

A Tale of Two Quads

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Summary

The foreign ministers of Israel and the United Arab Emirates met the United States (US) Secretary of State in Washington DC on 13 October 2021. Less than a week later, India joined the trio for the first virtual meeting of a new quadrilateral formation, creating instant comparisons with the Indo-Pacific Quad featuring the US, India and Japan. This paper looks at the significance of the new West Asia Quad, its possible economic and strategic implications and its potential to learn from and possibly complement the Indo-Pacific Quad.

Introduction

The 13 October 2021 meeting in Washington DC between United States (US) Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Israel’s alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid was a reminder of the extent West Asia has transformed since the announcement of the Abraham Accords on 14 August 2020. A press statement issued by the State Department said that Blinken “welcomed the warming relations between Israel and the UAE, including the opening of respective embassies, appointment of ambassadors, new direct flights, dozens of cultural exchanges, and burgeoning economic and business ties that have benefited the people of both countries and the region.”¹ The US also articulated the shared concern of the three countries about Iran’s activities in West Asia, while its worry about China’s growing influence remained an important subtext.

Less than a week later, India joined the trio in a virtual meeting on 19 October 2021. It was significant that it took place while India’s Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar, was in Tel Aviv and standing beside Lapid, as they conversed with Blinken in Washington DC and Sheikh Abdullah in Abu Dhabi. Blinken summed up the intent behind the meeting when he said, “Sitting here in Washington, I can say very simply that with Israel, the UAE and India, we have three of our most strategic partners. And given so many overlapping interests – energy, climate, trade, regional security – this seems like a really interesting and good idea to try and use this new format and very complementary capabilities in very many areas to just see many more things get done.”²

¹ Ned Price, “Secretary Blinken’s meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid and UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed”, Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, 14 October 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-israeli-foreign-minister-and-alternate-prime-minister-yair-lapid-and-uae-foreign-minister-sheikh-abdullah-bin-zayed/>.

² Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “New Quad in making: Foreign Ministers of USA-India-Israel to meet on Monday”, *The Economic Times*, 20 October 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/new-quad-in-making-foreign-ministers-of-usa-india-israel-uae-to-meet-on-monday/articleshow/87089681.cms?from=mdr>.

A Transformation in India's Bilateral Ties

Jaishankar, in his own brief remarks after the meeting, referred to India's ties with the three countries as "among the closest relationships we have, if not the closest", a fact also borne out by two recent foreign policy surveys. A *Survey of India's Strategic Community*, carried out by Brookings India in 2019,³ ranked Israel and the UAE as India's two most trusted partners in West Asia. The *ORF Foreign Policy Survey 2021: Young India and the World*⁴ ranked the US as the most trusted country. While Indo-US ties have grown steadily over the last three decades, neither the UAE nor Israel could be counted among India's traditional partners until even a decade ago, and the transformation in India's ties with them deserves a closer look.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in fact, has personally invested considerable effort and energy in bringing these two relationships to the 'most trusted' level reflected in the survey. When he visited Abu Dhabi in August 2015, it was the first visit by an Indian prime minister since Indira Gandhi in 1981 – an unconscionable hiatus of 34 years. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the de facto ruler of the UAE, responded with a state visit to India in February 2016 and was back in January 2017 as the high-profile Chief Guest for India's Republic Day celebrations. Modi returned to the UAE in February 2018 and again in August 2019 when he was also conferred the Order of Zayed, the UAE's highest civilian award. During those four years, the two countries had signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement and established pathways for collaboration in areas ranging from energy and investment to defence and security.

A similar dynamism and sense of urgency was also imparted to India's ties with Israel. India's President Pranab Mukherjee became the first Indian head of state to visit Israel in October 2015, and a year later, India hosted Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. In July 2017, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel. Their relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership, and the momentum continued when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to India the following year. A relationship that had grown quietly since the establishment of full diplomatic ties in 1992 was now out of the closet. India had finally shed its paranoia that ties with the Jewish state would impact its relationship with key Arab states or have a fallout in terms of domestic politics. In a relatively short span of time, Israel has become one of the top three suppliers of defence equipment, a major source of critical technologies and a key partner in the agriculture sector through an extensive network of Centres for Excellence.

