



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Harnessing the QUAD's Maritime Power

Author

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US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Japan's Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi, Australia Foreign Minister Penny Wong and India's External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar held the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, on January 21, 2025.

Source: [X/@DrSJaishankar](#)

Ships assigned to the Indian Navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, United States Navy and Royal Australian Navy sail together in the Arabian Sea during Exercise Malabar 2020. Source: [US Navy](#)

Three Made-in India Naval combatant ships - INS Surat, INS Vagsheer, INS Nilgiri commissioned at Mumbai Naval Dockyard, on January 15, 2025. Source: [X/@PRO_Vizag](#)

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Introduction

As is evident from its very name, the impetus for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, now known as the QUAD, was predicated on security concerns following the rise of China early in the millennium. However, policymakers in the four QUAD member states have steered clear from the military aspects of security, concerned about China's response, reactions in South East Asia, and the prospect of militarisation of the Indo-Pacific construct.

Whilst being steadfast in its aversion to any sort of military grouping, let alone alliance, India has also been ambivalent in regard to any joint military capability of the QUAD through interoperable forces. Two of the QUAD partners are US allies; India is not. Unlike the other three QUAD nations, India shares a disputed and militarily sensitive land border with the PRC, and has to understandably avoid missteps that could ignite tensions with Beijing.

The joint statement issued after the latest QUAD Foreign Ministers' meeting held in Washington D.C. on January 21, 2025, immediately after the advent of the Trump 2.0 administration, used the terminology of '*defending*' as well as '*upholding*' "the rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty and territorial integrity in the Indo-Pacific", and "opposing any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion". This could be interpreted as a signal of increasing securitisation, and future deliberations of the QUAD may focus on the role of military capability for traditional security functions, in addition to non-traditional security and HA/DR, as has been the case in the past. As the host of the next QUAD summit to be held later this year, India will need to consider how to best harness the latent maritime security advantages of the QUAD in buttressing regional stability, including in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which is vital for India's interests.

A Fleet-in-Being

In the year 1690, not long after the Peace of Westphalia, Admiral Herbert, Earl of Torrington, Commander of the Royal Navy in the English Channel, having to contend with a much stronger French force already at sea, chose to avoid an unfavourable outcome by having his own ships stay put in harbour. He calculated that by thus keeping his "*fleet-in-being*" he could maintain an active

threat, which the opposition would not be able to ignore, and which would perform have to be factored into any consequent strategic logic.

Whilst Torrington's decision had a specific context, a 'fleet-in-being' can also be interpreted as a credible force of warships, which, because of its very existence, has to be taken into consideration in the calculations of opposing forces, even if it is inactive. A well-honed 'fleet-in-being' translates into hard deterrence, as it has the potential of providing a rapid escalatory response if and when required.

What does all this have to do with the QUAD? Given that the grouping takes pains to underline that it is not a military alliance, nor even focused primarily on matters of security, adopting a contemporary version of Torrington's 'fleet-in-being' concept may serve to increase deterrence without provoking alarm. The incontestable and continuing relevance of the maritime dimension for the QUAD framework, and the persistence of the strategic concerns that led to its very establishment, should make the consideration of a 'fleet-in-being' worthwhile.

The QUAD and Maritime Security

The QUAD's very origins are maritime in nature, with the catastrophic tsunami of 2004 catalysing coordination of humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HA/DR) among the navies of the four eventual members. The affected area spanned the waters of both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which the Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe later aptly described as the "confluence of seas" when coining the term Indo-Pacific in 2007, emphasising the maritime nature of an emerging and contested geostrategic space.

By 2007, the primary impetus for this "diamond of democracies" to cooperate in the maritime sphere had shifted from HA/DR and non-traditional threats to traditional ones, as evident in the naming of the initiative as a 'security' dialogue. Although the contemporary concept of 'security' encompasses far more than the military dimension, it was evident to all that the marked increase in China's expansionist assertions in the South China Sea and elsewhere could escalate into military adventurism, unless deterred in some fashion.

