

India's Continental Connect on Indo-Pacific and Quad 2.0

By Jagannath Panda

No aspect of India's contemporary foreign policy is debated as much as New Delhi's approach towards the Quadrilateral consultative forum (popularly known as the "Quad") vis-à-vis China. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Shangri-La dialogue on June 1, 2018 indicated that he was not deeming the Indo-Pacific as a "strategy" but viewing China and Russia as partners within the purview of India's strategic autonomy. This has stimulated a debate about whether India's approach towards Quad 2.0 is China bound or not. Modi's attempt to rebuild New Delhi's relationship with China post-Doklam has reinvigorated this debate.

Fundamentally for India, the Quad 2.0 is just a consultation forum. Former foreign secretary Dr. S. Jaishankar noted in November 2017 that this forum is a reflection of the "changing nature of diplomacy" where different actors engage in advancing and configuring their national interests. The quadrilateral too, is a part of India's adherence to the new mode of four-partite diplomatic engagement to share ideas and possibly cooperate on issues of mutual interests and concerns. Important to note is that except for a few official statements, India has avoided terming this four-country consultative meeting as a "quadrilateral" forum, and has preferred to officially term it as "India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations on Indo-Pacific." It may be that New Delhi does not want to offer this grouping a deliberate strategic intent as that might be construed as anti-China.

The Indian approach towards Quad 2.0 is, however, much deeper, constituting a number of other factors. First, New Delhi's exposure to the notion of Indo-Pacific and its changing relationship discourse with the actors involved determines its perspective towards Quad 2.0. Quad 2.0 is a legacy of the United States' alliance-building exercise, though originally proposed by Japan in 2007. Given India's adversarial relations with China, it found a strategic compatibility in associating with "like-minded" countries such as the US, Japan and Australia, who believed in a "free and open Indo-Pacific" paradigm. In other words, the Quad essentially provided a platform for India to position itself as an "equal partner" with "like-minded" countries. It allows India to address Asia's power asymmetry with China while positioning Indian interests more prominently between US-led and China-led schemes of politics in Indo-Pacific.

Second, the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific is much grander and based on a 'continental connect' proposition. Quad 2.0 is primarily Indo-Pacific centric with a focus on the Indian Ocean whereas the Indian notion is much wider and stretches from Pacific Ocean to Indian Ocean to Africa. Essentially, the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific is based on an "Asia plus" continental connect notion where both maritime Asia and Africa are strong factors. This does not necessarily hold a strategic consonance with the other Quad countries, except for Japan, reflected in its co-envisioned Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The American understanding of it is more maritime-centric, focused on securitizing the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Underpinning President Trump's "Indo-Pacific" strategy, Mike Pompeo's US\$113 million commitment of investment funds for infrastructure, energy, and technology explains the American intent. Renaming of the Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command also boosts the maritime dimension of the American Indo-Pacific strategy.

Dr. Jagannath Panda, Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, explains that "India's notion of a regional order in the Indo-Pacific is most importantly associated with the "Beijing Consensus", but without distancing much from the "Washington Consensus."

This however contradicts the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific – India does not subscribe to a “geographical definition” of Indo-Pacific and is based more on a “positive” continental proposition, even including Africa. This “inter-connected” region as India calls it, is “free, open, prosperous and inclusive,” implying it does not disregard the scope of partnering with China and other continents such as Africa.

Third, India views the revival of Quad 2.0 as an outcome of the Indo-Pacific reality but to be handled with strategic caution. These realities emphasize maritime security, sustainable and safe connectivity, freedom of navigation, rule-based order, and international law, among other things. India does share a common perspective with most of the Quad-associated countries on these issues and is hesitant to pursue these within the Quad proposition. This hesitance was reflected in the Press Release (November 12, 2017) issued by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs after the forum's first consultative meeting, differing from other official press releases of the Quad-associated countries.

The main reason behind this non-mention is that India is yet to have a potential maritime dispute with China even though Indian interests are being challenged by China's increasing adventurism in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Indeed, India would prefer to view China as a maritime dialogue partner to avoid any direct confrontation in the future. The second India-China Maritime Affairs Dialogue held on July 13, 2018 is a reflection of this, where India preferred to discuss ‘maritime security’ as a subject. The subject of ‘maritime security’ was however missing in India's press release of November 12, 2017 which was released after the manila consultation meeting of Quad 2.0. The press release of second consultation meeting held on June 7, 2018 in Singapore, after the Shangri-La speech of Modi, mentioned about “maritime cooperation” but passingly linking with the HA-DR. This indicates to the strategic caution that India holds to promote out rightly the Quad 2.0 as a maritime coalition in IOR.

Fourth, the Indian approach towards Quad 2.0 stresses enhancing connectivity. No other country is as hard-pressed over Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as India. Given that India's reservations on BRI range from issues concerning sovereignty and transparency to its overall governance, New Delhi certainly would like to view the Quad 2.0 forum as a strategic pivot against China and restrict Chinese outreach through the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Beijing's emergence as a stronger “maritime power” has certainly endangered the Quad members' interests, owing to which India endorses the Quad 2.0 forum as a limited strategic proposition to protect its own maritime interests. Beijing's continuous focus on developing maritime infrastructure, key maritime zones, investment in port construction, and finding alternative routes in the IOR are strong factors to encourage India to associate with “like-minded” countries under the Quadrilateral consultative forum.

Fifth, there is no denying that the current regional order in the Indo-Pacific is in flux. The “Indo-Pacific” as a foreign policy concept is gaining recognition but is far from being materialized. Hence, India is rather hesitant to push Quad 2.0 as an anti-China bulwark. If the US-led or “like-minded” countries scheme of things is important to India's strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, cooperating with China as a partner equally serves India's domestic economic interests — China is emerging as a stronger domestic economic partner for India for infrastructure development. In other words, India cannot help but subscribe to a strategic ‘alignment minus alliance’ policy, working within a US-led framework while retaining the option of China as an economic partner. New Delhi's approach towards the region is based on its choice to be strategically autonomous and maintain an exclusive relationship with each one of these actors. This constitutes the core of the Indian approach towards Quad 2.0.

Above all these, India's notion of a regional order in the Indo-Pacific is most importantly associated with the “Beijing Consensus”, but without distancing much from the “Washington Consensus.” The “Beijing consensus” offers an alternative mode of developmental model – which is aimed towards developing countries or emerging economies. Infrastructure development and connectivity enhancement are part and parcel of this alternative developmental model that China enthusiastically advocates. India's association with China within the framework of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) strongly suggests that India is embracing the “Beijing Consensus” even though it still finds strategic consonance with the “Washington Consensus.” India's approach toward Quad 2.0 is a legacy of this post-Cold war discourse.

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