

Prospects for the Quad in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Prospects for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) amongst Australia, India, Japan and the United States have been the focus of increased attention following the identification of an Indo-Pacific strategic framework, which has been endorsed by the four countries. The centrality of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific has been emphasised by the Quad. To take the dialogue forward, the Quad needs to urgently converge existing divergences regarding their individual definitions of the Indo-Pacific. Equal participation of all four Quad countries in maritime security cooperation is crucial for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific region. Three issues which require priority attention for realising the full potential of the Quad are the identification of a common framework of international law to uphold a “rules-based order”; implementing connectivity projects with a view to integrating the hinterland of land-locked states of Asia and Africa into the Indo-Pacific region; and integrating the security of all the major sea lanes of communication in the broad Indo-Pacific region into the Quad’s strategic footprint. This will require upholding the principle of international cooperation, so that the Quad can contribute constructively to securing an inclusive Indo-Pacific at a time of increased great power rivalry.

Introduction

During the past year, the prospects for the Quad have been the focus of increased strategic analyses. These prospects may be seen in terms of three broad areas: the wider strategic policy context, cooperation in the maritime security context, and the ability of the Quad in ensuring a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Background

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is widely credited with the naming of the four countries – Australia, India, Japan and the United States– as a quadrilateral grouping in 2007. Speaking before the Parliament of India on 22 August that year, Prime Minister Abe placed his proposal within the framework of the “confluence of the two seas”, joining the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. It is significant to note that the primary driver of Japan in advocating this framework continues to be the implementation of the “strategic global partnership” between India and Japan. The four principles underpinning this partnership are, in the words of the Japanese Prime Minister, “freedom, democracy, and the respect for basic human rights as well as strategic interests”.

Japan sees its strategic global partnership with India as “pivotal” for creating an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” along the “outer rim of the Eurasian continent”. This would enable a “broader Asia” to emerge, which would encompass the Pacific, where Japan feels partnership with the United States and Australia would be integrated into its ambit. The four countries of the Quad would be committed to an open and transparent network which “will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely”.¹

Prospects in the Strategic Policy Context

Between August 2007 and November 2017, the prospect for a common strategic framework for the Quad was beset with ambiguities. This was a consequence of attempting to integrate the strategic views of Australia, India and the United States into

the Japanese vision. The first divergence in strategic approaches came from Australia. On 05 February 2008, Stephen Smith, Australia's Foreign Minister, addressing a press conference with the visiting Foreign Minister of China, stated that Australia preferred to continue with a tri-lateral strategic dialogue between Australia, Japan and the United States, emphasising that "our alliance with the United States continues to form the fundamental bedrock of our defence, security and strategic arrangements". He added that "Australia would not be proposing" to join any strategic dialogue between Japan, the United States and Australia which included India.²

The United States, while aware of Japan's initiative on the Indo-Pacific and the role of the Quad in it, hedged between its commitment to the Asia-Pacific, which was anchored in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) context since 1989, and its looming conflict of strategic interests with China (which had been a part of APEC since 1991). Both Australia and Japan were an integral part of the APEC. The United States kept China out of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was signed in April 2016, but repudiated by the Trump Administration of the United States on 23 January 2017. The decision by the other TPP countries, including Australia and Japan, to go ahead with the agreement without the United States created strategic space for the Trump Administration for endorsing the Indo-Pacific framework³, and refocus on the Quad. India was not included in either the APEC or the TPP.

The strategic framework of the "Indo-Pacific" in the context of the previous engagement of three of the Quad members (Australia, Japan and the United States) in consolidating an Asia-Pacific security structure throws up the question of what is meant by the "Indo-Pacific"? This is perhaps the most challenging issue when looking at the prospects of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific.

In October 2017, the definition of the Indo-Pacific given by the United States was contained in a highly publicised speech by the then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson before his first official visit to India. He forecast that the "Indo-Pacific, including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them, will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st

century”.⁴ Inexplicably, this broad definition of the scope of the Indo-Pacific was reduced by the National Security Strategy of the United States, published by the White House in December 2017. According to this document, the Indo-Pacific “stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”.⁵

Australia’s White Paper on Foreign Policy of 2017 termed the Indo-Pacific as the “region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States”.⁶ The “Eastern Indian Ocean” is defined by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) to extend from the Bay of Bengal to the western coast of Australia.⁷

Japan’s definition in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2007 speech to India’s Parliament was followed up in 2017 by Japan “envisioning” the two continents of Asia and Africa and the two oceans, viz. the Pacific and Indian oceans, “as an overarching, comprehensive concept” connected through “a free and open Indo-Pacific”.⁸

Speaking at the prestigious Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 01 June 2018, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi defined the Indo-Pacific as stretching “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas”,⁹ which incorporated the entire Indian and Pacific oceans.