In a sense, therefore, the QUAD and the Indo-Pacific became inextricably intertwined owing to security challenges in the oceanic dimension, a linkage reinforced by Exercise Malabar which is now conducted regularly by the four QUAD navies at different locations in the Indo-Pacific. *An oceanic security rationale thus underpins the QUAD, and holds good today, even as the mini-*

lateral evolves and addresses a host of areas that bring tangible and reassuring benefits of rules-based order and regional public goods to nations of the Indo-Pacific.

Grand Strategic Hedging

The first avatar of the QUAD which emerged in 2007 could not withstand China's calculated and concerted pushback, and QUAD 1.0 saw a hasty demise within the year. Despite serious concerns about China's burgeoning military capabilities and aggressive stance, all four QUAD members were wary of the economic and political consequences for their relations with China.

The second avatar of the QUAD, revived by President Trump in 2017 during his first term, gradually broadened the ambit of its vision to include economic, technological and humanitarian issues, in addition to maritime security-oriented deliberations and the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative (IPMDA) that is still a work in progress. This has allowed the QUAD to become more acceptable to existing regional groupings like ASEAN by mitigating concerns about an "Asian NATO" that are frequently raised by China.

Sagacity apart, the members of the QUAD are not in a position to economically decouple from China, and are therefore attempting 'de-risking' of their respective dependencies through multiple strategies, including engagement with China. Quite naturally, there has been reticence in emphasising the security rationale underlying the QUAD's original *raison d'être*.

Moreover, *given the extreme unpredictability of the contemporary geopolitical scenario, the broad geo-strategic impulse of our times— across geographies— is that of hedging*. India is not alone in seeking strategic autonomy as the impending trajectories of the great powers, and would-be great powers, are exceedingly difficult to predict. This is especially so after the recent initiation of direct talks between the US and Russia to end the Ukraine war.

The "Trump effect", including a possible US-Russia détente and the consequent upheaval in Europe, signals growing uncertainty. Given China's burgeoning military and technological power, even an accommodation between the US and China cannot be ruled out.

Strategic hedging is thus here so stay for the foreseeable future.

Hard Security and the Indian Ocean

As a consequence of the QUAD's shift in focus, it could be argued that matters of traditional security are getting insufficient attention in the Indian Ocean. The network of bilateral security alliances of the US with its allies in the Western Pacific, and more lately AUKUS, are the mainstay of US-led military deterrence against the PRC, which remains strategically constrained within the 'First Island Chain' in the Western Pacific despite its growing capabilities.

However, this is not the case in the Indian Ocean, where threats to commercial shipping posed by the Houthis in the Red Sea and renewed acts of piracy highlight the vulnerability of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and impact the trade and energy security of many nations. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, conflicts in West Asia and the Horn of Africa, and an unstable Af-Pak region add further to the vulnerability of SLOCs and security challenges in the Western Indian Ocean. Even the Bay of Bengal is witnessing storm-winds from growing instability in Bangladesh and Myanmar, or "BANMAR", to coin a new acronym.

Furthermore, China is on the verge of changing the security dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is indispensable for its energy needs as well as its trade, investments and access to markets. *China's great power ambitions can only be realised by global naval power projection and presence further westward, using the Indian Ocean as a springboard.* Ever since 2008, the PLA Navy has been present in the IOR under the guise of anti-piracy operations. This presence has been augmented over the last decade by large numbers of China's fishing fleet and PLA (Navy) intelligence ships.

The PLA (Navy) is undoubtedly going to increase its footprint in the Indian Ocean, especially as its Carrier Battle Groups take shape, and could pose a traditional security threat not only to India, but also to energy shipments and extra-regional trade interests of several countries. Influence operations, a more visible assertive presence, and traditional gunboat diplomacy can be expected in a region in which China is heavily invested financially and diplomatically through the Belt and Road Initiative. Recent developments in the Maldives, basing facilities in the port of Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, and a footprint at Gwadar in Pakistan, are indicative of Beijing's persistent ambitions in the IOR.

