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An Indo- Pacific Conundrum: Unearthing the role of QUAD as an Alternative Geo-Strategic Construct in case of India

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1. Introduction

The rise of many new and influential states in world affairs is becoming one of the critical milestones in the history of the world. The latest changing patterns of trajectories between India and China reflect that these states will play a prominent role in global affairs. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape also promotes the existence of these rising Asian powers (Ministry of Defence 2015). Among these developments, India's rise makes an intense remark to the world about how India could revamp its position as an emerging superpower in the coming decade. In particular, during the Cold War, it was observed that India's alignment with Soviet Russia ushered in a containment mechanism adopted by the USA and China with assistance from Pakistan. Hence, since 9/11, a sea change has taken place in the relationship stature between India and the USA. Accordingly, it opened up a new vista in the case of India to strengthen its outreach to its partners in the Asia-Pacific region. In the case of India, the trend toward maritime outreach and its protection is not new. However, the upsurge of globalization insists New Delhi slide towards activating its security mechanism over continental self-defence (Choudhury and Nayak 2020). At the same time, the incident of the December 2004 tsunami became the spotlight for the world on the geographical dimensions, which India chased as critically prominent and strategically challenging. The publication of *India's Maritime doctrine* explicitly tries to showcase the vibrant status of the Indian Ocean region in Indian strategic thought and the way in which India could sustain its presence in the area as an influencer (Nawaz 2023). Among the scholars, the fundamental question that always gets whispered is why India should worry about the Indian Ocean region. The answer lies in the fact that India is a '*continental power*' and occupies a central position in the Indian Ocean region as referred by David Brewster (Brewster, 2010). In this state, the fact lies that India will always mechanize its strategy in a way to sustain its profound influence in the region. This chapter seeks to identify and perceive certain factors in detail about the rise of QUAD in this evolving strategic pattern in the Indo-Pacific region. Further, along with the extensive understanding of the relevance of the Indo-Pacific region in regulating the geopolitical and economic factors in Asia and globally, in the long run, it would also put light on how India tailors its foreign policy while keeping Chinese developments under consideration.

2. A Spin towards the Idea of Indo-Pacific

To trace the origin of the term “**Indo-Pacific**”, one should roll back to the writings of German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer as ‘*Indopazifischen Raum*’ in the year 1920's. A prolific Indian author Kalidas Nag also referenced it in the year 1940's. Captain (Dr.) Gurpreet Khurana (Retd.) is a former Indian Navy officer who participated in naval operations during the Civil War in Sri Lanka (1987-91) and India-Pak Kargil War (1999). He is also accredited to be the first to use the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in 2007 in academic writing (Khurana 2007, 139–153). In recent times, in 2007, Japanese Prime minister, late Shinzo Abe, mentioned this term in his speech in the Indian Parliament. He stated, ‘ *We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the two seas coming into being.* ’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007). Hence both the seas will prosper with dynamics as a sea of freedom and prosperity. In this context, the speech became more popular when power shifted from the West to the eastern part of the globe.

Moreover, the existing framework of Asia-Pacific cannot fulfil the management process of changing geopolitical undercurrents encircling the region and as a consequence, the prominence of the Indo-Pacific region increases. Among the list of countries, Japan was the first country to use the phrase free and open 'Indo-Pacific' in its official discourse. Gradually, the above-mentioned premise has been validated through the US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report of 2019, which could be marked as an inflexion point in the evolution of the concept. Especially with respect to India, the Indo-Pacific policy was articulated by Prime minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 (Government of India 2018). Through this initiative, for the first time, he stated seven elements that will outline India's vision of the region. Those elements involve a free, open and inclusive region, ASEAN centrality, connectivity relevance, etc. The geographic outreach of the Indo-Pacific region extends from the US's west coast to Africa's east coast; Washington also refers to this region as a stretch from Hollywood to Bollywood and from penguins to polar bears (Kumar 2022).

In a geo-strategic sense, it's an acceptance in the scholarly domain that India is the major stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific region and always remains a flourishing figure in the process of changing geo-strategic and geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region (Bhatt 2018). The region's pursuit of enduring peace and prosperity fosters collaboration among countries and intra-regional organizations, fostering areas of convergence with India to drive holistic development in the Indo-Pacific. A deeper analysis unveils India's strategic approach through initiatives such as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), emphasizing a multifaceted commitment to regional security and sustainable growth (Paskal 2021). Through this SAGAR initiative, India tries to determine its pathways in economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours, assistance in building maritime security capabilities, coastal surveillance, intelligence sharing etc. Similarly, the objective related to (IPOI) clearly points out the way toward the maritime domain's security, safety and stability. In this context, an added fact is that there should be seamless connectivity so maritime disruptions can be managed in a feasible way. However, the aspects mentioned above were more emphasized through the statement by External Affairs minister: "This remains a maritime century, and the tides

