

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; the Great Democratic Wall to Siege the Great Firewall

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ABSTRACT

In the post-pandemic era, amid the Ukraine-Russia conflict, nations are reassessing security arrangements, with democratic values pitted against authoritarianism, led by the U.S. and China. This analysis delves into the significance of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in the contemporary global order, focusing on Indo-Pacific strategic interests. Employing a historical analytical approach, it traces QUAD's evolution since 2006, detailing strategic partnerships and joint military exercises. The assessment includes challenges in maintaining QUAD cohesion amidst divergent stakeholder interests and regional dynamics, alongside opportunities for enhanced collaboration. The analysis also engages in debates concerning India's role in QUAD, making comparisons to NATO and historical foreign policy perspectives. It discusses potential trajectories for QUAD's future, its impact on regional security, and broader implications for the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. Contextualizing QUAD's significance against China's assertive actions, the analysis underscores the necessity for a collective strategy among like-minded countries to counter Beijing's illegitimate moves in the region.

Key Words: *QUAD, China, Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific, Democracy, Authoritarianism.*

INTRODUCTION

The May 2022 gathering of QUAD leaders in Tokyo marks a notable change in the global landscape following the pandemic (GOI, 2022). Comprising the USA, Australia, India, and Japan, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) showcased a stronger dedication to their strategic concerns in the Indo-Pacific area. The significance of the QUAD summit is heightened by China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, such as building artificial islands, deploying nuclear submarines, and militarizing the area (Chellaney, 2007). China's rejection of globally recognized international maritime laws and rulings from international courts threatens to disrupt the established rules-

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based global order (Phillips, Holmes, & Bowcott, 2016). These developments have alerted the QUAD nations to strengthen their strategic cooperation, to safeguard free navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper assesses the significance of the QUAD in the context of the post-pandemic global order, focusing on Indo-Pacific strategic interests. Using a historical analytical methodology, it traces the origins and development of the QUAD from 2006, including strategic partnerships and joint military exercises. Additionally, it evaluates challenges in maintaining QUAD cohesion and navigating regional dynamics, highlighting opportunities for enhanced collaboration. The paper also examines QUAD's commitment to securing a free and independent Indo-Pacific against Chinese aggression, emphasizing military coordination and capabilities. Furthermore, it delves into the debates surrounding India's role in QUAD, considering comparisons to NATO and historical foreign policy perspectives (Jain, 2021). Finally, the paper discusses potential trajectories for QUAD's future, its impact on regional security, and broader implications for the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape.

QUAD EVOLUTION

The origins of QUAD can be traced back to Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's proposal for regional maritime security cooperation among major democracies in the Indo-Pacific. In his famous book 'Utsukushii Kunihe' published in 2006, Abe proposed a beautiful world based on democratic values and the notion that '*Democracies do not go to war*' (Langel, 2022). This initiative was a response to China's aggressive tactics in the region, prompting Australia, Japan, and the USA to initiate the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) to address common threats. India's inclusion in QUAD further solidified the group's purpose of safeguarding shared interests and responding collectively to regional challenges (Medcalf, 2009). The first QUAD meeting was organized in the Philippines in 2007 on May 25th during the assemblage of the 'Asian Regional Forum' (Buchan & Rimland, 2020). However, the secrecy of the meeting was maintained by member states to avoid the annoyance of China, and they declared it an informal group to address issues of conjunctive interest like terrorism and disaster management.

The QUAD's evolution culminated in joint military exercises like the Malabar naval exercise, demonstrating a commitment to maritime security and free navigation in areas of strategic importance (Cherian, 2007). Despite political pressures and Chinese objections, QUAD members have demonstrated a willingness to strengthen their cooperation, highlighting the

group's strategic significance in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic environment (Samachar,2007).

