

# CHINA'S RISE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: A QUAD COUNTRIES' PERSPECTIVE

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*China's rise as an economic, technological, and military superpower in the last two decades is one of the most prominent factors that led to the emergence of the Quad grouping consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India as a 'balance of power' mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region. The four-nation grouping has evolved over time, particularly in the last two to five years, reaching the summit-level in September 2021 and both broadening and diversifying its areas of cooperation. The fact that China openly denounces the terms "Quad" and "Indo-Pacific" as part of a U.S.-led strategy to contain its rise, by often referring to it as an "Asian NATO", highlights the critical role of the grouping and how Beijing's perception of it shapes the internal dynamics within the Quad itself. This issue brief looks into the rise of a belligerent China in the Indo-Pacific and the Quad countries' strategies to tackle its hegemony.*

## Introduction

The rise of modern China<sup>1</sup> began in the 1980s, following a period of 'national consolidation' in the 1950s and 1960s, and the 'diplomatic reconnection' decade of the 1970s, in the backdrop of the U.S.-China rapprochement. From the famous Deng Xiaoping-era dictum of "hide your strength, bide your time" to the Hu Jintao-era "peaceful rise", Chinese grand strategy remained largely on course until recently when it slipped away with the advent

of the outspoken "wolf-warrior diplomacy". While in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s China was careful in assuring the world that its growing economic and military prowess was not a threat to international peace and security, under the current President Xi Jinping, China is reinvigorating its revanchist<sup>2</sup> policies that challenge the rules-based international order. Today, Beijing can no longer claim that its rise is 'peaceful', particularly considering the contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Taiwan

Strait, the two China Seas, and the Himalayan frontiers, characterized by power projection and confrontational military posturing. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has ruled mainland China for more than seven decades and has been showing signs of what historian Paul Kennedy called ‘imperial overstretch’,<sup>3</sup> wherein an imperialist power tries to extend itself beyond its military capabilities, often leading to its collapse. Moreover, China’s continuing dominance in trade and global supply chains<sup>4</sup> over the last two decades reflects the looming prospect of weaponization,<sup>5</sup> as it increasingly resorts to the rhetoric of using punitive tariffs and other economic measures on hostile nations. Today, the legitimacy of the CCP amongst the mainland Chinese largely depends on its miraculous economic growth story, which has been negatively impacted since the COVID-19 pandemic began and by the constant invocation of nationalist sentiments pointing fingers at a victimhood-laden historical narrative.

The origins of modern China’s ‘rise’ from the shadows of the Deng Xiaoping-era can be traced back to 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organization<sup>6</sup> (WTO), thus gaining access to global markets and new trading partners as well as export

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destinations. Following this event, the mid-2000s represented a substantial shift in Chinese regional policy. In 2005, China passed an ‘Anti-Secession Law’<sup>7</sup> that vowed to use even “non-peaceful” means to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, if all other means were rendered fruitless. One year later, Chinese PLA Navy submarines surfaced<sup>8</sup> amid a U.S. carrier strike group engaged in regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the East China Sea, close to Japanese waters. It was a strategic signaling of regional assertion and a challenge to the United States, the region’s (and the world’s) largest military, particularly naval power. China views the U.S. naval presence in the various sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific as a major constraint to realizing its regional leadership and hegemony. With this belief, since 2009, China began to double down on its claims in the South China Sea<sup>9</sup> and has upped the ante on its dispute with several Southeast Asian nations through its “Nine/Ten Dash Line”<sup>10</sup> claims and land reclamation activities, which have intensified since Xi Jinping came to power and China’s economic profile also rose and grew into the “world’s factory”.

