

Beijing Thinks India is the ‘Weakling’ in Quad

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Abstract

“Quad” was first laughed at in Beijing as a “beggar’s club,” then denounced as Cold War mindset. Analysts globally, especially in Beijing, have been describing India as the outlier among the four nations. India’s failure in effectively tackling the second wave of Covid-19 and creating chaos in procuring and distributing vaccine across the country has “battered India’s ambitions to become the ‘pharmacy of the world’.” In the context of India’s Quad ambitions, the global media is dismissive of the US high expectations for New Delhi playing a leading role in countering China in the Indo-Pacific region. But some critics are not yet ready to undermine the Indian potential to emerge as the Quad keystone in the long run. Is India really the weakest link or the country will eventually become the keystone in the quartet?

Keywords

Quad, Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, India, China

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Image: The Quad that needs India
Source: opindia.com

What is in a name?

The famous phrase was used by Shakespeare in his play *Romeo and Juliet*. We don't know if the bard is more popular in Japan than in China. What we do know is that Shakespeare is the most popular and most read and staged foreign literary figure in the People's Republic. If so, is it possible to argue that the Chinese understand the meaning behind changing Japanese notional concept of "free and open Indo-Pacific"? Just like the other notional concept Quad. Let us first briefly talk about "free and open Indo-Pacific."

According to Shigeta (Nikkei Aisa), the new prime minister was trying to appease Beijing which had earlier accused Suga "of building an Indo-Pacific NATO aimed at containing China

In October 2020, while addressing the Diet, Japan's parliament, the new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga borrowed a foreign policy

concept from predecessor Shinzo Abe. The concept, originally called the "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" was first articulated by Abe in 2016. The idea had received full backing from the US. Though Abe claimed the concept was aimed at realizing regional cooperation on security and economic growth, Beijing was not fooled by its real purpose i.e. a counterweight to China's Belt and Road regional infrastructure initiative. However, perhaps disappointed that President Trump – a leader known for poor or no foreign policy vision – was not lending the expected support, Abe chose to adopt a softer line on China and in 2018 dropped the word "strategy" and replaced it with "vision."

Further, as observed by **Nikkei Asia's** Shunsuke Shigeta, while Abe hoped the use of the word "vision" might bring on board the ASEAN nations that had been long worried about pressure from Beijing, Suga in his speech went a step further and dropped "vision" altogether. A few days later, in a speech he delivered in Vietnam on his maiden visit abroad, Suga once again did not use "strategy" or "vision," and reiterated "free and open Indo-Pacific." According to Shigeta, the new prime minister was trying to appease Beijing which had earlier accused Suga "of building an Indo-Pacific NATO aimed at containing China."¹ However, the actual

¹ Shigeta, Shunsuke (2020) "Suga walks tightrope between China and the US," October, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-10-28/suga->

reason why Suga invoked Abe's concept but minus "vision" was his attempt to appear to be "more balanced towards Beijing and Washington."²

China's foreign policy makers and Tokyo watchers have been consistent in interpreting the Abe-Suga framework as Japan's strategy to contain China.

But dismissing Suga as a leader with no foreign policy experience, and at the same time relying upon its thorough grasp of Shakespearean phrase "what is there in the name," Beijing was too clever to be consumed by the face value of Suga's plain and simple coinage "free and open Indo-Pacific." By dropping "vision" Suga intended to show [to Beijing] that the idea was a mere "geographical concept" and not a geopolitical one. But both China's foreign policy makers and Tokyo watchers have been consistent in interpreting the Abe-Suga framework as Japan's strategy to contain China. Just three days before Suga held his first press conference overseas in Jakarta, a Chinese commentator described the new Japanese leader's Indo-Pacific objective as "a strategy to

walks-tightrope-between-us-and-china-101619688.html

² The Asahi Shimbun (2020) "Beijing blasts Suga over free, open Indo-Pacific region push," October, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13859974>

walk in step with the United States and deepen confrontation in the region."³

It is in this above backdrop, what does Quad mean for the Indo-Pacific must be understood.