THE RESISTANCE OF CHINA AND QUAD'S HIBERNATION

The democratic armour in the shape of QUAD very soon seemed to be rusted as the over-sensitive Dragon began to feel uncomfortable. China moves heaven and earth to voice its concern for QUAD and spare no effort to stop the countries from such grouping aiming at China. China blamed the USA for rushing to create a new struggle zone and instability in the Indo-Pacific region in the name of the dialectical superiority of democracies over communist kind of true democracies. China officially registered its protest with QUAD countries for the Malabar exercise and any collective dialogue initiative. Banting upon China's growing pressure, the QUAD member states started to distance themselves from further intensifying the dialogue process. The Left parties in India harshly criticized the UPA government for Malabar Exercise and its tilt toward America. The CPI (M) blamed the Manmohan Singh government for drowning India in US subordination through the various defence, nuclear agreements, and military exercises like Malabar. They also warned that India's growing closeness with the US is in dissonance with its long-term strategic interests. The mounting protests of Left parties (whose support was crucial for the survival of the then UPA government) forced the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, to clarify that the security implications were not the plan of QUAD (Cherian, 2007). During his state visit to China, he stated that a warm relationship with China is his biggest priority, and QUAD was not a grouping to bind China.

In July 2007, Australia's Defence Minister Brendan Nelson expressed hesitance during a state visit to India, indicating a preference to limit the QUAD to trade and cultural aspects. This early indication of reluctance marked a potential limitation on QUAD's scope. The grouping faced a significant setback with the resignation of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a key figure in QUAD's inception and design. His successor, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, adopted a more conciliatory approach towards China, tempering QUAD's initial assertiveness. The dynamics shifted further in December 2007 with the appointment of Australia's new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, known for his pro-China stance. PM Rudd's administration dealt a significant blow to QUAD by distancing itself from the dialogue. This was evidenced by Australia's refusal to participate in the upcoming QUAD meeting proposed for January 2008. PM Rudd's justification for this decision, citing that QUAD

did not align with Australia's long-term interests, underscored a strategic shift away from QUAD's objectives (Flitton, 2020). The latter events made it evident that despite their willingness to create a containment zone to resist China's aggressive proliferation, the QUAD nations did not have the same understanding and clarity for goals. Even years since its first confidential meeting in Manila, QUAD could not decide on its formal objectives and common agenda. Instead, it allowed its critics to symbolise it with a 'sea-foam' (TOI, 2020). China kept its wary eyes on the QUAD and held an intense drive against the grouping, which resulted in the pause of strategic and security discussions in the group, and ultimately the spirit of QUAD crumbled.

REJUVENATION OF QUAD

The idea of an Indo-Pacific gathering seemed to be halted until Shinzo Abe's return to the supreme office in 2012. In his second tenure, Abe tried to set the stage for the return of QUAD. He rejuvenated the QUAD concept and pushed hard for a multilateral dialogue of democracies. In another significant event in 2013, Tony Abbot of the Labor Party took the prime minister's office, and Australia made a significant policy shift. In September 2014, Australia accepted the Uranium trade deal with India and supported the QUAD concept. However, these small efforts could not rejuvenate the QUAD consciousness and could be restored only after a long gap of 10 years.

In July 2016, an important international event awakened the QUAD from its deep sleep. After a long three years wait, a five-judge bench of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague delivered its judgement in the much-awaited Philippines v/s China case. The Philippines approached PCA in January 2013, under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to challenge Beijing's South China Sea claims. In its unanimous judgement, PCA firmly rejected China's so-called historical nine-dash-line claims as '*having no basis in international law*' (Jibiki, 2020). As expected, China furiously reacted to the ruling. 'Xinhua', the Chinese news agency, called it an "*ill-founded*" verdict that was "*naturally null and void*". The People's Daily, the official voice of the Communist Party of China, declared, "*The Chinese government and the Chinese people firmly oppose [the ruling] and will neither acknowledge it nor accept it*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016). China tried to discredit the ruling through different interpretations of international law, state-controlled media and its effective propaganda machinery.

