



**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# DPG POLICY REPORT

**The Quad's Present and Future:  
A Geostrategic Perspective from Delhi**

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

## Cover Photographs:

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the First Quad Leaders' Summit on March 12, 2021.*

*Image Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India.*

*US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken meeting External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on July 28, 2021.*

*Image Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India*

*US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin meeting Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on March 20, 2021.*

*Image Source: Twitter Account of Rajnath Singh (@rajnathsingh)*

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# The Quad's Present and Future: A Geostrategic Perspective from Delhi

By

Hemant Krishan Singh, Arun Sahgal and Ambuj Sahu

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# The Quad's Present and Future: A Geostrategic Perspective from Delhi

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"If we are to have peace, we must learn loyalty to a larger group. And before we can learn loyalty, the thing to which we are to be loyal must be created." <sup>1</sup>

(Kenneth N. Waltz)

## I. Introduction

Since the end of World War II, the Euro-Atlantic has been at the core of the world economy and geopolitics. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing a rebalancing of global power. With post-1991 globalisation, the economic pivot has been steadily tilting toward Asia, but it is China's assertive rise that has finally shifted the locus of great power rivalry from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific.

This rivalry continues unabated, as China attempts to assert the centrality of its power in Asia and the United States (US) seeks to retain its longstanding salience in the Indo-Pacific. Given the present contours of US-China bilateral relations and the coalition of democracies that the Biden administration is trying to rally against an authoritarian China, this rivalry appears likely to intensify. This has profound implications for Asia, particularly for a middle power like India which shares unsettled borders with China and occupies a dominant space astride the critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) of the Indian Ocean.

China is unremittingly hostile towards the Indo-Pacific strategic construct, which in fact flows from global power rebalancing and growing multipolarity, exposing its intentions. It also refuses accommodation with an India which would like to see a stable and balanced region which is neither China-dominated nor US-centric.

Thus far, owing to its subcontinental geography and interest-based policy orientation, India has managed to balance the great power competition with a strategic focus centred around South Asia and the Indian Ocean. It has also reached out to Southeast and East Asia through its Act East Policy and has built strong relations with important regional powers, including Japan and Australia.

Even as these regional interests have remained the focus, changing international geopolitics have exerted new systemic pressures on India.<sup>2</sup> Unprecedented in history, India today faces the strategic challenge of managing a global power and aspiring regional overlord as its neighbour, not hesitating to flex its muscles in both continental and maritime domains. India's challenges have been exacerbated by the deadly second wave of COVID-19, a stressed economy and continuing Chinese aggression at the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India's options in the near term will be dictated largely by internal balancing and a stepped-up focus on building comprehensive national power. This is a time-consuming process, which could extend to anything from a decade to a decade-plus (2035). It is during this period of strategic vulnerability that India needs external balancing to stave off the multi-dimensional China challenge and enhance its deterrent capabilities.

The prevailing geopolitical scenario has created a strong convergence of interests between India and the United States, which is realigning its Asia focus by building strong regional partnerships and a credible dissuasive posture to deal with increasing Chinese bellicosity and coercion. India and the US have a shared interest in countering China's unilateral assertions and maintaining regional stability and order. India's growing relations with the United States, Japan and Australia in bilateral, trilateral and Quadrilateral groupings (or the Quad) are a manifestation of an interest-based foreign policy designed to create strategic space and address the multiple challenges posed by an increasingly uncertain regional environment.

The revival of the Quad since 2017 has been driven by these deep structural disturbances in the Indo-Pacific. From India's perspective, the Doklam episode in 2017 marked a turning point in its relations with China, which have since been on a downward trend despite "informal" summits and other high-level interactions. With its continuing border aggression, China has further confirmed its adversarial and hostile intentions.

Meanwhile, in East Asia and the Pacific, US concerns about China have also grown. The US National Security Strategy released by the Trump administration in 2017 affirmed that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour."<sup>3</sup> This document also described India as a leading partner in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. The Biden administration's Interim National Security Guidance similarly recognises an assertive China as a competitor that is capable of mounting a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system and underlines the importance of democratic alliances that can pool strengths and hold countries

like China to account.<sup>4</sup> It also affirms US commitment to deepen partnership with India (and other countries) to advance shared objectives.