of the Indo-Pacific region will certainly help shape its future. And India along with partner nations will make a collective effort to keep the oceans peaceful, open and secure, and at the same time, contributes to conserve its resources and keep it clean." (Government of India 2022). The evolving strategic global outlook will be nourished by keeping the Indo-Pacific region as the epicentre. While critically calibrating the evolving stature of the Indo-Pacific region, the influx and revival of great power rivalries are unavoidable. Amidst these configurations, the island countries and the other members of the revived strategic alliance, i.e., QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), are searching to mitigate the emerging challenges. India received a signal from the Chinese through the growing protests against the MALABAR naval exercises. Eventually, the growing Chinese belligerence compelled India to revisit and reformulate its strategic parameters so far as the Indo-Pacific mechanisms are a concern.

In addition, Chinese initiatives prevailing among the South Asian countries also irritate India to manoeuvre its Indo-Pacific interests. China's initiatives in South Asia, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), String of Pearls strategy, and strengthened ties with countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, pose challenges to India's Indo-Pacific interests (Zhou, et al. 2023). The BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, perceived as compromising India's territorial integrity, and strategic maritime infrastructure projects raise concerns of encirclement (Mohan 2018). Additionally, China's economic and military engagements with neighbouring countries may impact India's regional influence (Singh 2023). The 2017 Doklam standoff further underscored the complex geopolitical dynamics between India and China, adding to India's challenges in safeguarding its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Incidents like the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 and the Doklam issue of 2017 forced India to reactivate its expertise in supply chain mechanisms and technology production capacity.

Moreover, during the pandemic phase, the geo-strategic construct named QUAD took traction, even though this initiative was formalised from 2017 onwards. However, it has been viewed that New Delhi's stance towards QUAD is not explicitly an anti-China stance but rather a strategic move towards protecting its interests from the revisionist attitude of China. The challenges related to India's strategic ambitions could be managed through pluralistic foreign policy by keeping QUAD as a central nerve to build more engagement with the sustaining power structure.

On the other hand, this narrative depicts a clear ascendancy over an alternative revisionist entity. This chapter is divided mainly into three major sections. The first part perceives the way towards conceptualizing how QUAD has revived as a lifeline in the geo-strategic theatre of the Indo-Pacific region. It will also examine the role of India as a QUAD member and how New Delhi is trying to address the latest non-conventional non-military challenges related to maritime governance and management. It will also try to understand and analyze the role of existing regional organizations and groupings like BIMSTEC, IORA, East Asia Summit etc., in augmenting the solutions related to port management, piracy, climate effects, trade mechanisms, etc.

3. Unpacking the Revival Status of QUAD

The QUAD as a grouping has set its foundation as an informal setup and these four countries (USA, Australia, India & Japan) came together to have a coordinated initiative and accordingly

response to the 2004 tsunami in the Indian ocean. In the year 2007, the then Japanese Prime minister Shinzo Abe have taken an initiative to formalize the responses of the four nations with respect to disastrous phenomenon Tsunami into a quadrilateral security dialogue. However, the rise of Chinese assertive nature within the Indo pacific region have compelled these four countries to reset the tune to refurbished the aspects related to freedom of navigation, stability, peace in the Pacific Ocean as these parameters are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation within the Indian Ocean region. On the other hand, the rebirth of QUAD can be ascribed to the coercive nature or rather a monopolistic attitude of China, as the concerted efforts among the like-minded countries have set a pathway and elevated the status of QUAD as a grouping to the ministerial level dialogue.

Initially, the two consultative meetings were held among the officials from foreign ministries of Australia, India, Japan and the USA in November 2017 and June 2018. The central theme of this meeting was the enhancement of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific, and to actualize this notion, the QUAD members proposed seven core themes. Another prominent factor behind defining the exclusive characteristic of the QUAD alliance is that this alliance consists of four democratic countries who came together to usher in a kind of platform that would break the conventional stature of a regional consultative forum. It will involve many militaries and other security aspects which demand utmost attention so far as the maritime environment is concerned. This proposed initiative could be validated by the statement proposed by Shyam Saran that “QUAD 1.0 (*An American proposed term*) was formed with an understanding that it would not involve military dimension rather will only sustain as a regional consultative domain” [Shyam Saran, India's former Foreign Secretary, notes that China criticized the emergence of the QUAD in 2005 itself during the first India-China strategic dialogue. The Indian view was that this initiative was more of a consultative mechanism and did not subscribe to any military understanding. (Saran, 2017)]

