



Quadrilateral Security Dialogue 2 (Quad 2.0) – a credible strategic construct or mere “foam in the ocean”?

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ABSTRACT

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, hereinafter referred to as Quad), which had come into existence in 2007, ceased following the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the withdrawal of Australia during Kevin Rudd’s tenure as Prime Minister. However, on the side lines of the 2017 ASEAN Summit, the subject of a structure that would facilitate peace, stability and development in the Indo-Pacific region which, is supposedly under threat due to China’s assertive behaviour, came up for discussions once again between leaders of US, Japan, Australia and India. The revival of the Quad (colloquially termed as “Quad 2.0”), after a hiatus of nearly a decade was viewed with concern by the Chinese media, which termed the grouping as a possible first step towards the formation of an “Asian NATO”. The Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, however was more dismissive, comparing the idea of reviving the Quad to “foam in the ocean, destined to dissipate soon”. Against the backdrop of a globalised and intertwined economy, where economic interdependence appears to be the norm in deciding national interests, this paper examines the likely future trajectory of this grouping and attempts to determine which of the two assessments is more plausible.

KEYWORDS

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD); Australia; China; India; Japan; United States of America; Pivot to Asia

Introduction

The history of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, hereinafter referred to as Quad) is linked to the Indian Ocean *tsunami* of 2004.¹ On 26 December 2004, an earthquake of magnitude 9.1–9.3 on the Richter Scale, with its epicentre off the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, triggered devastating *tsunami* waves along the coasts of most countries bordering the Indian Ocean, killing some 2,30,000 to 2,82,000 people. The *tsunami* wreaked havoc, with Indonesia being the hardest hit. Within a short time-frame, Indian naval ships and helicopters were deployed and provided humanitarian relief not only to Sri Lanka but also to Indonesia. Some 32 ships and 5,000 troops from India were involved in those international disaster-relief efforts. India’s response, actions and capabilities surprised the world. Subsequently, in December 2004, the then US President, George Bush, announced that India, US, Japan and Australia would launch a coalition, along

with the United Nations, to collaborate on the massive relief and rehabilitation work.² This, in a way, led to the conceptualisation of the “Quadrilateral” or “Quad”.

Apart from undertaking Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, the Quad began to evolve into an informal strategic-dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia and India. The dialogue, involving diplomatic and military arrangements, was initiated in 2007 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, with the support of Vice President Dick Cheney of the USA, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia, and, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India.³ In parallel, at this juncture, the world was also witnessing an economically and militarily strong China becoming assertive in the Asia-Pacific region. Shinzo Abe, who had recently taken over as the Prime Minister of Japan, emphasised the need to establish a high-level strategic dialogue among the “Asia-Pacific Democratic G3 plus America”. According to Abe, there was a need to discuss how the four democratic countries could better cooperate and promote their common values in the rest of Asia. The dialogue, in combination with the naval exercises off the Japanese island of Okinawa, aroused suspicion in Beijing that the Quad was aiming to become a military alliance directed against it.⁴ The Chinese government responded to the Quadrilateral dialogue by issuing demarches to the four member-countries, as it saw the grouping as an attempt to contain it.⁵

The QSD however was short-lived and it folded-up following the resignation of Abe and the withdrawal of Australia under Kevin Rudd’s tenure as prime minister, reflecting ambivalence in Australian policy over the growing tension between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific.⁶ A point to note is that perhaps, each nation was calibrated in its approach towards forming a grouping of this sort and, therefore, was in no hurry to press on with a trilateral arrangement. Following Rudd’s replacement by Julia Gillard in 2010, enhanced military cooperation between the United States and Australia was resumed, leading to the placement of US Marines near Darwin, Australia. During the 2017 ASEAN Summit, all four former members recommenced negotiations to revive the quadrilateral alliance once again, with Prime Ministers Malcolm Turnbull, Shinzo Abe, Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump agreeing, in Manila, to revive the dialogue so as to promote peace and stability in the region, which was being disrupted due to China’s assertive behaviour.

