



BEIJING'S "ASIAN NATO" MAXIM ON QUAD IS STRUCTURAL

BY JAGANNATH PANDA

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A decade and half ago, the Chinese strategic community accused the United States of trying to build an "[Asian NATO](#)." Since then, Chinese experts have often alluded to the proposition of the Quadrilateral (Quad 1.0) Strategic Dialogue – consisting of Australia, India, Japan, the United States – as the formation of an "[Asian NATO](#)" [in the making](#). Such a Chinese perception is still very much prevalent with Quad 1.0 resurfacing as Quad 2.0 with frequent official meetings, and the recent foreign minister-level meeting, conferring much more seriousness to the Quad process than before.

As evident in the Chinese analysis, terming the Quad as the 'NATO' of Asia is certainly military centric. Yet, it would be inappropriate to confine the Chinese perception of the Quad to such a constricted view. No matter how straightforward and sensitive the Chinese strategic community's reactions over the Quad process might appear to be, it remains closely linked to the Chinese state perception and national identity in regional affairs. While terming it 'NATO' may exemplify a military centric perception, the 'Asian' adherence to the formation of NATO clarifies its difficulty with such a grouping. Beijing's perception of the Quad is more structural and linked to China's contested rise vis-à-vis India, the re-emergence of Japan in Asia, and US presence in the region, extending far beyond the military realm.

Officially, Beijing had welcomed the grouping by terming the Quad process "[state-to-state cooperation](#)," as stated in the Chinese Foreign Ministry press briefing on Nov. 15, 2017. A rather dismissive Chinese reaction was noted in [Wang Yi's statement on Sept. 3, 2018](#), where he not only viewed the Indo-Pacific as a proposition that would "dissipate," but also disregarded the grouping by stating that it is officially not an initiative to "contain China." Surprisingly, China even maintained strategic restraint against overtly commenting on the recent foreign minister-level meeting in New York that was held in September 2019. No matter how much restraint China officially maintains, its anxiousness is clearly visible over the progress of the Quad.

This remains a conscious Chinese strategy: Beijing does not want to give the impression that it is unduly anxious over a coalition that could pose credible deterrence to China's maritime adventurism in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Collectively, the Quad navies could pose a better scope for reconnaissance of the Chinese trade and naval movements, especially toward the three critical straits of Sunda, Lombok, and Malacca. Thus, China's perception of the Quad is adverse and alarmist.

At a time when China is trying hard to diversify its sea trade passages, including energy imports, the re-emergence of the Quad poses a stronger naval military balance to protect their respective Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Beijing is aware of the serious consequences that the Quad process could introduce, particularly in challenging China's vulnerabilities regarding the Malacca Strait. What is, however, important to note is that Beijing's perception of the Quad is linked to a number of other regional structural parameters beyond the construct of the Indo-Pacific.

First, Beijing perceives that the re-emergence of the Quad poses a credible challenge to China's regional leadership. Chinese policy makers have emphasized a "[global network of partnerships](#)," with a regional focus on countries in the immediate neighbourhood and in the IOR. Its [six economic corridors](#) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are based on this 'network building partnership' model. Emphasizing 'justice,' 'fairness,' and 'development,' the Chinese

leadership has tried to strengthen Beijing's partnership with countries in the region through projecting collaborations, signing deals, and offering loans and grants. In other words, Beijing is mindful of the collective economic competence that the Quad grouping brings to deter China's partnership network, affecting Beijing's emerging leadership role in the region.

Second, and more importantly, Beijing visualizes the re-emergence of Quad as changing the status quo in Asia, by empowering India's status in the region. Chinese analysts have often alluded to the idea that the prime factor behind the re-emergence of the Quad is India's "[policy adjustment](#)" in the region and the strategic confidence that India has gained in US foreign policy. India's emergence as a major defense partner, its access to high-end defense technologies, and advanced weapons systems has unnerved the Chinese. For long, China had dismissed the 'Rise of India'; Beijing's concern is linked to losing the structural balance to India that it has created for itself over the last two decades. China's rapid rise has positioned it as the custodian guardian of Asia, if not the world. The re-emergence of the Quad thus comes as a reset to such an image of China.

Third, the Quad process facilitates the re-emergence of a nationalist Japan in Asia, and more importantly, reinforces the 'broader Asia' concept reiterated by Abe Shinzo in his "[Confluence of the Two Seas](#)" speech. The Quad process not only strengthens Japan's "alliance structure" framework with the US, but equally reinforces Tokyo's attempt to explore a new spectrum of military and non-military security alignments. The arrival of the 'Reiwa' era in Japan further offers a strategic complementarity to the Quad process, for a new beginning for Tokyo in regional and global affairs. 'Reiwa' is derived from a [Japanese classical poem](#) and signifies that Japan's international outlook may factor more "Japanese-ness" bringing originality and innovation to its approach ahead of China's attractive investments and projects. Further, Australia's recent attempt to review Chinese projects worries Beijing. Besides, to China's disquiet, the Quad would facilitate a more consultative security and a rules-based order, promoting quality infrastructure

and bringing transparency to regional capacity-building initiatives.

Fourth, Chinese analysts visualize the re-emergence of the Quad as a strengthening of the US role in Asia as a security provider, triggering a more confrontational approach toward China. They already closely associate the Quad process with the mainstream policies of the US toward the Indo-Pacific, including the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), the BUILD Act, the Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative Act, the Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network (ITAN), and the Blue-Dot Network. Lastly, Beijing sees the Quad process as strengthening the trilateral networks – Australia-Japan-US and Japan-India-US – that the US still enjoys in the structural edifice of Asia.

For Beijing, the arrival of the Quad 2.0 is a strategic challenge to China's vision of regional architecture. Considering the challenges that the Quad process poses to China, Beijing's perception is neither completely reactionary nor entirely military centric. If anything, China's perception of the Quad is much more structural, linked to the geo-political shift that Asia is undergoing. Such a shift might encourage China to reassess its own approach toward the region, and search for its own Quad in the "Asia-Pacific," as it renounces the "Indo-Pacific" as being a US-led proposition.

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