

CONSOLIDATION OF THE QUAD REFLECTS DELHI'S POLITICAL WILL TO BREAK FREE FROM OLD SHIBBOLETHS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

Australia's participation in the annual Malabar exercises, kicking off this week in the Bay of Bengal, marks the emergence of the Quad as a new feature of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Although the recent decisions on its consolidation have all come in the final weeks of President Donald Trump's first term, the Quad is likely to endure, thanks to the strong institutional commitment in all four capitals — Canberra, Delhi, Tokyo and Washington.

The question is no longer about the Quad's sustainability, but India's ability to take full advantage of the possibilities after the US elections to construct a wide range of new international coalitions. Despite many ideological contentions between them, Republicans and Democrats agree on the need for an overhaul of global structures to cope with the emerging challenges.

The likely changes could envelop a range of old institutions like the Five Eyes — the Anglo-American alliance for sharing intelligence between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — and the G-7 grouping that coordinates Western policies on global economic management. We could also see the creation of a new League of Democracies that will address a wide range of issues, including the defence of shared values, commerce, corruption, taxation, climate change and digital governance.

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The consolidation of the Quad reflects the political will in Delhi to break free from old shibboleths and respond to security imperatives. The post-Quad era opens a new phase in which India, for the first time, can help shape global institutions.

Changing the world was indeed a major theme of newly independent India's aspiration in the middle of the 20th century. But the gap between Delhi's ambition and impact was large. If idealism was the hallmark of India's internationalism in the 1950s, the harsh politics of the Cold War quickly dampened it. In the 1970s, India embraced the radical agenda of a New International Economic Order, as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77. The results were meagre.

The third phase began with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the unipolar moment and the Washington Consensus in favour of globalisation. And as India's own economic model collapsed, Delhi had no option but to temper its political ambitions, put its political head down, focus on economic reform and prevent the world from intruding too much into its internal affairs. While the imperative of growth demanded a greater engagement with the West, the fear of the US activism on Kashmir and nuclear issues saw Delhi turn to Russia and China in search of a "multipolar world" that could constrain American power. The BRICS forum with Russia, China, Brazil and South Africa became emblematic of this strategy.

Delhi soon found that differences with the US on Kashmir and nuclear issues were easing, thanks to George W Bush's policies. But Kashmir and the nuclear question became part of

India's deepening territorial and political disputes with China. Delhi also figured out that it was not possible for BRICS to constrain Beijing, since China was so much bigger than the other four members put together. As India's focus inevitably shifted to the construction of a "multipolar Asia", the Quad and its central role in constructing a stable balance of power in Asia became apparent.

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That brings us into the fourth phase in India's multilateralism that is marked by three features — the relative rise in Delhi's international standing, the breakdown of the great power consensus on economic globalisation, and the breakout of the US-China rivalry.

Shaken by the aggressive Chinese strategy to weaken the US-led post-War architecture, both Republicans and Democrats are eager to reorder international institutions. The Trump administration has already sought to imagine the Quad's possibilities beyond the defence domain. The invitation to India to join a Five Eyes meeting earlier this month in Tokyo on communications security came amidst the bipartisan calls in the US Congress for the expansion of the forum and the inclusion of India. While an early expansion of the forum is not on the cards, it appears interested in developing wider circles of intelligence sharing and cooperation.

The "Quad Plus" dialogue, which began this spring at the initiative of the Trump Administration, has variously drawn in Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam for consultations with the Quad members on coordinating the responses to the [pandemic](#). Variations on this theme are of considerable interest to the Democrats. India is also engaged with Japan and Australia in developing resilient supply chains to reduce the reliance on China.

Both Republicans and Democrats are veering around to ideas of the "free world" coming together to set up new international coalitions to address the emerging challenges from China. President Trump has proposed the expansion of G-7 grouping to include Australia, India, Russia and South Korea. The Democrats are opposed to the inclusion of Russia, and Joe Biden has promised to convene a summit of major democracies soon after he takes charge.

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The last few months has seen the Trump administration promote a "Clean Network" that eliminates untrustworthy vendors from telecom systems, digital apps, trans-oceanic cables and cloud infrastructure. While it began with the targeting of Chinese suppliers like [Huawei](#), Clean Network is now a broader effort to build secure technology ecosystems among like-minded countries.

Britain is said to be developing plans to convene a coalition of 10 democracies, including India, that can contribute to the construction of secure 5G networks and reduce the current dependence on China. France and Canada have invited India to join the Global Partnership on artificial intelligence that now includes 15 countries. The objective is to promote responsible development of AI that is consistent with shared democratic values.

One of the most consequential developments after the US elections will be the demand to reform the global trading system that has been distorted by Chinese success in subverting it. If Trump wins, his assault on the World Trade Organisation could be fiercer than now. To be sure, Biden has been supportive of multilateralism in general. But pressure from Trump as well as the working classes and the progressives in his own party have compelled Biden to promise there

will be no return to an ideologically driven free trade policy.

Biden has also joined Trump in emphasising the case for an American industrial policy and “Buy American” strategy that could run counter to the WTO rules. As Delhi emphasises a similar agenda for itself in building an “Atmanirbhar India”, it becomes important to engage the US on rewriting the global trade rules.

Looking ahead to the next US administration, the Quad could soon become routine and boring. The real excitement will be about Delhi’s participation in the sweeping rearrangement of the global structures that will have major consequences for India’s economic prosperity and technological future. Unlike in the past, Delhi now has the resources, leverage and political will to make a difference to the global order.

This article first appeared in the print edition on November 3, 2020 under the title ‘Outside the Quad’. The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)

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