

QUAD: STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY OR QUAGMIRE?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

Indian Army fighter jets on the deck of an aircraft carrier during the second phase of the Malabar naval exercise in the Arabian Sea on November 18, 2020. India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. started the second phase of a strategic navy drill on November 17 >AF

On March 5, the Indian media carried news reports, based on remarks by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known briefly as Quad, would soon meet at summit level, thus signalling the importance attached to this grouping by the Biden administration. The Quad, which comprises the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, had in February been described by the U.S. State Department as having “essential momentum and important potential”.

India’s engagement with the Quad goes back to China’s expanding footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region over the last few years. China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, proposing logistical connectivity across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, rang alarm bells in India as the projects were viewed as encroachments into India’s strategic space. India responded with an upgradation of its naval capabilities and enhancement of ties with the Indian Ocean Region littoral states and other major powers in the region.

Separately, largely as a result of their shared concerns relating to the rise of China, India has been deepening its security ties with the U.S. Building on the initiatives of earlier administrations, the Obama and Trump presidencies focused on interoperability of defence equipment and training based on defence purchases, frequent land and sea exercises, and agreements harmonising the two countries’ military doctrines and operations.

The U.S.’s focus on the west Pacific due to aggressive Chinese maritime activity gradually pulled India into the ambit of the Indo-Pacific that views the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an integrated geopolitical space. Besides the U.S. navy, India expanded its maritime ties with other regional states, the most high-profile of the interactions being the Quad. Since November 2017, the joint naval exercises of Quad members are being supplemented by extensive consultations on security issues.

However, India’s involvement with the Quad was initially cautious due to its reluctance to join an overt anti-China coalition. For instance, at the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indo-Pacific as a “geographical definition” and firmly denied it was a “strategy” or a “club of limited members ... directed against any country”. Despite this, in September 2019, India agreed to elevate the Quad platform to ministerial level.

This had dire consequences. By affiliating with the U.S.-led maritime coalition, India ignored the principal areas of its security concerns; as former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon noted, “New Delhi and Washington see eye to eye on maritime strategy, but not on what to do on the Asian mainland”. India is the only Quad member that is not in the west Pacific and the only one that shares an undemarcated 3,500-km land border with China. From April 2020, Indian and Chinese forces had their latest border face-off in Ladakh, abruptly ending a long period of productive relations.

In retrospect, this confrontation appears to be China’s sharp response to the steady shift in India’s regional posture in favour of an alignment with the U.S. and its allies against China, particularly the increasing interoperability between the respective forces. China has given India a

rude reminder that India's security concerns lie in its northern borders, not the west Pacific.

The U.S. views China's rise as a threat to the world order it has led since the Second World War and is anxious to pull in allies to retard China's ambitions and maintain its global hegemony. Despite rhetoric relating to the promotion of a 'rules-based' world order (the rules being most frequently violated by the U.S. itself), the Quad neither shares a strategic vision nor is it animated by a shared agenda. This is obvious not only from its inability to deter China in the west Pacific, but also by its members' anxiety to maintain close ties with China.

Thus, in 2020 China became India's number one trade partner, with two-way trade at \$77 billion. Again, China-U.S. trade continues to favour China — American investors hold \$1 trillion of Chinese equity, and 75% of U.S. companies in China say they will continue to invest there.

The Quad has a core structural problem as well in that it pivots around the U.S. The U.S. is a super-power with global interests, but it is also self-centred in defining and pursuing its interests, even as its policies experience major shifts due to government change or domestic lobbies. Clearly, the Quad riles China as a hostile grouping, but hardly serves the security interests of its members.

Not surprisingly, the stand-off at Ladakh has been a bitter experience for India: it has affirmed the limits of India-U.S. security ties, the folly of Indian involvement in the Quad, and the need to focus national attention and resources in areas of abiding interest for India — the border, the neighbours and the Indian Ocean.

Ladakh also offers some valuable lessons for India. One, the rebuilding of ties with China will have to be a priority concern. Though it will take time for trust to be restored, what will help will be for India to dilute its focus on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad and accept that the borders and the Indian Ocean are where its crucial interests lie.

Two, the Ladakh experience has highlighted certain deficiencies at home: the government appears to be largely focused on reshaping the national ethos on the basis of a narrow and exclusive political ideology that has raised doubts about India's continued commitment to democratic pluralism. It hardly needs reiteration that India's capacities can only be built by a united people committed to the national cause.

Finally, foreign policy cannot be a part-time concern of the national leadership; in terms of priority and attention, it should be on a par with domestic affairs. While this approach is being corrected, it should also be noted that India's foreign policy has often been ad hoc, reactive and short term, reflecting the absence of a broad strategic culture. As the global scenario gets more complex and India's ambitions increase, a cohesive strategic vision would give substance and drive to India's pursuit of its interests over the long term.

Ladakh offers a clear blueprint for the content and direction of national policy. Implementing it will ensure that the martyrdom of our soldiers in the northern snows would not have been in vain.

Talmiz Ahmad served as Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE

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