

**INDIA AND THE QUADRILATERAL
SECURITY DIALOGUE:
FROM A HESITANT TO
COMMITTED PARTNER**

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Executive Summary

1. The Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprising Japan, Australia, India and the United States, was revived in 2017 after being in abeyance since the idea was first proposed in 2007.
2. The first iteration of the Quad turned out to be a false start not least because of the lack of a clear purpose. Australia's withdrawal and India's reluctance to embrace it because of the staunch opposition from China, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's departure from Japan's leadership position in late 2007, all added to its abandonment.
3. China's vigorous criticism was also a factor against its further development. None of the countries, especially India and Australia, wanted to annoy China. They aimed to engage and deepen their economic ties with the rising economic powerhouse.
4. The Quad's rebirth can be attributed to the changing strategic landscape, in particular China's growing assertiveness and often unacceptable, even coercive economic and military behaviour. There are growing concerns about China among Quad members and a willingness to cooperate on issues of regional and global concerns.
5. Coalition building of nations with similar goals and strategic outlook is one approach that the Quad nations have adopted to handle China's deemed unacceptable behaviour. The re-formed Quad complements the Japan-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific and is a capstone project of strategic partnerships between and among the four members, bilaterally and trilaterally.
6. India was initially a reluctant Quad partner. Some even called it the weakest link and suspected its credentials. However, recent developments suggest that India is now a willing partner and a strong member. India's hesitancy dissipated with its 2020 border skirmish with China.

7. India is no doubt an odd member of the Quad. The others are in a military alliance and a ‘hub and spokes’ relationship. India is neither an ally of the United States nor in a military alliance with any partner. While tying itself closely and tightly to the United States and partner nations’ strategies in the Quad, India maintains its policy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment.
8. Unlike other Quad partners, India engages Russia and China via minilateral frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) groupings.
9. Despite India’s attachment to its strategic autonomy and its continuing institutionalised engagement with China and Russia, it is now clear that India has embraced the Quad process much more tightly. This engagement is unlikely to change as India considers Quad partners as like-minded nations.

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Purnendra JAIN*

India in the Quad's Trajectory from 2007 to 2021

- 1.1 The Quad's emergence can be located back to the December 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami that struck many countries in the Indian Ocean region and claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people. Australia, Japan, India and the United States responded swiftly by harnessing their resources and working cooperatively towards human assistance and disaster relief.
- 1.2 This joint mission heralded a new-found synergy that gradually turned into a new four-nation framework, the Quad, or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, essentially led by Japan's then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe after he took office in September 2006. In a joint statement, Japan and India expressed their desire to begin a dialogue with 'other like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific region on themes of mutual interest'.¹
- 1.3 The cheerleader for India was most definitely Abe who advocated the hitherto neglected India's crucial role in his book, even before he became prime minister.² In his book *Utkushii Kuni e*, Abe persuaded his interlocutors and counterparts in Washington and Canberra to form a maritime grouping including India at the first working-level meeting of the four nations held on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Manila in 2007.³

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¹ <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6368/Joint+Statement+Towards+IndiaJapan+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership> (accessed 23 August 2021).

² Abe Shinzo (2006). *Utkushii Kuni e (Towards a beautiful country)*, Tokyo: Bungei Shinsho, pp. 158-61.

³ <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/shinzo-abe-legacy-new-delhi-japa-india-strategic-ties-quad> (accessed 23 August 2021).