### **The ‘Arc of Democracy’ and the ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’**

The aforementioned geopolitical changes in the Asia-Pacific prompted former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a visionary leader assassinated in July 2022, to establish an “arc of democracy” (later metamorphosing into the Quad), stretching from the U.S. to Japan, Australia, and India. He then popularized the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ that entered the political lexicon with the famous “confluence of the two seas” speech he delivered in the Parliament of India in 2007.<sup>11</sup> However, this alliance struggled early on. Abe acknowledged India’s geostrategic importance vis-a-vis China’s growing assertiveness, seeing as it is a major democracy in the region and a country with its own troubled past with China. Thus, the very first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue<sup>12</sup> of senior officials from the four Indo-Pacific democracies took place in 2007 on the

sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila. The rise of China necessitated the ‘coming together’ of four ‘like-minded democracies’ in the Indo-Pacific, whose common interests were identified to be at stake. In the same year, the four countries participated in Exercise Malabar together for the first time. Unfortunately, Australia witnessed a change in leadership the very next year, wherein Labour Party’s Kevin Rudd was elected as Prime Minister. He followed a policy of cozying up with China and consequently pulled Canberra out of the Quad in 2008.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Shinzo Abe, the de-facto motivator and initiator of the idea of Quad, lost power in Japan around the same time. Thus, the first meeting of the Quad seemed to be its last until 2017.

### **The Comeback of the Quad**

After nearly a decade-long period of inactivity between 2008 and 2016, owing to Australia’s exit following its Chinese rapprochement, the Quad took shape again in 2017, on the sidelines of that year’s ASEAN Summit in Manila. It happened largely due to the efforts of the Trump Administration which openly stated that it would ensure that China occupied only its “rightful place” in the world. The current Biden Administration also acknowledges that it seeks “healthy competition and not conflict”<sup>14</sup> with Beijing. American leadership evidently remains a crucial component binding the Quad together. Today, the Quad has been elevated to the summit-level<sup>15</sup> with two in-person Quad Leaders’ Summits held in September 2021 and May 2022, respectively, in addition to two virtual summit-level meetings, thereby bolstering the Quad’s growth trajectory and mutual cooperation. The grouping has come a long way from its humble beginnings and has now broadened and diversified its areas of co-operation, especially in the last two to five years. This is particularly true in the case of India and Japan, the two countries that share land and a maritime border with China. While for the physically distant U.S. the geostrategic rivalry with China is at a global level, for Australia,<sup>16</sup> tensions

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with China stemming from bilateral trade and investment, including the issue of retaliatory tariffs and countervailing measures, stand out and cast a shadow on overall ties. Any unilateral change in status quo regarding Taiwan, an act China threatens to execute sooner or later, will have a strategic bearing on Japan. Likewise, escalating disputes over the China-claimed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea will also urge a Japanese response. For India, 2022 marks 60 years since the debacle in its only major war<sup>17</sup> with China. However, 2020 witnessed violent clashes in eastern Ladakh, with soldiers killed on both sides and two remaining friction points in the Ladakh sector that are yet to be disengaged, leading to a tense potential conflict scenario.

Despite the common security challenge posed by China, the Quad hesitates to follow the traditional notions of balance of power and hard security. Rather, it has promoted a wide range of cooperative mechanisms including the annual leaders’ summits since 2021 and joint working groups on various critical issues facing the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Many of these initiatives would not have been possible had China not been taken into account, as its dominance permeates these areas and there is a need to come up with

plurilateral alternatives, to which other countries in the region can look forward to join the initiative. Every official-level and ministerial meeting along with the summits of the Quad have expanded the possibilities of co-operation within the four-nation grouping, which essentially capitalizes on each other's relative strengths and operational capabilities. It includes initiatives such as the Quad initiative for vaccines, critical and emerging technologies, climate crisis, quality infrastructure, cyber-security, supply chain diversification, and most recently the Quad Fellowship and the new Maritime Domain Awareness<sup>18</sup> initiative (IPMDA). This last initiative aims to build new avenues of co-operation between regional countries to collaborate on issues pertaining to illegal fishing, sharing of geospatial information, and humanitarian assistance. All of these happen to be arenas of geostrategic competition with China although the Quad nations never mention the word 'China' explicitly in any of their statements.