If the Quad is seen to be operating within the strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific, then the current narrow definition of the Indo-Pacific region by the United States and Australia undercuts the broad approach articulated by Japan and India. This makes the prospects for strategic cooperation between the Quad uncertain, unless there is convergence between all four countries on the strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific.

Prospects for Maritime Security Cooperation

The ambiguity regarding the strategic scope of the Indo-Pacific is compounded by the divergences between the four Quad countries about their maritime military cooperation. Although not outlined in Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s proposal in 2007, the role of the four navies of Australia, India, Japan and the United States in

cooperating with each other in the Indo-Pacific has become a means for gauging progress on this aspect of the Quad's impact.

The Malabar naval exercise was initiated in 1992 as a bilateral framework for the Indian and United States navies to coordinate marine interdiction efforts to keep open sea lanes of communication. Ships of all four Quad countries participated in the Malabar Naval Exercises for the first time in September 2007, when the exercises were held off the Japanese island of Okinawa. Following the Australian decision in 2008 not to participate in any strategic dialogue involving the Quad, Australian naval vessels have not participated in the Malabar exercises held subsequently. The issue of Australia's participation in these exercises is unresolved till date.

On the other hand, Japan became a formal part of the Malabar exercises from 2015, following agreement between India and the United States to invite Japan into their bilateral naval exercise structure. Japan participated in the exercise held in the Bay of Bengal in October 2015, in the maritime waters of the Philippines in June 2016, in the Bay of Bengal in July 2017, and in United States maritime waters off Guam in 2018.

An important operational issue for effective maritime security cooperation among the navies of the Quad is the fact that while three of the navies operate within a military alliance framework (Australia-United States¹⁰, Japan-United States¹¹), India is not part of any military alliance. This brings up the question of decision-making by the Quad as a group. It is more than likely that decisions between the three military alliance partners (Australia, Japan and United States) would be aligned, leaving India to safeguard her interests in an unequal framework of decision-making.

A second issue is inter-operability of the navies of the Quad. As an Indian analyst has perceptively noted:

“The employment of hi-tech equipment in these exercises not only helps show-case superior technology, whose efficacy is keenly watched, but also leads to subsequent procurement deals thereby further boosting inter-operability and integration. The Poseidon

Eight India (P8I) long range maritime patrol aircraft procured by India from the US is a pertinent example in this regard.”¹²

For the Indian Navy, inter-operability in the Indo-Pacific also involves the sensitive interface between Indian naval equipment and technologies sourced from countries which are currently antagonistic (such as the United States and Russia). In turn, this is linked with the wider issue of sales of defence equipment and technology, and, in India’s case, the impact of such sales on India’s ambitious domestic manufacturing priority under the “Make in India” policy.

In terms of the future prospects for the Quad on maritime security issues, it appears that actual cooperation will take more time to implement. This was the conclusion drawn by Admiral Phil Davidson, the Commander-in-Chief of the US Indo-Pacific Command, after listening to the views at the panel of naval chiefs representing Australia, India, Japan and the United States at the 2019 Raisina Dialogue held in January 2019 in New Delhi.¹³

Prospects for the Quad in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

The third broad area when looking at the prospects of the Quad is the impact of their strategic and maritime cooperation in meeting the core national interests of each of the four countries in a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”. All four countries have different threat perceptions in the Indo-Pacific. This includes their approach to upholding the freedom of navigation along the sea and air routes of communication, and the increasingly critical issue of connectivity, in the Indo-Pacific. It also impacts on their prioritisation of jointly countering challenges identified by them like terrorism, proliferation and cyber issues. Beyond these specific issues is the larger interplay between the political and economic interests of Quad members and other countries in the Indo-Pacific.

If between 2007 and 2017 meetings of Quad officials were limited, since 2017 senior officials of the Quad have already met three times. Their first meeting was at Manila on the margins of the ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2017, followed by the second at Singapore on the margins of the ASEAN Summit on 07

June 2018, and the third at Singapore on 15 November 2018 on the margins of the East Asia Summit. These meetings have been useful in identifying the prospects for cooperation among the Quad in creating a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

As democracies, all four countries have emphasised the common values that bring them together. After the June 2018 meeting, the United States¹⁴, Japan¹⁵ and Australia¹⁶ reported that the issues discussed included connectivity; good governance; countering terrorism and proliferation; humanitarian assistance for disaster relief; and promoting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. All participants upheld the ASEAN-centrality of the Indo-Pacific architecture. India, in addition, emphasised the vision for the Indo-Pacific given in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement at the Shangri La Dialogue on 1 June 2018.¹⁷

Three issues will be important for the prospects of the Quad in this context: a common international legal framework for Quad actions, connectivity proposals in the western Indo-Pacific, and applying its principles equally to all the major sea lanes of communication in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Rules-based order

The Quad has said it will implement its vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific on a “rules-based” legal framework to secure freedom of navigation in the sea lanes of communication in the Indo-Pacific. For Australia¹⁸, India and Japan, which have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), this means the application of UNCLOS as international law to secure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. However, in the case of the United States, which has not ratified UNCLOS, the reference in the joint statements issued after Quad meetings to upholding a “rules-based” order and “the peaceful resolution of disputes” brings up the question of which international rules and laws will be applied by the United States in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific to ensure freedom of navigation?