As mentioned above, India initially hesitated to endorse the QUAD proposal publicly. Still, the Japanese progressive attitude about these initiatives (*Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific*) stimulated India to indulge in many trilateral forums like US-India-Japan and India-Australia-Japan (Australian government n.d.). Moreover, this phenomenon received more thrust when the Commander of the US Pacific Command, Harry B. Harris, acknowledged the importance of India and her pro-active engagement in the region (Yeung 2022). Considering the other perceptions, another question frequently lingers: whether India's engagement in QUAD is disguised to contain China or whether India will sustain with a balancing approach. To answer this question, the status of India's re-defining Indo-Pacific strategy reaffirms India's changing priorities so far as the Look East Policy, mainly from economic to strategic aspects (Australian government n.d.).

Similarly, this perspective should also have to keep in mind that India's Indo-pacific strategy consists of several components, and among them, the China factor is a prominent one. The primary purpose behind revisiting the mechanism for India is to adjust with china inclusively. In this context, the vital point which cannot be sidelined is that while formulating India's Indo-Pacific strategy, the presence of ASEAN is essentially addressed by India. India is also seeking to

harmonize its Act East Policy with the ASEAN outlook of Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis its initiatives (ASEAN 2019). As a vital partner in the QUAD grouping, India's target is to explore various scope of her alliance with like-minded countries (especially ASEAN members) to strengthen its economic interests wrapped with the security aspects (Smith 2021). The crisis has been observed in the case of ASEAN that the consolidation status of QUAD may affect their approach towards the Indo-Pacific region (Crisis of ASEAN Centrality). However, to dilute this status in the case of ASEAN, India should build a relational status, which will elevate the desire to stitch together a workable and actionable partnership among themselves to mitigate the latest challenges from the Chinese end. Among the challenges, the most critical factor is the US-China friction in the relationship, which may cause fault lines among the ASEAN nations regarding which side to be chosen (ASEAN 2019).

Hence, being a QUAD member, India should factorize the calculation among the ASEAN countries by considering subtle aspects of military and non-military issues thoroughly. The ASEAN Plus and the small island countries should consider India, a prominent stakeholder to nurture other economic and cultural relations among themselves. The favourable instance which can be traced from the event of the 18th ASEAN-India summit was that India spontaneously adhered to the centrality of ASEAN, along with the theme of this summit, *"We care, we prepare, we prosper"* which is an important note to the world when the strength of India-ASEAN relation is under the testing mode, and the resilience of the ASEAN community has also been interrogated (PMO 2021). The existing notion about the QUAD and AUKUS security pact that has queered the pitch regarding pre-existing multilateral mechanisms by ASEAN has been resurrected by the recent joint statement of QUAD leaders (Government of India 2021).

4. Areas of Convergence between ASEAN and QUAD, An Incentive to 'Act East Policy

This current geopolitical complexity of the Asian world order in particular and the global order in general ushers a necessary configuration among ASEAN and quad member countries. However, in the recent India-ASEAN summit, few calculative measures have been adopted by the countries in search of new ways of collaboration per the fractious regional security ambit. By stating in the 18th India-ASEAN- India Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned that the post-pandemic challenges had created a testing ground for India-ASEAN friendship. Essentially, India as a quad member and ASEAN country has to utilize the potential areas of convergence between (AOIP) and (IPOI) and the way through which India could actively engage in the aspects like cooperation in maritime governance, dealing with the issues related to economic security and sustainable utilization of natural resources etc. (PMO 2021).

On the other hand, to furnish well the economic relational status among the countries, effort must be given to narrow down the developmental gap (particularly the social infrastructural development) so that the countries could function actively in the R&D related to vaccine production and its associated developments. Both the group also agreed to bring the existing groupings together like IORA, BIMSTEC, the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth

Triangle (IMT-GT), Mekong sub-regional cooperation frameworks, including Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). India has stimulated these initiatives by announcing 1 million US dollars to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. Additionally, emphasis has been given to the crucial parameter, i.e., the importance of connectivity and an offer of 1 billion US dollars was announced as a Line of Credit to assist ASEAN's goal of physical and digital connectivity (Government of India 2021). At the same pace, ASEAN members also highlighted the adoption of the ASEAN–India Plan of Action for 2021–2025.

While practicing these convergence interests, the prevailing challenges also need to be addressed equally, and it demands a contingent diplomatic initiative among the quad members and the ASEAN group. It is a known fact that among the like-minded countries, India holds the most significant scope to act minutely while addressing the disruptions emerging from the Chinese belligerence.

