

Associate Paper

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India's Dilemma: Strategic Autonomy or New Alliances?

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Key Points

- The “rebirth” of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is an outcome of China’s assertive policies.
- The sanctions placed on China, the *Malabar* naval exercises with Australia in attendance, and India’s more deliberate engagement with the other Quad members are also the result of China’s assertiveness.
- Despite not yet being as comfortable in its relationship with the United States as it is with Japan, New Delhi’s ties to Washington are progressing faster than ever before.
- Prime Minister Modi’s fixation on a “Hindu” India could act as a brake on that alignment, however.

Summary

At their recent Quad leaders’ meeting in the White House, President Biden and Prime Ministers Scott Morrison, Narendra Modi and Yoshihide Suga came together, overcoming periods of inactivity and disengagement, to agree on a way forward, bound by the rule of law promoted by their states. It does not embrace containment of China, towards whom their message is directed.

This paper examines the history of the Quad, including periods of sanctions against present member India during its nuclear weapons test periods, and the more recent effect on India’s bilateral relationship with China, surrounded as it now is by China’s Belt and Road maritime and land-based advances. Other regional groupings, which include either the United States or India but not both, are cited as examples of the multiplicity of regional multinational

groupings. India's relations with the United States and Australia after India's nuclear tests are discussed, as is the Indo-US Nuclear Agreement.

India's democratic credentials are examined, giving rise to the question whether the Quad members are to be more than Westminster-style democracies. This in turn gives rise to the question of whether the life of the Quad depends on each of the member states' shifting relations with China, and with each other. Rather than a "Cold War" in the old sense, it may be more a new version of the "great game" between the Quad states, with perhaps a changing membership that is not necessarily dependent on democracy.

Analysis

Background

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or "Quad", is a four-member strategic forum with a sometime shifting membership between the United States, Japan, Australia and India, which has moved over time from a diplomatic and military grouping to its present commitment that goes beyond maritime security to the provision of public goods across the Indo-Pacific. At their recent leaders meeting at the White House, President Biden, Prime Ministers Scott Morrison, Narendra Modi and Yoshihide Suga came together overcoming periods of convergence, disengagement and inactivity over the lifetime of the Quad.

A re-start in 2007 with India, the United States, Japan, Australia and, that year, Singapore, taking part in India's *Malabar* Naval Exercise, held in the Bay of Bengal, ceased rapidly following the decision made, also in 2007, by the Howard Government to not proceed further with the Quad, and subsequently maintained during Kevin Rudd's prime ministership amid uncertainty about Australia's place in the growing tension between the United States and China. While the *Malabar* Exercises continued without Australia, Prime Minister Julia Gillard replaced Rudd in 2010, and re-built military co-operation with America.

The next four-state Quad meeting grew out of the 2017 ASEAN meeting when all four members, led by then leaders, Abe, Modi, Trump and Turnbull agreed to reboot the group, returning to the early diplomatic and military approach to counter China's moves in the South China Sea. At this time it was clear that limiting China's PLA's maritime and terrestrial expansion was an objective.

India, virtually surrounded by China's off-shore Belt and Road Initiative, was affected in many ways by China's development of relations with India's neighbours as well as Beijing's "soft-hard bilateral relationship with New Delhi". India's options then were to manoeuvre within its bilateral boundaries with China, or form a non-binding alliance similar to "the not-quite quadrilateral" open for discussion between President Obama, Japan, India itself and, previously, Australia. As this author has previously [noted](#), 'The latter offered some foreign policy independence and a seat at a democratic table. The former allowed a version of non-alignment'.

The Quad Partners

The Quad evolved from the *Malabar* naval exercises which began as a bilateral venture in the Indian or Pacific Oceans between the Indian and United States' navies, held irregularly in 1992, 1995 and 1996. The exercises were suspended and short-lived financial sanctions imposed after May 1998 when India tested its nuclear weapons, awakening the United States to the realisation that the nuclear issue at that time was a barrier to any move on its part towards a partnership. *Malabar* was on hold until 2001 when the two states resumed exercises on an annual basis. Maritime co-operation among them began after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

A further barrier to a formal partnership that India had no intention of embarking on was the protracted and often difficult periods of negotiation over the India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement from its inception in 2005 lasting close to a decade. It followed the lifting of another round of American sanctions, lasting some 30 years, imposed after India's first nuclear test in 1974¹. Indian demands across the long path from 2005 to the Indo-US nuclear deal did not culminate in the formal alliance that the United States sought – and still seeks – but created a sound economic base and increasing degrees of interoperability as Washington drew New Delhi into a range of defence arrangements while still seeking a formal partnership with India that continues to be withheld.

Australia was involved in the *Malabar* exercise for the first time in 2007, but it, too, had suspended its relationship with India in 1998, effectively boycotting the country for an extended period when Atal Bihari Vajpayee, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was close to the end of his Prime Ministership. Australia's relationship with India floundered again when Prime Minister John Howard formed an agreement with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to sell uranium to India – albeit bound by a raft of conditions. The agreement was overturned by incoming Prime Minister Rudd in 2008 causing another downturn in relations.