The verdict seriously blew the legitimacy of Chinese claims in the South China Sea. But, even though the unilateral Chinese denial to respect the decision gave a stern message to the international community that the communist Authoritarian regime can snub rules-based international order and even international laws at any time in its favour and to defend its aggressive policies, it can go to any extent. This incident served as a wake-up call for democratic partners to recognize the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) as an essential alliance to counter China's escalating assertiveness in the convergence of the two seas. The gathering of QUAD leaders at the 30th ASEAN Summit in 2017, including Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull, Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, Indian PM Narendra Modi, and US President Donald Trump, provided a rare opportunity for these nations to come together on a common platform. In June 2018, QUAD member states convened another informal meeting in Singapore, albeit on the sidelines of ASEAN's official proceedings (Panda, 2018). Despite differing approaches, there was a sense of unity among QUAD members for the first time, acknowledging the imperative for the region's democracies to collectively uphold a "free and open Indo-Pacific".

However, despite recognizing China's aggressive rise as a shared challenge to the rules-based international order, each country exhibited hesitancy in fully committing to a formal QUAD structure. Instead of issuing a joint manifesto, they released separate statements reaffirming their support for a secure and independent Indo-Pacific region. Notably, India's statement cautiously mentioned "maritime cooperation," a term omitted from its 2017 consultative QUAD meeting statement. While Japan, Australia, and the US emphasized "*freedom of navigation and overflight*" and "*connectivity freedom*," they avoided explicitly referring to themselves as a "*Quadrilateral Grouping*." Nonetheless, there was a notable commitment among QUAD counterparts to sustain the QUAD spirit and establish mechanisms for more frequent and regular meetings, leading to the inaugural Ministerial-Level gathering in September 2019 in New York. This meeting aimed to bolster "*collective efforts to advance a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific*," (Panda, 2018) although it, too, occurred on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting.

The gathering's success made QUAD a step forward by agreeing to a formal QUAD meeting in Bangkok in November 2019. QUAD's Bangkok summit emphasized increasing cooperation on cyber-security, disaster management, tackling terrorism, and humanitarian aid (Panda, 2019). In their statements, India and the US especially underlined the importance of ASEAN in the view

of suspicion raised by some ASEAN countries that QUAD might be an effort to belittle the ASEAN grouping. All the member states cited the need for a rules-based international order and an open, accessible, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in their separate statements.

THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD ORDER AND THE NEED FOR QUAD

The year 2020 started with grim dawn. The Corona disease broke out in the Wuhan province of China and converted into pandemic Covid-19 very soon, with China's suspicious role proliferating it worldwide. However, QUAD found new relevancy in the post-pandemic world, and on March 20th 2020, the members of QUAD met at a virtual conference to discuss the corrective action to contain the disease. The participation of South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam and all the four members of QUAD in the Video Conference meet indicated the growing acceptance and the importance of the QUAD-like grouping in the emerging post-pandemic world order (Nair,2020). The grouping received global attention in the first week of October 2020, with its second ministerial meeting being held in Tokyo, giving a stern message to China (The Hindu, 2020). It focused on building a "*true security framework*" to ensure freedom on the Indo-Pacific region's high-sea. QUAD seemed to mature with a more precise objective and structural framework during the second ministerial meeting. Though, the Indian side was still cautious in issuing the statement, despite the ongoing deadlock on LAC and June 15th, Galwan face-off with China and stressed that like-minded countries' cooperation is focused on Covid-19 challenges, infrastructure building, and increasing connectivity chain. During this period, the US Secretary of State emphasized QUAD as a democratic alliance to counter China's coercive behavior. Japan's Foreign Minister reiterated support for a free Indo-Pacific, reflecting QUAD's strategic goals. The successor to Japan's PM showed enthusiasm for QUAD, akin to his predecessor. Australia's Foreign Minister's presence, despite quarantine requirements, underscored QUAD's significance in addressing regional challenges.

