

## *The Future Trajectory of the Quad* Subham Barua<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In March, the Quad Leader's Summit saw the revitalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the US and its friends – Japan, India, and Australia – in the Indo-Pacific. Although the Quad is more of a loose grouping than a formal alliance, 2021 saw the leaders become more aligned regarding their shared concerns over China. The increasing influence of China in the region has raised many eyebrows. To offset Beijing's meteoric rise, the Quad members have used its platform to give us insight into how the future of strategic competition against China might look like. Although the Asian superpower was not exclusively mentioned in the deliberations of the summit, the leaders' Joint Statement, titled 'Spirit of the Quad<sup>2</sup>', identified the threat to a rule-based maritime order in the South and East China seas as well as a need for a free, open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific, which clearly hint at the pushback against Beijing's long-arm. However, the Quad's function has undergone several evolutions over the years and the present scope of operation is far from its initial state of affairs. This commentary will briefly look into the history of the Quad, analyze the group's possible future trajectory, and deliberate the implications of growing competition between the Quad and China.

### Brief History

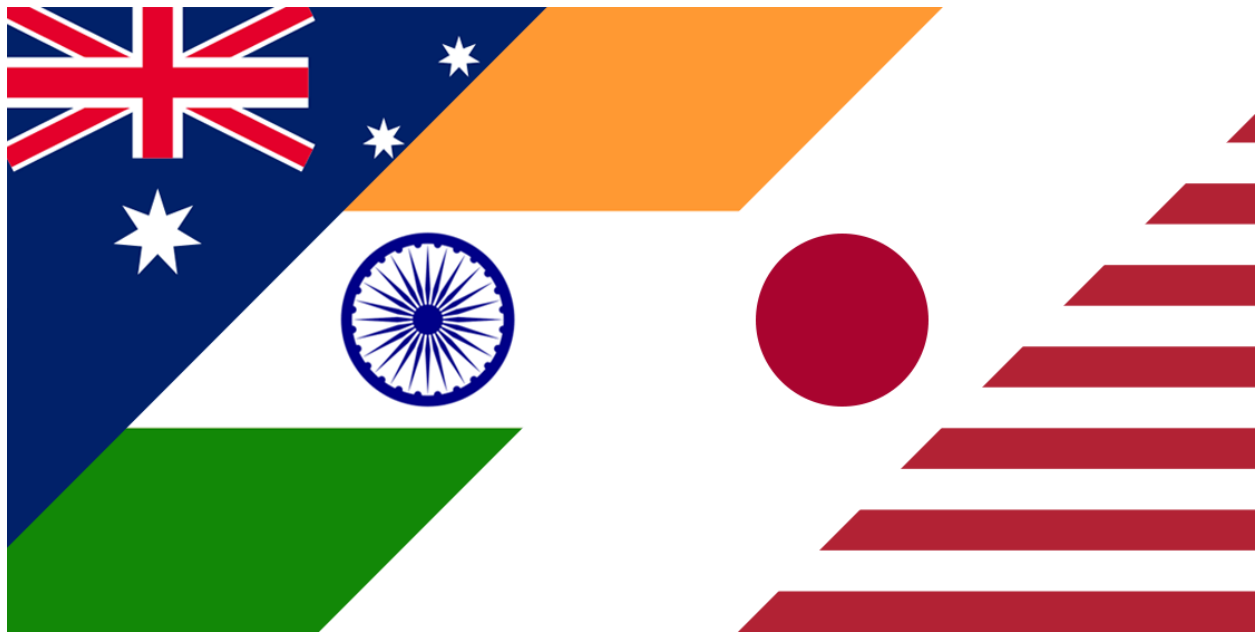
The first interaction between the members came during 2004-2005 in the form of cooperation where they coordinated efforts as the 'Tsunami Core Group' to mitigate the consequences of the

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<sup>2</sup> "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of The Quad" | The White House". *The White House*, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. So, at the very initial stages, the Quad's focus of operations was not exclusively towards security. However, in the fall of 2007, after the announcement from Japanese PM at the time Shinzo Abe, the Quad, along with Singapore, performed its first maritime exercise and expanded its scope from just disaster management. Just like today, the exercise back then left a notion of political ambiguity around what the maritime performance would mean: was this a simple demonstration to strengthen cooperation? Or the start of a new defense treaty?



*Figure: Quad Members' Flags*

The Quad was met with a significant hurdle when Australia decided to opt out of the coalition in February 2008<sup>3</sup>. China exhibited diplomatic protests after the joint naval exercise between the Quad and Singapore which resulted in the Australian Foreign Minister proposing, along with a Chinese counterpart, that they would prefer not to have such a dialogue again. Australia's exit marked the end of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue for a considerable amount of time, and it was not until the November of 2017 that the group reconciled. Since then, the Quad has met regularly on ministerial levels. Each member also laid out individual, comprehensive policies for

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<sup>3</sup> Air Power Asia. 2021. *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue -The Quad – Anti-China Alliance? – Where Does India Stand?*. [online] Available at: <<https://airpowerasia.com/2020/08/17/quadrilateral-security-dialogue-the-quad-anti-china-alliance-where-does-india-stand>>

their collective vision of a 'free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific,' demonstrating their way forward.