A related issue at least for India and Japan is the potential use of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions as

applicable law in the Indo-Pacific by the United States. One of the primary reasons for both India and Japan seeking early reform of the UNSC is to become equal participants in decision-making by the Security Council, which is currently dominated by the five permanent members including the United States. Therefore, attempts to use the Quad to enforce UNSC resolutions will need to be accompanied by implementing the long-overdue structural and procedural reforms of the UNSC.

Connectivity

A second area where the Quad requires to integrate the priorities of member countries is on connectivity proposals in the Indo-Pacific. In a transparent reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the United States has elaborated that discussions included connectivity "consistent with international law and standards, based on prudent financing".¹⁹ After the November 2018 meeting, Australia stated that the meeting supported "broad economic development that harnesses the region's full potential and fosters connectivity and affirmed the importance of development of infrastructure based on principles of transparency and openness, meeting genuine need, avoiding unsustainable debt burdens and adherence to high standards."²⁰

However, so far there has been no public reference by the Quad to connectivity proposals by its own members. This includes the ambitious Asia-Africa Growth Corridor proposed by Japan and endorsed by India in the western Indo-Pacific, which can be an alternative to the BRI in the region. Speaking at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) held in Nairobi on 27 August 2016, Prime Minister Abe said "Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous."²¹

Similarly, the Quad has not publicly referred to significant connectivity projects like India's Chabahar project in the western Indo-Pacific, which will integrate a large area of land-locked Asia, including Afghanistan and Central Asia, into the Indo-Pacific. The

Chabahar project has until now been exempted from unilateral sanctions by the United States.²² Like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor project, the Chabahar project is also not aligned with the BRI.

Sea Lanes of Communication

A third area relates to applying the principle of freedom of navigation equally to all the major strategic sea lanes of communication in the Indo-Pacific. This would require expanding the focus of Quad discussions to all three major choke-points in the Indo-Pacific – the straits of Malacca, the straits of Hormuz and the straits of Bab al-Mandeb, which have a direct impact on the economic prosperity of Quad members.

The import of crude oil and petroleum products from the Middle East plays a significant role in the Australian economy, with “Asian refineries on which Australia depend(s) for at least 64 per cent of its imports of petroleum products, [sourcing] around 79 per cent of their refinery feedstock from the Middle East.”²³ Japan imports 85 per cent of its crude oil and 20 per cent of its liquified natural gas from the Middle East. India imports 53 per cent of her crude oil and 62 per cent for her liquified natural gas from the Gulf alone. Both Japan and India use the Red Sea “sea lanes of communication” for their international trade.²⁴ The strategic importance of these choke-points of communication has been emphasised within the United States as well.²⁵

In the wider perspective, the Quad would also need to factor in its approach towards alternative connectivity routes linking Europe to Asia through Russia and Iran, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which would offer an alternative to the east-west alignment of China’s BRI.

Conclusion

The prospects for the Quad in the immediate future would depend on its ability to focus its discussions and activity on these three priorities within a common definition of the strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific. There has been reference to issues like countering terrorism and proliferation after meetings of Quad officials. Both these issues are currently listed on the agenda of the UNSC. The capacity of the Quad to become active in

implementing UNSC decisions on these issues will depend on the outcome of overcoming the gridlock in negotiations on UNSC reform in the UN General Assembly, led by China. As far as the recent reference to “cyber issues” in Quad discussions is concerned,²⁶ the situation in cyberspace will be influenced as much by the activities of trans-national private sector entities as by governments. The Quad may need to take the lead in creating an effective framework for international multi-stakeholder cooperation in the cyber domain, starting with the Indo-Pacific, to have any impact.

Prospects for the impact of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific will also depend on relations between the individual countries of the Quad and China and Russia. While the focus on China has been publicly commented upon,²⁷ the on-going polemics between the United States and Russia as a Eurasian power have not been reflected yet in Quad discussions of the issues discussed relating to maritime security in the Indian and Pacific oceans. Nor has there been any reference to Russia in the rule of law framework discussions of UNSC decisions on the Indo-Pacific, in which maritime security issues such as combating piracy off the coast of Somalia²⁸ were addressed. In the expanding framework of major power confrontation in the Indo-Pacific, these issues will have a direct impact on the prospects of the Quad.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIX, No. 615, January-March 2019.