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Issue Brief

Quad and the Ukrainian Crisis

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S*ummary*

Three of the four Quad members—the US, Japan and Australia—have taken an overtly critical stand towards Russia at the United Nations. In contrast, India has abstained from all the UN resolutions condemning Russia. This decision has made India stand apart from the rest in the Quad, raising the question of whether such a position would create wedges in the minilateral grouping. Against this backdrop, the issue brief critically analyses the salient features of the Quad Joint Readout and looks at the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the Quad. It examines whether the perception that there exist big differences within the Quad is true. Should India be looked at as a weak link in the Quad? Will divergent views over the Ukrainian crisis weaken the Quad? It argues that the Quad has a minimal role over the Ukrainian crisis, and that events occurring out of the geographic and functional mandate of the Quad should not impact the functioning of the grouping.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined a virtual meeting of the Quad leaders on 3 March 2022, along with his counterparts from the US, Japan and Australia. The purpose of the meeting was to review the progress on Quad initiatives since the September 2021 Quad Summit,¹ to reaffirm their commitment towards the Indo-Pacific and also to discuss the Ukrainian crisis. The joint statement released after the meeting was largely focused on the Indo-Pacific, along with a reference to the Ukrainian crisis. Three of the four Quad members—the US, Japan and Australia—have taken an overtly critical stand towards Russia at the United Nations (UN). In contrast, India has abstained from all the UN resolutions condemning Russia. The decision has made India stand apart from the rest in the Quad, raising the question of whether such a position would create wedges in the minilateral grouping. Against this backdrop, the issue brief critically analyses the salient features of the Quad Joint Readout and looks at the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on the Quad. It examines whether the perception that there exist big differences within the Quad is true. Should India be looked at as a weak link in the Quad? Will divergent views over the Ukrainian crisis weaken the Quad? It argues that the Quad has a minimal role over the Ukrainian crisis, and that events occurring out of the geographic and functional mandate of the Quad should not impact the functioning of the grouping.

Structural Contours of the Quad

Quad fits the mould of the security minilateralism of which there exists no fixed definition. However, minilateralism can be conceived to be a shorter version of multilateralism. More specifically, it sits between bilateralism and multilateralism. According to Naim, minilateralism can be defined as “the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem”.² More notably, a security minilateral ideally consists of three to five members interacting in a group over an issue of a mutual threat to their security and zero in on an action plan to mitigate the same.³ These groupings are “flexible networks whose membership varies based on situational interests, shared values, or relevant capabilities”.⁴ Security minilateralism is an avenue to bring together like-minded countries that can leverage common interests and values; pool collective resources; adapt to face fast-changing challenges in the region, thus flexible; set

¹ [“PM Participates in Virtual Summit of Quad Leaders”](#), PMINDIA, 3 March 2022.

² Moises Naim, [“Minilateralism”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 21 June 2009.

³ William Tow and H.D.P. Envall, [“The US and Implementing Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific: Can Convergent Security Work?”](#), *IFANS Review*, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 49–72, 2011.

⁴ Stewart Patrick, [“The New ‘New Multilateralism’: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?”](#), *Global Summitry*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 115–34, Winter 2015.

agendas in consonance with individual constituent’s national interests; and conducive to “minimise constraints on country’s individual freedom of action”.⁵ The longevity of the minilateral is directly proportional to the existence of the problem against which the grouping had come into being. Depending upon the nature of the threat, minilateral cooperation can be intensified horizontally as well as vertically. The horizontal growth denotes the expansion of the grouping in multiple functional areas. The vertical extension indicates gradual augmentation of the institutional foundation of the grouping, for instance, a minilateral cooperation can be graduated from low-ranking official meetings to high-level official meetings, or when an informal organisation gets formalised by establishment of the secretariat and bureaucracy.

In the post-Cold War years, Japan–China–South Korea trilateral convened on the sidelines of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)+3 meetings could be considered to be one of the first minilateral arrangements in the region. The informal gathering began in 1999, and the three countries decided to meet independently of the ASEAN from 2008. Its initial agenda was to collaborate on the matters of the economy⁶ against the backdrop of the Asian Financial Crisis. By 2010, the trilateral saw vertical expansion with the establishment of the secretariat.⁷ The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) formed between the US, Japan and South Korea was another minilateral in the region formed in 1999. The primary aim was to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue and coordinate policies accordingly. The Six-Party Talks later took it over. For India, the Russia–India–China trilateral formed in 2001 could be said to be the first minilateral to deal with the sudden exposure to the unipolarity of the US. The proposal for such a trilateral had come from Russian Premier Yevgeny Primakov in 1998. It was in line with India’s preference for a multipolar world. Even China thought its partnership with India and Russia in a “small clique” would best serve its interests in the post-Cold War world. In recent years, the region has seen a flurry of minilaterals such as India–Japan–Australia trilateral, India–US–Japan trilateral, India–Sri Lanka–Maldives trilateral, India–France–Australia trilateral, and the Quad, among many others.