COMMON GROUNDS FOR COMMON STRATEGY

The QUAD countries find themselves on the familiar ground due to '*a common adversary*' against China (Pant, 2020). For example, America, which has been enjoying superpower status till very recently, sees China as the only peer competitor, adamant about taking centre stage of world politics. Chinese

claim on international waters, especially on the entire South China Sea (SCS) (Phillips, et, al. 2016), trade war, its "six nos" strategy on the Taiwan issue, violations of international rules, and China's abysmal human rights track record are the main friction points between US and China. SCS is a busy sea route accountable for almost \$ 5 trillion in annual global trade and vibrant oil and gas blocks. Chinese claims on SCS are sketched through its nine-dash line, a virtual semi-circle-shaped line on the map of the region that covers 85% of the area (Kondapalli,2021). The nine-dash lines include *Paracel* and *Spratly* islands, which have rival claims by the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. Even China unilaterally denied respecting the decision of the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which rejected the historical claims of China on the SCS on July 16th. While the United States has no claims in SCS, it has strongly criticised the Chinese move as a threat to free global navigation and rules-based international order. The implementation of the 'Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act' (UFLPA) by the USA from June 21st 2022, signals another rubbing point for both nations. The UFLPA provisions for an import ban of products made in Xinjiang province of China on the pretext of forced Uyghur labour (Ropes & Gray, 2022). With the recent Nancy Pelosi visit to Taiwan and fierce reaction by China, the bilateral relations of both nations are now going down a slippery slope (The Interpreter, 2022).

However, the main reason behind the increasing volatility of relationships lies in a direct threat from unruly authoritarian China to rules-based international order and liberal democratic values. August 2013, guidelines issued by the Communist Party of China known as 'Document No: 9' provides enough space for this argument. This prescriptive document mentions seven "incorrect ways of thinking", which are: admiring liberal democracy to negate the communist party rule, supporting "universal values" to undermine socialism, encouraging "new liberalism" to dismantle the basic Chinese economy; questioning the Party's control of press and freedom of expression and, denying the *history of the People's Republic of China and the history of CCP*, including the "guiding role of Mao Zedong Thought" (Ranade, 2013). It proposes that these "incorrect thoughts and views" are trying to infiltrate the Chinese ideological base via the west-dominated internet and fake news machinery. It also adds that western liberal ideologues have always treated authoritarian systems like Russia and China as the enemy of open societies.

Concerning Australia, the bitter relationship of Canberra with Beijing is the factor pushing it towards QUAD. Chinese meddling in Australian domestic politics through its soft power tactics has created a gorge of mistrust

between the two nations. In 2018, the Australian Ban on Huawei, the Chinese technical giant, for security reasons and adopting of not-so-favourable policies for various other Chinese companies angered China. Later, Australia's bold initiatives for tracing the COVID-19 origin made China furious (Mu, 2022). China openly threatened Australia with dire consequences and retaliated in late 2020 by unofficially banning imports from Australia like coking coal, lobsters, wine, beef, etc. However, these aggressive Chinese steps have backed fire and aroused deep anti-China feelings among Australians. According to a recent survey by Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI), in Sydney, majority of Australians believed that China is trying to weaponise trade to silence the critics of its mischievous activities, and 73 percent of people had no trust in China Government (Collinson, 2022). The strong anti-China public sentiments and fear of emerging super bully nation is the leading cause for sailing Australia towards Quad. Simply put due to a lack of nuclear deterrence, Australia finds itself in a very vulnerable situation; thus, to contain growing Chinese ambitions and to overcome its security concerns, Australian willingness for QUAD, like a common security strategy, is very likely.

Regarding Japan, Sino-Japan relations have been a victim of historic hostility. The first Sino-Japanese war (January 1895) and the 1937 imperialist Japanese attack are part of the Chinese historical narration of humiliation. In addition, the close Asian neighbours bordered by the East China Sea have been facing antagonist relationships due to various issues. Among them, the most prominent is the Senkaku Islands dispute (five tiny unpopulated islands situated in the east China sea) claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan). While China alleges that the refusal of Japan to acknowledge and apologise to China for its war crimes is the main reason for these restrained relations, Japan asserts that the expansionist and assertive actions of the People's Liberation Army are responsible for this situation (He, 2022). In addition, the controversy over Yasukuni Shrine, situated in Tokyo, which glorifies the Japanese war heroes, some of whom were convicted for war crimes in China and Korea, is another friction point. However, this is interesting to note that the recent electoral victory of Japan's ruling coalition LDP-Komeito is being interpreted as a mandate for crucial amendments in the 'Peace Constitutional' of 1950 to increase Japan's defence budget to 2 percent or more of GDP and aim for 'Self-Defense Forces' to boost Japan's defence potentiality (The Hindu, 2020, July 11). These reforms were strongly advocated by the late Shinzo Abe, the architect of QUAD, in the context of China's enlarged assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and North Korea's threatening nuclear and missile development programme. Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stressed that viewing the

