

# The New Era of the Quad: Opportunities for India-US Cooperation

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## Summary

*The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has officially been institutionalised with the convening of its first in-person Leaders' Summit in Washington on 24 September 2021. The release of a joint statement, new initiatives and guidelines have garnered considerable attention in the media and policy circles. With Quad engagements deepening since 2017, the fields of cooperation and areas of discussion have also expanded. Alongside the summit, the United States (US) and India also released a joint leaders' statement which reflects "charting a new course" in the partnership between the world's largest democracies.*

*This paper looks at the growing Quad collaboration and its new initiatives which would further boost India-US cooperation. It concludes that India is becoming increasingly significant to the US to the point where it may be considered as the most salient Quad member and is likely to be a key US partner in Asia for the foreseeable future.*

## Introduction

In March 2021, the leaders of the United States (US), Japan, Australia and India met virtually for the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit. Less than six months later, they met formally in-person at a summit hosted by American President Joe Biden in Washington DC, signalling the acceleration of cooperation among the four Quad members. While individual members of the Quad have different reasons for joining the group and harbour varied expectations, the premise of the grouping is to coordinate a platform to counter rising Chinese influence in economic, technological and maritime domains.

The Quad has come a long way from its initial ideation as a disaster response group and an informal security dialogue in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami to a discussive initiative at assistant secretary level in 2017, a formal mechanism at minister level in 2019, and its present incarnation as a strategic dialogue in 2021. Moreover, the 'Quad Plus' discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 included the participation of South Korea, New Zealand and Vietnam, indicating that the Quad is still evolving and may welcome new members in the near future.

There has been a significant expansion in the areas and fields on which the Quad collaborates. The Vaccine Experts Group, Climate Working Group and Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group were formed in 2017. These have now been expanded to include the Infrastructure Coordination Group, Space Cooperation, Senior Cyber Group, Technical Standards Contact Groups, Climate and Information Services Task Force and Shipping Taskforce.

Significantly, Biden met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi alongside the summit and released the US-India joint statement. Titled ‘A Partnership for Global Good’, the statement emphasised the mutual commitment to “building a strategic partnership” and political resolve in improving bilateral cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Both leaders echoed the latest joint Quad statement’s emphasis on democratic values and openness and the need to build and maintain “a free and open Indo-Pacific”.

There appears to be a subtle shift in India’s sentiments regarding the Quad: it was initially passive, but today stands that the grouping is a force for global good. In a conversation with Ashley Tellis at the inaugural Indian Ocean Initiative forum launched by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, India’s Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar, referred to the Quad as “an effort of cooperation... all impelled by a sense of responsibility towards the global commons.”<sup>2</sup> From India’s perspective, the Quad is more of an issue-based coalition than a security one. Because India is not a treaty ally of the US, it has the ability and capacity to maintain flexibility in its engagement with the US in Quad initiatives, and New Delhi wants to keep a high degree of autonomy in selecting the issues on which it wants to cooperate on.

## **AUKUS as a Complement to the Quad**

Notably, the Quad has been collecting partners into its fold. The European Union (EU), as a traditional US partner, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as the ‘heart of the Indo-Pacific’, are the natural choices for partnership. In the latest joint statement, the Quad reaffirmed “strong support” for ASEAN’s unity and welcomed the latest EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The inking of AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between US, the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, on 15 September 2021, further strengthened the potency of the Quad. The pact, described by many as “historic”, would entail the sharing of historically out-of-reach American military nuclear propulsion technology with Australia and the UK, demonstrating the determination of Washington to confront Beijing’s growing military capabilities.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the presence of UK in the pact highlighted the addition of an American ally into the Indo-Pacific region.

Further, there has been considerable French interest in joining in Quad-led activities, as seen by the participation of French submarines in joint exercises with US and Japan near the South China Sea since 2020, and the participation of the Quad members in the French-led La Pérouse naval exercise in the Indian Ocean for the first time in April 2021. In the face of French indignation over the cancellation of the France-Australia nuclear submarine deal owing to AUKUS, Modi assured French President Emmanuel Macron in a phone call that

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<sup>1</sup> “US-India Joint Leaders’ Statement: A Partnership for Global Good”, The White House Statement, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/u-s-india-joint-leaders-statement-a-partnership-for-global-good/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Indian Ocean Initiative Launch”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 September 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/14/indian-ocean-initiative-launch-event-7682>.