The revival of the Quad after a hiatus of nearly a decade was viewed with concern by the Chinese media, which declared that the gathering was a possible first-step towards the creation of an *Asian NATO*.⁷ The Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, however, was far more dismissive of this grouping, and compared the idea of reviving the Quad to mere “foam in the ocean, destined to dissipate soon.”⁸

The remainder of this paper examines which of the two assessments is more plausible in order to arrive at a plausible trajectory the Quad may take in the foreseeable future. It begins with a review of the mandate, interests and motives of the member-States of the grouping of the revamped Quad or “Quad 2.0”, the US actions in the Indo-Pacific region thus far, especially after the advent of the Donald Trump administration in the USA, and, the influence of a rising China vis-à-vis its neighbourhood. It will thereafter look at India’s own response to “Quad 2.0” and recommend options that India could consider in furtherance of its national interests.

Mandate, interests and motives of member-states

The first meeting, on 12 November 2017, by Quad 2.0 member-states, addressed seven core themes: (1) *a rules-based order in Asia*, (2) *freedom of navigation and overflight in the maritime common*, (3) *respect for international law*, (4) *enhancing connectivity*, (5) *maritime security*, (6) *the North Korean threat and non-proliferation*, and, (7) *terrorism*.⁹ The concerns of the USA, Japan and Australia, against the backdrop of the prevailing geopolitical and geostrategic environment in the region, are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs. India's concerns will be examined later in the paper.

The United States of America

The US sees its primacy being robustly challenged in the Indo-Pacific region, by an increasingly confident and assertive China. Riding upon its phenomenal economic growth, China's modernisation of its military is perceived by the USA as China's attempt to replace the US sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Washington sees China working hard to erode US military primacy and power by raising the cost of intervention, thereby leaving an "Asia for Asians".¹⁰ The USA, which has, in the post-Cold War era, donned the mantle of a global policeman, is guided by the perception that under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who has been, since his assumption of office in 2013,¹¹ pursuing a far more muscular foreign policy. There are adequate examples to support this perception. These include the unilateral declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over a large area of the East China Sea, the deployment of a Chinese State-owned oil-rig in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the forceful occupation of Philippines claimed Scarborough Shoal, and of course, the frenetic land-reclamation efforts through which China has been transforming reefs and rocks in the South China Sea into manmade islands, including construction of airstrips, ports and buildings on these artificial islands.¹² In an effort to revise the *status quo*, China's action of challenging international rules and global norms through a coercive, provocative and damaging campaign continues to raise tensions and unsettle many in the region and beyond. China's rise appears to be the central strategic challenge to the US. President Obama had propagated his "rebalance to Asia",¹³ citing growing concern for the security and well-being of America's allies in what was, at that time, called the Asia-Pacific, and, his felt need to revive US primacy in the region. A case in point was the China–Japan face-off with respect to the Senkaku islands.

Japan

China's rise and the relative decline of US power in the Indo-Pacific have done much to shape Japan's response to the increasingly complex regional threat environment. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has stated that "Japan's top foreign policy priority must be to expand the country's strategic horizons".¹⁴ Brad Glosserman believes that Abe's central goal is the "assertion and affirmation of Japan's global status as a first-tier nation".¹⁵ Beyond his domestic focus on reinvigorating the long-stagnant Japanese economy, Abe has energetically pursued a global, yet Asia-focussed, agenda with such initiatives as the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity", "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and "Asia's