The conflict between a free and open rules-based Indo-Pacific order and China's political, economic, and military assertions has sharpened the relevance of the Quad for regional stability and provided an impetus for Quad engagement. In a span of three years since 2017, Quad 2.0 was elevated from intermittent working-level security dialogues to a full-fledged Ministerial meeting in October 2020. A new benchmark was established when President Biden convened the Quad Leaders' Virtual Summit on March 12, 2021 which is to be followed by an in-person summit proposed for October this year. In their joint statement titled "The Spirit of the Quad", the leaders of all four countries reiterated their "commitment to quadrilateral cooperation" and stood united behind a "shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific".<sup>5</sup>

Of the four, India had initially maintained a cautious approach towards the Quad, adopting the nomenclature 'Quad' only in October 2020 at the 2nd Quadrilateral Ministerial Meeting.<sup>6</sup> India had good reason to be cautious, particularly as the other three Quad members are alliance partners with a converging East Asia-Western Pacific strategic focus, while a common strategic agenda of the Quad to uphold a rules-based order across the broader Indo-Pacific remains undefined.

That hesitation is now in the past. At the Quad leaders' virtual summit in March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unequivocally described the Quad as "a force for the global good" which has "come of age" and will "now remain an important pillar of stability in the region".<sup>7</sup> And at his meeting with the US Secretary of State on July 28, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar affirmed that "deepening the Quad as a collaborative platform is in our mutual interest".



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the First Quad Leaders' Summit on March 12, 2021. Image Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India.

This paper examines the geo-strategic rationale and purpose of the Quad from an Indian perspective, as well as the utility of the grouping in meeting India's economic, political and security challenges. The opening section traces the shift in India's strategic thinking over the last five years to establish the necessity of the Quad for meeting India's medium-term strategic objectives. The second section analyses India's salience to the Quad. The third section discusses the current status of the Quad and its potential to cater to India's economic and security interests. The final section identifies India's strategic challenges, underlines its expectations from the grouping and highlights what is still missing: credible security architecture without which the Quad will be unable to underpin strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific.

## II. Why Does India Need the Quad?

The chronology of the Quad, starting from its unscripted inception during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to the failure of Quad 1.0 in 2007-8 and the reboot of Quad 2.0 in November 2017, has been detailed elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> This section traces the change in India's strategic thinking post-2016 and its intersection with international developments to shape India's growing interest in the Quad.

The long-standing paradigm of Pakistan centrality in India's security outlook persisted till late 2016, when India conducted a surgical strike across the Line of Control (LoC) in the aftermath of the Uri terror attack. India was slow to recognise that this paradigm had become outdated after President Xi Jinping came to power in March 2013. Despite India's attempts to build a functional bilateral relationship based on mutual understanding and accommodation, China steadily escalated military pressure along the disputed LAC. Incidents along the Sino-Indian border in 2013 and 2014 were followed by a 72-day standoff at the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction in Doklam in July-August 2017.<sup>9</sup> By then, China had already challenged India's territorial sovereignty by initiating the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). It had also repeatedly opposed India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and had undermined India's position on J&K by supporting Pakistan, in a clear shift from its erstwhile neutrality. India's attempts at rebuilding relations with China through two "informal" summits and a multitude of high-level interactions yielded little results.

The reality was that China had begun to see India as a potential regional competitor and strategic partner of the US. Through a mix of direct confrontations, China-Pak collusion and strategic inroads in the subcontinent,

China's activities were targeting India's interests. At this juncture, India realised the need to re-assess its options and strategic partnerships.