After a decade, the Quad re-emerged in 2017 in response to an all-encompassing Chinese challenge in the Indo-Pacific. The four maritime nations—India, the US, Japan and Australia—on the four flanks of the maritime continuum called Indo-Pacific thought themselves to be best suited to ensure stability in the region. The shared interests and values further complimented the four-legged minilateral on achieving its primary goal in the region. During Tsunami, in 2004, the countries had

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Andrew Yeo, [“China, Japan, South Korea Trilateral Cooperation: Implications for Northeast Asian Politics and Order”](#), East Asia Institute, Issue Briefing No. MASI 2012–07, 6 November 2012.

⁷ [“Agreement on The Establishment of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat among the Governments of the People’s Republic of China, Japan and The Republic of Korea”](#), The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Official Website.

demonstrated how effectively they could pool their collective resources and capabilities for a larger public good. The Quad has proved nimble to expand both horizontally and vertically in the face of changing regional dynamics. The gradual progression from Secretary-level meetings to Summit Meetings shows the vertical progression of the Quad. The cooperation on the issues of infrastructure development, debt sustainability, technology, cyber domain and providing the global common goods such as vaccine partnership shows its horizontal expansion.

In the security domain, the Quad countries have been coming together for joint naval exercises under the banner of Malabar. The four countries have the bilateral logistics support agreements with one another. Moreover, the countries are closely cooperating in sensitive information sharing. Thus, the Quad is proving to be a platform for the constituents to align their strategies to keep the region inclusive, open and stable without getting into the formal alliance. Lack of alliance has offered necessary space for each participant to take an independent stand on the issue of their interests. The Quad has been conveying its perspective on regional matters through individual readouts and, of late, through joint readouts. However, it must be underlined that the very genesis of the Quad is attributed to the challenges emanating out of the region and the need to preserve stable and balanced regional order. The grouping is firmly rooted in the Indo-Pacific.

Salient Features of the Quad Joint Readout

The joint readout after the Quad leaders’ virtual meeting accommodates the interests of all the four countries. The first part of the statement was dedicated to the Indo-Pacific, while the latter had references to the Ukrainian crisis. According to the statement, the Quad leaders had convened “to reaffirm their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, in which the *sovereignty and territorial integrity* (emphasis added) of all states is respected and countries are free from military, economic, and political coercion”.⁸ The phrase “sovereignty and territorial integrity” was not used for the first time in the joint statement of the Quad. India’s External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, had used it as recently as during the opening remarks at the 4th Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Melbourne on 11 February 2022.⁹ It was also a part of the Quad Foreign Ministers’ joint statement.¹⁰ However, the words got associated with an insinuation that the reference was in the context of the Ukrainian

⁸ [“Joint Readout of Quad Leaders Call”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 3 March 2022.

⁹ [“Opening Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the 4th Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Melbourne”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 February 2022.

¹⁰ [“Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Australia, India and Japan and the Secretary of State of the United States following the 4th Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 February 2022.

crisis since New Delhi had used the same phrase while abstaining on Resolution on Ukraine in the UN General Assembly.¹¹ Since the choice of words could be interpreted in multiple ways, it can be read as an example of constructive ambiguity on India’s part.

The second part of the statement discussed the Ukrainian crisis, which was referred to as “the ongoing conflict” and not as an “invasion”, which is how the US and its allies are calling out Russian actions. The focus of the statement was on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. It was decided to “stand up a new humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mechanism”, which would help Quad deal effectively with future crises in the Indo-Pacific. The mechanism would also “provide a channel for communication *as they* (Quad countries) *each address and respond* (emphasis added) to the crisis in Ukraine”.¹² Thus, the statement recognised that each country might address and respond to the crisis distinctively. It offered the much-needed space for individual countries to choose according to their national interests.

Meanwhile, the statement also indicated Quad’s functional boundaries by framing it as “a mechanism to promote regional stability and prosperity”.¹³ Prime Minister Modi further reinforced the Quad’s scope when he said that “the Quad must remain focused on its core objective of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region”.¹⁴ Therefore, summoning the Quad meeting on the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis can be interpreted as an attempt to link the Indo-Pacific with the Euro-Atlantic security issues. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022 explicitly mentions linking the two regions.¹⁵ However, India sees the Quad as an exclusive arrangement tailor-made for the Indo-Pacific region.

Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the Quad

Though India has disapproved the infringement of territorial integrity and sovereignty of a country, it has used a different language to describe Russian action individually or at the UN. The rest three countries are on exactly the opposite plane vis-à-vis the Ukrainian crisis. This leads to a few questions. First, is the perception that there exist serious differences within the Quad true? As argued earlier, the Quad has been constituted as a minilateral grouping dealing with the strategic issues of

¹¹ [“Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations”](#), Adoption of Resolution on Ukraine in UN General Assembly, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, 2 March 2022.