- 1.4 Much has been written about the formation of such a grouping, ranging from a ‘US-led alliance’, an ‘axis of democracies’, a ‘security diamond’, to a ‘China containment’ project.⁴ Whatever the objectives, the enthusiasm soon dissipated with little appetite to pursue it further, especially in view of fierce protests from China, framing it as a NATO-like alliance and an anti-China axis. Chellaney dubbed it ‘an inharmonious concert of democracies’.⁵
- 1.5 Over the years, there has been a wide-ranging debate and finger pointing for the Quad being consigned to the dustbin of history at birth. Australia’s then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd explained his role as the perceived spoiler, arguing that there was little desire for it among Quad nations and for their ditching it. Rudd vehemently dismissed as ‘right-wing zealots’ those who advanced him as being the prime villain.⁶
- 1.6 The spotlight on Rudd continued because his Foreign Minister Stephen Smith announced Australia’s detachment from the Quad with his Chinese counterpart standing behind him. This did not go down well in many partner capitals and was perceived negatively around the region, more generally.⁷ Australia particularly loathed India’s inclusion in such a dialogue and wanted to continue only with the United States and Japan.⁸ Rudd also announced Australia’s withdrawal from future Malabar exercises after participating in 2007, signalling Canberra’s complete withdrawal from the Quad.
- 1.7 The 2007 Quad did not catch further tailwind both because of China’s strong opposition and the domestic circumstances in each of the Quad nations (e.g. the sudden resignation of Abe, the Quad’s chief protagonist), but the idea behind it did

⁴ Tanvi Madan, ‘The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the Quad’, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/> (accessed 27 September 2021).

⁵ Brahma Chellaney, “‘Quad Initiative’: an inharmonious concert of democracies”, *Japan Times*, 19 July 2007.

⁶ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-Convenient-Rewriting-of-the-History-of-the-Quad> (accessed 27 August 2021).

⁷ Many of my interlocutors around the region over the years have made this point to me.

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/australia-to-pull-out-of-quad-that-excludes-china/articleshow/2760109.cms> (accessed 7 August 2021).

not vanish. Instead of pursuing the four-way framework, each began to strengthen its ties economically and strategically via bilateral and trilateral frameworks.

- 1.8 India eventually came to be seen as a key component of a new regional geometry. As Smith writes: ‘A once-reluctant partner has become a new driver of a critical coalition’.⁹ While China began to be construed as revisionist and a strategic threat, India was perceived as a friendly, like-minded and status quo nation that supports the existing global order led by the United States. As relations with China began to deteriorate, India emerged on the global stage as a more attractive nation geo-strategically.
- 1.9 When Abe returned to office in 2012, his focus on India became sharper and India became an integral part and partner of Abe’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, a geo-political vision that gave a new lease of life to the Quad concept.
- 1.10 The Quad re-emerged when Prime Minister Abe invited officials of each member country to meet in Manila in 2017. The meeting was subsequently elevated to foreign minister level in September 2019 and a second face-to-face meeting of foreign ministers was held in Tokyo in October 2020 despite the global pandemic. With the election of Joe Biden as US president, the Quad progressed to a leaders’ level summit in March 2021, albeit virtually.
- 1.11 The Quad’s quick scaling to foreign ministers and finally to leaders’ level, conveyed the growing consensus among Quad nations of the need to take joint action over the deteriorating global strategic environment. The grouping issued its first joint statement following the Quad summit in 2021; earlier officials and foreign ministers’ meetings did not produce any statements, only ‘read outs’ issued separately by each nation.¹⁰

⁹ Jeff Smith, ‘How to keep India all-in on the Quad’, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/india-quadrilateral-security-dialogue-us-australia-japan-china-russia/> (accessed 7 August 2021).

¹⁰ According to a press statement, officials of the four countries at the “quad” meeting in 2017 agreed that a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and the world at large. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/modi-holds-first-quad-meet-with-us-japan-australia-to-meet-trump-today-117111200627_1.html (accessed 17 August 2021).

- 1.12 Senior officials of the Quad nations met online in August 2021, acknowledged their commitment to the process and to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. The first leaders' level meeting confirmed the Quad's staying power, reinforced by an in-person leaders' meeting held in September 2021 in Washington DC hosted by President Joe Biden. In a joint statement the four leaders, namely President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated their commitment 'to refocus ourselves and the world on the Indo-Pacific and on our vision for what we hope to achieve. Together, we recommit to promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond'.¹¹
- 1.13 India's crucial role in the Quad process is now solidified even though India is not a military ally, nor is it willing to see the world entirely from the eyes of the other Quad partners. It maintains its strategic autonomy and engages China and Russia via SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