Clearly, maritime security and hard security challenges in the vast and broad expanse of the Indian Ocean cannot be ignored.

Whilst the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) operating in the North Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa under the aegis of the US Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain has contributed in some measure to non-traditional maritime threats in the Western Indian Ocean, it is composed of 46 countries, making it cumbersome and unwieldy. India has joined the CMF as an associate member, but does not exercise a leading role within it. India remains largely alone in providing security capability across the broader Indian Ocean.

Given the "security hesitancy" of the QUAD, and the limitations of the CMF, what, if anything, could serve as deterrence to miscalculation or mischief by state and non-state actors in the expanse of waters from the Red Sea to Malacca? The answer may lie in borrowing the 'fleet-in-being' concept and tweaking it to accommodate the realities of contemporary geopolitics.

A QUAD Fleet-in-Being

It needs but a little leap of imagination to conceive of available elements of the blue-water navies of the four capable maritime powers that constitute the QUAD as a fleet-in-being *provided, of course, that these forces are, and remain, significantly interoperable*, and can thereby hypothetically undertake combined operations across the spectrum of maritime activities.

Here, it is important to recall that the QUAD's stated objective is a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), with freedom of navigation and secure SLOCs for the safety of global and regional trade and the reliability of supply chains. Security concerns continue to be a major driver of QUAD cooperation. The availability of a relatively invisible, yet professionally integrated and capable 'fleet-in-being', could be the QUAD's best bet for underlining its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The four navies of the QUAD are already interoperable to some degree, despite no overarching formal or binding structures or commitments. They exercise and interact through Exercise Malabar and a host of other bilateral and multilateral exercises. *Their interoperability remains open-ended, with no declared adversary or objective.* Willy-nilly, as in the case of the QUAD, circumstances and commonality of interests have laid the foundation for a unique and pioneering type of a mutually reassuring maritime arrangement which performance has to be factored in by anyone inclined to use force in the Indo-Pacific.

Like the QUAD, the 'fleet-in-being' would essentially be a power-balancing and stabilising arrangement dedicated to the Indo-Pacific. It would require no

headquarters and no permanent command and control hierarchy. The deterrent value of such a fleet-in-being would depend on any potential adversary's assessment of its operational capabilities. *All that requires to be achieved is an incremental enhancement of sustenance and interoperability, and a general commitment by QUAD members to nurture this one security vertical*, despite the evolving nature of the QUAD's other diverse engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

Warships can be used not only to deter or threaten, but also to reassure, coax, and influence by their very appearance. They are extremely flexible instruments which can be effectively deployed for long periods in an area of interest or concern, without crossing international borders or airspace, and can be withdrawn without the stigma of retreat.

Warships are also very expensive to build, maintain and operate, and no nation can afford enough of them to address all threats and interests. It, therefore, makes sense for like-minded nations to club their resources by choice, to the degree possible, to address a variety of objectives - from deterring pirates and criminals to contributing to safety and good order at sea. In 2006, Admiral Mullen, the then US Chief of Naval Operations, had proposed such a concept, referring it to as a "thousand ship navy" - a multinational framework to stem a variety of challenges to maritime security. This was perhaps too far-reaching and impractical an idea, but a 'fleet-in-being' comprising ships from a smaller group of nations could be more workable, optimising ship availability and cost.

From the point of view of China, the 'fleet-in-being' would perhaps be less provocative than any prolonged and overt military cooperation by the QUAD members involving land or air forces, which by nature are war fighting 'cross-border' military forces, and whose assembly in peacetime is aggravating and intimidating. On the other hand, apart from always being combat-worthy, Navies customarily and consistently operate in an owner-less global commons. International law allows warships to be legally deployed - in peacetime and in periods of crisis - on the high seas for a variety of diplomatic, benign and constabulary purposes. A 'fleet-in-being' would be a low profile, yet persistent force, signalling a tangible investment by the QUAD in upholding the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

The transformation of present interactions of the QUAD navies into a 'fleet-in-being' would require no declaration or document, but only a steady progression of greater 'joint visibility and presence' through increased coordination. Operational modalities could be incrementally instituted to generate the perception and reality of a force which is 'in being'. For example, more frequent

presence in the Western Pacific could be included in the Indian Navy's mission-based deployments; Australia and Japan could do the same in regard to the IOR. Such mechanisms may also assuage those opposed to any form of 'joint deployment/patrolling' as signalling an alliance, or diluting their strategic autonomy.