Accordingly, India ramped up diplomatic efforts to strengthen relations with the US and other Quad members individually. From 2016-2020, the Indian Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister (EAM) undertook 25 bilateral visits to the United States, Japan and Australia (see Table 1). PM Modi visited the United States four times while US President Trump visited India once and the US Secretary of State five times, signalling a major foreign policy push in both capitals. Bilateral visits exchanged with Quad countries were backed by tangible results, as they elevated India's ties with all three to the equivalent of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships.<sup>10</sup> With the United States and Japan, India agreed to hold annual bilateral 2+2 Dialogues between the Defence and External Affairs Ministers.<sup>11</sup> A similar bi-annual 2+2 ministerial dialogue is on the anvil with Australia. These robust bilateral and trilateral partnerships prepared the ground for India to engage with these countries in the quadrilateral format.

Meanwhile, India was still hedging on the China front. However, the PLA's deliberate and pre-planned cross-LAC intrusions in the spring of 2020 and the Galwan Valley incident of June 15, 2020 finally made it clear to India that high level engagement of China had failed to secure compliance with past agreements and prevent "differences from becoming disputes"; China now regarded India as a challenger that had to be contained through military coercion.

Table 1: Exchange of Bilateral Visits involving the Prime Minister and the Minister of External Affairs of India with the United States, Japan and Australia (2016-2020).

Visits Level	United States		Japan		Australia *		TOTAL
	Incoming	Outgoing	Incoming	Outgoing	Incoming	Outgoing	
<b>Leaders'</b>	1	4	1	3	1	0	10
<b>Ministerial</b>	5	2	2	3	3	0	15
<b>TOTAL</b>	6	6	3	6	4	0	25

(\* Virtual Summits due to COVID-19 are not included in the table. India and Australia elevated their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during a Virtual Summit in June 2020)

By mid-2020, two major developments provided the ultimate impetus for India's engagement with the Quad: the continuing border standoff in Ladakh and the COVID-19 pandemic. While the first strained India's military resources, the pandemic created an economic setback. India incurred additional operational military expenditure of US \$2.84 billion (Rs. 20,776 crore) in FY20-



21.<sup>12</sup> As of writing, India deploys around 200,000 troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). 2020-21 also saw India's economy contracting by 7.3% due to pandemic-induced shutdowns.<sup>13</sup> The second wave of the pandemic in mid-2021 has further imposed enormous human, economic and diplomatic costs on India, including holding in abeyance India's laudable Vaccine Maitri initiative.<sup>14</sup> India's economic growth in 2021 is now projected by the IMF to be lower, at 9.5%.<sup>15</sup>

For building a strong and secure India, nothing is more critical than accelerated internal balancing, i.e., expansion of comprehensive national power. This is particularly so as recent developments have created major strategic vulnerabilities that will require the next 10-15 years to address. India's foremost priority is the post-pandemic economic recovery. This necessitates a strong fiscal stimulus which will directly constrain India's capacity for capital military expenditure in the short term.<sup>16</sup> Even after the economy recovers, India's interminably slow and process-driven defence acquisitions ecosystem implies that it will take at least a decade-plus (15 years) to address the prevailing military asymmetry with China through the aggregation of sufficient dissuasive deterrent power.

In India's evolving geopolitical environment, external balancing thus becomes a necessary option to manage a difficult security situation. Apart from the strategic convergences outlined earlier, it is the construct of the medium-term challenge from China and the need for regional stability and rules-based order that are the main drivers for India to engage with like-minded partners like the United States, Japan and Australia. Partnering with the Quad is a form of 'hedging', i.e., minimising security risks by diversifying them, though this engagement may also exhibit a range of strategic behaviour from balancing to bandwagoning.<sup>17</sup> Hedging is typically deployed to seek risk mitigation against uncertainties of the future. The Quad may be of limited utility for India in the case of a war on its borders, but its strategic value lies in building broader deterrence against Chinese assertions across multiple domains. Moreover, in a scenario where the power gap between the US and China is narrowing, India's engagement with the Quad in turn provides the partners with important leverage against China's unilateral assertions.