The China Factor and India

- 2.1 That China was one of the key reasons for the disbanding of the Quad soon after it was formed in 2007 and the critical factor behind the Quad's revival in 2017 is beyond doubt. Abe's initial proposal was made in the context of deteriorating Japan-China relations around 2005. Abe identified India as an important partner and pursued Japan's engagement with India. He believed that India's participation was crucial for devising an effective cooperative mechanism to maintain a global order based on the rule-of-law. India was an important player in Abe's idea of the 'arc of freedom and prosperity'.
- 2.2 Around this time, India began to be globally perceived as a rising nation of 1.3 billion people, similar to China, and with immense economic potential. New Delhi's economic reform programmes coupled with the opening up of the Indian economy

¹¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/> (accessed 27 September 2021).

made India appear as the democratic antidote to the People's Republic surveillance capitalist state. Comparing India with China became a new cottage industry, and analysts offered perspectives on the two nations' economic and geo-political impact on the existing world order.¹²

- 2.3 While India's *potential* was recognised, China's presence on the world stage was exceptional. With China's critical role in stabilising the global economy in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China's global standing took a big leap forward to overtake Japan's as the world's number two economy in 2010.
- 2.4 With China's economic prosperity came the country's diplomatic and military assertiveness; Beijing doubled down on its irredentist claims on maritime and territorial spaces, claims which accelerated with the rise of Xi Jinping in 2012. With Xi in power, Beijing became a matter of greater concern and indeed for some a threat around the Indo-Pacific region.
- 2.5 Today, there are now even greater concerns about China, especially in its potential to forcefully assimilate Taiwan, clamp down on Hong Kong's democratic movement and treatment of minorities, mainly the Turkic/Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang.
- 2.6 Despite strategic concerns around the world, China remains the largest trading partner of all Quad nations and of many more around the world. In 2020, China was the largest trading partner of India with close to US\$88bn in two-way trade. Despite boycotts of Chinese goods after the Galwan Valley border skirmish, China-India trade increased by more than 60% in the first two quarters of 2021 because of the larger volume of Chinese exports to India.¹³

¹² For example, David Smith, *The Dragon and the Elephant: China, India and the New World Order*, 2007, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1861978154?tag=eco0b-21&camp=1406&creative=6394&linkCode=as1&creativeASIN=1861978154&adid=1WGPNS5Q8N5CCXS70P5K&> (accessed 20 August 2021); and Robyn Meredith, *The Elephant and the Dragon: The Rise of India and China and What it Means for all of us*, 2007, <https://www.amazon.com/Elephant-Dragon-India-China-Means/dp/0393331938> (accessed 20 August 2021).

¹³ <https://theprint.in/economy/indias-imports-from-china-rise-despite-boycott-calls-pandemic-but-this-may-not-last/710615/> (accessed 27 September 2021).

- 2.7 While India-China trade has increased, India has been cautious of China's technology and growing footprint around India and in the Indian Ocean, a strategic maritime domain where India wants to maintain its dominance. India has kept Chinese suppliers out of 5G technology trials in India and refused to endorse Beijing's multi-trillion dollar global infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India opposes BRI's flagship Pakistan project – the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – that passes through the contested territory of Kashmir.
- 2.8 Despite pushback in certain economic and technology areas, China's economic power is immense and the world economy is tied to China. Decoupling, though much talked about, remains a difficult proposition and an impracticable one for many.
- 2.9 While concerned nations have no choice but to remain engaged with China, at least economically and willing to cooperate on some global issues of humanity such as climate change, there is a growing consensus to check not just China's strategic designs and its military behaviour, but also its use of coercive economics which Beijing often deploys to inflict damage on those it considers weak, co-dependent or recalcitrant.
- 2.10 It is not just the Indo-Pacific nations but also extra-regional powers such as EU nations and Britain which have raised concerns about China's economic and strategic designs. To make a point of its concern for China's military activities in the maritime space Britain, for example, decided to send its aircraft carrier strike group, led by the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, to the South China Sea, provoking the expected strong response from China.
- 2.11 China dismissed the Quad as 'sea foam' which would dissipate and characterised it as an Indo-Pacific NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). However, China seems to understand that the Quad is not going to dissipate easily, complicating Beijing's strategic ambitions.¹⁴

¹⁴ Kevin Rudd, 'Why the Quad Alarms China', <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-06/why-quad-alarms-china> (accessed 1 September 2021).