Democratic Security Diamond”.¹⁶ Driving his agenda is an understanding that China remains Japan’s main strategic competitor and threat. The fact the two countries are engaged in a dispute over the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, reinforces Abe’s stand. He has doubled-down on the Japan-US alliance, lifted Japan’s self-imposed ban on arms-exports, and overseen three consecutive years of increased defence spending – albeit at a modest less-than-one-per-cent of the country’s GDP¹⁷ (whereby the allocation is more symbolic than substantial). Abe’s efforts to normalise Japan’s military posture and power by reinterpreting the constraints imposed by Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution permits Japan to play a more active security-role in the region. It also enables Japan a better way to defend itself and its allies. Having won a thumping majority in the snap-election of December 2014 and subsequently again in November 2018, Abe appears to have paved his way towards providing Japan the political stability which in turn can redefine Japan’s role in the world, and, confirm his country’s commitment to the post-1945 rules-based international order.¹⁸

Australia

Australia seeks to calibrate the challenges of this century in which competition is set to intensify between its chief security-partner, the USA, and its most important trading-partner, China. On the back of a successful G20 summit in Brisbane and a two-year term on the UN Security Council, Australia considers itself to be a “top 20” nation with deep and enduring interests in a stable regional security environment.¹⁹ Canberra has successfully negotiated “free-trade agreements” with Japan, South Korea and China. It also under Prime Minister Abbot, stands committed to raising its defence spending to 2% of the GDP by 2024,²⁰ despite a tough fiscal environment. Australia has worked to strengthen its military ties in the Indo-Pacific, sending the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) to join those of the Philippines and the USA in Exercise BALIKATAN in the South China Sea, and both Japan and New Zealand have been participating in Exercise TALISMAN SABRE, the biennial combined military drill between the USA and Australia.²¹ According to Abbot, the US-Australia alliance was “for stability, for peace, for progress, for justice, and to be a cornerstone of the stability of the region for many decades to come.”²² Prime Minister Morrison, in his first big foreign policy speech on 01 November 2018, emphasised Australia’s “vitaly important” relationship with China even as he stressed the importance of a strong US presence in the Indo-Pacific. On 12 November 2018, speaking to the *Australian Financial Review*, he said that Australia did not want to choose between Beijing and Washington, its biggest trade partner and principal defence ally, respectively, but would enhance relations with both. He was emphatic in stating, “*The more stable the region is, the more prosperous the region is.*”²³

Ground realities -2018

In order to arrive at the likely trajectory that “Quad 2.0” would take, there is a need to examine the “ground-realities” in 2018, taking particular note of regional perceptions of the degree of the USA’s commitment (or otherwise) to the region, as also leadership-dynamics within both, the member-States of “Quad 2.0”, as also other littorals of the region. The more significant of these “ground-realities” are briefly mentioned below:

- The USA was the lynchpin of the Quad in 2007, while the “Pivot to Asia” – a brainchild of the Obama administration – provided the overall regional context. The USA continues to remain central to the Quad 2.0 the Trump administration, too, President Donald Trump’s degree of commitment to the region seem to tell a different tale. Several confusing signals emanating from recent actions of the USA have placed regional littorals, which have thus far enjoyed the US defence umbrella, in a deep quandary. Amongst the more prominent of these signals are the USA pulling out from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was earlier touted as a vital “economic fulcrum” of the “Rebalance to Asia”; the US insistence that all its allies (including NATO countries) increase their share of defence spending to at least two per cent of their GDP; withdrawal from the Climate Summit; taking a hawkish protectionist approach to an otherwise globalised trade and economy; and, of course, Washington’s current insistence that its partners and allies take a Manichean approach by strict adherence to the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act” (CAATSA).
- Australia’s rapid change of six premiers in a short span of a decade is bound to have a bearing on its national policy formulations, given the differing foreign-policy and trade-related viewpoints of the Australian Labour Party (ALP) and the Liberal Party of Australia (LPA). As seen from the aforementioned statements of PM Morrison, Australia continues to be ambivalent with China being its number one trading partner.²⁴
- While Japan has witnessed the return of Abe, Manmohan Singh has been replaced by Narendra Modi in India.
- The Philippines, despite having won its Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) case against China, continues to remain aligned with Beijing under President Duterte, while the ASEAN countries continue to remain fractured in their condemnation of China’s assertiveness and its delayed signing of the Code of conduct (CoC).
- In the meantime, of course, China’s assertiveness continues unabated as Xi Jinping consolidates his firm grip over power in China.