What then should be the mechanism of such an engagement? India's long tradition of seeking strategic autonomy in securing its national interests provides some answers to this question.<sup>18</sup> India has traditionally resorted to strategic partnerships and multilateral forums for external balancing.<sup>19</sup> Further, engaging in partnership-based frameworks provides strategic flexibility because it facilitates working jointly on issues of common interest. As

multilateral organisations have failed to address unilateral assertions of a power in recent years, India has increasingly shown interest in plurilateral forums. As Dr. S. Jaishankar writes, "determined opposition to the core agenda from one country [has undermined] much needed cooperation. India, therefore, focuses more on aggregating bilateral and plurilateral initiatives for the moment".<sup>20</sup> He also argues that plurilateral groupings are relevant in an uncertain environment because they occupy "both the hedging and the emerging space at the same time".<sup>21</sup>

In this light, the Quad is an apt platform for India's external balancing needs because it is already reinforced by bilateral relationships and trilaterals across a range of issues among the leading democracies of the Indo-Pacific.

### III. What does India bring to the Quad?

India is a vital component in a Quad-based Indo-Pacific strategy because of its geopolitical salience as a western lynchpin, growing national power and autonomous strategic capability. Being the 'Indo' in the Indo-Pacific, it is India's presence in the grouping that provides a comprehensive geographical coverage to the interlinked operational theatre of the Quad. The US, Japan and Australia are essentially East Asia and Western Pacific oriented powers. The Indian Ocean Region remains under-balanced in the wider geopolitical calculus of the Indo-Pacific, as the presence of the US and its allies in the Indian Ocean is limited. Further withdrawals and relocations of military resources are expected following the complete evacuation of American forces and assets from Afghanistan.

It is here that credible Indian maritime power and the accompanying SAGAR construct fill the strategic vacuum and help create an enabling security architecture to protect the critical sea lines of communication and deal with the PLAN's maritime assertions in the Indian Ocean, which are likely to grow in the not-too-distant future. For China, India's active involvement in the Quad creates a two-front geopolitical pressure as its key priority area remains the South China Sea and Taiwan. India's strategic location can also be vital in conflict scenarios due to its vast coastline, unhindered access to the Indian Ocean as well as the proximity of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the Malacca strait chokepoint.

On the economic front, India provides a large consumer market and investment opportunities which can contribute to revitalising the global economy. As the industrialised democracies of the Quad seek to reorder their supply chains away from China, India offers considerable potential for investment and production. If India leverages its economic promise by

integrating with Quad supply chains, this will help reduce its economic dependence on China. This, in turn, can make regional institutions like ASEAN look at the Quad not only as a security provider but also an economic aggregator.

It is time for India to shed its hesitations of history and become a proactive driver of strategic cooperation with the US and other Quad partners, as also with other powers in Asia such as Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea and Singapore.

#### IV. Where Does the Quad Stand Today vis-à-vis India's Interests?

The issues discussed in Quadrilateral meetings so far reflect a broad agenda of cooperation on multiple regional challenges among the four countries. Following the meeting between External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken on July 28, 2021 it is clear that India and the US have convergent expectations from the Quad.

According to EAM Dr. Jaishankar, the Quad is designed to meet challenges to stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific; it is engaged in collaboration on maritime security, HADR, counterterrorism, connectivity and infrastructure, cyber and digital concerns, COVID-19 response, climate action, education, and reliable supply chains. In addition, the Quad is focusing on observance of international law, rules and norms, including UNCLOS. This benefits the region and the international community as a whole.<sup>22</sup>



US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken meeting External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on July 28, 2021. Image Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

In Secretary Blinken's words, the four like-minded countries are working "collectively on some of the most important issues of our time that are going to have a real impact on the lives of our people (COVID-19 vaccine initiative, post

pandemic economic recovery, climate crisis, maritime security and infrastructure)", and doing it in a way that "hopefully ensures a free and open Indo-Pacific region and peace, security, and prosperity for the people of that region".<sup>23</sup> Importantly, he has also stated:

"What the Quad is not is a military alliance; it is not that. Its purpose is, again, just to advance cooperation on regional challenges while reinforcing international rules and value that we believe, together, underpin peace, prosperity, and stability in the region. And, of course, we're doing that as well in cooperation with other countries, with ASEAN, and other like-minded partners".<sup>24</sup>

The Quad countries agreed to formalise their cooperation on vaccine distribution, climate change and emerging technologies at their First Leaders' Virtual Summit in March 2021.

