhood,<sup>xxv</sup> which in turn drives its parochialism – in the form of calls for ‘Asian values’ or ‘Asia for Asians’, for example – and seeking a hierarchical order with itself at the top.<sup>xxvi</sup> Regional governments, including that of India, must not be swayed by Chinese rhetoric on this score and must continue to pursue a regional order based on fairness and respect for the rule of international law. In contrast to China, India must make a greater effort to showcase how, both in principle and in practice, it has always been guided by the best of the West and the East.

An Indian leadership that represents the best of both, the West and the East, could fashion a new kind of grouping that includes powerful developed countries but is also attuned to the needs of its weaker members. Such a grouping should be considerably harder for the Chinese to criticise without reforming their own behaviour and actions. At the same time, this grouping, led by India and based on a genuine commonality of principles instead of simply geographical contiguity, can create a new template for inter-State behaviour in Asia that goes beyond the ritual or pretence of amity or consensus that only postpones problems for another day or ignores the bad behaviour of its members.

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U.S 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue.” *Bilateral/Multilateral Documents*, 6 September, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30358/joint+statement+on+the+inaugural+india+us+2+2+ministerial+dialogue>. In media briefings, MEA representatives have, in general, been freer in the use of the expression. For example, then Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar talks, in one instance, of “a very passing mention of the quadrilateral.” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2017. “Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary and Secretary (East) in Manila (November 13, 2017).” *Media Briefings*, 14 November. <https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/29114/transcript+of+media+briefing+by+foreign+secretary+and+secretary+east+in+manila+november+13+2017>.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The word should also be familiar to the strategic community from Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan’s 2012 book *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Global Times*. 2019. “China will tread own path steadily in 2019.” 1 January. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1134184.shtml>.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Curtis Stone. 2019. “The revival of China as a great power is a blessing to the world.” *People’s Daily Online*. 27 March. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0327/c90000-9561111.html>.