

The Emergence of a New Cold War Mentality and the Role Of Quad

Abu Bakar*

Introduction

China's rapid rise as a regional and global power is one of the most important political developments of the 21st century which is deeply upsetting the US. The American side considers China the only potential threat to its hegemony and national interests. The competition between the two great powers is at the epicentre of political, economic, and most importantly strategic debate and points towards the emergence of a 'new Cold War mentality'. The reason behind heightened tension between the US and China goes back to 2011, when the term 'Pivot to Asia' first entered the American political lexicon. It was basically the US strategy to bolster its ties with East Asian states and the clear subtext was to try and manage the rise of China. If we look at the recent developments in Asia Pacific region and activities of the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) also known as the Quad, we can assume that the US is laying out the full-blown China containment strategy and ideological basis for this containment. On the other hand, the US is trying to frame China not just as an economic and military rival but also as an ideological one.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad

Quad is basically an intergovernmental security forum of likeminded democracies. It comprises of 4 countries India, Japan, Australia,

and the United States, which predominantly aims to counter the rising Chinese influence in the region and the world. It is often credited as the brainchild of the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose August 2007 speech titled 'confluence of the two seas' provided the foundations for the security grouping.ⁱ The forum was joined by the vice president of the US Dick Cheney, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and Prime Minister of Australia John Howard.ⁱⁱ The security forum was paralleled by joint military exercises with the name 'Exercise Malabar'. Quad suffered a serious blow after the Government of China issued formal demarches to all four members and Australia withdrew from the forum back in February 2008. The Australian government under the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd found the grouping to be in too much conflict with Australia's economic relationship with China.ⁱⁱⁱ The Quad discontinued after the withdrawal of Australia from further formal discussion in 2008. Canberra at that time, tried to alleviate Chinese concerns about the US plans to expand its influence in the region and cast itself as the geopolitical broker between the US and China. Australia back tracked from the Quad under Chinese pressure and made its intention clear not to participate in future Malabar exercises and remained absent until 2020.

* Abu Bakar is an Intern at IRS.

Revival of Quad and the Geostrategic Interests of Member States

During the 2017 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, all four members vowed to revive the Quad forum. The four countries have their own unique set of strategic imperatives to revive the Quad and to confront the challenges emanating from China. They consider China as a threat to open and free trade in the Indo-Pacific region, liberal democracy, and the rules-based liberal international order.^{iv} The US side firmly considers China as its primary strategic competitor in the post-Cold War era in all domains and mounted its containment efforts by pushing back on Beijing's assertions. The Quad group was heavily promoted by the US as a way for the region's major democracies to step up cooperation in the face of military and other threats posed by China. The Quad fits nicely into the US strategy to protect its interests in the backdrop of growing Chinese power. The US policies towards China show Cold War mentality and belief that the US side will naturally emerge victorious. Since 2017, America, under Trump's presidency has adopted a hard stance against China. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) implied that China is a challenger to American 'influence, interest, and power' and seeking to erode American security and prosperity.^v Hence, the US aims to tame the rising Chinese influence in the region, which is evident from its projection of hard power and military alliances to counterbalance the rising China. The Indian government was not keen to publicly acknowledge the Chinese threat, despite serious lingering territorial disputes with China. But the recent Chinese actions along the disputed Line of

Actual Control (LAC) that resulted in the loss of 20 Indian soldiers pushed India to embrace the Indo-Pacific Quad. They believe that Quad enhances their strategic autonomy. India has long aspired to increase its sphere of influence to become a regional hegemon. Keeping Indian aspirations in mind, America has effectively used India to counter the rising China threat. Both have signed a civil nuclear deal, COMCASA, LEMOA, and BECA^{vi} to strengthen their strategic partnership and to counter Chinese assertiveness. The military alliance with Australia is seen by Americans as an 'anchor of peaceful, rule-based order' in the Asia Pacific and ramped up their efforts to challenge Chinese actions in the South China sea. Japan on the other hand is concerned about the advancement of Chinese military capacity and its claims on the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

Quad under President Joe Biden

With the change in the presidency of a country comes a change in the foreign policy as well, but the US approach towards China will likely remain the same. There is bipartisan consensus in the US against China. The US considers China an ambitious and aggressive strategic competitor to American hegemony. President Biden has expressed his thoughts and concerns about the threat posed by China's security apparatus, as well as economic and government practices. The general perception about President Biden is that he believes in working through Multilateral institutions and it was evident from the first virtual summit of the Quad. Through Quad, he is trying to expand the diplomatic and political space to counter Chinese influence and to address issues related to Covid-19, global impact of climate change, and the traditional security issues.