The Quad Vaccine Partnership aims to pool the capabilities of the four countries to produce at least one billion vaccine doses by the end of 2022.<sup>25</sup> The vaccine production will be funded by the United States and manufactured in India, with Japan and Australia leading the logistics and distribution efforts. As India's Vaccine Maitri initiative has suffered a major blow during the devastating second wave of the pandemic, this Quad partnership is an opportunity for India to revive its contributions as the world's largest producer of vaccines. Managing the pandemic remains the primary global challenge, and making good on vaccine delivery targets will help establish the Quad's credibility across the Indo-Pacific. This Quad vaccine initiative will thus be a litmus test on whether the Quad can effectively translate its vision into concrete actions for the regional public good.

The Quad Climate Working Group aims to strengthen compliance with the Paris Agreement through adoption of low-emissions technology solutions. Its focus is cooperation on issues of "climate mitigation, adaptation, resilience, technology, capacity-building, and climate finance".<sup>26</sup> India can utilise the platform to induct climate-friendly technologies and reduce dependence on China in the renewable energy sector. As the only developing country in the Quad, India can also attract concessional funding for green infrastructure projects. Notwithstanding initial skepticism, India is already well on track to cut its carbon emissions as per its Paris Agreement commitments (33% reduction from 2015 levels by 2030).<sup>27</sup>

The Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group reflects a convergence that emerging technologies should be "governed and operated as per shared interests and values".<sup>28</sup> The group has agreed to formulate the

principles of technology design and to coordinate efforts for setting international technology standards. In this domain, the Quad comes closest to countering China through cooperation on future telecommunications design and diversification of equipment suppliers. China has emerged as a leading power in technology standard-setting and harbours global ambitions regarding the deployment of its 5G networks. In the backdrop of the border crisis, India has taken strong measures to plug the inflow of Chinese technology. These have included steps like banning Chinese apps and disallowing Huawei from 5G trials underway.<sup>29</sup> With technological decoupling with China as a priority, India can leverage its large digital market to attract investments for its tech start-ups. The demand for telecom equipment will rise after the induction of 5G in the near future. India can participate in critical technology supply chains with its Quad partners to meet this demand.

Other issues that have been discussed in the Quad include higher education, HADR, resilient supply chains, semiconductors, disinformation, counterterrorism and maritime security. These issues enhance or preserve elements of national power. India should welcome cooperation with its Quad partners based on their shared interests in these fields.

Cooperation on issues like semiconductors, resilient supply chains and higher education can contribute extensively to the development of India's economic and social capital. China currently occupies a large share in India's growing semiconductor market. India has two primary interests: diversifying its semiconductor supplies and establishing its presence in the semiconductor supply chain. Semiconductor production is a highly complex process involving various stages.<sup>30</sup> Although India currently lacks the capability for chip fabrication and manufacturing, it can set up assembly and testing plants that are labour intensive to integrate with the global semiconductor supply chain with the United States, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea under a possible Quad-plus umbrella.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of supply chain resilience that can withstand global disruptions. In April 2021, the trade ministers of India, Australia and Japan unveiled a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative to focus on "sharing best practices on supply chain resilience" and "explore the possibility of diversification of their supply chains".<sup>31</sup> Linking India's supply chains, especially with Japan and Australia, will also increase their stakes in the region which is critical for expanding the focus of the Quad towards the Indian Ocean Region.

Issues like disinformation, counterterrorism and maritime security are directly linked to national security challenges, as vulnerability in these areas can become a threat multiplier for states. As US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin stated in a recent speech in Singapore, cooperation in these areas among strategic partners can be networked into an integrated deterrence.<sup>32</sup> Quad cooperation on China's disinformation campaigns also assumes particular importance in shaping regional public opinion across the Indo-Pacific.