China and the region

With a GDP of 11 trillion USD an economy that is still growing at the rate of 6–7 per cent per annum,²⁵ China, which is aggressively pursuing its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) programmes, continues to be the talk of the town. Whilst the US experiences a resurgence of protectionism, China is seen to be proactively engaging its proximate (and not-so-proximate) littorals. China continues to strengthen its trade, economic and infrastructure engagement with countries within and beyond the region. In fact, China has become the number one trading partner²⁶ to a large number of countries of the Indo-Pacific. This is in sharp contrast to the USA under the unpredictable Donald Trump, whose policies are increasingly seen at being at cross-purposes with those of the European Union (EU), the G-7, and most developing countries. For its part, Beijing continues to proactively engage the European Union and the African nations.

In March of 2018, Foreign Minister of Singapore echoed the views of Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, in stating, “... we do not want to end up with rival blocs forming or countries having to take one side or another”.²⁷ It was not just Singapore that was

hedging. Indonesia's President, Joko Widodo, met the Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, on 07 May 2018, only six days after CNBC broke the news that China had installed anti-ship cruise missiles on three outposts in the South China Sea. Yet, there was no mention of this issue in their joint statement, which released soon after the meeting. Instead he stressed that "*peace and stability in the region including the South China Sea serve the shared interests of the two countries*" and reiterated his commitment to a Code of Conduct.²⁸ Similarly, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines dismissed the militarisation of the South China Sea by stating, "*Ignore the missiles there. They are not for us*".²⁹ A poll conducted by Singapore's ASEAN Studies Centre in May 2017 showed that 74% of elite individuals in Southeast Asia think that China is the most influential country in the region. Only 3.5% opted for the USA.

Announcing the formation of the Indo-Pacific forum at the US Chamber of Commerce in Washington, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said that developing countries in the region would need to attract nearly US\$ 26 trillion in capital to fund their infrastructure needs. However, he went ahead to pledge only US\$ 113 million as the USA's contribution to the region. Once again contrast this with Beijing pledging to contribute up to US\$ 2 billion towards the region's infrastructure development,³⁰ quite apart from its active engagement with the region through its BRI and MSR initiatives.

Japan and China

On 9 May 2017, Japan, which was the initiator of the original Quad, as well as "Quad 2.0", participated in a Trilateral Summit comprising South Korea and China, with each country being represented by their top leaders. This action of Japan is indicative of a thaw in Sino-Japanese relations. While critics attribute this trilateral grouping to Tokyo's nervousness resulting from Trump's protectionism and his flamboyant diplomacy in respect of North Korea, the fact remains that Japan has reached out to engage China despite their bilateral differences in the East China Sea. Japan's actions are being read (prematurely, perhaps) as its attempt to arrive at a rapprochement with China with a view to resolve their maritime territorial dispute in the East China Sea through dialogue. Alternatively, it could just be executing a hedging strategy vis-à-vis China, given the prevailing circumstances dominated by an increasingly unpredictable Trump. During Chinese Premier Li's visit to Japan, both sides agreed to establish a maritime-communication mechanism. The Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, has invited the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, to visit Japan. If this were to happen, it would be a visit by a Chinese president after about ten years.

