

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Maritime Security: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract:

China's increasing expansionist approach in the South China Sea has a security concern for the littoral countries and maritime trade, and poses a challenge to international legal regimes. These concerns in the South China Sea today have been well integrated into the broad fulcrum of security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The increasing volume of trade and consequent more dependency on maritime route by major economic powers and international players like Japan, Australia, India and the US have necessitated for a coordinated approach for safeguarding sea-lane security, free movement of ships and overall peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. In this context, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) or Quadrilateral (Quad) is a potential force to reckon with. India's robust bilateral economic and strategic relationship with other three member countries, and Pacific region as a whole, makes a great sense for India's maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. However, in the process, there are issues involved in giving a concrete shape to the agenda and objectives of the QSD. There is a mushrooming growth in the forum; but needs a structured guideline for a sustainable mutual cooperation on maritime security, trade interests and geostrategic leverages.

Key words: Security, Maritime, geostrategic, naval exercise, Indo-Pacific.

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Introduction:

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) is a forum of four major economic and international players in the Indo-Pacific region which include India, the USA, Australia and Japan. Its activities include organising conferences and summits, information exchange and military exercises. The consultations among the member countries include, "Cooperation in the areas of better connectivity and networks, sustainable development, combating-terrorism, maritime security, cyber security and non-proliferation challenges with a focus on promoting peace, prosperity and stability in an increasingly inter-dependence and inter-connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). The QSD with its broader attributes has turned as a forum of security engagement, regional economic platform and development initiative (CSIS Briefs, 2020). However, this growth of QSD itself is a gradual convergence instead of a rapid institutionalization. The idea of QSD was initiated in 2007 by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, joined by American Vice President Dick Cheney, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh. It was established as an informal strategic and security dialogue forum of the member countries (Chand, 2018). Since then a large number of combined naval exercises have been conducted, well known as Malabar Exercise, and other such exercises. This diplomatic, strategic and military approach among the four nations was largely a response to Beijing's economic and strategic leverage and military pressure in the Pacific Ocean region. However, in 2008, Australia had withdrawn from the forum due to protest from China, and thus there was a slowdown of progress of the forum. Yet, in 2017, there was a move for a united effort for the common cause. Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, American President Donald Trump, Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull and Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan, looked for the revival of the security pact in Manila on the sideline of the 31st ASEAN Summit and East Asian Summit, largely due to

growing tensions in South China Sea-caused by aggressive geopolitical, territorial and regional pursuits by China. The press release of the meeting stressed for a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region and combating terrorism” (Bej, 2017). Since 2017, the member countries are meeting regularly and working jointly on the issues of common interest. In March 2020, amid COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad met for the preparation of a roadmap to deal the crisis situation caused by the pandemic. Significantly, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam also joined the meeting. Maritime security, maritime connectivity, health security, humanitarian assistance and combating terrorism are the broader areas of cooperation of the Quad. In a very recent development, Shinzo Abe has surfaced the idea of 'Democratic Security Diamond' to protect the maritime commons-stretching from Indian Ocean to Pacific region-well known as Indo-Pacific for the QSD nations (Javaid, 2020). Security is an acknowledgement of the fact, according to American Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, includes, “Economic capability and rule of law, protection of intellectual property, trade arrangements, diplomatic engagements, and all the necessary elements which form a security structure, not just military but deeper in nature and extent” (<https://www.moneycontrol.com>, 2020). Outcomes of the various Quad meetings, so far, include: a rule-based structure in the Indo-Pacific region; discussions on collective cooperation for an open, free, and all-encompassing Indo-Pacific region; and global respect to international regimes, freedom of navigation, and overflight facilities (www.insightsonindia.com, 2019). The establishment of QSD, from the Indian perspective, is largely due to increasing sphere of influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing has been claiming almost entire South China Sea under its Nine-Dash Line and established **it's** military base in Djibouti and developed Gwadar port in Pakistan, while developing Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, and having initiated for artificial islands in the Maldives, and virtually criticised the Quad as the “Asian NATO” (Javaid, 2020).