The genesis of the Quad goes back to the joint provision of HADR in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami. The Quad also has shared interests in ensuring maritime security and freedoms of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific.

As already mentioned, India carries the weight of 'Indo' in the Indo-Pacific. Geography and national interests dictate that the Indian Ocean is a priority region for India, whereas it is a secondary theatre for the other three Quad partners. Although the Indian Ocean is a major maritime trade and energy route for both South East and East Asia, owing to the security dynamics of East Asia, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula, the US, Japan and Australia are predominantly focused on the western Pacific.

With the emerging "Look West" maritime strategy of the PLAN, which includes the outreach of Chinese naval power into the western Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and across the East Coast of Africa, the salience of the Indian Ocean has increased. It is important for the Quad to extend its focus on a rules-based order and freedom of navigation beyond the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean. This will require greater attention to developing a security architecture that straddles the strategic space of the two oceans. There is also much that the Quad can add to net security provision in the region through cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities and counter-terrorism.

## V. What should India's realistic expectations be from the Quad?

For India, the Quad is emerging as an important external balancing mechanism to deal with its strategic challenges and realise its global ambitions in the near-to-medium term. The Quad can serve India's national interests from multiple vantage points, depending on how one approaches its participation in the grouping. From a threat-centric paradigm, the Quad provides a favourable alignment to balance China during a period of strategic vulnerability. From a nationalist perspective, the Quad facilitates collaboration with partners for domestic capacity-building. From an aspirational outlook, the Quad is a forum where India stands alongside the leading Indo-Pacific democracies and gains

a position of influence on issues of regional and international relevance. In short, the Quad can be what India wishes to make of it.

### Covert Balancing against China?

Indian officials have repeatedly emphasised that the Quad is not directed against any particular country. EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar, in various interviews and speeches, has strongly argued against seeing the Quad as the Asian NATO. He has also stressed that India's interest in the Quad is not determined by the deterioration in Sino-Indian relations.<sup>33</sup> According to Foreign Secretary Harshvardhan Shringla, the Quad is focused on a "more constructive" and "positive" agenda since the pandemic.<sup>34</sup> This is broadly in line with the stance of India's three Quad partners. At the same time, it is clear that through the Quad, India can balance China by building the non-military dimensions of national power while also working on regional security and stability with the other Quad members.

China as expected has reacted with anger at the re-emergence of the Quad, which has repudiated Foreign Minister Wang Yi's claim that the Quad will "dissipate like a sea foam".<sup>35</sup> Since the Quad leaders' virtual summit, China has regularly denounced the Quad as being the forerunner of an Asian NATO. These outbursts ironically only provide weight to the centrality of China in the Quad calculus. China's continuing attempts at unilateral aggrandisement provide purpose and motivation to the Quad.

Looking at the security interests of individual Quad members, one can observe that Japan and Australia have the least to gain from a NATO-like alliance between the Quad members because both of them are already part of the United States' security umbrella. From their perspective, India is in a state of prolonged border tensions with China and does not add military weight to threats in their geographical proximity. The United States on its part prefers that India should take the leading role as security provider in the Indian Ocean region. The US position is driven by the fact that a strong India creates a two-front, multi-domain situation for China.<sup>36</sup> And for India, closer cooperation on traditional security with strategic partners is desirable and necessary mainly as a dissuasive posture against Chinese assertions and to increase the costs of any escalation.

So, the Quad is not going to be a treaty bound and process-driven Asian NATO. It will be driven by shared interest-based purpose, much as India would like the Quad to be. And the strength of the Quad will be determined by the nature of the India-US relationship, which is continuing to deepen.

## Securing a Regional Environment for India's CNP and Capacity Building

The economic backlash from COVID-19 and Sino-Indian border tensions have added to India's strategic vulnerabilities in the near term. In the absence of external balancing, a developing India will be constrained to trade-off scarce resources between managing the challenges of today and meeting the aspirations of tomorrow. This resource competition will spill across the economic, technological, and military domains.

