



QUAD and its Prospects

Webinar Summary Report

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Acknowledgements:

The Webinar “QUAD and its Prospects” held on 22 November 2020 at 12pm IST was organised by The Current and Strategic Affairs Forum (CASA). We would like to thank our panelists for their comprehensive analysis and candidly expressing their views:

- Professor Brendan Sargeant
Professor of Practice in Defence and Strategic Studies and Head of the Defence and Strategic Studies Centre at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

- Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)
Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation
Former C-in-C, Western and Eastern Naval Commands, Indian Navy and Board Member, NSAB, Government of India.

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We would also like to thank the many other distinguished attendees including many senior veterans, business leaders, professors, think tank researchers, contributors, analysts and others who took time out of their busy schedules to attend and shared their inputs with views, including the very relevant Q&A and comments during the session.

We would like to thank Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC (Retd), Former DG Ordnance Services and founder of CASA for his motivational role in guiding the CASA Core Committee and Lt Gen PR Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Former DG Artillery and Mahadevan Shankar, both CASA Core Committee members, for moderating, coordinating and contributing towards organising the Webinar.

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Presentation:

Introductory comments by Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) in his capacity as Founder, CASA:

General Moorthy introduced the eminent panelists on the Webinar with a broad overview of the key challenges impacting the geopolitical environment creating a need for the QUAD in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo Pacific Region (IPR).

This Webinar topic was timed with the high-level meetings initiated by Government of India (GoI) that was held in October 2020 in Tokyo between the Foreign Ministers of Japan, Australia and India together with American Secretary of State. We also had the ongoing Malabar exercises in which Australia accepted the invitation of Government of India to participate after a gap of 13 years, since the last full QUAD Malabar exercises held in 2007. Whilst there are pros and cons to the QUAD's status, to analyse them further, both erudite speakers were invited to share their views.

Professor Brendan Sargeant:

The concept of QUAD is important for Australia's strategic environment re-thinking process and not any attempt to supplant the earlier concept of Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific. The term Indo Pacific was used in Australia's 2013 Defence White Paper as the overarching conceptualization of Australia's strategic environment. This was in



recognition that the strategic order was changing globally with redistribution of power across the IPR.

Although China is becoming economically powerful, it will never be able to dominate like the US military has since the WW2 as there are other important countries in the IPR that are significant strategic players in their own right. The purpose of a rules based global order in the IPR is of paramount importance and the QUAD embodies these ideas towards free and democratic IPR. As such, QUAD was not a mature idea but worth exploring where China was growing assertive with regional institutions not able to respond to the challenges that China was throwing at them.

Australia's commitment to the rules'-based order has drawn it closer to these like-minded countries in the QUAD. The IPR has witnessed growing competitive and adversarial relationship between US and China that has in a major manner impacted Australia China relations. The aggressive measures adopted by China have grown since the advent of Xi Jinping as President causing disputes in SCS and refusal to accept the ICJ/ICA ruling on the Scarborough shoal.

We have witnessed China's suppression of local government in Hong Kong, increased pressure on Taiwan with it becoming a potential flashpoint for regional conflict and an upturn in conflict with India on the China- India border. Chinese diplomacy has ratcheted up China's status as a regional power and it has become increasingly aggressive to any country that refuses to accept this theory. Australia is experiencing this coercion currently.



There is increasing Chinese presence in the South Pacific which is an area of direct concern for Australia because its strategic geography states that any threat to Australia is expected to come from the archipelago to the north. This has been recognized in the recent Defence Strategic Update which made the comment that we no longer have the luxury of assuming a decade warning time before the advent of potential conflict.

Another important reason for concept of the IPR is India and Australia's converging strategic interests in the IOR where India has a major role to play in regional security. In this context, the QUAD is a timely and important strategic intervention. It embodies number of ideas which are still nascent with different political formations in the regional architecture that may not favour China's interests and which would be met with hostility. This is because although QUAD is not aimed towards China, it does not align with China's vision of what the strategic order should look like in the region. In China's response to the QUAD, their state-controlled media started using terms like "Outdated Cold War Frameworks".

QUAD is a fragile formation because interests of the countries involved in it are both convergent and divergent. Its primarily a political formation in response to China's assertiveness. Policy makers are strengthening it to make it relevant to the future strategic order. There's divergent rhetoric amongst countries involved in the QUAD where US Secretary of State wants greater institutionalisation than the other countries involved. It will be interesting to see whether the QUAD evolves in response to its own organic needs or in response to the challenge of



China. As such, US position in QUAD is more forward leaning than other countries. The Malabar exercises add extra perspective having been linked to the QUAD, as it represents operational level expression of strategic intent, that gives substance to the idea that they have converging interests in the IPR security issues. Australia's past unfortunate decisions not to participate in the QUAD is now reversed with recent decision which is most welcome. This indicates increased response to China's growing assertiveness in the IPR, particularly in the maritime domain and growing convergence of interests in IOR, especially to increase interoperability of naval forces, which has many benefits beyond the immediate objectives of the coalition activity, in times of conflict. This QUAD alliance is a good way of preparation for future crisis.