## Future Trajectory

### Security

With all things considered, and with Australia returning to the nexus, the spotlight is on the future trajectory of the Quad. Analysts argue that the current activity of the Quad gives the essence of the formation of a possible defense alliance – a NATO of Asia perhaps. The growing apprehension of a militarized Indo-Pacific could see the light of day considering the recent joint participation of India, Japan and the US in the Malabar naval exercises, with Australia being the latest addition. The nations have also participated in each other's multilateral exercises, most notably the Rim of Pacific (RIMPAC)—the world's largest naval exercise—a clear attempt at intensifying defense ties.



*Figure: The USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier participates in a group sail during the RIMPAC exercise off the coast of Hawaii in July 2018. (Photo courtesy of the US Navy)*

## Membership Expansion

The Quad may also be expected to increase its membership to other relevant nations to bolster its influence in the region<sup>4</sup>. This can happen through a few approaches. Firstly, the Quad may include significant Indo-Pacific countries with an already ubiquitous presence in the region. We can already observe this possible outcome with the joint naval exercise with the People's Republic of South Korea (Pacific Vanguard). New Zealand also makes an option for a suitable addition. Their membership in the '*Five Eyes*' intelligence alliance with Australia, Canada, UK and the US, and the '*Five Power Defense Arrangement*' security dialogue with Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the UK demonstrate the nation's value additive potential. The group may also look to import allies with existing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The UK and France would make great additions in this regard. The UK's recent 'tilt' towards the Indo-Pacific, coupled with their relationship with members of the Commonwealth will provide great utility to the Quad. France can supplement the UK's resources with their connections through the FRANZ arrangement with Australia and New Zealand. The French Republic is also a member of the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group with the US, Australia and New Zealand, making them well versed in security coordination in the region.

Rather than directly expanding membership, the Quad may look to undertake a 'plus process' approach – Quad+2, etc., to engage with nations at various levels. They may look to ASEAN<sup>5</sup> and adopt how the regional cooperation body conducts its ASEAN+3 process. The Quad can also look to smaller nations in the region. These states can help implement the Quad's specific functions and act in groups or 'support clusters. The countries of the clusters would have to be from South and South-East Asia primarily, keeping in mind their strategic relevance.

## Evolving Scope of Operations

The Quad has not just limited its evolution just to include security. The "Quad Leader's Joint Statement" also stated the group's affirmation to combatting climate change. A more focused

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<sup>4</sup> Muniruzzaman, ANM. "Quad: Quo Vadis?". *The Daily Star*, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/quad-quo-vadis-2110293>.

<sup>5</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations

aspect of cooperation that the summit identified was equitable access for the Covid-19 vaccination in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is restricting itself to conventional diplomacy and exploring new avenues of multilateralism. Countries were left astray as they could not meet the demands for vaccines required to help fight the spread of Covid. Initially, Russia and China came to their rescue as they shipped millions of jabs to these impoverished nations<sup>6</sup>. This not only strengthens bilateral ties but also bolsters their strategic influence. The Quad is perhaps looking to form its vaccine distribution project to offset the influence that of China and Russia. However, this exhibition of "vaccine diplomacy" combined with the Quad's expansion into regional security can prompt severe implications.

## Strategic Competition Against China

The Quad's attempts at countering China's rising influence can cause a sharp rise in strategic competition in the region. The recent G7 summit even saw the announcement of a new infrastructure plan, called the Build Back Better World (B3W), to counter Beijing's BRI. The White House Fact Sheet specifically highlighted the B3W's expansive range to connect to the Indo-Pacific<sup>7</sup>. Since Japan and the US were part of the discussions at the summit, it is reasonable to assume that the Quad will deploy resources should the plan come to actualization.