¹² [“Joint Readout of Quad Leaders Call”](#), No. 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ [“PM Participates in Virtual Summit of Quad Leaders”](#), No. 1.

¹⁵ [“Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”](#), The White House, Washington, February 2022.

the Indo-Pacific. The Quad’s informal mandate is limited to the Indo-Pacific and challenges posed to the regional order. The basic purpose of forging such a forum is to allow members to have the freedom to exercise strategic autonomy. Unlike alliances that put restrictions on allies’ freedom to take the independent strategic decision, the minilaterals, by their structural constitution, inherently allow members to have divergent views on important international issues. Since the Ukrainian crisis does not have a direct bearing on the Indo-Pacific, it is best left outside the mandate of the Quad. Moreover, despite divergent views, the Quad met, discussed the Ukrainian crisis, and concluded a joint readout that speaks aloud about its health. The joint statement is a testimony to the fact that Quad partners respect each other’s sensitivities, understand the purpose of the minilateral and have, so far, not mixed regional issues with that of extra-regional developments.

Second, should India be looked at as a weak link in the Quad? India has always stood up for the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and abided by the international law not only through words but also through deeds, whether it is the peaceful resolution of the maritime dispute between India and Bangladesh according to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the Hague, judgement in 2014 or selling the BrahMos to the Philippines according to the Missile Technology Control Regime guidelines. However, when a country takes a stand at the international high-table, it considers the entirety of the situation where interests, values and history work in tandem rather than any one of these elements working in isolation. There are many issues where individual Quad nations have different views. For example, Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver for COVID-19 vaccines or the Myanmar crisis. In the case of the Myanmar crisis, India and Japan take a nuanced position dealing with the junta government while the remaining two countries of the Quad respond to the crisis differently. A diversity of views regarding the means is acceptable as far as there is convergence on the ends. India has always stood for the normative order. Moreover, the Quad has clearly expressed its commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond that, the Quad had little agency to impact the events in the far-away conflict zone.

Third, will divergent views over the Ukrainian crisis weaken the Quad? In a way, the crisis is a test of the Quad’s resilience. So far, the joint statement suggests that there is a common understanding among the Quad members as to how far it would be prudent to drag the Quad in the Ukrainian crisis. Furthermore, it is likely to take US’ attention back to the Euro-Atlantic theatre. Although the US has refuted such a notion by saying that it can “chew the gum and walk at the same time”,¹⁶ it is difficult to effectively look after a two-front situation if any exigency arises in the Indo-Pacific.

¹⁶ “[Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing](#)”, U.S. Department of Defence, 27 January 2022.

When the Euro-Atlantic theatre has become the primary area of focus for the US, it is in the region's interest to have a strong and cohesive Quad. Moreover, the US' Indo-Pacific strategy has accepted that “a successful Indo-Pacific vision must advance freedom and openness and offer ‘*autonomy and options*’” (emphasis added). Therefore, it looks improbable that the Ukrainian crisis will have any inadvertent impact on the functioning of the Quad. However, if the US decides to impose sanctions on India over its defence ties with Russia, that will likely have unwarranted effects on the Quad. Although India has done exceptionally well in walking on a tightrope during the Ukrainian crisis, it may come under pressure from the Quad countries in the future to take a fresh look at its position on the Ukrainian crisis. New Delhi should keep taking decisions based solely on the national interest. India's position on international matters should be delinked with its standing in the Quad since the existence of the minilateral is conjoint with particular issues in a defined geography.

Conclusion

The Quad has established itself as one of the foremost minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific, dealing with a range of regional challenges. Its gamut has been expanded to provide global common goods by way of vaccine distribution to face one of the worst health crises of the century. Although Quad's plan has been growing to tackle humanity's new challenges, it has negligible sway over the events in Ukraine. India has shown prudence by agreeing to discuss the sensitive issue of the Ukrainian crisis on the Quad platform. The Quad, in turn, has released a joint statement accommodating sensitivities of each of the constituents. From the joint statement, it seems probable that the restrained language of the readout vis-à-vis Russia was at the behest of India. Thus, Russia should take note of India's role as an independent player in the Quad who takes an independent view of the events.

The joint readout demonstrates that the Quad has come of age to develop a shared understanding of each country's positions in peculiar cases. So far, the events suggest that there are differences among the Quad members, but they know how to get over them. However, if the bilateral relationship between India and the US gets negatively impacted due to a third country, it would cast a grim shadow over the future of the Quad. Considering the importance of each of Quad's members and the current geopolitical situation in the world, the Quad is the need of the hour for the Indo-Pacific. If far-flung events start negatively impacting the functioning of the Quad, it will pose serious questions to the longevity of the minilateral. But if Quad comes out unscathed, it has a long way to go in the times to come.

About the Author



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