Foreign policy makers, diplomats, academia and media in all four Quad nations welcomed the March 12 US-Japan-India-Australia summit as "dramatic leap forward for the 'Quad' and one of the most significant developments in the *Indo-Pacific security architecture* in recent years." (*Emphasis added*).⁴ Citing US National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan, widely circulated **The Diplomat** not only called the March 12 virtual summit "historic," but also applauded President Biden's unexpected embracing of "free and open Indo-Pacific" nomenclature. "Biden's enthusiastic initiative to hold Quad heads-of-state summit is contrary to apprehensions that the new president would choose a softer line toward China which will exercise a downstream effect leading to Indo-Pacific construct losing salience for the new US administration," the newsmagazine noted.⁵

³ Suryadinata, Leo (2020) "Prime Minister Suga goes to Jakarta," October, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/prime-minister-suga-goes-to-jakarta/>

⁴ Maude, Richard (2021) "What a revived Quad mean for the Indo-Pacific," March, <https://asiasociety.org/australia/explainer-what-revived-quad-means-indo-pacific>

⁵ Rej, Abhijnan (2021) "In Historic Summit Quad Commits to Meeting Key Indo-Pacific Challenges," March, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/in-historic->

Now, with regards to questions such as is Quad still fragile and within its frail frame is India the outlier, let us recall it was Australia and not India who “killed” Quad 1.0 under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008. According to defence analyst David Grossman, the first attempt at the Quad died on the vine because “Australia withdrew over concerns that the Quad needlessly antagonized China.” Writing in July 2018, Grossman pithily singled out India as seemingly least enthusiastic among the four countries toward Quad 2.0.⁶

the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 had turned into the most serious issue between the two sides since the 2018 informal Wuhan summit.

Furthermore and arguably, the following factors have been most discussed for India’s so-called “getting cold feet” on Quad 2.0, namely the Wuhan summit in April 2018; a day after Xi-Modi friendly get-together in Wuhan, India rejecting Australia’s request to participate in Malabar military exercises along with the US and Japan; in the same year in June, Prime Minister Modi delivered keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in

summit-quad-commits-to-meeting-key-indo-pacific-challenges/

⁶ Grossman, Derek (2018) “Is India the weakest link in the Quad?”, July, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/07/is-india-the-weakest-link-in-the-quad.html>

Singapore in which “he declined the opportunity” to invoke the Quad; a week later Modi attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Qingdao, China – for the first time as official member of the regional group – and India signed the Qingdao Declaration; last but not the least, a month after returning from Qingdao, in July, India used the second opportunity of maritime dialogue in New Delhi with Beijing and emphasized ASEAN and not Quad should be central to the Indo-Pacific.

But as they say, this was then. Three “long” years have passed since what can be called “the golden year” in India-China bilateral relations in the past decade. Currently, as India is observing the first anniversary of “Galwan Martyrs,” looking back, the year 2018 seemed a “lull before the storm.” Even before Coronavirus fundamentally changed our world, also much before the border skirmishes starting last year in May and snowballing into ongoing, unresolved standoff in Ladakh, the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 had turned into the most serious issue between the two sides since the 2018 informal Wuhan summit. Though China kept under wraps until the last hour before Xi landed in Chennai for the second informal summit with Modi, the latest friction arising out of the abrogation of Article 370 had put to test the Wuhan Consensus, i.e., as Uday Singh Rana quoting Suhasini Haidar of The

Hindu put it: “differences don’t turn into disputes.”⁷

Although the atmosphere was filled with euphoria during the two-day second informal Modi-Xi summit in Chennai in as many years, no one can deny the two leaders “eschewed confrontation for the sake of plodding along.” A week after Xi’s departure, the Indian media generally summed up the informal summit by saying there was an emphasis on optics rather than substance.⁸ But speaking of the Quad, the strong Chinese reaction to the elevation of the status of Ladakh to the Union Territory of India ensured “the lustre of the Wuhan process” was beginning to fade away. Besides, India also became proactively engaged in the upgrading of the Quad to the foreign ministers level at the sidelines of the UNGA in New York, just weeks before Mamllapuram summit.

a pertinent question to ask is why has everyone been characterizing India as the weak link in the Quad chain?

