

Where Should the Quad Go Next?

Speaker: Dr. David Brewster
Chair: Ambassador Anil Wadhwa,
Date: 18 November 2020
Venue: Zoom Webinar, ICS Delhi

The presentation focused on the future trajectory of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between India, United States, Japan and Australia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Speaker started by stating that the Quad is certainly one of the most important development in terms of regional security for some decades, bringing together four key maritime democracies in a loose coalition with shared values and interests and shared concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the region.

Addressing the larger concern on whether there is a clear understanding of common objectives including threat perceptions regarding China, the speaker mentioned that there are broad concerns about China but they have not been formalized into any public document other than a common usage of phrases such as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". Different members of the Quad naturally will have different threat perceptions regarding China deriving from a whole lot of factors, which are different for different countries. He said that Australia is concerned about China displacing the role of the USA in maintaining regional security. The concerted campaigns of economic coercion against Australia through various trade sanctions are driven by a desire to teach Australia a lesson and it is prompted by a number of factors including Australia's attempts to limit any interference in its domestic political system and more immediately Australia's co-sponsorship of a resolution in the World Health Organization (WHO) alongside the European Union (EU) in calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. He added that "overall we have shared concerns but they are really coming from different places and I don't see that as natural and not particularly a bad thing. It just reflects our different positions as countries." In his opinion, the current understanding of how the Indo-Pacific political order should look like has no consensus among the Quad.

On how should the Quad prioritize areas for cooperation whether it be military political economic or in other domains, the speaker observed that the Quad members will tend to prioritize areas for cooperation in context of their own historical experiences and certainly the

United States and Australia and to somewhat lesser extent Japan too have long histories of operating within military alliances. However, India comes from quite a different history and it needs to be recognized and respected. With a history of non-alignment or what now is called strategic autonomy, there is greater enthusiasm for emphasizing cooperation in the political and economic domains. The author noted that China's recent actions in the Himalayas has probably considerably increased enthusiasm for cooperation in the military domain. There is a whole spectrum of co-operative activities or alignments between acting alone and acting in alliance and it is very important that we emphasize its importance.

Regarding discussions about the need for a loose geographic or thematic division of responsibilities among Quad members, the speaker said that, “given the vast geographic size of the Indo-Pacific and the number of domains about which Quad members have concerns from China's activities, whether it be in maritime security disputes, cyber space, economic, etc., it would make some sense for there to be a loose understanding about when which members of the Quad should take a leading role in responding to these issues in cooperation with other partners”. He further mentioned that, “if you just look at it from a geographic sense, you know some divisions of responsibilities are fairly obvious. So, for example, in the South Pacific, Australia is really the leading power and it would take a leading role together with United States and to a lesser extent Japan and India. In the western Indian Ocean, India has very strong interests, particularly among the island states and so it would take a leading role there, in cooperation with others Quad members.” He then gave a straw-man for the same, by mentioning that we can divide the Indo-Pacific up in a number of different ways and similarly on a thematic basis, what are the areas where quad member states have particular strengths and it should be leveraged whether it be in the cyber domain, space domain among others.

He also shared an interesting perspective regarding the positive aspect of having an informal dialogue instead of a formalised one. The reason being that, as long as the Quad remains informal, no country can make a formal criticism from countries and analysts who might try to claim it as an Asian NATO. However, he emphasised that a level of formalisation or a basic agreement will give a roadmap and basic operational approach to manage the Chinese assertiveness, such as, supply chain resilience or cyber responses. The speaker continued, “we need an ongoing executive or secretariat that could help coordinate these issues rather than just relying upon intermittent meetings every several months or coordinated by foreign ministries and of course the creation of a secretariat would in itself be a highly symbolic act and for good

or bad, it would have a high degree of symbolism in terms of demonstrating a commitment of the quad members by working together.”

Regarding talks about if Quad should focus only be on regional issues, and what global issues might be relevant to the grouping, the speaker said, “the core interests of the Quad lie within the Indo-Pacific and in particular China's actions within the Indo-Pacific but to what extent is it in the interests of the quad members to be addressing issues that lie beyond the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific. For example, should the Quad be taking a united position on global issues that are not directly related to China such as climate change or global economic issues? I don't want to sound too ambitious but it's a question that might be asked. There are common interests that could be addressed.” Discussing further on whether priority should be given to broadening or deepening the Quad, should new like- minded countries be brought together or work on strengthening relations among the four countries which already are members, the speaker said, “in the Indo-Pacific, there are obviously many other capable and important countries that the quad clearly needs to work with to leverage its position and achieve its aims and these so-called Quad plus partners include like-minded countries such as France, Britain, Germany, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and New Zealand.”

During the discussion, when asked about the possible approach of the USA in the coming days regarding its Indo-Pacific strategy, he said, “the Biden administration will in many ways is back to the future in terms of a much more traditional US approach to the world. Obviously the big change there is China; I think the substance of US approach to China in many ways will be quite similar under the Biden administration, even if the rhetoric will perhaps be less confrontational. Addressing the question on what areas the Quad should and should not concentrate, the speaker said, that the focus areas for the Quad should include building resilience among smaller and weaker states within the region, cooperation in the field of cyber security and supply chain resilience, intelligence cooperation and the four countries should be working together including with key partners such as Taiwan in the intelligence sharing. On the question about the need of Quad to keep the ASEAN concerns and sensitivities into consideration, the speaker said that the Quad members need to take into account ASEAN sensitivities and they need to be talking at least rhetorically, about ASEAN centrality. However, Quad simply cannot be held hostage to what ASEAN may or may not agree to, as it is well known that China has been successful in splitting the organization and in many ways paralyzing it. So one cannot bring that level of paralysis into whatever Quad does and the they

know that some key ASEAN member states such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore are really more or less on board with what the Quad members are trying to achieve. Although the key Southeast Asian states are incredibly important for the Quad, he argued, one cannot be held back by the necessities of ASEAN consensus when it is universally known that there is no ASEAN consensus on issues pertaining to China.

This report was prepared by Abhyoday Sisodia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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