As per a 2020 report<sup>19</sup> conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Chinese PLA's objective is to become a "world-class" military by the end of 2049, the year the People's Republic observes its centenary and something that was proclaimed by President Xi Jinping in 2017.<sup>20</sup> Although China has failed to define what a "world-class" military is, it

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is likely that Beijing will seek to develop a military that is equal to, or in some cases superior to, the U.S. military. The report also states that China "has built the largest naval fleet in the world with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants". In comparison, as of 2020, the U.S. Navy has approximately 293 ships even though there are differences in the criteria of categorizing warships. China today is the top ship-building nation in the world by tonnage and is increasing its production capacity for all classes of naval ships. The fact that the Chinese have achieved this feat in a remarkably short time is surprising. Although China currently has only one overseas military base in Djibouti, compared to the 800 U.S. bases around the world, it is likely that Cambodia, Sri Lanka or Pakistan could host Chinese bases in the future given these countries' excessive dependency on Chinese loans and investments for infrastructure development. According to a recent report by *The Washington Post*, China is supposedly building a secret naval facility in Cambodia's Ream.<sup>21</sup> This location would give Beijing a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia and a position in the western region of the South China Sea. As such, China could make increasing inroads into the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which could only be kept in check by a plurilateral response from other regional countries, like the Quad.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Quad Plurilateralism**

As in any other coalition of sovereign states, the Quad too has its strengths and limitations. Australia and Japan are formal treaty allies of the U.S. while India follows a highly independent foreign policy. Each Quad member has its own causes of 'strategic insecurity' with the rise of China in their respective neighborhoods. While India is the only Quad member that shares a land border with China, along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), China is also engaged in disruptive activities in India's maritime neighborhood of the Indian Ocean Region. The East China Sea remains the arena of Chinese power

projection that concerns Japan the most while for Australia it is the trade routes in the South Pacific where China is increasingly making inroads through geo-economic means and by forging new security pacts with a handful of small island states. Washington is drawn to these dynamics as it bound to protect the interests of its allies and partners in the region. Naval exercises such as ‘Malabar’ have seen the participation of all the Quad countries in its last two editions, even though Australia is yet to be inducted as a permanent participant. It must be noted that although the Quad is not a military alliance based on the age-old principle of ‘collective security’, it has identified areas for mutual co-operation. Balancing China in crucial geographies and sub-regions within the Indo-Pacific has been considered as a collective effort of the grouping.

The Quad also has the potential to offer credible alternatives to the ones offered by China in the region for lesser powers. The U.S. remains the only power in the world with the required military muscle, operational reach, and vast alliance network that could impede China from indulging in any misadventure in the region. The Quad also acts as a strategic watchdog over the region reminding Beijing that it is being supervised. Through the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiated in 2013, China aims to dominate global trade and increase its strategic footprint across the world by a slew of infrastructure and connectivity mega projects. It is worthwhile to recall that imperial China remained at the center of continental Asia for centuries with the Silk Road connecting Asia to Europe from the second century BCE to the mid-fifteenth century CE. The discovery of alternative sea routes by European seafarers with the dawn of the Age of Exploration in Europe diminished the ancient trade dominance of China. Furthermore, under the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), China suffered back-to-back military defeats at the hands of European powers. Today this fact is used by the Chinese Communist Party to strengthen propaganda phrases such as the “century of humiliation”<sup>22</sup> (1839-1949) and the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”<sup>23</sup> as

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well as to justify the policies of the Party. A greater share of the total ‘comprehensive national power’ of China is derived from its mammoth-sized economy, the second largest in the world since 2010.<sup>24</sup>

### **Internal Differences**

Unlike Australia and Japan that are wholly part of the U.S.-led global system of alliances and ‘the developed West’, India continues to be a ‘developing country’ and greatly values its ‘strategic autonomy’ in foreign policy decision-making. India simultaneously participates in China and Russia led groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), along with the Quad. Having been under the cusp of Western (British) rule for nearly two centuries, India also bears the baggage of its colonial history. Moreover, New Delhi was once the champion of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) for much of the second-half of the 20th century, which metamorphosed into ‘multi-alignment’ in the present.<sup>25</sup> As China keeps expanding its geostrategic influence across the Indo-Pacific through economic and commercial means, the Quad has a natural role in providing sustainable alternatives to the ones offered by China, not only to other regional countries but to its member-states as well, if needed. The Quad’s internal dynamics and cohesion, or rather

its very existence, is heavily dependent on India's participation because the other three members can continue to be allies with or without a grouping like the Quad. But, for India, being part of the Quad is perhaps the easiest way to cozy up to the West. Russia, being a common friend of both India and China, has its limitations in acting decisively when it comes to taking sides. This leaves India with only the U.S.-led West as an ally without conflicting interests, particularly considering its power asymmetry with China. On the other hand, the U.S.-led West needs India as a counter-balance to a 'Sino-centric' Asia. Simultaneously, India has also made clear that it will not be part of any 'alliance system'. So, the West cannot expect India to take categorical stances against China without the Quad providing sustainable and viable alternatives that can gradually bring down India's dependency on Russia and China.

