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Why China is concerned about the Quad

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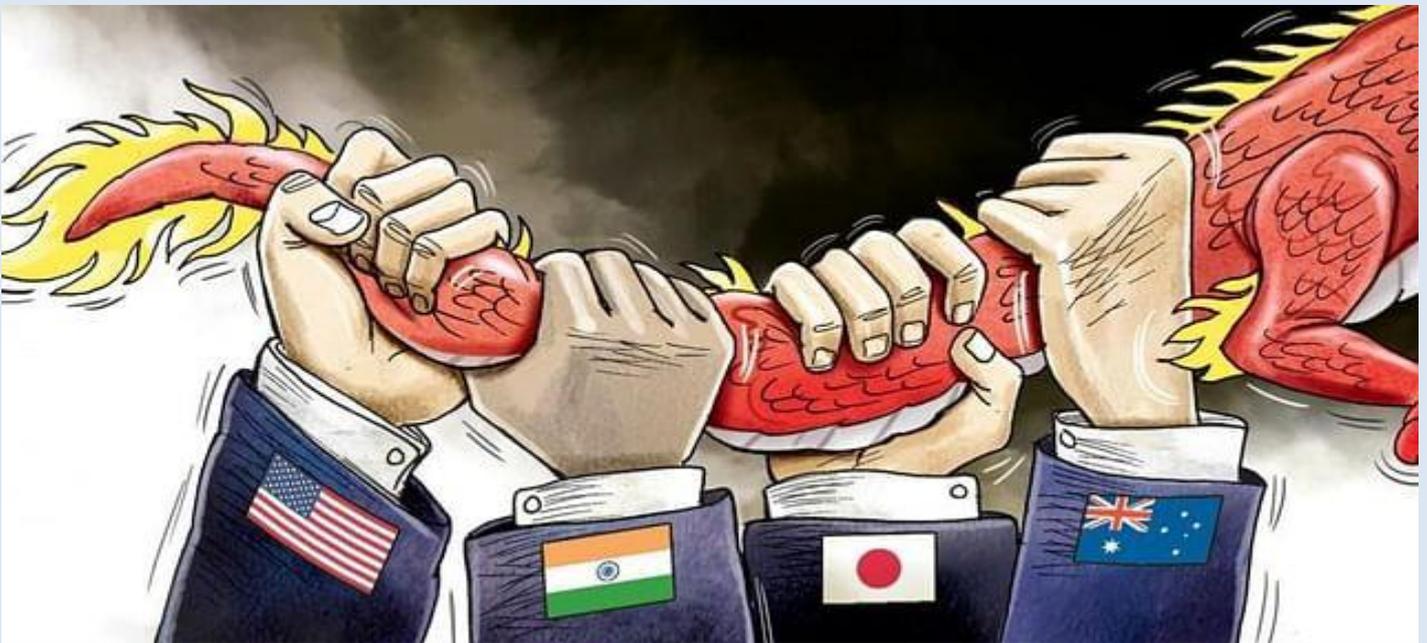


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The second in-person summit of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) was held in Tokyo on May 24, 2022. The leaders have agreed to set up joint monitoring of ships in the Indo-Pacific region, a move designed to deter illegal Chinese fishing and maritime militias.¹ Prior to the meeting, China reacted that the grouping was to 'contain China' and was 'bound to fail'.² While the summit was going on, the Japanese Defence Minister, Nobuo Kishi, announced that Russian and Chinese fighter jets carried out joint flights near the Japanese airspace.³ When the quad was formed by Japan, India, Australia, and the US in 2017, China's initial reaction was to dismiss it, saying the group would "dissipate like sea foam", but later termed it as an "Asian NATO" when Beijing found that the Quad gathered steam to rise as a countervailing mechanism.⁴ Japan is the progenitor of the idea of creating a regional grouping of democratic countries to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. It was initially termed 'Democratic Security Diamond' by the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2012,⁵ which was an expansion of his earlier concept of the "Confluence of the Two Seas"⁶ proposed at the Indian Parliament in 2007. The Quad can even be traced back to its origin in the Tsunami disaster relief operations of 2004 conducted jointly by the four countries and the four nations joint naval exercise 'Malabar' in 2007 (Singapore also participated).⁷ China strongly protested against the 'Malabar 2007', filing official demarches with each of the four countries. The 'Malabar 2007' was the first-ever coming together of the potential enemies of China for a military drill, and Beijing called the grouping as 'Asian NATO' to counter China's 'legitimate' rise as a global power.⁸ Malabar has now become the de facto naval drill of the Quad.

In fact, China is the largest beneficiary of the existing East Asian regional order. The East Asia region has been peaceful since the Second World War, largely due to the bilateral military alliances stitched together by the United States to varying degrees, also known as the 'hub-and-spoke' model. There were two objectives for the bilateral military alliances: one was to guarantee the security of its friendly capitalist states from the communist Soviet Union and China; and secondly, to prevent Japan from rearming and rising as a military power. China found no regional competitor when the Soviet Union collapsed. It started filling the vacuum and rose as a peer competitor against the US in East Asia. China's around twenty years of military modernisation was to counter the US preponderance in East Asia, but it has also facilitated China becoming the largest military power in Asia. Under President Xi Jinping, China envisions becoming the largest global military power by the middle of the 21st century.

