



THANKS TO COVID AND CHINA, THE QUAD IS A SEALED DEAL

BY AMRITA JASH

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The first ever leaders meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue on March 12 had more than symbolic import. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting between Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Indian PM Narendra Modi, Japanese PM Suga Yoshihide, and US President Biden took place in virtual mode. Nonetheless, it was significant in laying the tracks for the Indo-Pacific vision, as explained by the Quad Leaders' [Joint Statement](#). Reaffirming the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" vision, the "spirit" is premised on a joint commitment to "a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond" and support "the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity."

The joint declaration released by the four leaders laid the foundation of this "spirit." Even before the summit, the leaders penned a [joint op-ed](#) where they clearly stated the "quest [is] for a region that is open and free."

However, the precursor to this leaders-level meeting was set by the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo in [October 2020](#), which defied the norm of virtual meetings. The leaders' meeting signaled the institutionalization of the Quad, clearly suggesting that the forum is here to stay. Some resonance can be drawn from former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's [statement](#) last October: "Once we've institutionalized what we're doing—the four of us together—we can begin to build out a true security

framework." Furthermore, this Quad meeting also clarified the intentions of the new leadership in both the US and Japan under the respective Biden and Suga administrations. While there was anxiety over whether President Biden would follow the footsteps of his predecessor on the Indo-Pacific, Biden's calling of the meeting alleviated such concerns, affirming America's commitment to pursuing its Indo-Pacific vision.

And Biden is not alone in this commitment.

Growing Interest and Institutionalism

Having first met in 2007, the Quad quickly lost traction thereafter, only revived in 2017 when the four countries met on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit meetings in Manila. Since then, the Quad countries have met twice a year. Additionally, in 2019, the grouping upgraded its dialogue to the level of foreign minister/secretary of state—with two meetings so far. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new boost to the Indo-Pacific vision, as exemplified by the [upgrade](#) to the "Quad Plus," with the addition of New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam. Add to this the growing interest among countries, such as [Canada](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), and the [United Kingdom](#), to become party to the Indo-Pacific vision. This expansion of interest exemplifies the growing need to maintain an open, free maritime corridor in the region.

Furthermore, the very idea of the grouping is rooted in maritime security and stability. For the Quad, initially launched in response to the devastating [2004 tsunami](#), the pandemic triggered an expansion of the security canvas enveloping both non-traditional and traditional security concerns. This is exemplified by the joint pledge of the Quad: "to respond to the economic and health impacts of COVID-19, combat climate change, and address shared challenges, including in cyber space, critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investment, and humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief as well as maritime domains."

This expansive portfolio demonstrates that China is mistaken to believe—and [argue](#)—that it is the “cause” behind the Quad. Yet, it is also true that the “China factor” cannot be discounted. The artificial island buildup in the South China Sea and the [unilateral declaration](#) of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea have accentuated the PRC threat in the Indo-Pacific. Concomitantly, China’s increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) presents further complications. Specifically, PLA Navy activities, such as the deployment of submarines, anti-piracy operations, live-fire drills in the IOR, the establishment of an overseas military base in Djibouti and, finally, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—resulting in port activities and base facilities in the IOR—have raised red flags regarding whether China intends to become an expeditionary force, willing and able to intervene in matters beyond its borders. This has prompted further calls for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” based on a rules-based order “anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”

How China Boosts the Quad

Such shared concerns constitute a binding factor for the Quad but also make Beijing anxious. Hours before the leaders’ meeting, Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Spokesperson Zhao Lijian categorically remarked that “relevant countries” should “refrain from pursuing exclusive blocs.”

Yet, despite Beijing’s protests, the leaders’ summit only confirms that the Quad is here to stay. One can rightly posit that the old logic of alliance and containment has not changed, but is now taking the form of a multilateral framework. The more assertive China becomes in testing its adversaries’ resolve in a variety of quarters the more it lends credence to the Quad, thus causing a greater tilt among countries toward “a free and open Indo-Pacific.” The primary outcome of this tilt is witnessed in that the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision is gaining currency among more countries who seek to become party to it. With security as the lynchpin, the vision will take a formal posture in the near future, and China’s expansionist policy under its Belt and Road Initiative will only provide greater momentum toward a potential security alliance.

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