

## India, the Quad, and the China Question



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How does India, the “strategic fulcrum” of the Indo-Pacific, perceive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States?

The idea of the Quad was born in 2007, but was shelved when former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd withdrew his country’s participation. The Quad made a comeback in November 2017 with a formal consultation meeting in Manila involving the four countries. More than Japan and Australia, it is India, China’s immediate and largest neighbor, that holds the key to the Quad’s prospects.

Great Expectations

The Quad members are advocating for a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” During his September 2017 visit to India, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [expressed the view](#) that “a powerful Japan and powerful India can protect each other’s interests.” The US, in its [National Security Strategy](#) released in December 2017, vowed that it will support India’s role as a “leading global power” in the Indo-Pacific by expanding the India-US strategic and defence partnership. Australia, too, [has acknowledged](#) India’s importance in the Indo-Pacific strategic calculus.

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The intent behind these statements is unequivocal. The US, Japan, and Australia want India to play a central and constructive role in shaping the Quad’s role in the Indo-Pacific, which is often seen as one of an “anti-China” bulwark. How is India responding?

India does share a common perspective with the other Quad members that the Indo-Pacific must encourage a “rules-based order.” But more importantly, India’s role in the Quad is driven by New Delhi’s rising ambitions. The Quad’s “open-minded agenda” is relevant to India’s strategic interests and the strategic compatibility that India enjoys with the other members.

Advancing India’s Position in the Indo-Pacific, Not Against China

China is a strong factor in India’s perspective on the Quad. But New Delhi’s approach is more to advance India’s position in the Indo-Pacific than simply

to counter China.

*First*, more than anything, India sees the Quad as a way of addressing the rising power asymmetry in Asia. India has long sought a power equilibrium with regards to China. Yet, China has surpassed India on many accounts to improve its “comprehensive national power” in Asia and the world at large. In addition, Beijing under President Xi Jinping’s leadership is pursuing a “new era” in foreign policy strategy that is much more US-centric and thus neglects its neighbors in Asia. Furthermore, China’s emergence as a “revisionist” power comes as a strategic challenge to India’s interests in Asia. In order to address this power disequilibrium, India finds strategic consonance with the Quad members.

*Second*, China’s unilateralism in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has constrained India’s choice of interests in Asia and elsewhere. China’s Maritime Silk Route (MSR) poses a challenge to India’s maritime superiority in the region, as it focuses on infrastructure along “alternative” routes in the Indian Ocean.

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China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, East China Sea, India-China border disputes, and its maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean have further complicated Asia’s geopolitics. This has resulted in greater uncertainty for India and many other countries.

These developments have encouraged India to demand that the status quo in the Indian Ocean be upheld in a “free and open” maritime environment. Here, the Quad countries are seen as strategic partners. India looks upon Japan as a financial partner in bolstering its maritime infrastructure, and the United States as a military partner in the region. Likewise, Australia provides strategic comfort to India’s growing Indo-Pacific ambitions.

*Third*, India’s vision of the maritime Indo-Pacific is based on an “inclusive” and “consultative” approach that establishes a strategic consonance with other democratic countries such as Australia, Japan, and the US. India’s advocacy of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), which calls for inclusivity and universalism, is proof of this. There is no caveat in this inclusivity and universalism that excludes China. SAGAR invites all countries to promote transparency and transnationalism in maritime governance.

**India-China Strategic Issues Are Not Going to Go Away**

In my view, China’s relations with India hold greater strategic importance than its relations with the other Quad members. As emerging economies, India and China relate to each other in a range of regional and global fora. These fora include the IMF, WTO, World Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS, AIIB, BASIC climate group, and the trilateral Russia-India-China (RIC) group. This makes the Quad a comparatively feeble proposition.

But the India-China border disputes and the countries’ growing discord in areas such as water, maritime security, and regional politics often make them appear as Asian rivals.

The India-China relationship is taking on a defining structure in the Indo-

Pacific, and New Delhi is more inclined to nurture it than repudiate it. India's strategic consonance with the other Quad countries does not guarantee its security and the safeguarding of its territorial interests in the event of an India-China conflict. None of the other Quad countries has taken an exclusive stance in supporting New Delhi's position on the India-China border disputes. Most of their statements during the recent Doklam border stand-off involving India, China, and Bhutan were virtually neutral.

Likewise, the other Quad members broadly support BRI, and consensus has not emerged among them to challenge either the MSR or BRI. India's stance on BRI has not been endorsed by the other Quad countries. In fact, all of the other members have offered tactical support for the continents-spanning project.

Therefore, India's participation in the Quad is not an explicit move against China. Rather, it is a calculated measure to protect its interests in a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific. In addition, strategic contradictions among the Quad countries discourage India from forming a formal alliance against its immediate and largest neighbor. The India-China relationship is taking on a defining structure in the Indo-Pacific, and New Delhi is more inclined to nurture it than repudiate it.