To sum up, there are two questions which arise:

1. What kind of world is the QUAD trying to build? The answer to that will depend on what China does over the next couple of decades.
2. The second, more profound question, is what is the political and security crisis that the QUAD most effectively represents a response to?

The QUAD is an important strategic initiative in our period in history. It is a major intervention to develop the architecture of the future IPR strategic order. Besides, it is new, fragile and needs convergence of interests.



Admiral Anil Chopra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd):

At the very outset, Admiral Chopra opined that the strong momentum given to the QUAD grouping in recent years is likely to diminish in the immediate future, primarily due to the change of guard in the US and Japan, as the personalities and proclivities of apex leadership greatly impact the trajectory of international groupings. The collapse of QUAD 1.0 in 2007, very shortly after inception, was precisely on account of the same, with the Kevin Rudd government unilaterally pulling out of the group, and with Premier Fukuda adopting a conciliatory approach to China.

After outlining the events leading to the formulation of the QUAD in 2007, beginning with the first bilateral Indo-US MALABAR exercise in 1992, Admiral Chopra underscored the developments of the 'Lost Decade 2007-2017'. This period witnessed growing assertiveness on the part of Beijing in the China Seas and the Indian Ocean, with consequent reclamation and militarization of reefs in the South China Sea, and near permanent deployment of the PLA Navy in the IOR. The advent of the Obama administration in 2009, which remained strategically passive to Chinese aggressiveness for eight years, coupled with Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, tilted the strategic balance in Beijing's favour, and allowed the part realization of Xi's China Dream in the Western Pacific region, as well as effective Anti-Access Area-Denial (A2AD) in the China Seas.

However, with the election of President Trump in 2017, the US became far more pugnacious towards China, initiating trade wars, and calling it



out as a threat to US security and to regional stability. Inter alia, this led to the revival of QUAD in 2017, and subsequently to a first ministerial level meeting in 2019. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) articulation, the renaming of US Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command, and a greatly renewed engagement with India were other pointers of an active counter-China policy.

The year 2020 gave a fillip to QUAD efforts. Chinese incursions into Eastern Ladakh region led India to eschew its hesitancy about QUAD. New Delhi signed the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) with Australia and the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Japan, thereby strengthening military ties with both other QUAD members in this region. That was followed by the Indo-US 2+2 dialogue, resulting in the signing of the strategically important Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). Further, India resorted to strategic signaling by finally inviting Australia to participate in MALABAR. Despite adopting a nonchalant façade to these developments, the CCP was clearly concerned at the open re-emergence of this potentially military grouping in its proximity.

However, the defeat of Trump in the US elections has come at a critical juncture, and in all probability, will work to China's benefit, and to the detriment of QUAD. The departure of Abe would add to the uncertainty in regard to further progress in the grouping. The recent signing of the RCEP which includes Japan and Australia, would likely impact on further strengthening of the 'concert of democracies'. The future prospect of QUAD thus remains wide open and will depend on the intensity of the



US lead, US policies, RCEP outcomes and ASEAN concerns. Plans for a Secretariat, QUAD Plus, QUAD++, and a summit meeting may witness a slowdown. On the other hand, plans for a US First Fleet based in Singapore, and the UK deploying its aircraft carrier group in IPR during 2021 though as yet at nascent stage, would improve prospects for QUAD renewal and effectiveness.

The most significant factor impinging on the prospects for QUAD would be whether the three regional powers of the group have the stomach to individually and collectively stand up against China in the face of weakened US lead, Chinese economic and military pressure, and shifting priorities of all.

Admiral Chopra concluded by underlining that the QUAD is an important formation, and all efforts should be made to keep it viable as a strategic grouping. Further, it should not become unduly large even with Plus additions, and nor should it align with other regional groupings. It must maintain its own distinctive character and potential, to ensure the rules-based order is not driven by Chinese narratives.



Q&A Session

Question 1

QUAD has many economic challenges and contradictions to handle-RCEP, ASEAN, CPTPP, BRI and economic linkages within itself. Yet the most critical need for QUAD is to provide an economic platform. How do you see this going forward?

Professor Sargeant—USA provides the binding agent that works towards underpinning the current order and we are seeing a diminishing US power which is turning inwards into itself. As such, we will witness less engagement by the US with more conditions imposed. The QUAD keeps US engaged in Asia with its forward presence in Japan, the alliance with Australia and the order in SE Asia is underpinned by US presence in places like Singapore. As such, QUAD provides a strategic political and military formation to keep the US engaged with more regional leadership by QUAD members. To make QUAD an economic formation will dilute its purpose and provides an alternative model to what the Chinese want as an order in the Indo Pacific. The future strategic order in IPR will not be akin to NATO but a mix of different formations interacting with each other, managed strategically by regional powers rather than by the US.

Question 2

The QUAD is a powerful concept with military, economic, diplomatic and political potential. How do you see this potential leveraged in the Indo Pacific conception in sync with ASEAN, EU, UK, France and Middle East?