PLA's aggressive ambitions for Taiwan and Senkaku Islands, this is imperative for Japan to "*fundamentally reinforce*" its defence and counterstrike capacity. Moreover, he warned, "*Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow*," and thus fortifying the response capabilities of the Japan-U.S. alliance is necessary for deterrence and rules-based international order being under threat by countries such as China and Russia (Bikhchandani, 2022).

As far as India is concerned, its continuous border clashes with China oblige it enough to join QUAD. China's unprovoked attack on unprepared India in 1962 resulted in the illegal encroachment of approximately 38,000 square km of Indian territory by China. The 1962 Chinese attack is deeply embedded in Sino-India relations, and the national memoir of India considers it a real stab in the back, which killed the spirit of '*Hindi-Chinee Bhai-Bhai*'. The worrisome factor is China is still on its mission of land grab of border areas. According to The Telegraph, "*China is estimated to have taken over close to 1,000 sqkm of India-claimed territory in eastern Ladakh since May 2020*" (The Wire, 2022). The Galwan Valley vicious brawl in June 2020, and the failure of 16 border peace talks over the past 26 months, have stretched the relations of both countries to a breaking point. Despite the Indian resistance, China is still on its land grab mission. Following the same South China Sea strategy pattern, where it has created artificial islands and used them as military bases, China has established 624 new villages with military equipment in bordering areas or on no-man's-land in the Himalayan frontier. To cement its illegal claims Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) is employing typical Chinese tactics, the building of roads, bridges, and military bases on bordering territories belonging to India, Bhutan and Nepal, to throw India off balance (Chellaney, 2022).

The nexus of China and Pakistan, which has reached levels of colonisation of the latter, is another serious security threat to India, posing the risk of two front wars for India. Under the so-called China-Pakistan' Boundary Agreement' of 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq km territory of Pakistan occupied Kashmir to China. With its notorious '*string of pearl strategic trap*', building of 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' on Indian territory occupied by Pakistan and occupying the strategic Hambantota port of Sri Lanka through debt trap China has provided enough proof of the '*Chinese encirclement of India*' thesis. Chinese bullying tactics are writings on the wall, which dictates the nations to accept the new geopolitical map redrawn by China suddenly, deceitfully, and mischievously and left no option for its opponents except to use force with fears of war to bring back the status quo. From the South China Sea to the Indian subcontinent, the Neo-imperial expansionism of China is a real threat to

rules-based international order. However, India has limited options despite its willingness to restore the status quo. Thus, a collective strategy of like-minded countries to contain Chinese expansionism may be fruitful if the pledge of QUAD is not an empty declaration.

INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY AUTONOMY AND QUAD

QUAD's recent activities are enough to confirm the strategic reshaping of the equations of the Indo-Pacific region. The post-pandemic challenges of geopolitics have compelled Indian foreign policy to make a pivotal shift in its involvement with the nations, especially China. The deadly skirmishes at LAC and China's adventurism in the Indo-Pacific region have pushed New Delhi to explore options for safeguarding its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Unfortunately, India's external policy postures, particularly regarding China, have reflected a lack of confidence in the past. India's antipathy for some specific foreign policy choices, mainly for alliances, is well known (Pant, 2021). In India's diplomatic dictionary, 'Military Alliance' is a forbidden word treated as a perverted means and a dangerous threat to the nation's sovereign and independent foreign policy. As a founding father of 'NAM', it has been challenging to come out of the shadow of the past idealism, though it has hindered India's rise. The word alliance has been charted against India's foreign policy autonomy. The opponents, viewing QUAD as the Indo-Pacific wing of NATO, argue that Australia and Japan are subordinate allies of the USA and part of its militaristic treaties. In contrast, India had a great history of independent policy choices. Thus, they find it unwise to shift from a strategic partner's previous prided position to being the USA's ally.

