

# The First Quad Summit

## Ambassador Prabhat P Shukla

*"The fact of the matter is, we can do all we need to do without punishing anybody, anybody...China is going to eat our lunch? Come on, man... I mean, you know, they're not bad folks, folks. But guess what? They're not competition for us."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dew9qgoAM9A>

Candidate Joe Biden *AP 2 May 2019*

*"They're investing billions of dollars in dealing with a whole range of issues that deal with transportation, the environment, and a whole range of other things. So, we just have to step up...We don't get moving, they're going to eat our lunch."*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkaHpj0hZus>

President Joe Biden *Reuters 12 February 2021*

The Quad process may be said to have come of age with the recent virtual summit on 12 March of the top leaders of the member-states, India, Australia, Japan and the United States. This Summit, coming early in the Biden Presidency, establishes the Quad as a fixture in the security architecture, and fixes its ambition of an open and free Indo-Pacific as an integral part of that architecture.

This new reality must contend with the reality that India's stakes in the western Pacific are limited: no more than a third of India's total trade is with the region, and it is not a major source of foreign investment, with the important exception of Singapore.

Moreover, the Quad so far has an exclusive focus on the maritime aspects of security. India is the only country among the four that has a land border with China, and that is an area of active hostilities. India also has important interests in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, which again is not the prime focus of the Quad, though the definition of the term Indo-Pacific has been extended now to cover this area as well.

It is worth exploring these anomalies: the starting point is an important contradiction within the US approach to security in the region. It seeks

an India that is powerful enough to contribute to balancing the rise of China, but not powerful enough to cause concern to the the Generals in Pakistan. The way they have solved this dilemma is to focus exclusively on maritime security. This explains why the bilateral defence cooperation deals principally with naval matters, while other arms are not keeping pace. An example is the suspension of the working group on Jet Engine technology. There are other examples, but these need not detain this narrative here.

In purely logical terms, this is a mistake. The notion that China can be stymied at sea is based on a false premise. Even a tiny country like Qatar, with a total population of some two-and-a-half million, and citizens numbering 300,000, could not be subdued by its GCC neighbours despite a blockade lasting over three years. China is continent-sized, and has a friendly hinterland in the shape of well-endowed Russia, which the west is busily pushing into China's embrace. There is little hope that maritime action alone will be able to exert the necessary pressure on China to influence its actions.

This brief discussion of the conceptual shortcomings of the Quad is not meant to denigrate the initiative. On the contrary, it is a welcome step in building a security framework for the future of the region. It needs to evolve in the light of future developments, and it serves the purpose of buttressing the growing bilateral understandings between the member-states.

With this by way of backdrop, some of the important outcomes of the Summit may be toted up. The main points in brief:

- ➔ The Quad Summit has placed priority on the Covid-19 pandemic, climate challenge, and emerging technologies, and sets up working groups on each of them. This dilutes the security aspect of the group. It is the Quad Security Dialogue.
- ➔ The group does need to expand into economic cooperation, but the right vehicle for that is TPP-11. India should seek to join, the US to rejoin.

- ➔ Among the country statements, two issues stand out. The first is Biden's call for countries to raise domestic demand. The second is Suga's remark about the Quad revival in 2017 "**after overcoming some difficult circumstances**"; this is as close as a diplomat can come to blaming Obama for the hiatus after 2007.
- ➔ For the first time, there is a reference to the role of the Quad playing a role to "advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific **and beyond**". Prime Minister Modi's observation that the Quad was now a "force for global good" makes the same point.
- ➔ The Indian statement refers to the growing interest in the Indo-Pacific on the part of Europe; this has received concrete manifestation in the recent trilateral talks between India, France and Australia in September 2020.
- ➔ One weakness in the process – apart from its exclusive focus on the maritime dimension – is the absence of any outreach to Russia. The Biden team is hostile towards Russia and that forces the country ever closer to China.
- ➔ The usual references to free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific and the specifics regarding territorial issues are included in the Joint Statements. UNCLOS finds mention though the US has not ratified the Convention; China has lately stopped mentioning it in its military doctrines.

The first Summit of the top leaders of the Quad issued the first ever official joint statement of the Quad, reflecting an agreed approach to the matters discussed. This meeting also reflected the formal acceptance by the new Biden Administration of the concept of the Indo-Pacific. These are signs that the Quad now is assured of a stable future.