On the military front, the modernisation of massive land-based armed forces as well as development of capabilities for ISR and asymmetric warfare pose a major challenge for India. On the maritime front, India must build a much stronger presence in the Indian Ocean Region for protecting its offshore territories, EEZs and SLOCs from both coercive and non-traditional challenges. As China raises the stakes in the IOR, this strategic space will become more contested. On the economic front, India must continue with its post-pandemic recovery and thereafter sustain robust economic growth. India's efforts to economically decouple with China and strengthen secure and reliable supply chains have been set back by the pandemic. India must reduce its dependence on China for several critical technologies like semiconductor chips, electronics, active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), telecommunications gear and solar/photovoltaic cells by integrating with the global technology supply chains of like-minded partners.



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin meeting Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on March 20, 2021. Image Source: Twitter Account of Rajnath Singh (@rajnathsingh)

The utility of Quad will be two-fold with respect to India's objective of building comprehensive national power. Firstly, it will create a balancing architecture in the Indo-Pacific to stabilise the regional environment and mitigate coercive



security threats. Secondly, enhancing cooperation on issues of common interest like pandemic response, critical technologies, climate change, supply chains and maritime security will help buttress India's own capacity-building efforts.

### The Missing Link: Quad Security Coordination Architecture

The emerging framework of Quad cooperation on common challenges while reinforcing international rules and norms that underpin stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific provides a degree of reassurance to regional states and will be broadly welcomed, including by ASEAN. However, Quad convergences on a rules-based order will continue to be tested by China's wilful disregard for international law, as evidenced from the Himalayas to the East and South China Seas. There will be need for greater dissuasive deterrence against China's military coercion and creeping unilateral alterations of the status quo which cannot be reversed. This requires consideration of an integrated Quad security coordination architecture, the sooner the better, for which the forthcoming in-person Quad leaders' summit will provide a suitable opportunity. In the final analysis, it is only the aggregation of Quad capabilities, capacities and resources in a seamless security architecture for the Indo-Pacific that can provide credible reassurance against China's shows of force and intimidation to stamp its dominance. Such architecture can also enhance the effectiveness of the Malabar Exercise and the series of bilateral and trilateral exercises among the Quad countries and their like-minded partners. Going forward, the addition of this traditional security element which provides meaningful threat mitigation during a period of vulnerability should be an important priority for India in its Quad interactions.

## VI. Conclusion

China's relentless pursuit of regional dominance and its aggrandising assertions have created major structural disturbances in the Indo-Pacific, providing impetus for the revival of the Quad since 2017. The next decade to decade-plus is a period of strategic vulnerability where India needs external balancing to stave off the multi-dimensional China challenge and enhance its deterrent capabilities. This imperative and the need for regional stability and rules-based order are the main drivers for India's engagement with like-minded partners of the Quad.

Furthermore, this policy direction conforms with India's current focus on aggregating bilateral and plurilateral initiatives. Engaging in partnership-based frameworks provides strategic flexibility while facilitating cooperation on issues of common interest. The Quad is an apt platform for India's external

balancing because it is already reinforced by bilateral relationships and trilaterals among the leading democracies of the Indo-Pacific.

India is a vital component in the Quad because of its geopolitical salience as a western lynchpin, growing national power and autonomous strategic capability. It is only India's presence in the grouping that provides a comprehensive geographical coverage to the interlinked operational theatre of the Quad.

The Quad can serve India's national interests from multiple vantage points. Simply put, it can be what India wishes to make of it. The deepening India-US relationship reinforces the strength of the Quad.

The current structure of Quad cooperation on common challenges while reinforcing international rules and norms that bring stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific provides a degree of reassurance to regional states. However, this alone will be insufficient to deter China's military coercion and creeping alterations of the status quo. Going forward, a more effective response to China requires consideration of a Quad security coordination architecture, which should be an important priority for India in its forthcoming Quad interactions.

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