India's stakes

India's reluctance in the past to make Quad a military alliance was largely because of its strong adherence to NAM perspectives. But the renewed and pragmatic momentum of QSD in contemporary time is largely due to India's "buy-in approach." Jayant Prasad, an Indian diplomat said, "Beijing's belligerence has been forcing India for a tougher position" (www.moneycontrol.com,2020). Therefore, the conduct of Malabar exercises has become imminent. The exercise conducted in two stages-The Bay of Bengal exercise conducted during September 26- October 4, 2019 and the maritime exercise involving Quad members in November 3-6 and November 17-20, 2019. The broader objectives of all Quad members included free, unhindered access and open navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. Former Foreign Secretary of India Kanwal Sibal hailed the forum as non- military alliance, yet enjoys closer security understanding and intelligence sharing. According to S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister of India, "India is quietly forging robust ties with all the members, even at the bilateral level" (www.moneycontrol.com, 2020). This can be best illustrated through an enhanced Indo-US security engagement in recent times. In a new twist, India has invited Vietnam to become a member of the forum. Congruent to it, Vietnam considers of filing a legal complaint in the international court against Beijing's South China Sea claim. Vietnam, along with other countries like New Zealand and South Korea, has taken part in an online 'Quad plus' conference. The increasing tension between India and China across the border region and land-grabbing approach of China prompts India to have closer ties with other Quad members so as to choke the entry points of China in the strategic locations or straits of the Indo-Pacific region.

There are important strategic reasons which implies prominence of QSD in India's quest for maritime security. First, for Beijing, maritime space is crucial for its trade routes that stretches from the South China Sea in the Pacific region to the entire Indian Ocean region-connecting Africa, Asia and Australia. There are also

many choke points like Malacca Strait or “Malacca Dilemma”. So, any military adventurism by China against India may result in India along with other countries to block the maritime trade route of China. Second, since there is bonhomie of China-Pakistan relationship, Quad is a counter strategy to this maritime security challenge. Third, with the inception of Indo-Pacific, the maritime security gains prominence in a larger context. Since India is central to Indo-Pacific region, India’s prominence is well recognised in QSD. Fourth, it is of common interest for India and other Quad members to check the expansionist pursuits of China in the Pacific and Indian Ocean areas, thus ensuring maritime interests of all four countries. Thus, by prioritising “Act East Policy as the cornerstone of it’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific,” New Delhi has pointed out Quad as an extension of this policy. However, New Delhi is yet to define and demarcate it’s maritime pursuits in the East. In 2015, India restructured its maritime doctrine, titled, “Ensuring Securing Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy” that talked for an actionable plan and policy. Consequently, “New Delhi made port calls in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, and undertaken maritime capacity building efforts (beyond training) in Vietnam and Myanmar” (Bej, 2017). India, so far, has made annual naval drills with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The Malabar exercises, along with America and subsequently Japan have drawn the most of the attention. The use of INS Vikramaditya, the aircraft carrier of India, flat-top Nimitz of US, and JS Izumo, the helicopter carrier of Japan, during July 10-17, 2017, indicated that Malabar exercises have expanded military potential, confidence building, and geopolitical ambit. In their operations, activities included surface drills, anti-submarine warfare practices, coordinated air defence practices, and the Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) drills. As a part of its core interest in East Asia, India joined Japan as a permanent and regular member of Malabar exercise (Bej, 2017). The Malabar exercise today includes a quadrilateral maritime exercise that involves the India, America, Japan and Australia. Started between India and America

in 1992, the naval exercise in 2015 included Japan as a permanent member, and New Delhi conducted bilateral naval and maritime security exercise AUSINDEX with Canberra (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