China's rise as an emerging economy created exciting opportunities for many emerging actors worldwide. In 2020, China became the world's largest merchandise trader, with a total trade volume of \$4.6 trillion (Feingold 2023). Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, involves over 140 partner countries, and by 2020, China had invested more than \$150 billion in BRI projects (NEDOPIL 2022). China's technological prowess is evident in its 2020 spending of \$378 billion on research and development, making it the second-largest spender globally (WANG 2023). With a consumer market of over 1.4 billion people, China's retail sales reached \$6.6 trillion in 2020, making it a pivotal market for businesses worldwide (Potts 2023).

India and China's bilateral trade reached \$115.83 billion in 2021, with a growth of 34% (India Brand Equity Foundation 2023). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects offer infrastructure development opportunities for India (G. Singh 2023). China's spending on research and development in 2020 was \$378 billion (Testbook Edu Solutions Pvt. Ltd. 2023). With over 1.4 billion consumers, China's market represents significant export potential for India (Clear IAS 2022). India has been actively participating in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), where China is a major contributor, to aid its infrastructure development (The Economic Times 2023). However, these opportunities necessitate careful management of the trade deficit and geopolitical complexities for a mutually beneficial relationship. However, despite all the favourable developments, anxiety still exists in India, Asia and around the globe. The prevailing challenges can be divided into four ways, firstly, the Chinese opaque system of governance and its effects on the global system; secondly, China manages its economic parameters in a non-inclusive way that creates imbalances and market disruptions. Thirdly, China's revisionist pattern of gaining control over the territory like the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Himalayas etc., tactically using non-military means like road construction, island governance, civil aviation, fishing fleet etc. Fourthly, Chinese's ignorant nature toward international conventions while actualizing the factors like the proliferation of nuclear weapons, navigation, cyber security etc. There are certain existing harsh realities concerning the post-cold war inadequacies in the case of regulating regional security world order. Therefore, to revive those realities, India should adopt a balancing attitude

with a decisive nature that like-minded countries could quickly acclaim. This mechanism will help India to reconfigure its policy toward the Indo-Pacific region.

Being a quad member, New Delhi clearly explains the derivations regarding the '*Act East Policy*'. To reframe the strategic narrative concerning the Act East Policy, India should categorically prioritize her initiatives associated with the ASEAN and other like-minded democracies such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Among the given priorities, most significantly, India should validate its existence as a balancer in the Indo-Pacific region; India should also deepen its strategic outreach to capable and like-minded powers to calibrate the everyday challenges raised by the Chinese behaviour. Along with this, India must find common avenues for beneficial cooperation, with China being the rising power in Asia. Among the like-minded countries, Japan could be a favourable stakeholder after the USA as both Tokyo and New Delhi shared similar concerns about China's assertive behaviour, especially after 2009. In the case of Tokyo, India is a prominent partner in ensuring a conducive security environment for Japan's commercial interests and energy security. The two countries embarked upon anti-piracy operations and coast guard exercises. In the current dynamics of the post-pandemic world order, for Japan, India has emerged as an all-weather partner to deal with the challenges related to economic factors. Still, likewise, Indo-Japan relations continue to have obvious limitations like resource constraints, weakness in private sector communication etc. Despite showing mutual concerns about China's rise, India and Japan should be sensitive about the extra-regional or secondary security concerns.

Moreover, while doing a comparative analysis of the trade dynamics between ASEAN and China and ASEAN and India, the statistics reflect that India trails China by more than seven times, whose trade with the ASEAN was \$700 billion in 2020 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). After the ASEAN–China Free trade agreement (ACFTA), China's trade in ASEAN increased around “5–6 times between 1995–2017” — or in other words, China's share in ASEAN's imports “saw a steep rise vis-a-vis exports” (Nachiappan 2021). In this stature, the prominence of RCEP emerges where it is ostensibly meant to address the trade-in services gap between India-ASEAN countries and other signatories. The RCEP negotiations started in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, in November 2012, and India joined this group; even after entering preferential trade relationships, a modest growth rate has been observed among ASEAN, Japan and South Korea. However, while observing the future economic trajectories with India's entry into RCEP, it appears slim, but potential areas always exist to deepen specific economic ties with ASEAN countries (MEA, 2019). Since ASEAN and India are thriving as digital economies, the digital connectivity mechanism has become an essential parameter. Therefore, in August 2020, India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal emphasized refocusing trade on digital issues to increase bilateral trade to \$300 billion (The Hindu Business Line, 2020). The favourable effect of the Pandemic is that it has fueled the digital trade ties between ASEAN and India. Currently, the trends also reflect that ASEAN's booming digital economy is generating approximately \$150 billion per year, with connectivity and online services being the most significant components, making up nearly 35%–40% of revenue (Nachiappan 2021). These initiatives will accelerate India's dream of acting toward the east more effectively.