The Quad and the concept of the Indo-Pacific is of limited utility to India if it will not cover the land frontiers. India being the only member that has land borders with China and more substantive interests on its western seaboard, this becomes a lacuna that will need to be filled in

course of time. At some stage, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Himalayan frontiers will need to be brought into the ambit of the Quad.

Much western commentary notes the Indian reluctance: this is the reason. India is being asked to confront China at sea, but without any assurance of reciprocal support if China were to apply pressure on the land frontiers. Indeed, this has happened through the latter half of 2020, and there was little support from the Quad partners. To his credit, former Secretary of State Pompeo did mention the Himalayas in his speech at the Tokyo Foreign Ministers' meeting in October 2020. But that has not been sustained.

This is the occasion to address a view frequently heard at seminars: that the maritime dimension is sufficient to address Chinese pressure on our land frontiers. The example of Qatar should lay to rest any such illusion. A tiny country with a native population of some 300,000 withstood a blockade by much more powerful neighbours for over three years. It did not change any of its policies, as had been demanded by those neighbours. Finally, it was these countries that dropped the issue and reconciled themselves with Qatar. A continental sized country like China is much better equipped to face down a maritime challenge. It also has a hinterland – Russia – which can meet all and every need in the event of a blockade.

This is the background to the Indian diplomacy on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. As to the Summit itself, the most important fact is that it happened, and happened as early as it did. As Japanese Prime Minister Suga mentioned, it took place after overcoming some difficulties; it surely is no coincidence that it was revived in President Trump's first year in office. True, past Indian and Australian governments had been reserved about the process and the provocation it would offer to China. But there is no getting away from the principal role of the US.

It is worth recalling the details of President Obama's visit to India in 2015 in this connection. A separate joint document was signed during the visit on the joint approach to the Asia Pacific, the preferred term of the Obama team. It contained this formulation: "over the next five

years, **we will strengthen our regional dialogues, invest in making trilateral consultations with third countries in the region more robust...**" [Emphasis added]. In short, he was implicitly ruling out the quadrilateral dialogue. That this was not the preferred stance of the Indian government became clear at the alacrity with which the same government – led by Prime Minister Modi – joined in the Quad in 2017, when the Trump Administration proposed its revival.

By now, the standard fare of these meetings is well established. We call for a free, open [and inclusive] Indo-Pacific; we mention counter-terrorism, freedom of navigation and overflight, democratic values, peaceful settlement of disputes, rule of law [UNCLOS], ASEAN centrality and similar commitments. Of late, there have been references to ASEAN cohesion or unity: it is not readily apparent what lies behind this, but it is known that China has close ties with certain members, who evidently do not like this approach.

This time, the Quad has taken an approach that goes beyond this standard menu. There was discussion at the February meeting of the Quad Foreign Ministers on resilient value chains. Presumably, this was an allusion to the Chinese pressure on its trade partners, Australia in the main, by blocking imports of certain products. Similarly, the Chinese applied pressure on Taiwan as well, by banning imports of pineapples. Both countries found means to cope with the challenges, but the possibility of further moves by China cannot be ignored.

The answer is to activate the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It seemed destined to collapse when Trump pulled out of it, but Japanese leadership saw it through to a successful conclusion with the remaining eleven members. Recently, China has expressed interest in joining it. Before that happens, and countries like India and Taiwan are shut out, it would be a good move on the part of these two – along with other ASEAN countries that have expressed interest in acceding to it – to open negotiations. Taiwan is not formally recognised as a country, but it is a member of organisations like APEC, so there should be no difficulty in admitting it. It is in charge of its economic policy, tariffs and investment rules, and is also in the WTO as a separate customs territory, so it

qualifies to join. This would be the best way to establish stable value chains.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most notable formulations used in the joint statement is a common commitment to “advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific **and beyond**” [emphasis added]. The significance of this is in the growing involvement of other powers in the dynamic of the Indo-Pacific. Australia was invited for the Malabar naval exercises by India in 2020. Malabar is, of course, the western seaboard, but the exercises are not always – or even usually – held in the Arabian Sea. Moreover, there is no formal link between the Malabar series and the Quad, though the involvement of Australia made it a Quad gathering. As it happens, in 2020, there were two sets of Malabar exercises, one off the eastern seaboard, the other off the western.