⁷ Rana, Uday Singh (2019) “What is The Wuhan Spirit and How Can Modi-Xi it in Mahabalipuram,” October, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/what-is-the-wuhan-spirit-and-how-can-modi-xi-repair-it-in-mahabalipuram-2341693.html>

⁸ Gupta, Anubhav (2019) “Xi and Modi Trade Confrontation for Comity at another Formal Summit, October, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28285/xi-and-modi-trade-confrontation-for-comity-at-another-informal-summit>

Following the foreign ministers of the Quad countries’ first meeting in New York, India’s seasoned security affairs analyst Manoj Joshi did predict in anticipation that “the upgrading of the Quad, which formerly consisted of officials, could be consequential.” But what led to India’s sudden turnaround from “cold feet” to active engagement? Joshi pointed out three factors: Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi taking initiative in organizing a UNSC meet on India’s action in J & K; cancellation of Wang Yi–Ajit Doval 9-10 September Special Representative talks in New Delhi; and most significantly India holding two military exercises in eastern Ladakh on the border with China and in Arunachal Pradesh on September 17 and October 3, respectively.⁹ Without going into further details of the process of India becoming integrated into Quad grouping since the four foreign ministers meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA in September 2019, suffice it to say India did surprise others by agreeing to sign what has been characterized as the unexpectedly blunt component on maritime security in the joint statement issued after 12 March virtual summit.

At another level, a pertinent question to ask is why has everyone been characterizing India as the weak link in the Quad chain? For more

⁹ Joshi, Manoj (2020) “Modi & Xi at Mamallapuram: How India can increase diplomatic clout,” October, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/modi-xi-mamallapuram-how-india-can-increase-diplomatic-clout-56426/>

clarity on this, it is imperative to divide the answer in two categories. On the one hand, there are those who refer to a series of India's domestic weaknesses to prove the point. These include factors highlighted by the Japan Times recently, such as despite being equipped with nuclear weapons which are a bulwark against China's much superior military might, it is nonetheless true India is a poor country with per capita income of only 3% to 5% of the other three Quad nations; a weak state with a limited capacity to govern a billion plus population; and a soft state without political will to make and implement tough decisions, etc. and so on.¹⁰

..... Biden's fear that the Quad partners' "failure to counter China's vaccine nationalism" in the Indo-Pacific region might lead to Chinese win over the Quad

In addition, a lead story in the Financial Times two months ago, headlined "India's Covid calamity exposes weakest link in US-led 'Quad' alliance," declared that the country's coronavirus crisis and subsequent vaccine export ban have overshadowed the quartet's first attempt to prove it is not just an anti-

¹⁰ Thakur, Ramesh (2021) "India's Suspect Quad Credentials," June, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/06/05/commentary/world-commentary/india-suspect-quad-credentials/>

China military alliance. "Instead, India's failure has created an opportunity that China is exploiting," the FT noted.¹¹ Citing Kurt Campbell, the White House's top Asia official, the London-based financial daily wrote "despite setbacks, Washington still viewed the Quad as deeply consequential for the 21st century." Earlier on in early July, echoing similar sentiments as expressed by Amy Kazmin of the FT, China's popular digital news platform *guancha.cn* published Chinese translation of an article by Thomas Wright.¹² Thomas Wright, a contributing editor at *The Atlantic* and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, in a recent article expressed scepticism regarding the online summit of the Quad leaders by pointing out how the US President has put his finger on an important geopolitical development. Focusing on the Indian failure to effectively carry out the Covid-19 vaccination drive, Wright did not fail to notice Biden's fear that the Quad partners' "failure to counter China's vaccine

¹¹ Kazmin, Amy (2021) "India's Covid Calamity Exposes Weakest Link in US-led Quad Alliance," June, <https://www.ft.com/content/8c5e6c26-6583-4524-994d-2f52b37d9216>

¹² *Guancha.cn* (2021) 托马斯·赖特：拜登想要团结民主国家一道对抗中国，但可惜做不到 *Tuōmāsī-lài tè: Bāi dēng xiǎng yào tuánjié mínhǔ guójiā yì dào duìkàng zhōngguó, dàn kěxí zuò bù dào* "Thomas Wright: Biden wants to unite democratic countries against China, but unfortunately he can't," July, https://www.guancha.cn/THOMASWRIGHT/2021_07_06_597121.shtml

nationalism” in the Indo-Pacific region might lead to Chinese win over the Quad.¹³

The second set of arguments on India’s weak link status in the quartet has much to do with New Delhi’s chequered diplomatic history of involvement with the quadrilateral security dialogue. According to a January 2019 commentary published by the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, following key factors need to be studied why India had been tentative in its relationship with the Quad: Firstly, partly for fear of alienating China, the India government was left jaded when Australia withdrew from the group; for the next decade until the group’s revival in 2017, India consistently dismissed appeals from Japan and the US to regroup the alliance; India’s decision to finally relent came after: 1) a contentious few years in India-China relations; 2) India’s major differences over China’s Belt and Road Initiative (especially CPEC); 3) China’s rigid stand and consistent efforts to deny India’s membership in the NSG; secondly, Beijing’s protection of Pakistan-based terrorists from the UN sanctions; and third, unprecedented months-long standoff on the Doklam plateau.¹⁴