- 2.12 So far China has shown little regard for the concerns raised by its behaviour among many nations around and beyond the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, China marches on and appears to be willing to lock horns with the United States strategically and economically as it is convinced of its innate superiority and the inevitability of America's declining power.

Background to India's Indo-Pacific and Quad Engagement

- 3.1 Today, India is a key nation on the Indo-Pacific map. Since 1989 and the post-Cold War era when nations began to realign following the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional institutions have been revamped and reorganised. India stood at the periphery of Asia. Its close ties with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, pursuit of non-alignment, politico-strategic distance from the American-led alliance system and autarkic economy made the country an unappealing partner to key regional players such as Japan, Australia and the United States.
- 3.2 When Japan and Australia were busy designing a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific region that culminated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, China was given a prominent place but India was sidelined for its unattractive economic policy.
- 3.3 India's strategic and economic isolation continued while New Delhi was searching for new ways to engage with the region beyond its immediate neighbourhood and past connections with the Soviet Union and the new Russian Federation. To that end India launched its 'Look East' policy in the early 1990s and set itself on a path towards economic liberalisation away from its 'licence and permit' Raj (rule) of state control on business and economic activities.
- 3.4 Around this time India became more attractive to the wider world, but its 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests shocked the international community and many, including Japan, Australia and the United States, reacted with condemnation and opprobrium, sending New Delhi into diplomatic damage control.

- 3.5 It was not until the visit of American President Bill Clinton in March 2000 that international sentiment towards India began to warm. Since 2000 India's diplomatic community and political class have sought deeper and wider ties with the global community including Japan, the United States, ASEAN and Australia while maintaining its ties to Russia and managing China. The current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has continued with the broad foreign directions set out by his predecessors Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee.
- 3.6 Today, India is attractive to the United States, Japan, Australia and many other Western powers as a counterweight to China and for its economic potential, coupled with its crucial role in the Indian Ocean, an area of concern to many because of China's growing economic presence and military activity. While New Delhi engages these nations to the utmost, it treads carefully, conscious of its immediate neighbourhood and the difficult strategic environment and challenges emanating therefrom.

India's Reluctance and Gradual Embrace of the Quad

- 4.1 India's initial reluctance to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad has been extensively noted.¹⁵ India was not opposed to Abe's proposals and was indeed willing to work with Japan as closely as possible. The hesitancy was about establishing a formal collective including the United States and Australia which will be construed as an informal alliance and against its principle of 'strategic autonomy'. It needed to delicately manage its relations with China and Russia, both of which were particularly critical of such formations. Clearly India is not in 'alliance' with the United States as Japan and Australia are, and New Delhi's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' and foreign policy the 'India way' were some of the reasons for India's hesitancy to enthusiastically embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific and of the Quad.
- 4.2 While hesitancy prevailed, India has cultivated closer ties bilaterally with a range of nations in the Indo-Pacific, most significantly with the United States and Japan.

¹⁵ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325490836_India_the_Indo-Pacific_and_the_Quad (accessed 10 August 2021).

With Japan in particular, India developed strong strategic ties reflected in the deepening of defence and security relations. For example, late in 2020, the two countries signed the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to allow their defence forces share supplies, such as food and fuel, and reciprocally provide communications and transportation services during joint drills and rescue operations in case of disasters. Tokyo has signed such an agreement only with the United States and alliance partners like the UK, France, Canada and Australia. India is Japan's sixth and first non-Western and non-US-ally ACSA partner. This shows the high level of trust that India enjoys in Tokyo as a strategic partner.