Bilateral Engagements

In the context of Japan, India sees the QSD as a platform to take the next step ahead of a potential engagement. Japan is suspicious of China's ties with North Korea, the arch-rival of South Korea—a strong ally of Japan. Further, Japan is worried of China's aggressive ambitions and there are many territorial or island disputes between the two countries. Therefore, Japan is looking for a security umbrella that will well check Chinese aggression and contain Chinese hegemony in the region. In a more strategic and security perspective, "India-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Agreements included GSOMIA, Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services; Dialogues on defence policy, joint research on UGVs and robotics technology; Staff talks at all three services; and Bilateral military exercises such as JIMEX, DHARMA GUARDIAN, SHINYUU MAITRI, SAHYOG-KAIJIN" (Brookings, 2020). By expressing Indo-Pacific Ocean as a "single strategic arena", Rex Tillerson, the US Secretary of State, hailed New Delhi and Washington as "regional bookends." This implies that the US is looking forward for a bigger and more effective role of New Delhi in consolidating and promoting regional stability and maritime security, and thus balancing Beijing. Specifically, India-US relations can be best explained through various engagements such as, "2+2 Minister Agreements that include GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA, ISA, HOSTAC; Dialogues on defence policy, defence technology and trade and maritime security; Joint training of peacekeepers and Indian liaison at NAVCENT; Bilateral military exercises include, VAJRA PRAHAR, YUDH ABHYAS, COPE INDIA, Tiger TRIUMPH; Defence deals comprised C-17, C-130J, P-81, M777, SIG716, AH-64E, CH-47 (I), MH-60R, and Strategic Authorisation-1 for India" (Brookings, 2020). In a very recent development, the US Senate has passed a resolution condemning Chinese Aggression in Galwan Valley and China's aggressive

approach to alter status quo at the LAC. The Senators John Cornyn and Mark Warner, who introduced the resolution commended for improvement of a secured Indian telecommunications establishments so as to detect and thwart Chinese movements across the volatile border points of Depsang Plains, Galwan Valley, Hot Springs, and Pangong, and advocated for a stronger bilateral and multilateral engagements like QSD where a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region could be achieved (Jha, 2020). In short, the US outreach strategy involved President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' and Donald Trump's 'Indo-Pacific' partnership which implied US strategies for better integration in East Asia, akin to New Delhi's 'Look East', and recently 'Act East' policy of Narendra Modi government. Further, of the QSD, India has less maritime or naval connectivity with Australia. Yet, with India having a pivotal role in the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), in 2017, the Indian warships INS Kamorta, INS Shivalik and INS Jyoti arrived in Western Australia's Fremantle port city for a joint exercise. Australia in its outreach under IOR-ARC has started economic partnership with Seychelles and Mauritius under its "blue economy" project that includes exploration of oil and natural gas resources. Crucially, both Seychelles and Mauritius are strong economic and strategic partners of India. Along with, Australia is well known for its mining resources and exploration technologies such as coal and underwater exploration. This can be well illustrated through the Indian companies like Adani group. Both India and Australia are trying to establish a free trade arrangement with India and thus promotion of a blue economy. In a more strategic way, India-Australia relationship can be best explained through various bilateral engagements such as Australia-India "2+2 Ministerial Agreements on Mutual Logistics Support, and Information Sharing Agreement; Dialogues include defence policy, defence research, material collaborations and maritime security (+Indonesia); Staff talks at all the three services; Joint military exercise of AUSINDEX, and AUSTRA HIND;

and Participation of India in Australian exercises such as PITCH BLACK, KAKADU” (Brookings, 2020).