India, Israel and the UAE also have a clear focus on technology and innovation. Israel's claim as a 'Start-up Nation' is well-established. India has surprised many by emerging as one of the hottest venture capital destinations, spawning as many as 33 unicorns during the first 10 months of 2021. The UAE may not be in the same league yet but there can be no doubt about its outsized ambition, from its mission to Mars and the vision behind

³ Dhruva Jaishankar, *Report: Survey of India's Strategic Community*, Brookings, 1 March 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/introduction-survey-of-indias-strategic-community/>.

⁴ Eds. Harsh V Pant, Prithvi Iyer, Nivedita Kapoor, Aarshi Tirkey and Kartik Bommakanti, *The ORF Foreign Policy Survey 2021: Young India and The World*, Observer Research Foundation, 15 August 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-orf-foreign-policy-survey-2021-young-india-and-the-world/>.

Dubai Future Foundation and Abu Dhabi's Hub 71 to the world's first Ministers for the Future and for Artificial Intelligence. In addition, the UAE also has abundant capital resources, including those housed in major sovereign wealth funds like Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, Mubadala Investment Company and Abu Dhabi Development Holding Company. These offer the tantalising possibility of marrying cutting edge technology and capital with the market size and scale offered by a country like India. A couple of tripartite ventures are already in the pipeline, and these could be the harbingers of many more to follow.

Shared Concerns

The US has traditionally had a close security partnership with both Israel and the UAE and is a major supplier of the latest defence equipment to both. Over the last few years, it has also deepened its defence relationship with India, supplying crucial platforms like the P8i maritime patrol aircraft, the Apache and Chinook helicopters and the C-17 heavy lift aircraft. From a US perspective, the new Quad brings together three of its key partners in a strategic and volatile region. The fact that each of the partners also possesses a significant defence capability of its own may provide an implicit security dimension to the new grouping.

Security cooperation may not be on the cards immediately, and the relevant spokespersons will likely make the usual statements affirming that this is essentially a non-military gathering of like-minded nations. But it is worth looking at the other Quad in the Indo-Pacific that brought India, Japan and Australia together with the US. It was their shared interest in pushing back China's increasingly aggressive military posture, its willingness to blatantly deploy instruments of economic coercion and its growing dominance in the Indo-Pacific that became the catalyst to turbocharge a group that was otherwise meandering without a clear purpose.

In the West Asia Quad, Israel, the UAE and the US also have a similar shared interest about Iran. The US, through the P5+1⁵ mandated Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, has focussed on trying to cap and roll back Iran's nuclear ambition. Israel sees Iran's nuclear programme as an existential threat and has often hinted at its willingness to act unilaterally if international efforts fail. The UAE worries about the nuclear programme but is also concerned about Iran's missile capability and what it sees as a malign influence in an arc extending from Yemen in the south to Lebanon in the north via Bahrain, Iraq and Syria.

The first ever naval exercises conducted by the US, Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in the Red Sea during the second week of November 2021 are, according to Israeli media,⁶ specifically aimed at countering Iranian aggression in the Middle East. An excessively Iran-centric approach may cause some problems for India which has a qualitatively

⁵ The P5+1 refers to the United Nations Security Council's five permanent members (the P5); namely, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States; plus Germany.

⁶ Judah Ari Gross, "Israel, UAE, Bahrain, US hold major Red Sea drill 'to counter Iran's aggression'", *The Times of Israel*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-uae-bahrain-us-launch-drill-in-red-sea-in-apparent-message-to-iran/>.

different relationship with Iran, but Indian diplomacy has shown that it is quite adept at maintaining close ties with countries that may have a strong antipathy with each other. Moreover, the advantage of an informal grouping like this Quad is that all members do not necessarily have to agree on everything.

A New Transport Corridor?

The West Asia Quad could have another facet that has both economic and strategic implications. Following the virtual meeting on 19 October 2021, Jaishankar tweeted that the four ministers “discussed working together more closely on economic growth and global issues” and emphasised the “agreement on expeditious follow-up”. The US State Department readout focussed on the synergy between the four countries, while the Israeli statement was more expansive, highlighting the “possibilities for joint infrastructure projects in the fields of transportation, technology, maritime security, and economics and trade...”