Eminent IR scholar Mearsheimer argues that a rising great power doesn't allow another peer competitor in the same region.⁹ China sees India and Japan as potential competitors in Asia, but is constrained by internal problems. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution restricts Japan from holding a warfighting army and relies on the US security umbrella for its sovereignty. Although Japan has

been taking measures to become a 'normal' military power, the US is still the major supplier of arms for the Japanese Self-Defence Forces. However, Tokyo has recently taken initiatives to increase homemade production of defence items, including next-generation fighter jets.¹⁰ The US-Japan security cooperation is moving from purely a security guarantee to somewhat equipping Japan to secure itself, and Japan is widening its arms industry cooperation with the European Union and other fellow Asian countries.¹¹ An independent and militarily self-reliant Japan would be a major challenger to China in East Asia rather than a passive power under the US umbrella in the region.¹²

If China fears an independent Japan in East Asia, then a strong Indian military powered by sophisticated US technology is the worry in both the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean. Since India doesn't have a vibrant arms industry domestically, most of India's arms are imported from abroad, especially from Russia, Israel, France, and the US. While US technology is much more advanced than the systems currently being used in India, with US collaboration in the defence sector, India can produce advanced systems and can match China technologically. China believes strong defence cooperation between India and the US would entail India getting more advanced systems than the Chinese, which would negate China's advantage over India.

Cooperation of the Quad member countries is inclusive and is at different levels, which include bilaterals and trilaterals. Bilaterally, there are annual summit meetings, 2+2 (Foreign and Defence Ministers) meetings, defence policy dialogues, joint military exercises, and Mutual Logistic Support Agreements. They have also been involved in trilateral mechanisms such as Australia-India-Indonesia, Japan-US-India, Australia-India-Japan and US-Japan-Australia aimed at fostering maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. With the announcement of the 12 member Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the US looks not only to strengthen economic cooperation but also to counter China's economic influence in the Asia-Pacific region.¹³

Regardless, the military component is not part of Quad's agenda, but its looming importance cannot be discarded.¹⁴ Countries form alliances not just against the real threat but also against a perceived threat.¹⁵ Regional countries form a balancing mechanism against a revisionist power with the support of a great power. The combined military strength of the Quad can effectively counter the revisionist actions of China as and when it attempts to change the status quo. To strengthen the Quad strategic partnership, the member countries need to enhance their cooperation in arms deals. As of now, the US is the major seller of arms to the Quad members. Through the mutual sales and joint production of defence equipment the Quad partnership can be strengthened.

Individually, China is far ahead of each of the Quad members but weaker than their combined military strength. China has already adopted a 'divide and rule' policy in the South China Sea by

strategically weakening the capacity of ASEAN's united front against China in the territorial dispute. Instead, it is managing individually with ASEAN member countries. Similarly, China is firmly against the grouping of other regional heavyweights, especially India and Japan, for managing the security matters of the Indo-Pacific. China expects it can settle the boundary disputes with India and Japan on its own terms unless they come together in partnership with the US. As and when China becomes a revisionist state then naturally the regional countries would form a military coalition against China so a military Quad is the last regional mechanism to prevent China's regional and global ambitions.

NOTES

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⁵ Shinzo Abe "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>. Accessed on May 26, 2022

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Better to Be Godzilla than Bambi", in Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans", *Foreign Policy*, vol. 146, January/February, 2005, pp. 46–50.

¹⁰ *The Japan Times*, "Japan will work with Lockheed Martin on a new fighter jet, Defense Ministry says", December 18, 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/12/18/national/lockheed-martin-new-fighter-jet/>. Accessed on January 6, 2022.

¹¹ *Nikkei Asia*, "Japan to enable fighter jet and missile exports to 12 nations", May 27, 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-to-enable-fighter-jet-and-missile-exports-to-12-nations?fbclid=IwAR3es72tPIGtXNkIweFBxTtJ7Wl0o3ViA2NI8KtYDQsntoMOz2_3jnnJaY; Also see, Michito Tsuruoka and Daniel Fiott, "EU-Japan cooperation on defence capabilities: possibilities?" *Elcano Royal Institute*, *ARI 76/2020* – May 22, 2020, <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ari76-2020-tsuruoka-fiott-eu-japan-cooperation-on-defence-capabilities-possibilities.pdf>. Accessed on May 26, 2022

¹² ANI, “China frets about 'arms race' as Japan plans to increase military spending”, Business Standard, May 22, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/china-frets-about-arms-race-as-japan-plans-to-increase-military-spending-121052200067_1.html. Accessed on May 26, 2022

¹³ Mohammadbagher Forough,” America’s Pivot to Asia 2.0: The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework”, *The Diplomat*, May 26, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/americas-pivot-to-asia-2-0-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework/>. Accessed on May 26, 2022.

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