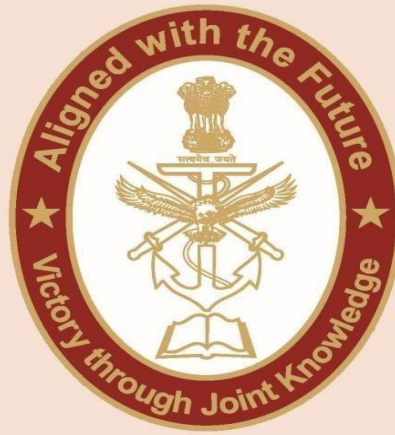


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The Strategic Contours of the Quad under Trump and India's Position



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Introduction

America's Quad Strategy in Countering China: An Overview

The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), initiated by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, initially emerged as a coordination effort among India, Japan, Australia and the US, in context of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, as the 'Tsunami Core Group'.ⁱ However, an overarching concern was also the growing Chinese threat, as Beijing ramped up its military spending by nearly \$10 billion from 2005 to 2006, followed by a similar increase from 2006 to 2007.ⁱⁱ In the same year, China conducted anti-satellite missile tests, ramping concerns for the USⁱⁱⁱ It also engaged in skirmishes with its neighbours, including Vietnam^{iv} and the Philippines.^v Another major concern was China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, where it

began building ports in Pakistan^{vi} and subsequently, Sri Lanka.^{vii} Additionally, China's grey-zone tactics created territorial ambiguity and tensions with Southeast Asian nations including Japan.^{viii}

At the time, China strongly protested against the Quad^{ix} and has consistently viewed it as an "Indo-Pacific version of the NATO".^x Quad's first informal meeting was held in 2007, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila.^{xi} However, amidst the 2008–09 global financial crisis^{xii} and Obama administration's subsequent 'Pivot to Asia', which sought to engage China rather than isolate it,^{xiii} the Quad went dormant.

In 2017, during Trump's first term, the Quad resurged in response to China's growing aggression in the South China Sea (SCS) and Spratly Islands^{xiv}, as well as its standoff with India along the Doklam plateau.^{xv} Other overarching factors driving this renewed cooperation were concerns over China's rapidly expanding defence budget,^{xvi} and the strategic reach of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with which arose the potential for heightened Chinese hegemony in the region.^{xvii}

The Trump administration's revival of the Quad centered around shared-vision agendas, particularly the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework, which reinforced a rules-based regional order in the region, along with maritime security and regional connectivity being additional focal points.^{xviii} Under the Biden administration, the Quad was elevated from senior officials' consultations to the ministerial level, leading to the first-ever Quad Leaders' Summit, held virtually in March 2021. This saw the release of "The Spirit of the Quad",^{xix} followed by an in-person summit in Washington, D.C., later that year, hosted by former US President, Joe Biden.^{xx}

The Quad in Biden's Era and a Circle-Back to Trump

Under Biden, Quad saw the inception and subsequent expansion of six major working groups including Health Security, Climate Working Group, Cybersecurity Working Group, Space Working Group, Infrastructure, and one which laid the foundation for deeper US-India collaboration through a parallel bilateral initiative¹ – the Critical and Emerging Technologies (CET) Working Group.^{xxi}

¹ The iCET (US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology), a bilateral initiative between the US and India, can be seen as a parallel and ideologically aligned counterpart to the Quad's CET working group. A basic distinction between the CET and iCET is that the former focuses on shared technological standards, securing semiconductor and other critical supply chains, and collaborates on R&D in AI, quantum, biotechnology, etc. as a multilateral cooperation initiative among the Quad countries. iCET, on the other hand, focuses on co-development of technology, joint R&D initiatives in AI, quantum, and biotechnology, as well as semiconductor collaboration, securing supply chains and critical minerals, alongside space and defence initiatives (such as INDUS-X), from a strictly bilateral approach between the US and India.

Strategically, under Biden, Quad has been careful to avoid the “anti-China” tag, by avoiding explicitly stating that its joint military^{xxii} and coast guard activities^{xxiii} are capacity-building efforts against Chinese aggression,² emphasising cooperation over deterrence.^{xxiv}

While the Quad has predominantly maintained a non-military posture in the Indo-Pacific, a more security-oriented framework has begun to shape up in parallel, particularly in response to maritime tensions in the South China Sea. The United States, under the Biden administration, has been part of this emanating informal maritime security alliance, focused on countering Chinese naval aggression in the South China Sea, known as the ‘Squad’.^{xxv} The grouping includes the US, and other Quad members such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. It has principally emerged in response to China’s assertive posturing in the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the SCS.^{xxvi}

Trump 2.0’s more transactional approach to allies poses a significant challenge to the Quad: a tendency to pressure partners into more weighty commitments, including expectations of military alignment – an approach India has traditionally resisted.^{xxvii} The pressing concern, therefore, is what the strategic contours of Quad would look like under Trump’s second administration, especially in navigating the China challenge – considering Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s view of China as the defining challenge of this century^{xxviii} - and where India fits into this evolving facet.