Challenges and Prospect

All the QSD members are well aware of the fact that the Chinese approaches and actions are detrimental or near detrimental to their mutual interests. Yet, they have not reached at a point of common cooperation. According to the American Security Project, “Without a clear and unified objective, there runs the risk that the Quad will break up for a second time; in other words, another win for China” (American Security Project, 2020). Some of the important issues that the forum is facing today are mentioned here. First, there is no clear cut structure and agenda on which direction it will move. Second, the members affected by Beijing’s economic and military preparedness are reluctant to announce a joint statement against Beijing’s expansionist approach. Third, the trade and transaction of China with US, India, Australia and Japan is so much inter-wined that it proves difficult to take a decisive stand against China. Fourth, the role is largely confined to bureaucratic level, and lacks regular meetings (Kirubakaran, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to take some more effective steps. Firstly, regular talks on defence cooperation and infrastructure collaboration. Second, Indo-Pacific cooperation on economic aspects. Third, setting up a working committee to execute the outcomes of meetings. Fourth, regular meetings of the defence staff of all the member countries. Fifth, while China is advocating for separation of security aspects from economic relations, the member countries of the forum must justify how both security and economy are inextricably intertwined. Fifth, increasing ties bilaterally while pursuing for a collective effort. Sixth, access opportunities, and production and development of defence equipments and technology. Sixth, maritime awareness, and development of logistics thereupon. Seventh, development of infrastructure and defence that is based on rule-based order which has been undermined by China (Lee, 2020). Eighth, the member countries should carry forward the step to the level of deepening military and strategic engagements among themselves

that can well intend to counter and deter future attempts of Beijing to imbalance the existing status quo, and thus development of a credible maritime deterrence. Ninth, joint cooperation for interoperability, larger intelligence sharing, surveillance and reconnaissance, and the logistics. Tenth, cooperation for a standard setting, and establishment of an “Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Critical Infrastructure Funding” that can act as a viable option to counter China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) where Beijing can use other states for power projection in future (Lee, 2020).

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can say that the QSD or Quad has tuned and turned as a strategic and security move largely to fulfil the common interests of the member countries which can be summarised here. First, establishment of stability or maintain balance of power in the region and thus preventing a littoral or any other country from becoming aggressive or dominant. Second, establishing a maritime order-based on free movement and transportation of goods and services. Third, shared interest for deterring a country that wants to resolve the issues forcefully. Fourth, rule-based economic order which includes free and open trade and investment, competitive tendering, and execution of rule of law. Fifth, supporting, consolidating and promoting liberal democratic values and good governance in the Indo-Pacific region. Sixth, the Indo-Pacific Quad is a strategic and security balance to Belt and Road Initiative of China. Therefore, the QSD is an opportunity and avenue for like-minded countries to share their ideas and concerns and collaborate on programmes and projects of common interest. Definitely, open and free maritime movement in the Indo-Pacific is the motto of all the nations concerned. Cooperation has already begun in development, maritime and economic projects of the member countries. The skirmish, territorial tensions and conflicts have become the order of the South China Sea in the form of island disputes, land grabbing, confrontations, which are largely emanated from the expansionist China. Hence, the QSD is on its way to materialise

the interests of all the stakeholders. India should be proactive in guarding its maritime interest against the aggressive China and its designs as well. Although the QSD countries do not explicitly indicate China, yet their behaviour and actions indicate that it is a force against the imperialist ambitions of China. As discussed earlier, India has every reason to strengthen QSD or Quad. The Galwan clash and ongoing tension in the north eastern part of India are the fresh reminders for a united and effective force to contain and counter expansionist China. Despite the divergence in threat perceptions, military calculations, risk forbearance, and strategic pursuits, the cooperation and assistance among the QSD members are expected to heighten as long as Beijing continues to challenge the existing status quo, rule-based order and liberal governance. Contextualising QSD or Quad, it can be concluded that the Mediterranean Ocean was the Ocean of the long past, the Atlantic Ocean was the Ocean in past, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, well integrated as Indo-Pacific, is the order of the day. So being a littoral country and strong stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific region, India's strategic quest for maritime security through QSD or Quad will well serve the interests of India and other members in the forum, and peace and stability in the region.

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