India and Quad 2.0

Although it is seen to be inching closer to the USA, India also shares a long, albeit complex, relationship with China. In contemporary times, the visits of Prime Minister Modi and other delegations led by senior ministers and bureaucrats to China are indications of New Delhi's attempt to proactively engage Beijing even though the latter remains committed to supporting its all-weather ally, Pakistan. China continues to hamper India's efforts to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); as also India's attempt to gain membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group

(NSG). Beijing has consistently vetoed the declaration of Pakistan resident, Hafeez Saeed, as an international terrorist. The PLA Navy's increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean also continues to roil India. New Delhi has clearly spelt out its stance vis-à-vis China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which should actually be referred-to as the China Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor (CPOKE-C?) continues to mar the India–China relationship. Chinese interests in Djibouti and Gwadar further complicate India's security environment. The 2017 face-off at Doklam³¹ and the 2018 Maldivian crisis³² are stark reminders that all is not necessarily “quiet on the northern front” and that Beijing has, *de facto*, begun to seriously impact the geopolitics and the geostrategic dynamics within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). While India is a willing partner in the trilateral MALABAR series of naval exercises, it is not too pleased with Washington's CAATSA, wherein India finds itself being coerced vis-à-vis its relations with Russia and Iran. The US insistence of restricted engagement with Iran, with whom India maintains good relations, is particularly galling to New Delhi, given India's dependence upon imports crude-oil, and the future use of Chabahar port through which India plans to connect-up with Central Asia. All this is seen by many Indian scholars and strategists as adversely impacting India's strategic autonomy.

New Delhi has always advocated peace and non-alignment, with dialogue and adherence to international law as its preferred approach towards solving disputes and bridging differences. India and China are contiguous neighbours and New Delhi is acutely aware of the tyranny of geography. India has always prided itself on maintaining its strategic autonomy. While New Delhi would not like to repeat the Panglossian-Nehruvian approach vis-à-vis China of the late-1950s and early-1960s, it would nevertheless like to maintain its strategic autonomy and not be dictated-to by any nation.

Way ahead

Against the backdrop of an assertive China and given the prevailing security environment there is a need to weigh the options available to India, with an aim to achieving peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, without overtly displaying an anti-China or a China-containment posture.

The Modi-Xi engagement in Wuhan, in April 2018, appears, *prima facie*, to offer a pragmatic approach. The two leaders displayed manifest intent to resolve issues through dialogue and keep their lines of communication open. India's stand to continue to engage with Iran and Russia, constitute strong strategic signals to Washington that New Delhi will continue to be guided by its principled stance of Non-Alignment, while remaining willing to engage with any nation, so long as such engagement is in India's national interest. Several Western analysts have alluded to India's refusal to include Australia in the MALABAR-2018 and have opined that this was due to India succumbing to Beijing's pressure, as the announcement of Australia's exclusion from the MALABAR series of naval exercises happened on the eve of the Wuhan Summit. Even if this were to be true, it appears to have been the best course of action under the prevailing circumstances, as the meeting provided a congenial environment for the conduct of talks between the two leaders. Another indicator that India has taken a more pragmatic approach in its

relationship with China is Prime Minister Modi's inaugural address at the Shangri-La Dialogue on 1 June 2018 where-in he clearly spelt out India's stance, stating unequivocally,

... ..we do not want to return to the great power rivalries ... Asia of rivalry will hold us back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century. So, each nation must ask itself: Are its choices building a more united world, or forcing more divisions? It is a responsibility that both existing and rising powers have. Competition is normal. But contests must not turn into conflict; differences must not be allowed to become disputes³³

The Japanese statement in the Shangri-La dialogue also echoed similar sentiments in that no mention of "connectivity" was made. Only the statements from Australia and the United States contained the term "quadrilateral".³⁴ These omissions and divergences may be relatively minor, but they do support the view that strategic geography, threat-perceptions, and dynamics vis-à-vis China, vary among the members of "Quad 2.0".

Quad 2.0 needs to be looked at dispassionately. There is no denying that China is exhibiting signs of being an assertive – if not aggressive – revisionist power. It can be argued that assuming an overtly anti-China posture may not be in the interest of the four members. Australia has permitted the US to position troops in Darwin, and yet, is very clear that it doesn't want to jeopardise its economic relations with China, which is its number-one trading partner. Japan is already engaging China more vigorously. India, apart from its bilateral engagement of China, also engages Beijing through multilateral constructs such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The recent exercise SCO PEACE MISSION 2018 saw Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Russian troops, along with troops from the other four SCO nations, participate in anti-terrorism drills.³⁵ This is an example of India's skilful engagement of China, and, through China, of the Pakistani military, as well.