Australia's relationship with India since the 2014 election victory of BJP leader Modi has been one of affectionate gestures (real and virtual), and grand joint statements but little progress, and no invitation to Australia to take part in the *Malabar* exercises again until 2020.

Unlike India's one step forward-two steps back relations over time with the United States and Australia, India-Japan relations have traditionally been strong. Two of the largest and oldest democracies in Asia, they have a high degree of congruence of political, economic and strategic interests and view each other through bilateral and further trilateral agreements as capable of responding to global and regional challenges.

Other divisions or differences between the Quad partners are clear – Tokyo and Canberra are members of the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); neither India nor the United States are. Any American push for the Quad to take an anti-

¹ The US sanctions post-1974 consisted of stopping all assistance except humanitarian aid, ending credit guarantees to India, opposition to any lending by international financial institutions and banning the export of a range of defence technology and materials.

China stance becomes a risk of alienating India: ‘It’s one thing for India to have a tense, antagonistic relationship of its own with Beijing. It’s another for India to be part of an explicit coalition that seeks to [contain Beijing](#)’.

That suggests that there is no universal consensus among the Quad partners on how to deter Beijing. For example, Australia also was an early sceptic of the need for a Quad, and it is arguably also wary of further upsetting diplomatic relations with China by closely following any future American hard line. Difficulties emerge, of course, when viewing India as a long-term member of a coalition that seeks to contain Beijing while New Delhi also seeks to preserve its domestically important bilateral relations with China.

Other multinational groupings suggest that the four Quad states have established options. The Five Eyes Alliance between the English-speaking democracies – the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – is an intelligence-sharing body. India is not a member, but America and Australia are Quad members. Similarly, India alone among the Quad states is a member of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). Its headquarters are in Beijing; it is also a security alliance, Eurasian in membership and with political and economic interests.

Interestingly, the SCO’s policies are loosely based on the principles of *Panchsheel*, derived from India’s and China’s post-Indian independence commitment in 1954 to equity and peaceful co-existence – similar in concept to the Quad’s aims of working for a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo- Pacific.

While India’s commitment to non-alignment had its place in the *Panchsheel* principles and beyond, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar recently noted that it was ‘a concept of relevance in a specific era ...’ and went on to suggest that as independence of action, as it was enshrined, ‘seems to be the driving cog of India’s foreign policy’, that India’s membership of the Quad should now be seen ‘as an intersection of India and the West’s self-interests with [no formal alliance on the cards](#)’. While India’s non-alliance principles are well recognised and noted above, their repetition suggests that an Indian withdrawal from the Quad at a time beneficial to it, is not to be overlooked.

India’s Democratic Credentials

The Quad Leaders’ [Joint Statement](#) following their virtual meeting in March 2021 reaffirmed their commitment to ‘the rule of law, freedom of navigation ... peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values and territorial integrity’, followed by an outline of shared goals. Citing “democratic values” as one basis for an alliance raises immediate questions.

Democracy and, thus, democratic values, are well-entrenched in the Indo-Pacific with, for example, New Zealand and South Korea, both outside the Quad, while India is a member. It may be argued that, as a Quad member, India’s deepwater naval capacity adds value to its democratic credentials as they relate to the Quad alignment.

Modi’s intentions to carry out reforms in India that enable its re-badging as “Hindu” India were clearly signalled (if in small print) in his 2014 and, more openly, in 2019 Election Manifestos. Thus, his intention to change the Citizenship Act with amendments that were

initially applied in east Indian states where only non-Muslim illegal immigrants were offered amnesty was enacted in 2018. Similarly, the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act (2019) revoked their special status as states – with their own constitutions and a high degree of administrative freedom – and drew them into the Indian Union as union territories. Muslim-majority Kashmir, and Muslims across Jammu, were penalised by the Act.

Ongoing assaults on minorities’ political rights, civil liberties and religious practices have increased under Modi’s Hindu nationalist government, shifting India over a relatively short period from a secular democracy to what has been described as an [‘electoral autocracy’](#). That article goes on to suggest that electoral autocracies are the most common regime type, while liberal democracies continue to decline. India also dropped from free to partly-free status in the Freedom in the World 2021 rankings, which, however, also noted the [‘parlous state’](#) of US democracy.

A New Great Game?

A question arises: need the newly-minted Quad, as a non-binding alliance of states, be regarded as a club of functioning democracies? As the Quad’s identifying reason for its banding together is to guide and promote the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific under the banner of democracy, facing, but not containing, China, does this do more than suggest that Quad members are practicing democracy in terms of Westminster-style elections?

If failures in democratic practice, as noted above, are not criteria for membership of the Quad, it may demonstrate that American and Indian interests are aligned and that their ties, while they are not “allies”, are strong, and hedging against a foe. Japan, the instigator of the revival of the Quad in 2017, and Australia, somewhat ambivalent about its approach to China, make up the democratic arc.

The life of the Quad thus appears to depend on each of the member states’ shifting relations with China and with each other. Not a “Cold War” in the old sense, but a new version of the “great game” between the Quad states, perhaps changing or adding to its membership, but not disbanding ‘because of the [China compulsion’](#), nor even necessarily bound by democracy.

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