The previous regimes in India have not been very vocal in supporting such a grouping that could be openly viewed as anti-China. Despite keeping the idea of democratic collaboration to secure peace and stability, Indian decision-makers have shown indecisiveness in taking any course of action that could incite China in any way. India is proud of its foreign policy autonomy, even though, after the first QUAD meeting, due to mounting pressure from China, PM Manmohan Singh stated that he had '*explained to the President of China, Hu Jintao that the QUAD was neither a 'Ganging Up' against China nor an 'Axis of Democracies'*' (Chellaney, 2007). Surprisingly, a democratic regime with prided strategic autonomy 'explains' its course of action to an autocratic one. That too, the country, which has spared no effort in moving against Indian interests and never care to justify its act of bullying its neighbours, either in the Himalayan region or in the South China Sea.

It is notable that, in the past, India has accepted partnership treaties and the 1971 treaty with the USSR, known as the '*Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation*,' is a fine example of realism of Indian foreign policy. Even India enthusiastically participates in the 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation' (SCO) with Russia and China, which openly declares its objective to maintain a balance of power against western hegemonic powers. India joined it with observer status and acquired a full membership position in 2017 (Haidar, 2020). Despite the Doklam standoff with China, India joined SCO, and it has been justified on the ground of its multilateral engagement approach and strategic autonomy principle. Thus, there is no point in hesitating to come up with QUAD. Undoubtedly, nations can better manage the threats to rule-based world order in collective capacities, so opting for alliances to enhance security and peace should be open. However, acceptance or rejection of partnerships should be based on the nation's strategic needs and not on idealism.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The rejuvenated "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" has become more relevant in the post-pandemic scenario. Even though institutionalizing the group and unity among like-minded countries are the most significant challenges before the nations. The difference of opinion within the corners over the QUAD strategy has hindered its rise until very recently. Viewing China's hyper-activism in the region, one cannot deny QUAD's dire need and grouping of democracies to work as an alliance to safeguard their high sea interests. Some other countries like France, Germany and Canada, have also shown their interest in QUAD, for future engagement in the Indo-Pacific region to ensure navigational freedom. It indicates the growing significance of the QUAD on the one hand, but at the same time, it has increased the anger of China on the other. The warnings to Australia by 'Global Times' (the mouthpiece of China) to face dire consequences for participating in a joint naval exercise and asking India to distance itself from America indicate the Dragon's restlessness (Kondapalli, 2021). China has fiercely criticised QUAD's real motives without admitting that it was PLA's audacious territorial encroachments and irredentism at the root of QUAD nations rethinking collective efforts to contain China.

Dragon's omnipresence in both the Indian and Pacific oceans has been a matter of great concern for the countries in the region. Since 2013, when Xi Jinping took the baton of power, China has embarked on a mission to place the middle kingdom at the centre stage of the globe. During the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, China has become a saviour to western sections

torn Russian economy. The friendship between China and Russia' *with no limits*, is an indicator of a new Sino-Russia axis in the chaotic world order. A 'common strategy of like-minded countries is the need of the hour to counter Beijing's ill-legitimate moves in the region. As a vital geopolitical strategy, QUAD is driven by the goal of containing China's adventurism in the resource-rich Indo-Pacific region. Increasing maritime cooperation among the major democratic powers of the area is another significant objective. The recent enthusiasm for QUAD indicates that these nations seem to have woken up to the Chinese brewing agenda of neo-expansionism and its geopolitical ambitions. The increasing apprehension of China toward QUAD is enough evidence to prove that QUAD can shift the regional power balance (Datta, 2006). Despite the uncertain plans, the present-day QUAD seems to be a promising strategic grouping in Asia-Pacific for upcoming years. However, despite some minor success, this strategic group have a rambling road ahead; the main hurdle lies in the divergent interests of stakeholders and their failure to architect a solid geopolitical and geo-economic strategy to deal with China. China's second rank in the global economic index is the primary catalyst of its aggressive behaviour, its trade surplus marked US \$ 676.4 billion in 2021, and the most wondering is that all the QUAD members are contributing to the Chinese economic engine with their growing and large trade deficit or bilateral trade relations (Chellaney, 2022). In the single financial year of 2021 Indian trade deficit with China touched US\$77 billion. This development is noted at a time when the Indian government is continuously vowing to cut short its economic relations with China and taking symbolic steps to ban Chinese apps or some of its mobile companies to pacify the growing anti-China sentiments in the country, especially after Galwan incident.

