

Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting Sends a Clear Signal to Beijing

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Summary

The meeting of foreign ministers of the Quad countries during the 2019 United Nations General Assembly Session sends a clear signal that Beijing's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific will not go unchecked. Reticent for more than a decade due to the fear of ruffling Chinese sensitivities, the Quad has now started gaining significant momentum.

The Quad, or the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#), is an initiative to coordinate policy and enhance security cooperation among India, Japan, Australia, and the US in ensuring the collective security of the Indo-Pacific. The idea of a '[concert of maritime democracies](#)' in Asia was first mooted by Shinzo Abe, during his first stint as Japan's Prime Minister in 2006. After consultation between the four countries during the 2007 East Asia Summit in Manila, the Quad was put into practice. In [December 2007](#), the navies of these four leading naval powers in the Indo-Pacific, along with the Singapore navy, conducted a series of naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. This nascent security initiative among maritime democracies in the Indo-Pacific was however nipped in the bud by China's overly hostile position. Beijing saw the process as an entente cordial between the US, its allies and its strategic partners in the region, singularly aimed at China's containment. For both Australia and India, Chinese pressure was enough to quit the Quad informally. For almost a decade since then, the Quad remained dormant even when India, Japan, Australia, and the US continued to increase maritime cooperation in either bilateral or trilateral settings.

Lately, however, the Quad has once again started gaining currency in the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical discourse. In [November 2017](#), the Quad received a new lease of life when the four countries decided to conduct Joint Secretary-level discussions on the Indo-Pacific. With the [consultations of the foreign ministers](#) during the UNGA session on 26 September 2019, the Quad is now on the cusp of becoming the most significant element in Asia's evolving balance of power. Several reasons explain the Quad's recent resurgence.

First, unlike in 2007, China has now truly arrived as a great power competitor in the Indo-Pacific. If in 2007, Beijing could justifiably argue that the Quad was a premature containment strategy, its assertiveness now imperils the security of the Indo-Pacific. If its conquest of South China Sea points towards a policy of colonisation of the seas, its nonchalance towards rules of maritime freedom and navigation in the region have bothered states with a stake in a free Indo-Pacific. Moreover, China's territorial disputes with India and Japan have remained volatile irrespective of New Delhi and Tokyo's repeated attempts to mollify Beijing. Second, if the Quad is as strong as its weakest links, both Australia and India now have strong motivations to pursue a full security dialogue with Japan and the US. For India, leaving aside the vexed question of the boundary dispute, Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a significant dampener in the bilateral relationship. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an

element of the BRI, encroaches upon some parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a region which India claims sovereignty upon but is under Pakistan's effective control. To counter China's increasing influence in the region, India requires an alternative plan to counter Beijing's economic agenda in the Indo-Pacific. The public opinion, as well as the official discourse in Australia, has undergone a massive shift in the last decade. Chinese influence in Australia's domestic politics and public institutions has made Canberra realise the security implications of a close economic partnership with China. Lastly, the Quad countries are slowly realising the significance of signalling to China that the era of diffidence is now coming to an end. If Asia's maritime democracies fail to counter China's assertiveness, Beijing is bound to view such reticence as weakness. Common threats and shared values of the Quad countries provide a strong edifice to create a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Slowly but surely, the maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific are finding a collective political will to take the Quad forward. Moreover, in the last decade, either bilaterally or trilaterally, the Quad states have built the political, institutional and organisational foundations of a maritime order in the Indo-Pacific. At the political level, if Australia, Japan and the US have been treaty allies, India has built strategic partnerships with all the three. Since 2017, India has started conducting high level 2+2 (Foreign and Defence Ministers) dialogues with other Quad countries. [India-Australia](#) held its first 2+2 dialogue in 2017 followed by the [US-India 2+2 in 2018](#). During the recently concluded East Asia Summit in Vladivostok, Tokyo and New Delhi [decided](#) to initiate a 2+2-level dialogue before the Indo-Japan bilateral summit in December 2019. Beyond these high-level bilateral meetings, the Quad countries are also involved in [three trilateral security dialogues](#): India-Japan-US; Japan-Australia-India and Japan-US-Australia. In all these forums, coordination on the [Indo-Pacific](#) has emerged as the central agenda.

If the political coordination has taken place in bilateral and trilateral settings, so has their [military partnership](#). The Malabar series of Indo-US naval exercises began in 1991 and, with the participation of the Japanese navy in 2017, expanded into a trilateral naval exercise. In [July 2018](#), Indian and Australian navies conducted their first joint naval exercises. During its second edition in [April 2019](#), the AUSINDEX bilateral naval exercise saw dramatic increases in both intensity and content. Canberra has also expressed a desire to participate in the Malabar naval exercises. The Quad countries have also made significant advancements in logistics, communications, and information-sharing. In the last three years, India and the US have signed [three foundational defence agreements](#) with the US: Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA); Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). The Indo-Japanese logistics agreement is at an advanced [stage of negotiations](#), and Australia has shown [interest](#) in a similar logistics agreement with New Delhi.

Even without the Quad, India, Japan, Australia, and the US have made substantial progress in coordinating their political and military strategies in the Indo-Pacific. This process of consultation and coordination ensures that the Quad if required, can be operationalised without delay.

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