Analysts have also regarded China's discussion with Afghanistan, Nepal, and Pakistan as part of the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network, as a 'Himalayan Quad' for countering the existing group<sup>8</sup>. Beijing has mentioned that this cooperation is only for mutual economic interests, but much apprehension remains. A significant reaction is yet to be seen from China. However, experts predict that the Quad's activity in the region may push Beijing to look at

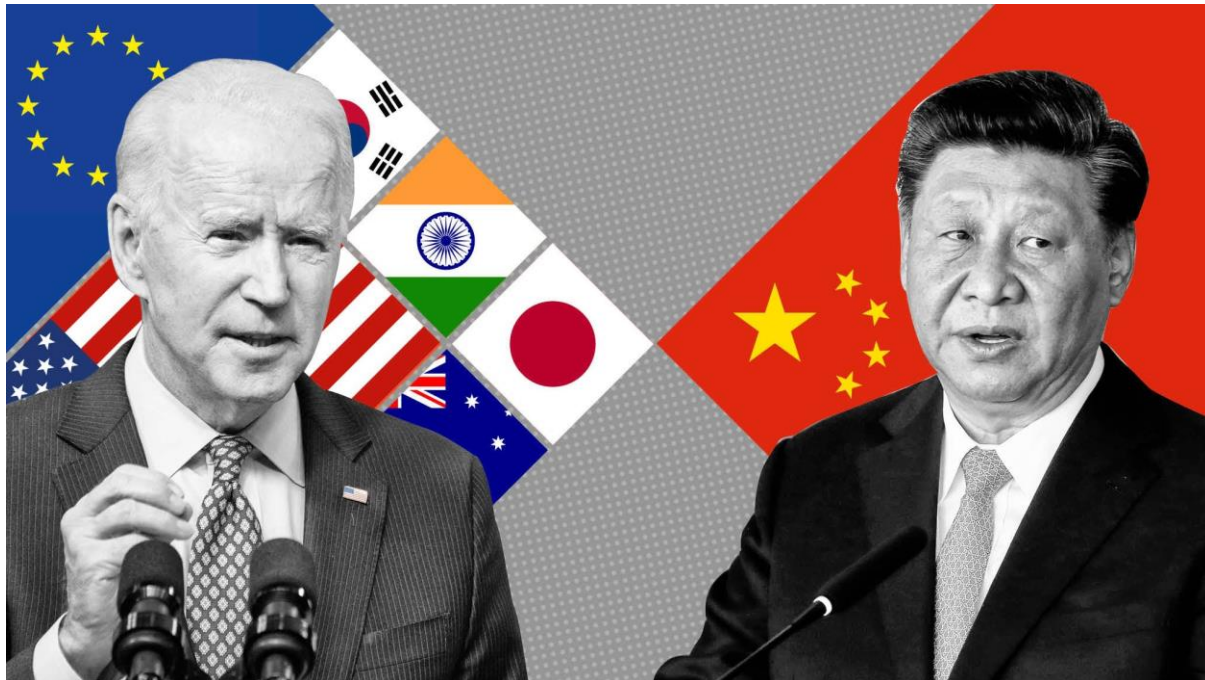
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<sup>6</sup> "Vaccine Diplomacy Boosts Russia's And China's Global Standing". *The Economist*, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/04/29/vaccine-diplomacy-boosts-russias-and-chinas-global-standing>.

<sup>7</sup> "FACT SHEET: President Biden And G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership | The White House". *The White House*, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.

<sup>8</sup> Panda, Jagannath. "The Trans-Himalayan 'Quad,' Beijing's Territorialism, And India". *Jamestown*, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-trans-himalayan-quad-beijings-territorialism-and-india/>.

Moscow for a unified deterrence mechanism. Beijing will also look at its friends in South and Southeast Asia to ensure no deterrence in China's influence in the face of the Quad.



*Source: TheReport*

## Conclusion

The future of the Indo-Pacific region may reach a state of polarization, much like that of the Cold War era. In the Munich Security Conference 2021, President Biden rightly mentioned that the world had reached an 'inflection point' – a standoff between the bearers of democracy and a plausible, working autocratic system. The Quad wants to provide an idealistic future of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' consolidated by a rules-based order. However, through the allure of its soft power and using its economy as an example, Beijing has shown that the ideal democratic order the Quad preaches is not the only model that works for the world. The most vulnerable nations will be smaller countries in South and Southeast Asia. Any hint of them getting involved with the Quad may prompt a consequence of facing deteriorated bilateral relations with China.

Bangladesh has recently been a recipient of this as the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh has stated that Dhaka's relationship with Beijing would deteriorate if the nation joined the informal

group, even though there was no indication of any formal invitation from Quad member states<sup>9</sup>. Australia also continues to bear the brunt of economic sanctions by the Chinese after they suggested the World Health Organization investigate the origins of COVID-19<sup>10</sup>. The reactions exemplify one thing – either you with the Quad or against China. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that smaller nations tread carefully when dealing with this issue as they have restricted room for diplomatic maneuverability.

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<sup>9</sup> UNB, Dhaka. "Relations with China Will Be Damaged If Bangladesh Joins US-Led 'Quad': Envoy". *The Daily Star*, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/news/relations-china-will-be-damaged-if-bangladesh-joins-us-led-quad-envoy-2091345>.

<sup>10</sup> "The Quad In The Indo-Pacific: What To Know". *Council On Foreign Relations*, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know>.