The American contribution to the Chinese economy is also noted, whose trade deficit with China recorded US\$396.6 billion in 2021 (Reuters, 2022). This sole factor is enough to hamper China's potential to bear comfortably the cost of its military manoeuvres in the South China Sea, Southeast Asia, South Asia and beyond. Australia too significantly depends on Chinese trade. China shares almost a third of Australia's total international trade, which is why China weaponises trade to blackmail Australia if it seems to be acting against Chinese interests. For example, one may recall Chinese warnings to Australia when it participated in the Malabar 2020 exercise or Chinese threats to economically boycott Australia when it demanded a probe into the origin of Covid-19. Despite these tensions, Australia willingly accepted the membership of the 15-member China-dominated trade group Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which became effective in 2021(GOA,2021).

Japan, too is not behind in obliging China with economic ties with an eye to the larger Chinese market. Even QUAD's architect, Mr Abe, took no time to join the RCEP. Abe also showed his interest in Belt and Road Initiative by offering to invest \$100 billion in the "quality infrastructure" route (Kondapalli, 2022).

No doubt, QUAD members are still deluding that good conciliation is the only way to peace-building and that resistance will lead to confrontation. Rather than looking for serious alternatives to discontinue China's economic empowerment and appeasement, QUAD members' activities seem contradictory to their strategic objectives. For example, America, the largest global economy, is still hesitant to open its market for its Indo-Pacific partners to undercut Chinese economic influence by boosting relations among QUAD members. Furthermore, Quad's recent summit discussed topics like the Covid-19 vaccine delivery system and climate change that brushed aside the group's core objectives. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war may further cause a dent in QUAD by spurring the USA to take a more compromising policy on China to prevent it from neutralizing the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. Quad seems at a roundabout, still confused about its geopolitical objectives and contradiction of its strategic action plan to create a democratic wall to seize the great firewall of aggressive Chinese expansionism. The July 16th PCA decision (Jakhar, 2021) which aroused a stronger hope to check illegal Chinese actions, has made no difference to Chinese behaviour or its militarization of the disputed sea; in essence, the landmark decision has been belittled as just a moral triumph for the Philippines. In the way China rebuked the UN maritime convention law and its arbitration procedures, All Quad members must understand the writing on the wall to ensure a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' and rules-based international order; this strategic grouping needs not only determination but action too.

The QUAD has emerged as a crucial response to the post-pandemic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in light of China's assertive actions. Despite its renewed relevance, QUAD faces significant hurdles, including divergent stakeholder interests and a lack of cohesive geopolitical and economic strategies to counter China effectively. China's aggressive stance, evident in its criticism and warnings to QUAD members like Australia and India, underscores the urgency of strengthening this alliance. The growing interest from countries such as France, Germany, and Canada in QUAD reflects a broader recognition of the need to ensure navigational freedom in high seas and deter Chinese expansionism. Economically, QUAD members exhibit varying

degrees of dependence on China, with significant trade deficits contributing to China's economic leverage. However, QUAD's reluctance to confront China economically and its diversion from core objectives like maritime cooperation and security pose challenges to its effectiveness. Thus, it's time for QUAD members to move beyond rhetoric and take tangible steps to fortify the alliance by addressing economic vulnerabilities, enhancing coordination on strategic issues, and reaffirming a commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region to effectively counter China's aggressive expansionism and uphold regional stability.

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