

## BEIJING'S BELLIGERENCE AND DHAKA'S PUSHBACK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

China's Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming (left), Bangladesh Foreign Minister Professor Dr. A. K. Abdul Momen (right) and Health Minister Zahid Maleque, in Dhaka. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

In May, in another brazen display of its 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, China issued a strange warning to Bangladesh, a nation that it has tried to cultivate assiduously over several years. While suggesting that China considers the Quad to be a minor anti-China initiative, the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, warned Dhaka that there will be "substantial damage" in bilateral ties between China and Bangladesh if the latter joins the Quad. It was an extraordinary statement by a diplomat in a host nation but it had all thechutzpah that Chinese diplomats think they deserve to embed in their seemingly non-diplomatic outpourings.

As was expected, Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen promptly and publicly challenged the Chinese envoy's statement, underlining categorically that Dhaka pursues an independent foreign policy. "It's very regrettable... We are an independent and sovereign state. We decide our foreign policy," he said. "They [the Chinese] can say what they want... We will listen to what they say. But we will decide what is good for us." There was some attempt at damage control with Mr. Li reportedly trying to explain his remarks to Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen later in a meeting where he apparently said that he "did not mean to harm the ties between the two countries" and that his remarks were taken "out of context." But the Chinese Foreign Ministry continued to target Quad "as a small clique against China" and said that "remarks expressing opposition to this mechanism are not about interference but about expressing opposition to small cliques and bloc politics. They also reflect the aspiration for maintaining regional peace and stability." That China's remarks would reverberate far beyond South Asia was expected and perhaps intended by Beijing itself. The spokesperson of U.S. State Department remarked, "What we would say is that we respect Bangladesh's sovereignty and we respect Bangladesh's right to make foreign policy decisions for itself."

This episode captures the emerging fault lines in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific in ways that are both revealing and challenging. As the tectonic plates in the Indo-Pacific shift, major players are making their moves and testing the waters. For all its attempts to play down the relevance of the Quad, Beijing realises that the grouping, with all its weaknesses, is emerging as a reality and there is little it can do to prevent that. It tried but failed. And so, it is agitated about Quad's future role and its potential success in offering the regional states an alternative to its own strong-arm tactics.

The Quad member states are busy in figuring out a cohesive agenda amongst themselves and there are no plans for an expansion. There is a desire to work with like-minded nations but that can only happen if the four members of the Quad can build a credible platform first. No one is sending out invitations to join Quad and no one has shown an interest. But Beijing wants to ensure that after failing in its initial attempt to prevent the Quad from gaining any traction, its message is well understood by other states who may harbour any desire of working closely with the Quad members to uphold a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. With its message to Dhaka, Beijing was laying down a marker that nations should desist from engaging with the Quad.

Of course, this aggressive diplomacy is likely to have the opposite effect, but that is for the future. For the moment, it is enough for Beijing to showcase its public disapproval of a platform

that has gained rapid traction. Beijing has failed to prevent nations from the West to the East from coming out with their Indo-Pacific strategies, it has failed to prevent the operationalisation of the Quad, and now it might be worried about other nations in the region thinking of engaging with the Quad more proactively. Even Bangladesh is planning to come out with its own Indo-Pacific strategy and Beijing has now warned Dhaka that a close cooperation with the Quad should not be part of the policy mix.

This is just the beginning. As the Quad gains more momentum and the churn in the waters of the Indo-Pacific leads to new countervailing coalitions against China, Beijing's belligerence can only be expected to grow. For many regional states in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, it has been a smooth ride so far with China being the only game in town. For all the criticism China has heaped on the Quad's members for trying to create an exclusive clique, it will be Beijing that is likely to demand clear-cut foreign policy choices from its regional interlocutors, as its outburst at Bangladesh underscores. But as Dhaka's robust response makes it clear, states are more likely to push back than become subservient to Chinese largesse.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

**END**

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