This indication that the Quad may take up joint infrastructure projects is especially promising for the kind of multi-modal India-Arab Med transport corridor envisaged by Professor Michael Tanchum.⁷ This could potentially link Indian ports like Mumbai with Piraeus in Greece via Jebel Ali in the UAE and by rail thereafter through Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Israel’s Mediterranean port of Haifa. Barring a relatively short 300-kilometre link from Al Haditha on the Saudi-Jordan border to Beit She’an near the Jordan-Israel border, most of the railway track is already in place or is coming up rapidly and could shorten the transit from Jebel Ali to Haifa to just over a day. Emirati and Saudi capital and US muscle could make this a reality, providing an economic boost for Europe, West Asia and India and creating an alternative to the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative project linking China with Europe via Central Asia.

The fact that India has decided to fast-track its Free Trade Agreements with the EU, the UAE and Israel should provide the scale needed to make the project competitive vis-à-vis existing shipping routes through the Suez Canal. It could also provide some of the logistics support needed to restructure supply chains and reduce the dependence of global trade on China.

Pointers from the East

As with any new organisation or grouping, questions will inevitably be posed about its substance and sustainability.⁸ With just a virtual meeting of the four foreign ministers under its belt, questions like these may appear somewhat premature for the West Asia Quad. But once it has had an opportunity to put some systems in place to follow through on decisions taken at the high political level, it would do well to seek inspiration from the manner in which the Indo-Pacific Quad has evolved. After a fitful beginning, it is rapidly maturing into a meaningful grouping that has regular meetings at the level of expert groups, senior officials

⁷ Navdeep Suri, “An India-Europe Trade Corridor? The geoeconomics dimension of an emerging West Asia Quad”, Observer Research Foundation, 24 October 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/an-india-europe-trade-corridor/>.

⁸ Michael Kugelman, “Why India is Joining Another Quad”, South Asia Brief, *Foreign Policy*, 21 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/21/why-india-is-joining-another-quad/>.

and foreign ministers and has already had a virtual summit in March 2021 and an in-person summit of the four leaders in Washington DC in September. It has established clear roadmaps in areas like COVID-19 and global health; infrastructure; climate; critical and emerging technologies; cybersecurity; space; people-to-people engagement; and Quad fellowships.⁹ Working groups have been established on vaccines, climate action and critical technologies. Taskforces and expert groups have been set up to focus on specific areas through an infrastructure coordination group; a green shipping network; a clean hydrogen partnership; 5G diversification and deployment; a semiconductor supply chain initiative; biotechnology scanning and genome sequencing; a cyber group on standards, talent and trustworthy digital infrastructure, among others.

These are substantive areas of cooperation that go well-beyond the Indo-Pacific Quad's initial focus on freedom of navigation and take a much more expansive approach towards the concept of security. Equally important are the mechanisms being established to assign responsibilities on the basis of capacity and commitment of the four members and the emphasis on delivering tangible outcomes. The Quad's format, nevertheless, remains informal and the absence of a common secretariat probably makes it nimbler and more flexible.

In doing so, the Indo-Pacific Quad has defied sceptics and addressed the issue of both substance and sustainability. The West Asia Quad would do well to emulate its older sister to the east and identify areas in which there is an overlap of interests. The fact that both groupings are anchored by the US and India could provide the glue needed for convergence. They could create informal channels that facilitate a crosspollination of ideas and processes despite the obvious differences in the priorities and interests of the two quads.

Conclusion

The emergence of a new West Asia Quad is in line with the growing preference of minilaterals bringing together a small group of like-minded nations that have identified a set of shared interests. It also demonstrates the extent to which the Abraham Accords are reshaping the geopolitical landscape in the region. Until even a couple of years back, the notion of the UAE and Israel moving so quickly to establish a vibrant, multi-faceted relationship would have been dismissed out of hand. The only template of Arab-Israeli ties in existence was the cold, security-dominated one established by Egypt and Jordan.

The trilateral meeting of 13 October 2021 in Washington DC may have been a natural extension of the Abraham Accords, but the inclusion of India to create a quad reflects a higher level of ambition. It opens new possibilities for political, economic and strategic cooperation and for a coordinated approach on issues relevant to the region.

The presence of India in both the West Asia and the Indo-Pacific Quads also reflects recognition of the country's growing regional and international stature and its increasingly pragmatic and non-ideological approach to contemporary realities. Equally important, it

⁹ The White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit", Statements and Releases, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>.

indicates the extent to which the US has started seeing India as a strategic partner in two distinct geographies.

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