There is also an increasing commonality of platforms being operated by the QUAD Navies. The use of the P8 MPA and MQ-9 Predator drones by the Indian Navy in a successful operation to rescue the crew of MV Lila Norfolk in the Arabian Sea highlights this fact. Sharing of information for Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which has been considerably augmented, would also facilitate the 'fleet-in-being' concept. In sum, should the QUAD members so wish, adoption of a 'fleet-in-being' initiative could strengthen and sustain its security commitments and credentials.

Misgivings and Guarantees

Over the years, analysts and commentators have often and misleadingly branded India (as also Japan and Australia) as the weak-link in the QUAD. This is because New Delhi has firmly rejected any form of what George Washington famously termed as "entangling alliances". India has been realistically cognisant of its troubled northern borders with China and the existing power differentials, as it pursues its own development objectives and comprehensive national power.

Critics also underline that India is unlikely to participate in any combined military operations outside of the Indian Ocean. Not being a formal alliance partner of the US certainly allows India to maintain strategic ambiguity as it resorts to geo-strategic hedging. India has, nevertheless, steadily though cautiously, moved forward in giving concrete shape to the QUAD and its vision of the Indian Ocean (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The presence, visibility and deployment of the Indian Navy east of Malacca has been increasing with time, as have its interactions with the maritime establishments of ASEAN and Oceania. India has also considerably broadened its bilateral military cooperation with each of the other QUAD members, and may not be averse to participating in efforts to increase interoperability and augment operational logistics.

The recent India-US joint statement released after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with President Donald Trump in Washington D.C. on February 13, 2025, has clearly endorsed the objective of enhancing military cooperation through exercises of increased scale and complexity, as well as to "break new

ground to support and sustain US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific". This can also be progressed in tandem with the other two QUAD nations.

History records that formal treaties and pacts have not guaranteed expected actions from partners. Expecting total reliability, even from formal allies' signatory to a full-fledged treaty, is unrealistic; nations throughout the ages have dispensed with treaty obligations if these have worked against their national interests or ambitions at a point of time. *It is a coalition of the willing which forms the stronger bond, and this emanates from building on shared basic values and converging interests, rather than merely through collective defence treaty constructs.*

In this regard, an Indian Ocean 'fleet-in-being' would contribute to building trust, mutual respect and a shared vision, leading to a more assured collective response. Participating in a 'fleet-in-being' construct would keep India's strategic autonomy intact. Any construct which bolsters Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean security as a whole can only assist New Delhi's objectives of strength-based deterrence, allowing it to focus on development and growth.

Conclusion

There is no better way for the QUAD to retain its latent potentiality as a grouping capable of addressing security challenges than to persist with enhancing maritime interoperability through the medium of a 'fleet-in-being'. *This can be and should be on the agenda at the QUAD summit in India later this year.*

This would allow the QUAD to envision a force which would exist in fact, but not in name, with no formal structure, nomenclature or hierarchy, but with a common doctrine and tactical template, and practised rotational command and control procedures. The potential to muster such an interoperable force - should the need ever arise - would significantly lend to stability in both the Indian Ocean Region and the Western Pacific.

A 'fleet-in-being' would also give substance to the rhetoric of a FOIP and allow the QUAD's maritime democracies to simultaneously focus on multiple social, economic and technological challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The QUAD need not ponder whether "to be or not to be" a security-centred community. *By embracing the concept of a fleet-in-being, it can simultaneously be, yet not be, a security partnership.*



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