- 4.3 An annual summit between Japanese and Indian prime ministers since 2006, with subsequent long joint statements, is an exceptional act of engagement at the highest level.
- 4.4 Delhi-Tokyo ties began to develop faster than any other during Abe's first stint as prime minister (2006-2007). The momentum continued even while Abe was out of office and accelerated with his return as prime minister in 2012.¹⁶ The two nations have signed many agreements covering security, defence and economic matters, reconfirming their complementarities and commitment to shared strategic views of the region and beyond. So important has India been seen in Tokyo that Japan even lowered its guard on India's nuclear policy, a long-held sticking point, and signed a nuclear agreement with India. China was the key factor in these enhancements of relations.¹⁷
- 4.5 With Canberra, Delhi's relations were on a roller-coaster during the 2000s and deteriorated sharply under Rudd, who attached little importance to India and was essentially focused on China. Relations became even more difficult after Rudd ditched the Quad and withdrew from the Malabar exercises.¹⁸ Relations began to

¹⁶ Horimoto, Takenori (2017). *Gendai Nichi 'In Kankei Nyumon* (Introduction to Contemporary Japan-India Relations), Tokyo: Todai Shuppan.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive overview of their bilateral ties, see Horimoto Takenori (ed.) *Introduction to Contemporary Japan-India Relations* (in Japanese), Tokyo University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ Purnendra Jain, 'Australia's Asia Dilemma', *Global Asia*, 2008, https://www.globalasia.org/v3no3/feature/australias-asia-dilemma_purnendra-jain (accessed 3 August 2021).

pick up pace towards the latter half of the 2010s, with India and Australia currently enjoying a reasonably stable relationship, albeit not as deep as between India and Japan. Here too, China is a factor.¹⁹

- 4.6 After 2008 India has been reluctant to reinstate Australia in the Malabar exercises because of the Rudd government's unilaterally exit from it. After much persuasion, New Delhi finally confirmed Canberra's renewed participation not long after the 2020 Modi-Morrison virtual summit where they upgraded their relationship from 'strategic partnership' to 'comprehensive strategic partnership'.
- 4.7 While the Rudd government perceived India as a weak player, today Australia has big expectations of India as Prime Minister Morrison's special trade envoy to India Tony Abbott declared in his op-ed in *The Australian*.²⁰ However, some analysts have dismissed this prospect and believe that, 'The truth is that India displacing China as a global manufacturing hub is more about wishful thinking born out of geopolitics than it is based on sound economics'.²¹
- 4.8 Australia joined the 2020 Malabar exercises with the United States and Japan in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea after a gap of 13 years and continued to participate in the 2021 exercises held late August. Australia has also endorsed India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, which is similar to the FOIP concept, in ensuring the security and stability of the region's maritime domain. Canberra is also keen for India to join Australia's biggest war games, Exercise Talisman Sabre,²² to be held together with the United States and Japan in 2023. This will certainly give the Quad a greater heft.
- 4.9 India-US relations have also come a long way in the decades since Bill Clinton's 2000 visit to New Delhi following Washington's denouncement of New Delhi in

¹⁹ Hall, Ian (2020). 'How Shared Distrust of China is Fuelling Closer India-Australia Relations', <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28891/how-shared-distrust-of-china-is-fueling-closer-india-australia-relations> (accessed 3 August 2021).

²⁰ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/india-the-sensible-substitute-for-belligerent-beijing/news-story/2d7940c990e38bb4c4574c38c2c45e79> (accessed 4 August 2021).

²¹ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/India-nowhere-near-ready-to-substitute-for-China> (accessed 5 September 2021).

²² <https://www1.defence.gov.au/exercises/talisman-sabre-21> (accessed 1 September 2021).

the aftermath of the latter's nuclear tests in 1998. As a clear sign of the deepening partnership, in 2016, India was declared a major defence partner of the United States. The two have developed substantial military cooperation and India signed the Basic Exchange and Co-operation Agreement or BECA with the United States in 2020, thus making India, a non-alliance partner, on par with the other two alliance Quad members in gaining highly valuable access to US military data.²³