Another significant development was the inclusion of France in a trilateral dialogue with India and Australia in September 2020. France has been evincing considerable interest in the region, and has a burgeoning relationship with India. Defence Minister Parly had visited India at the time of the induction of the Rafale fighters in the Indian Air Force, and had made a ringing declaration of intent to work with India to establish its air superiority in the region. This would fit in nicely with the idea of the Quad working beyond the Indo-Pacific region at some future date.

India, France and the UAE are also scheduled to conduct naval exercises in the Persian Gulf region in the coming weeks – this adds yet another dimension to the emerging dynamic. UAE also participated in the re-fuelling of the Rafale aircraft destined for India, over the Gulf of Oman.

Russia: the perennial thorny issue. The first point to be made is to repeat that an Indo-Pacific strategy that does not find some place for Russia is incomplete, at a minimum. At the same time, Foreign Minister Lavrov has made it clear that he holds strongly negative views about the Indo-Pacific, as being aimed against Russia and China. But there are

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<sup>1</sup> Taiwan will need to make some changes in its stance on issues like Tibet before it becomes acceptable to the grouping.

important shadings between the foreign policy and President Putin. At the Vladivostok Summit with Prime Minister Modi [Prime Minister Abe was also present] he came close to endorsing the concept of Indo-Pacific in the Joint Statement issued with the Indian side. The presence of the Indian and Japanese Prime Ministers was signal enough; but the joint document also contains this formulation:

India and Russia as stakeholders in this common space agreed to intensify consultations on complementarities between integration and development initiatives in greater Eurasian space and in the regions of Indian and Pacific Oceans.

This, coupled with the agreement on establishing a shipping link between Chennai and Vladivostok, are evidence of some fresh thinking on the part of President Putin. No doubt, being called a "killer" by the US President will make it difficult to work out any compromises. Perhaps India and Japan could play some mediatory role. An indication of Russian thinking that is finding resonance among some of their think tanks is the notion of nonalignment for Russia between the US and China. It must be stressed, however, that with each new sanction, with each unparliamentary epithet, this is becoming a Sisyphean task.

China is predictably displeased with the first Quad meeting at the top leadership level. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson derided the formation of closed and exclusive cliques, said that such groupings "should not target or undermine the interests of any third party". For good measure, the *Global Times* added that

"Countries like India and Japan have close economic ties with China. The border clash should make India realize that being China's enemy won't do the country any good".

The paper appears to be convinced that this is leading to the formation of an Asian NATO, with the economic aspects added so as to constrain China economically.

Chinese media comment has also been making the point that there are divisions within the Biden team on how to approach China. Underlying this is the hope that the several holdovers from the Obama team will

eventually steer policy towards accommodating China, as was the case under Obama. The Trump Presidency seems to have changed the basis of the US assessment of Chinese policy and actions, but the change may not run very deep. China's leaders certainly must hope that the clock can be turned back, and the economic investments they have made both with US businesses and the political class will eventually prevail. Which strand will eventually drive US policy is something Biden will need to clarify soon, perhaps at the planned bilateral with Xi Jinping that is supposed to take place in the near future.

In this context, it is worth noting one feature of the joint statement issued by the leaders: though it does mention a few specific issues, none of these concerns China directly. The statement speaks of the denuclearisation of North Korea, of the issue of Japanese abductees, and the imperative of restoring democracy in Myanmar. The real issue, however, facing the region is China's creeping annexation and expansion in the East and South China Seas and the Himalayas. This is the kind of omission that leads Chinese analysts to believe that the new US team will not do anything substantive against Chinese interests. And who can blame them?

To sum up, the level of the Quad engagement has been raised to the very top, but the security aspect is being diluted with the inclusion of subjects that could be better addressed in other forums. Hopefully, some of the issues, like vaccine production and distribution, will be out of the way in short order; and then the Quad can place its focus back where it rightfully belongs – security in the region, and not just in the maritime domain.

The arrangement, whatever its shortcomings, is very much in the Indian interest, as it is of the other partners, and needs to be nurtured and strengthened. There is also no doubt that the security issues will be given greater salience going forward, as Chinese threats and actions are bound to aggravate the security of the region. The Quad is also a cementing factor in bilateral ties between the members, a not unimportant additional benefit.

**New Delhi,**

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