Additionally, the increase in tech startups in the ASEAN countries also creates a dynamic ecosystem for an Indian FDI.

On the other hand, the security aspects concerning India's defence approach to Southeast Asia are detrimental around the maritime domain. Additionally, since 2010 India has been actively involved in enhancing the process of naval modernization, considering the eastern water security reflecting the growing threat. Thus, geopolitically ASEAN remains pivotal in India's security initiatives.

5. QUAD, A Lifeline of India's Indo Pacific Strategy

The 21st-century changing geo-strategic circumstances created a compulsive ambience to alter the focus from Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific region. This notion is triggered by the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean as a strategic trade corridor that carries almost two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. Hence, eventually, the QUAD's primary objectives and cooperative content became evident, which involved the Indo-Pacific region as a geographical theatre for cooperation, especially considering economic and security matters. The objectives include strengthening collaboration in developing regional infrastructure and establishing a proper, free and rules-based, open regional order. Among the other vital parameters, the emphasis is on jointly maintaining the relaxed, prosperous and free Indo-Pacific region. E.g., In January 2018, India hosted the third Raisina Dialogue, a forum organized by the MEA and the ORF. Notably, high-ranking military leaders from the USA, Japan, India, and Australia participated, converging on a significant discussion topic—the perceived 'China Threat' (Zie, 2019). In the economic domain, the QUAD members are worried of the sceptical scenario that China could use the OBOR initiative as a financial tool and dominate other countries to mechanize its security and strategic goals. In this case, the quad countries should emphasize transparency in the infrastructural setup to sideline the non-transparent attributes involved in the OBOR-related phenomenon.

During the Australia-India (2+2) dialogue, External affairs minister S. Jaishankar clarified an essential aspect concerning QUAD in response to the Chinese misinterpretation that Quad is gradually trying to form an Asian NATO; he stated instead QUAD is a grouping or a platform of four countries who cooperate among themselves for or to actualize their respective benefits and the broader sphere for the benefit of the world (InsightsIAS n.d.). He added that QUAD would act more comprehensively, indulging crucial aspects that create a compulsive zone for the countries to work together. Indeed, it is evident that there has been a synergy among the quad navies since November 2020, when the Royal Navy of Australia joined India, Japan and USA navies for the Malabar exercise in the Bay of Bengal (BYJU'S Exam Prep n.d.). However, this naval exercise opened up many areas which proposed a series of multilateral engagements among the quad partners. In addition, India also revealed that she would hold a tri-service exercise with the royal navy to strengthen and equip Australia with nuclear power submarines (Ranade 2022). These periodical engagements reflect a broader picture that, through these dynamic engagements, India is seeking to give a clear message about the inclusive nature of regulatory mechanisms within the QUAD.

Moreover, prevailing observations show that New Delhi is no longer hesitant to offend Chinese sensitized activity in the western pacific. On the other hand, the existing fact shows that PLAN

holds the status of the world's second most powerful navy. However, the existing constraints that Chinese commanders face may cause a partial opportunity to mitigate the current gaps. Still, it would be folly for India to underestimate Chinese combat capacity. Hence, to remain strategized to deal with, the Indian Navy should navigate the Chinese naval activity in the Bay of Bengal so that India could successfully manage the Chinese build-up in the neighbourhood. Thus, to tackle this pattern, India should prioritize intelligence and information sharing and maritime diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal. There should be an assurance from New Delhi's end that Chinese-built facilities should not be utilized as supply hubs for PLAN warships and submarines. Holistically, quad engagement in the Indian Ocean would undoubtedly help develop the habits of cooperation with friendly naval powers. Similarly, to expand interoperability and to acquire critical strategic technology, India is engaging with the navies of Australia, Britain, France, Japan and the USA. Further, there is a global consensus that during the post-pandemic global framework, the nations should reformulate foreign trade policy in a manner that includes managing disruptions, addressing vulnerabilities etc. During this stature, India should grab the chance to leverage these developments to attract the global value chains, especially by developing partnerships with strategically and geopolitically aligned nations such as the members of the Quad. The additional decisive factor also critically mentioned in the joint statement is that the members would closely coordinate their economic, diplomatic and human rights policies. Thus, India, the severe victim of terrorism, will address the multi-variant interests in the Indo-Pacific region, blending Pacific interests in regional security with the counterbalancing needs that the pan-Asian expanse wants with the asymmetric rise of China.

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