¹³ Wright, Thomas (2021) “Joe Biden Worries That China Might Win,” June, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/06/joe-biden-foreign-policy/619130/>

¹⁴ Smith, Jeff (2019) “India and the Quad: Weak link or Keystone?” January, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/india-and-the-quad-weak-link-or-keystone>

for several years Chinese scholars have maintained that the Quad will exist only in New Delhi’s “realm of fantasy”

Interestingly, in Beijing’s view, India’s recent change in stance on the Quad from being a “geographical concept” to “good mechanism” in Asia Pacific has provided enough dynamism to the US “Indo Pacific” concept to revive up its China containment policy. Quite in tune with what at least some scholars in China have been telling us, a US commentator recently wrote of both Indo Pacific concept and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: “QUAD was served up to spice up (the Indo Pacific) alphabet soup, as a new strategy to slow, if not thwart, China’s rise as the predominant economic powerhouse in Asia Pacific.”¹⁵

Be that as it may, for several years Chinese scholars have maintained that the Quad will exist only in New Delhi’s “realm of fantasy.” Now, following the first Quad leaders’ summit last March, perhaps it is this unseen, unanticipated and unprecedented Indian “resolve” to risk participating in US-led anti-China political and military alliances which is beginning “to touch a nerve in the Chinese psyche.” Or, it may well be that Beijing is feeling rattled by the near consensus the Indian political elite has arrived at, that China’s

¹⁵ Adlakha, Hemant (2020) “Is Quad the US latest toy to thwart China’s growth,” October, <https://niice.org.np/archives/6087>

Galwan intrusion, Galwan Valley “massacre,” and China’s stubborn refusal to return to status quo ante in Ladakh, are reasons enough for India to admit relations with “expansionist” China have reached an inflection point and that India must teach its northern neighbor “a good lesson.”

Ultimately, what matters the most is that if the perceived threat from China doesn’t grow, India’s enthusiasm for upgrading the Quad will remain subdued

Finally, no doubt India’s continuing failure in the fight against Covid-19 in the near term “will weigh on the quartet’s ability to tackle other issues of common concerns, such as technology supply chains and cyber policy.” Yet, as mentioned in the Heritage Foundation paper cited above, it cannot be denied that India is also driven by more pragmatic considerations. Indeed it is true India can boast of experiences (against China) other three Quad member countries can only imagine. Namely, it is the only country in the grouping with a large disputed, unsettled border with China; it is the only country in the quartet that has faced a Chinese invasion; it is the only country periodically getting entangled into long standoffs on the border with China; it is the only country whose presence in the Quad provides meaning to the US Indo-Pacific security architecture; India has been the most

steadfast of the four in halting diplomatic endorsements of Beijing’s “One China” policy as way back as in 2010; finally and recently, India is the only Quad member to show resolve in staring down the PLA first during the Doklam dispute in 2017 and then again last year in mid-June in Galwan.

To conclude, of all four countries in the Quad, it is only India which is in a unique position and possesses unique sensitivities against Beijing. India’s enthusiasm for taking initiative is likely “to depend less on the other three members of the group and more on the behaviour of China.” Sceptics may be right in saying that the coronavirus crisis has exposed “the differential between the idea of India as a rising power and its ability to deliver on commitments.”¹⁶ Ultimately, what matters the most is that if the perceived threat from China doesn’t grow, India’s enthusiasm for upgrading the Quad will remain subdued. On the contrary, if it does, the gravitational pull of the Quad will grow stronger. It is that which will make India become the Quad keystone from being a weak link!

¹⁶ Kazmin, Amy (2021) “India’s Covid Calamity Exposes Weakest Link in US-led Quad Alliance,” June, <https://www.ft.com/content/8c5e6c26-6583-4524-994d-2f52b37d9216>

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The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.

This is slightly expanded and edited version of 2-part article published on June 18-19, 2021 under the title [‘Quad: Is India the Weakest Link in the US-led Alliance’](#)

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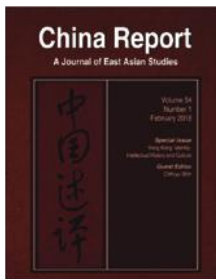


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