Conclusion

The Quad of 2007 was an offshoot of the regional naval cooperative engagement in the immediate aftermath of the *tsunami* of 2004, whereby four countries – Japan, the USA, Australia and India – decided to set-up a construct that could cooperate in organising HADR operations, followed by the undertaking of rehabilitation activities in affected areas. In short, the focus was primarily humanitarian and infrastructure-development, albeit with a subtle layer of maritime-military operations, as the navies of these countries were the primary instruments through which the initial responses were undertaken.

The USA, with its "Pivot to Asia" (later renamed "Rebalance to Asia") was seen as the lynchpin of the Quad construct. On date, however, the USA appears to be rethinking its commitment to the region as witness its withdrawal from the TPP and its insistence that its allies, irrespective of their economic growth, enhance their defence budget to at least two per cent of GDP. China's role in bringing North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, to the negotiating table with the USA was openly lauded by Trump on the one hand, while tariffs were imposed on Chinese goods, on the other. This action of the USA has sent fairly confusing signals to its regional allies and partners. Additionally, the thawing of relations between North and South Korea, as also South Korea's absence (either by design or by default) from the Quad 2.0 Construct, are other imponderables to be considered. Similarly, Japan, which was one of the lead initiators of the Quad (and

subsequently of the Quad2.0 as well), appears to have chosen a path of engagement with China, as seen from its trilateral engagement with China and South Korea. This, amongst other issues, could be considered to be an indicator of Japan's attempt to recalibrate its relations with China. As China is Australia's largest trading-partner, Canberra remains committed to maintaining its economic relations with China and maintaining close diplomatic relations, too, with the People's Republic. The US–Russia entanglement in Syria has further pushed the Russians closer to the Chinese, which many analysts consider to be a strategic blunder by Washington.

The recent statements of Prime Minister Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue, as also India's active participation in the SCO, are indicators of India trying to balance its own relations between the USA and China. *Prima facie*, all Quad-members appear to be handling their relations with China with dexterity and pragmatism.

The BRI and MSR will continue to be a high priority for China – at least as long as Xi Jinping stays in power. China's growth-engine continues to be export-driven and China's growth graph is likely to rise steadily as it continues to consolidate economic and military power. This will dictate how the other players in the region engage China. For India, the China–Pakistan nexus and the CPEC (CPOK-C) will continue to be a cause of concern. India, like the other members of the Quad, will continue to calibrate its relations with both, the USA and China. As things presently stand, a lack of enthusiasm in the Quad – exemplified by the fact that since the November 2017 meeting, no steps towards regularised cooperation have been taken – appears to be quite understandable. And yet, while the Quad may not currently be functioning as envisaged and desired, there is no gainsaying the fact that the future is unpredictable beyond certain fairly narrow bounds. Thus, the future may well witness the birth of new ways and means by which the Quad 2.0 could be a functional and useful platform to ensure a more stable balance of power and the maintenance of stability and peace.

Notes

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32. The crisis saw President Abdulla Yameen move against the orders of the Supreme Court and ordered the release of nine political prisoners, while reinstating 12 Members of Parliament. He subsequently declared an emergency and ordered the arrest of the Chief Justice of the Maldives and a judge of the Supreme Court.
33. Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shanri La Dialogue (June 1, 2018), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt of India.
34. Gale Jesse Barker and Andrew Shearer, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” *CSIS Briefs*, March 2018. ²⁶ QUAD – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) First Published: November 12, 2017 | Last Updated: November 12, 2017. Extracted from: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/quadrilateral-security-dialogue-and-maritime-silk-road-initiative>.
35. See <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=183039> (accessed December 30, 2018).

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