Quad and Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has experienced regional tensions and disputes over the South China Sea. Disagreements over competing territorial sovereignty and maritime claims between different states like China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam are the main source of these tensions.^{vii} The region has experienced worrying trends, including unilateral actions in disputed areas such as building artificial islands, conducting oil and gas exploration, and increasing military presence. The issue of South China Sea has negatively affected relations between regional and extra-regional powers like China and the US. The ongoing tussle between China and the US-led Quad may lead them towards an armed conflict. Regional states are apprehensive of such a situation and believe that the South China Sea dispute is a subset of the broader regional agenda. The regional countries do not want to be embroiled in existing territorial, political, and strategic rivalries and stress upon the need to resolve the issue through peaceful means, according to the established norms and international law. They support the idea of sustainable peace and regional development and oppose the zero-sum mentality of the Cold War era.

How China Perceives Quad?

China considers the formation of Quad as an American effort aimed at containing China's peaceful rise and has labelled the four-country alliance as "the Asian version of NATO."^{viii} China accused the US of stoking tensions in the region to achieve its vested interests and to disrupt the maritime trade of China through the SCS. To counter American led Quad alliance, China

developed a strong economy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China initiated economic projects like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to attract the US allies to counter an all-out anti-China military alliance in the region. On the other hand, China has structured the armed forces in a modern way to compete with the world's most advanced militaries and to balance the threat emanating from Quad. As China's prominence has risen in international arena, so too has its global interests. Therefore, it is developing its power projection capabilities to safeguard its core national interests. It urged the US not to indulge in another Cold War and proposed the path of peaceful development and stressed upon the need to jointly prevent conflict and wars.

Implications and Concerns

The revival of Quad with the aim to support a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region has signalled to China that the US-led Quad wants to maintain a stable balance of power in the region. It points that relations between the two great powers are at a dangerous juncture and may lead them towards an armed conflict in the near future.

The situation in the South China Sea is highly volatile and is considered the major flashpoint between the US, regional countries of Southeast Asia, and China. China, under Xi Jinping, has moved away from the injunction that China should hide its strength and bide its time and has strengthened its assertion of legal jurisdiction and its presence in the sea. In order to broadly strengthen its presence and its ability to enforce naval law within the U-shaped line, China has been mobilizing the People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), paramilitary, and civilian naval bodies in an

attempt to assert a de facto control over the South China Sea. The US denounced China's claims that it had no legal grounds to unilaterally impose its will on the region and deployed its advanced military aircraft carriers in the South China Sea to deter China. The revival of Quad, Malabar exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, and countermeasures by China show a worrying trend towards an armed conflict. Any conflict in the region would be disastrous for the economic stability, trade, prosperity, and development of the Southeast Asia. The ASEAN countries are very much concerned about such possible future scenarios and are trying to balance their relationship with both powers to end hostilities. They do not support elements of competition in the region and stress upon the need to regard a cohesive ASEAN and maintenance of its centrality within the ASEAN-led multilateral framework for peace, stability and security in the region. On the other hand, members of the Quad countries particularly Japan and India, the two with direct territorial

disputes with China, should try to mend their differences with China because they are more vulnerable to Chinese retaliation along the border should the Quad take on a military dimension.

Conclusion

The US and China are locked in an uneasy situation and tensions are running high over a range of issues including trade, technology, pandemic, Hong Kong's autonomy, Taiwan, and alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang. They have levelled accusations against each other and traded barbs, these actions show the belligerent posturing and negative trend. To maintain international stability, they should avoid provocative actions that undermine the core interests of each other. They should focus more on the peaceful means to resolve their differences. It will pave the way forward for sustainable peace and security in the world.

Notes and References

- ⁱ Haider Abbas, "Trump, Modi or Abe – whose Brainchild is the Quad & which 9 Nations could join the Asian NATO?" *The Eurasian Times*, 30 September 2020. <https://eurasianimes.com/trump-modi-or-abe-whose-brainchild-is-the-quad-which-9-nations-could-join-the-asian-nato-analysis/>.
- ⁱⁱ Arfa Javaid, "What is Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) or Quad?" *Jagran Josh*, 8 October 2020. <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/quadrilateral-security-dialogue-or-quad-1602169728-1>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Grant Wyeth, "Why has Australia shifted back to the Quad?" *The Diplomat*, 16 November 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/why-has-australia-shifted-back-to-the-quad/>
- ^{iv} Manoj Rawat, "Quad 2.0 Is off to a Good Start – It must keep Going," *The Diplomat*, 23 November 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/quad-2-0-is-off-to-a-good-start-it-must-keep-going/>
- ^v Hira Akram, "US and China's balance of power on the Asia-Pacific chessboard," *Paradigm Shift*, 11 February 2020. <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/us-balance-of-power/>
- ^{vi} Shubhajit Roy, "Explained: BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defense cooperation," *The Indian Express*, 3 November 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/beca-india-us-trade-agreements-rajnath-singh-mike-pompeo-6906637/>
- ^{vii} Jane Chan, "Singapore and the South China sea: Being an effective coordinator and Honest broker," *National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)*, no.21 (January, 2016): 6. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24905088?seq=1>
- ^{viii} Manoj Rawat, "Quad 2.0 Is off to a Good Start – It must keep Going," *The Diplomat*, 23 November 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/quad-2-0-is-off-to-a-good-start-it-must-keep-going/>.