Tariffs, ‘Trumponomics’, and Military Pressure

Biden’s approach to China leaned towards strategic decoupling and covert economic tactics, driven by long-term wariness and national security concerns. This resulted in targeted bans on advanced technologies such as AI chips, semiconductors, and quantum computing,^{xxix} in contrast to the Trumpian era,^{xxx} which is marked by overt economic warfare between both parties,^{xxxi} reaching a climax with heavy tariffs and escalatory rhetoric.^{xxxii} As America’s major partner in the Indo-Pacific and amidst a rapidly growing defence partnership between both countries, an assertive Trump 2.0 may pressure India to adopt a more hardline approach towards China, which would entail apprehension on India’s part, especially as India-China tensions de-escalate.^{xxxiii} Historically too, India has been reluctant to engage in military groupings with partners, including the US^{xxxiv}, and is therefore unlikely to enter into one with the Quad, or any of its counterparts,

² Although former President Joe Biden has acknowledged, in objective terms, Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait.

such as the Squad. While it has often been argued that New Delhi's reluctance to engage in military posturing with the Quad affects its cohesion and hinders a potentially stronger Indo-Pacific strategy,^{xxxv} its reluctance may heighten in the Trumpian era out of a stronger-than-ever need to maintain its strategic autonomy.

While Trump's imposition of 145 percent tariffs on China^{xxxvi} may signal his willingness to cut economic ties with Beijing, India is unlikely to align with such a position. Moreover, the EU's experience with Trump^{xxxvii} serves as a lesson-learned for India to be fiercer in maintaining strategic independence. India's "neighbourhood-first" policy^{xxxviii} and its subsequent approach to avoid further border skirmishes with Beijing through cooperation^{xxxix} may also be a reason for this reluctance – a substantial diversion from other Quad members who are a part of military expeditions against China.^{xl} Furthermore, rooted in its Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) legacy,^{xli} India positions itself as a peaceful power in both the Global South^{xlii} and the Indo-Pacific,^{xliii} and as an advocate for a multipolar global order.^{xliv} This strategic identity makes it unlikely for India to join formal military alliances or adopt deterrence-based postures in the absence of immediate physical threat. Moreover, from a strictly economic perspective, India is likely to remain unpressed if an overbearing Trump insists on major allies condensing economic ties with China, particularly given that the latter has consistently ranked at the top of India's largest trading partners.^{xlv} India remains well positioned to maintain this stance: Washington needs to maintain a close relationship with New Delhi if it wants to further expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific and the Global South – and maintain a counterbalancing force against Beijing, and to possess a viable partner if Trump decides to strategically align with Taiwan.^{xlvi}

In this capacity, while India may not fully align with all of the Quad members' strategic inclinations, particularly in their efforts to isolate China, given that it is the only Quad member sharing a land border with Beijing, it prefers to deal with its relationship with China independently and diplomatically.

However, in recent years, India has deepened maritime cooperation with other Quad members^{xlvii} – a delicate balancing act – while maintaining its stature as a peaceful and cooperative Indo-Pacific actor. This calibrated positioning by New Delhi may be intended at distinguishing itself from China's assertive and often hegemonic regional posture.^{xlviii} While Beijing is a shared concern among all Quad countries, India's strategic approach differs due to specific historical, geographical and strategic contexts. Given its legacy of border tensions with China, India tends

to perceive overt military posturing as a potential trigger for escalation, fuelled by the belief that any level of perceived physical threat could invite an aggressive Chinese response.

At the same time, the Trump administration's emphasis on bilateral engagements – though this has monumentally strengthened defence ties with India since January 2025 – has sparked apprehension about the future of multilateral and minilateral frameworks involving the United States. For India, this is of particular concern, as its "rising power" image is closely tied to the sustenance of a multipolar global order.

Such instances have emerged during his first term when Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP),^{xlix} and in his current term, tensions with ASEAN nations have surfaced over tariff-related issues.^l The risk of Trump further sidelining the Quad in favour of bilateral engagements with Australia and Japan looms large, entailing the risk of the Quad becoming inconsequential in shaping regional dynamics and as a counter-balancing grouping against China. In short, Trump's preference for bilateral deals results in stronger bilateral ties, possibly stronger than ever, but a substantially less coherent Indo-Pacific strategy.

Recommendations and Conclusion

A foremost recommendation is for India to adopt a nuanced approach to the Quad: while bilateral deals with the US should be encouraged, a balance must be struck by strongly advocating for minilateral engagements as well. Although India may not be inclined to militarily position itself against China, it can actively pursue alternative initiatives, such as large-scale connectivity projects and AI collaborations. Advancing critical technology initiatives modelled after the CET framework could be advantageous, especially in balancing China's strides in the domain. Big-ticket regional projects like the I2U2 (India, Israel, US, UAE) could also be explored to further the Quad's regional importance. Additionally, collective R&D presents an opportunity to enhance the Quad's vision for the Indo-Pacific, which would also benefit individual members. Finally, the Quad could consider partnering with external countries on expansive projects, thereby enhancing its global outreach and strategic influence, reinforcing the grouping's collective impact. The focus, therefore, needs to be on strategically posturing Trump to engage with partners in a more real multilateral sense, while fostering a sense of shared agendas and collective alignment.

DISCLAIMER

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