<sup>3</sup> C Raja Mohan, “India Welcomes AUKUS Pact as China Deterrent”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/16/aukus-india-australia-uk-us-submarines/>.

India remains committed to working with France in the Indo-Pacific. As France has been one of the key EU states active in the Indian Ocean and being one of the earliest to adopt the Indo-Pacific geopolitical concept into its political lexicon in 2018, the assurance by New Delhi guaranteed that Paris would not be left out. This episode exemplifies that New Delhi has an emerging role of becoming a conduit of communication between the different Western countries.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the exchange of sensitive technology within AUKUS and the Quad's military cooperation with its European counterparts would benefit India which is enhancing its military capabilities to check China. Faced with Chinese incursion into its neighbourhood due to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the China-India border conflicts and the larger expansion of Chinese maritime influence, the Quad is crucial for India in securing strategic and diplomatic gains to rebalance power in South Asia in its favour. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, defence spending in the Indo-Pacific region has increased by 47 per cent in the last decade, with India and China leading the way.<sup>5</sup> Buttressed with the American "unwavering commitment" to India as a major defence partner and the broadening of US-India counter-terrorism cooperation, New Delhi is well-positioned to become a prominent security player in the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN, on the other hand, appears to be more reticent of the Quad. Aside from Vietnam which joined in 'Quad Plus' conversations, the rest of ASEAN has been largely unresponsive to the grouping beyond the conciliatory gestures of welcoming the Quad's non-security initiatives as a source of public goods for the region.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps cognisant of the Quad's anti-China undertones, the ASEAN states are trading carefully between the US and China to avoid directly confronting the US-China competition and potentially destabilising the regional security environment.

## **Building a Better Global Health**

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing calls to improve global health standards have given impetus to the Quad cooperation and accelerated its efforts to provide public goods. The challenges of the pandemic bonded the four countries in vision and spirit to provide better healthcare goods and services. With its launch of the vaccine diplomacy, a humanitarian aspect was introduced into what was originally conceived as a security initiative. In the upcoming 75<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly, the members plan to discuss measures to overcome vaccine hesitancy, further adding credibility to its vaccine diplomacy by going beyond provision to confidence building and education among the public.

The Quad's Vaccine Partnership is a unique concoction of collaboration, premising on American technology and research for vaccine, Australian logistical support, Japanese

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian and Alexandra Marksteiner, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2020", SIPRI Publications, April 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2020>.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Stromseth, "ASEAN and the Quad: Strategic impasse or avenue for cooperation?", The Brookings Institution, 23 September 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/23/asean-and-the-quad-strategic-impasse-or-avenue-for-cooperation/>.

financial assistance and Indian pharmaceutical manufacturing capabilities. The grouping has delivered about 79 million vaccines to the Indo-Pacific as of September 2021. As India announced its resumption of vaccine export from October 2021, the Quad's efforts to fight the pandemic would be significantly bolstered.

As part of its continuous efforts to heighten confidence in pandemic response and improve the Indo-Pacific health-security axis, the Quad plans to organise a joint pandemic preparedness tabletop in 2022. The Quad's promotion of global welfare and health is congruent with India's desire to assume global responsibility and be a responsible power. The establishment of the US-India Gandhi-King Development Foundation would see more bilateral cooperation on health, education and the environment. As the pharmaceutical powerhouse among the four members, India's role in the world as a responsible provider of public goods would be reinforced with Quad's support.

## **India joins Quad Infrastructure Partnership**

With the advent of China's BRI, the competition for global infrastructure partnerships is intensifying. Having consistently refused to join this initiative, India is no stranger to the calls of proposals to participate in infrastructural and connectivity partnerships. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (2017) between India and Japan and the European Union-India connectivity partnership (2021) are two notable examples. However, India had previously been hesitant to join American-sponsored infrastructure initiatives with Australia and Japan, such as the Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific (2018) and the Blue Dot Network (BDN) [2019].

Recently, India's stance has undergone an adjustment. The country has confirmed its participation in the Quad infrastructure partnership, as outlined in the latest Quad joint statement. The new partnership reaffirms support for the G7's infrastructure efforts, as well as a desire to cooperate with EU partners and to sustain BDN engagement.