4.10 The Modi-Trump 'bromance' was a new height in India-US relations. Shared concern about China was the reason. India remains a country of utmost importance for even the Biden administration, as evidenced by the most recent visit to India of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in July 2021. Blinken and Modi discussed efforts to deepen the US-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership and meet regional challenges such as COVID-19, climate change, shared values, democratic principles and regional security, including through the Quad consultation process.²⁴ In his first face to face meeting with President Biden just before the Quad summit in late September at the White House, Prime Minister Modi stated that 'the seeds have been sown for an even stronger friendship between India and USA', to which Biden responded that 'Relations between India and US are destined to be stronger'.²⁵

4.11 Although India was hesitant to openly endorse the FOIP as an exclusive group of nations, in the intervening years from the disbandment to the rebirth of the Quad India was connected to the other three through trilateral frameworks. Japan is central to these trilateral relationships, one involving Japan, India and the United States (since 2011) and another involving Japan, India and Australia (since 2015). These trilateral frameworks then transited seamlessly to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue when the time was right. India also now conducts 2+2 dialogue with foreign and defence ministers of Japan, United States and Australia.

²³ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/beca-india-us-trade-agreements-rajnath-singh-mike-pompeo-6906637/> (accessed 6 September 2021).

²⁴ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-indian-prime-minister-modi/> (accessed 7 September 2021).

²⁵ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-narendra-modi-in-us-pms-meet-with-joe-biden-quad-summit-today-cap-whirlwind-us-visit-10-points-2552075> (accessed 27 September 2021).

- 4.12 Whatever hesitancy India had about the Quad has dissipated after its setback following a mini-war with China in 2020 in which 20 Indian soldiers and an undeclared number of Chinese soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand fighting. This brawl between Chinese and Indian troops turned Indian sentiment sharply against China with street protests and boycotts of Chinese goods, something not seen since the 1962 border war.
- 4.13 The strategic community in India, including policy analysts and former ambassadors to China, largely advocates a hard-line approach towards China. Although it is difficult to establish in the Indian multiparty system the kind of decisive bipartisan approach to foreign policy as observed in some nations with a two-party system, it can be said that there is now a broad consensus among the domestic constituency of India to be tough on China.
- 4.14 India's border issues and skirmishes with China and Beijing's strong links to Pakistan are largely matters that India has to deal with as no third country wants to get involved in this dynamic. India's full commitment to the joining of the Quad is an expression of anger and frustration that India feels strongly towards China after decades of engagement and agreements came to nought in the Galwan Valley fight in 2020.²⁶ It also keeps India in the company of nations with similar but transitory geo-strategic interests.

Developments and Way Forward

- 5.1 There is no doubt that the Quad has emerged as a major security pillar of the FOIP concept that China and Russia, the two key competitors of the West, oppose. Both Beijing and Moscow regard the Indo-Pacific and the Quad as anti-China and exclusive groupings.
- 5.2 Irrefutably, these mechanisms are largely a product of a challenging strategic environment centred on the People's Republic of China that these Quad nations see the need to create strategic synergy to deal with these challenges.

²⁶ Purnendra Jain, *Hesitant Realism: China-India Border Tensions and Delhi's Deepening Strategic Ties with Tokyo and Canberra*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2347797021992529> (accessed 30 August 2021).

- 5.3 While India is now an indispensable part of the Quad, its position remains significantly different from that of its three Quad partners. As discussed, India is not in an alliance relationship with the United States, nor is it likely to be. India has developed closer relations with Japan, the United States and Australia in recent years, but remains deeply embedded with its time-tested and long-time close defence partner, Russia, which supplies a vast quantity of military ware. Russia is India's 'strategic partner' and the two have recently established a 2+2 dialogue, just like India has with the United States, Japan and Australia. The delicate balance between India's growing relations with the United States and its allies, and its continuing ties with Russia is not easy to maintain. As some analysts have commented that 'so far it (India) has been able to walk on both sides of the street',²⁷ but how long can India avoid falling between the stools is a question that must be bothering the minds of India's strategists.
- 5.4 Significant future differences and thus strategy could arise between India and its Quad partners, showing that the Quad as a concept is vulnerable. For example, no other Quad partner nation has been in warlike situations as encountered by India with its neighbours, namely China and Pakistan which have developed iron-clad defence, security and economic ties.
- 5.5 New Delhi would also prefer not to frame the Quad in purely military and defence terms. At the virtual summit and more recently the in-person Quad summit at the White House, India has committed itself to cooperate with the Quad in a range of areas including infrastructure development, economic partnership, and human assistance and disaster relief operations around the region that fit into India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) framework.
- 5.6 From time-to-time, other Quad partners may feel frustrated by the need to tolerate India's sovereign foreign policy objectives and strategic circumstances as was the case with India's eleventh-hour withdrawal from the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Partnership) agreement. India will act in its own national interest,