Admiral Chopra – There needs to be clarity on geographical expanse of IPR which stretches from Africa to Central Pacific. QUAD is a strategic and security construct and should not become an economic construct or be involved in other structures and organisations globally. There is still confusion on the exact role of QUAD with China calling it Asian NATO and treating Malabar as the naval front for QUAD. Much depends on the US commitment and initiatives taken by the three other countries taking the leadership role themselves, funding levels and material commitment despite the change of POTUS. To hold China, we need a coalition where JAI with France and other European powers will need to come up with a strategic solution in the diminishing presence of US leadership. Strategic positioning of QUAD and QUAD Plus Plus will be important. US has ceded ground by pulling out of TPP and China has pushed ahead with RCEP with Japan and Australia playing an important role to shape RCEP without India's presence. though the grouping is multifaceted having political, military and economic alignments, but with strategic signaling, it can provide focus on the security matters.

Question 3

What do your respective countries bring to the QUAD table to make it successful? What are your expectations and concerns?

Professor Sargeant – QUAD is not everything, but Australia has always wanted to engage and influence regional, political and architectural formations. As such, Australia brings to the table:

- being a significant country in the IPR,



- a large economy,
- a very deep relationship with Japan, a developing relationship with India and a deep relationship with US different from Japan.

Australia wants to contribute to the development of the new strategic order in IPR, bringing ideas and strategic weight to influence development of that order, to support Australia and likeminded countries. Australian policy is always towards pursuing the rules-based order and putting our money where our mouth is.

Admiral Chopra – India brings to the table:

- participation in QUAD is a strategic shift and signaling,
- shared values of democracy and freedom,
- participating in larger security structures whilst retaining strategic autonomy,
- vast economic potential for QUAD members and IPR countries,
- the global naval fraternity recognizes that India brings stability to the Indian Ocean to the Asia Pacific in ways that nobody else can as India is only central to the Indian ocean geographically, that is between the Suez and Malacca, also the only country with the economy, population, size and military to be able to influence and stabilize the IOR,
- The Indian Ocean being the maritime highway of the world, every country, values India's contributions for security of trade in the IOR.



Question 4

What is Russia's potential role in or view of QUAD and if push comes to shove, how will Russia play its role in a conflict situation, given India's strategic reliance on Russia as a trusted arms supplier for long time?

Professor Sargeant – Russia and Australia have never really had a good relationship in the past. As such, from Australia's perspective, Russia is on the other side of the QUAD, not a country with whom Australia will have a close relationship, given past actions against Australia's interests. Important question is how India and China will balance their Russia relationship and the answer lies more in Central Asia rather than in the IPR. Russia will manage their relations with both countries in a bilateral manner rather than through the QUAD prism.

Admiral Chopra – India's relation with Russia goes back to the 60s with supply of arms and economic perspectives. It is a relationship that has been important towards fine-tuning India's relationship with CAR, China, the Islamic world, and Pakistan. Both countries are active in RIC, SCO & BRICS. India manages this relationship while still going ahead with QUAD, and has diversified its arms purchases from Israel, US and France while continuing relations with Russia without sole dependency. Russia is always a possible counterweight to China given their land borders and past rivalry. Russia's continental and aerial capacity can be brought to bear in the IPR.



Question 5

Given the possible change of POTUS and recent change of PM in Japan, will any potential change of guard or leadership of QUAD countries impact the role of QUAD?

Admiral Chopra – The apex leadership of each country significantly impacts their commitment to QUAD in their sensitive and political decision-making processes. The only way to avoid any impact is to have alliances and treaties to avoid adhoc alignments / coalitions open to interpretation, leadership issues and withdrawal by any member country at any point in time. But India does not want to be part of entangled alliances to retain its sovereign autonomy but, risks rapid changes in other member countries.

Professor Sargeant – Alliances are not completely robust as member countries tend to act in what they perceive as their best interests. It is important to identify where the interests converge and to focus on that in the QUAD. As such, QUAD needs to strengthen its political and security intervention mechanisms by creating suitable environment for doing things together using strong bilateral relationships. Find areas of common interest like Australia's economic ties with Japan and its security interests converging with India in NE parts of IOR going further towards Arabian Seas. Managing each other's interests will be critical.

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Summary

General Shankar's succinct summary of the Webinar flagged the key issues raised by both esteemed speakers, expressing a greater need for QUAD to continue its journey towards strengthening the military cooperation between its member countries. This is essential to thwart any threats emanating from China's expansionist agendas in the IOR & IPR, especially in the SCS from its A2AD actions.

General Moorthy in his closing comments thanked the eminent speakers and the audience for their incisive comments with diverse questions. A vote of thanks was also given to General Shankar, Mr Mahadevan Shankar and Mr Irfan Malik for their significant assistance in facilitating the Webinar with the secured IT platform as well as to the other CASA team members for helping organise the event.

The Webinar closed at 1:30pm IST.