The BDN was instrumental in the formation of the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W), which was announced by the Group of Seven in June 2021. The B3W is an extension of the BDN that encourages private investments into infrastructure projects worldwide. Due to its global scope and grand ambitions, the B3W is in some respects the first viable alternative to China's BRI.<sup>7</sup>

In June 2021, the BDN consultation group met with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to discuss the development of a BDN certification framework. In contrast to the BRI projects' lack of transparency, which has been widely criticised, using the OECD's principles and regulations provides future BDN initiatives with a robust accountability mechanism and ensures the delivery of quality infrastructure projects, which is an appealing factor to Indo-Pacific countries looking for partners.

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<sup>7</sup> Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership, The White House Statement, 12 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.

It remains to be seen how these US-driven infrastructural plans compare to the BRI. Beijing has announced new initiatives such as the 'Health Silk Road', 'Digital Silk Road' and 'Green Silk Road' in its efforts to expand its operations and demonstrate its commitment to delivering public goods and sustainable development. Conversely, the B3W partnership could be a good supplement to the BRI. Given Beijing's reduction in BRI spending, the emergence of the B3W and its private sector financing may prove to be a timely addition to meeting global infrastructure needs.

## **Strengthening Technology Cooperation**

As the Quad continues to emphasise focus on enhancing technology cooperation in critical technologies, it has proposed the 'Principles on Technology Design, Development, Governance and Use' alongside an industry contact group to set and implement these standards.<sup>8</sup> Most crucially, this underlines the Quad's greater push to emendate and reset the international standards and order for technology in fear of perceived digital authoritarianism by China.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, for the first time, the members announced that they will collaborate on space technologies. The sharing of satellite images would be one of the important contributions towards combating climate change. Correspondingly, the US and India agreed to finalise a memorandum of understanding on a space situational awareness in order to share services and data to formulate long-term sustainability of outer space activities.

The US-India partnership in technology would be a strong collaboration. Concerns regarding China's investments into the Western semiconductor industry have prompted the Biden administration to formulate plans with diverse partners to build a resilient and secure supply chain network for semiconductors. In this light, India's recent efforts to develop its own semiconductor ecosystem and its expertise in Information Technology qualifies it as a good candidate for the US. India has announced the plan to offer more than US\$1 billion (S\$1.35 billion) to each semiconductor company that opens manufacturing units within the country in push to strengthen its smartphone assembly industry and to strengthen the electronics supply chain.

In terms of 5G, India has formally rejected Chinese firms from partaking in its trials, which has satisfied the US and opens space for American companies to join. The threat of escalating cyber-attacks and cybercrimes fosters a common goal among Quad members to deepen technological cooperation. The success of the Quad technological cooperation would be determined by the Indo-Pacific states' ability to overcome trade barriers and gaps in digital governance.

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<sup>8</sup> "Quad Principles on Technology Design, Development, Governance, and Use", The White House Statement, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/quad-principles-on-technology-design-development-governance-and-use/>.

<sup>9</sup> Karthik Nachiappan and Nishant Rajeev, "India, Techno-diplomacy and the Quad summit," Institute of South Asian Studies, Brief No. 868, 30 September 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-techno-diplomacy-and-the-quad-summit/>.

## Conclusion

The US-India relationship in the newer iteration of the Quad has been dubbed as “the Quad’s litmus test”.<sup>10</sup> There are concerns about historical baggage colouring the current trajectory of bilateral relations as New Delhi begins to engage Washington seriously after many years of expounding non-alignment. Differences in approaches to climate change, political directives regarding Pakistan and vaccine supply chain difficulties continue to loom over bilateral ties.

On another hand, India’s perception of the Quad as an issue-based coalition is operating well within the comfortable limits of Indian policy circles that lauded strategic autonomy. The Quad members’ extensive collaboration in health, technology and infrastructure have alleviated India’s initial concerns about an overt security alliance akin to an “Asian NATO”. Despite the differences in US-India relations, India is possibly the most salient Quad member because it has the greatest potential to increase vaccine production, provide influence in communication with Indo-Pacific island states, and the comparatively low cost of technology in India cannot be underestimated. Good working relations with India would provide US more leverage in fostering a better strategic environment for the development of an inclusive, rules-based international order.

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<sup>10</sup> Harsh V Pant and Chirayu Thakkar, “The U.S.-India Relationship Is the Quad’s Litmus Test”, Observer Research Foundation, 30 September 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-u-s-india-relationship-is-the-quads-litmus-test/>.