²⁷ <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/correspondence/2021/04/response-to-rory-medcalfs-balancing-act/pradeep-taneja> (accessed 10 August 2021).

as it deems fit. Therefore, in spite of the media hyperbole, the Quad is far from a military alliance network to contain China.

- 5.7 Although some commentators have characterised India as the weakest link in the Quad chain,²⁸ and some even suspect India's credentials as an effective member of the Quad,²⁹ others see the Quad as a 'principal element of India's foreign policy destiny'.³⁰ Today there is a broad consensus in India favouring the Quad as long as it promotes collaboration between and among partner members and remains an inclusive body.
- 5.8 A recent survey of Quad nations showed that respondents were generally in favour of a standing annual meeting of the heads of government of the four Quad partners, supplemented by regular ministerial-level sessions. Nearly 80% of Indian and Japanese strategic elites, 100% of US strategic elites, and 100% of Australian strategic elites in a survey responded positively to the idea of an annual heads of government meeting. While Indian respondents did not vote in favour of 'strongly agree', this result clearly demonstrates that the general perception of India as a weak link or opposed to furthering the Quad relationship is incorrect.³¹ India along with the other three Quad partners affirmed in the September joint statement that leaders and foreign ministers of Quad nations will meet annually, thus semi-institutionalising the Quad.³²
- 5.9 Criticisms of India's commitment to the Quad were put to rest when Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the first leaders' summit stated that '[o]ur agenda today — covering areas like vaccines, climate change, and emerging technologies — make the Quad a force for global good'. He further declared that 'today's summit meeting

²⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/23/india-is-the-weakest-link-in-the-quad/2018> (accessed 10 August 2021).

²⁹ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/06/05/commentary/world-commentary/india-suspect-quad-credentials/> (accessed 10 August 2021).

³⁰ <https://www.spmrf.org/the-quad-is-indias-destiny/> (accessed 22 August 2021).

³¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue> (accessed 6 August 2021).

³² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/> (accessed 27 September 2021).

shows that Quad had come of age. It will now remain an important pillar of stability in the region'.³³ What is significant is not whether the Quad could and would achieve these aims and objectives but that India's prime minister has given his full commitment to the Quad. His commitment to the Quad was reiterated at the September summit and Prime Minister Modi called it again 'a force for global good'.³⁴

5.10 India's interest in the Quad is larger than just security and defence matters. Like Japan, India places priority on ASEAN's centrality. For the Quad to persist and stay effective and acceptable to the larger global community, the four nations need to work in close consultation with each other and design frameworks and policies that could achieve broader security objectives of nations around the region and beyond rather than offering itself purely as a defence and military security framework. In the September joint statement the leaders reaffirmed their 'strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality and for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific'; they resolved to work with ASEAN and its member states in 'practical and inclusive ways'.³⁵

5.11 While India conveys its trust in the Quad members and readiness to do business with them within India's national interest and policy of 'strategic autonomy' and 'multi-alignment', New Delhi is not willing to put all its eggs into one basket. It is deeply conscious of how big powers including the United States could change their strategic orientation to pursue their own interests without giving a thought to the consequences faced by partners and allies. The recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan is one such example. The more recent formation of the AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) defence pact is another.

³³ https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33618/Prime_Ministers_opening_remarks_at_the_first_Quadrilateral_Leaders_Virtual_Summit (accessed 9 August 2021).

³⁴ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/a-force-for-global-good-pm-modi-on-quad-leaders-summit-during-covid19-101632506759149.html> (accessed 28 September 2021).

³⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/> (accessed 27 September 2021).