India has over a \$70-billion trade deficit with China as per the latest figures, despite border tensions, and it continues to be heavily dependent on Russian-made weaponry. The Washington-based Stimson Center estimates that about 85 percent of India's arms and weapon systems are of Russian origin, owing to the decades-old friendship between the two countries. India also purchases cutting-edge Russian

weapons such as the S-400 air defense systems, even though New Delhi is trying hard to diversify and indigenize its defense supplies. This reliance also explains India's unwillingness to plainly and openly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, unlike the other Quad members. India is already co-operating with Japan bilaterally to offer sustainable economic alternatives to countries such as Sri Lanka that are reeling under huge Chinese debt. India and Australia have also started an annual 2+2 ministerial dialogue in 2021 and already have such mechanisms with the other two Quad members, the U.S. and Japan. When it comes to building economic partnerships and investments throughout Asia, Japan is a heavyweight, while Australia is the regional leader in the South Pacific. Likewise, India has to remain as a key balancing power in the Indian Ocean and South Asian regions, which are key segments of the Indo-Pacific. India has also inked mutual logistics pacts with all the three other Quad members, in the last decade, to ensure military interoperability, thereby keeping the scope of further co-operation between the Quad countries open and wide.

## Conclusion

The fact that China openly denounces both the terms "Quad" and "Indo-Pacific" as part of a U.S.-led strategy to contain its rise, by often referring to it as an "Asian NATO",<sup>26</sup> gives a clear perspective on the role of the grouping and how Beijing's perceptions of it shape the internal dynamics within the Quad. Washington has to be cautious about the prospect of other new groupings in the region such as the AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) overshadowing the Quad. If the four-nation grouping wants to strengthen its internal cohesion, it must support regional countries, including its own member India, to reduce its dependency on China and Russia. In the meantime, the Quad should also be in sync with other Western-led initiatives such as the 2019-initiated Blue Dot Network, the 2021-initiated Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, and the 2022-initiated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

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(IPEF). The West has to be clear on how it envisions the utility of the Quad. Since three members of the Quad are already Western nations, it is India's participation that makes the grouping more inclusive and reflective of the contemporary geopolitical reality. Having two G7 countries – the U.S. and Japan – as members, the Quad can mobilize large sums to provide alternative means for the financial, developmental, and infrastructural needs of middle and smaller powers in the Indo-Pacific, particularly Southeast Asia, superseding Chinese engagement in the region. The role that the Quad would play in supporting India to reconfigure its defense ties with Russia and economic ties with China will prove decisive in bringing New Delhi closer to the U.S. and in the overall Western vision for the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that India has a robust and independent foreign policy with its own vision and initiatives to reach out to key actors in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of its demographic and current military power, India is the most apt country that the U.S. can count on to counter-balance Chinese hegemonic ambitions for Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

China's rise and its various regional manifestations are indeed the primary factors that have led to the rise of the Quad. The relevance of the Quad will continue to grow as China emboldens its comprehensive national power. Contemporary geopolitical realities point out that the path towards a 'Sino-centric' Indo-Pacific will not be without security hiccups. The rise of new regional balance of power mechanisms, such as the Quad, is indeed imperative to keep a check on rising hegemonic tendencies. Being a coalition of democracies, the Quad also has an additional role in proving itself to be a viable, systemic alternative that smaller and middle-powers in the region can turn to. For that to be achieved, there has to be an internal harmonization of interests of individual member-states, keeping in mind the higher purpose of balancing Chinese power to sustain a free and open Indo-Pacific, and also a peaceful and rules-based world order.

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