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India and the QUAD: The Opportunities and Challenges of Trump 2.0

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SYNOPSIS

*Amid signs that the Trump administration is keen to bolster the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), **Sinderpal Singh** outlines India's interests in the partnership and its concerns. He assesses that India is likely to revive its efforts to expand the partnership to non-QUAD members and to increase cooperation in the non-traditional security domain to avoid getting caught in a de facto military alliance that could prompt China to renew hostilities on their common border.*

COMMENTARY

There is a growing consensus that Donald Trump's administration views multilateralism and associated multilateral institutions with scepticism, if not distrust. However, the Trump administration seems keen to bolster the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the partnership involving Australia, India, and Japan alongside the United States. Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted the first QUAD meeting of foreign ministers hours after being sworn in. For the other QUAD members, this might signal an opportunity, but in the specific case of India, the new US administration's approach to the QUAD may present some challenges as well. This paper highlights three key points in relation to India's approach to the QUAD in the context of the second Trump administration.

Indian's Abhorrence of Military Alliances

Firstly, for India, the QUAD is an important component of India's broader strategy to deal with the threat posed by China. It serves as a signalling device to China, with the expectation that India's membership of the QUAD may temper China's approach to Indian interests within South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). QUAD membership also opens up opportunities for India to work jointly with the other three

countries in certain domains, which may not be possible purely bilaterally. However, India has not been keen to add an explicit military dimension to the QUAD, probably from a deep-set, persistent fear of walking into a de facto military alliance, especially since Japan and Australia are already treaty alliance partners of the United States. Instead, it has worked to increase cooperation within the QUAD in non-traditional security domains as well as tried to get third countries to cooperate with QUAD countries in such areas. In 2020, there was some discussion of a “QUAD-Plus”, with Indian officials pushing this narrative on the back of a virtual meeting to discuss possible joint responses to the COVID pandemic between the QUAD members and New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam. However, this particular rendition of the QUAD-Plus fizzled out shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, it is important to note that India was at the forefront of trying to represent this interaction as a QUAD-Plus meeting, signifying an expansion of the manner in which the QUAD could operate within the region with like-minded partners on specific issue areas.



On 21 January 2025, his first day in the job, Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. *Image source: [Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#).*

The China Factor

Secondly, the second Trump administration seems keen to give security cooperation a larger role within the QUAD. As outlined earlier, India is not enthused to move the QUAD in this direction. Besides persistent historical anxieties about the pitfalls of military alliances, there is concern about China’s response to India being part of a QUAD that increasingly appears to want to contain China militarily. Since 2014, the Indian government has attempted to reset relations with China by attempting a strategic compact with it. This attempted compact formed the basis for the two summits that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had with President Xi Jinping, first in China in 2018 and then in India in 2019. The key aim of this compact, from the Indian perspective, was to find a way to assuage Chinese concerns about US-India ties while looking for China’s agreement to maintain peace along the India-China border. The 2020–2021 Galwan crisis along the India-China border ended any hope of a strategic compact and Indian leaders are aware of China’s current ability to challenge India militarily at the border at any point of its choosing. The recent 2024 “reset” in relations with China has not solved the fundamental structural threat that China continues to pose to India but there are concerns in Delhi that being in a more security-oriented grouping that is meant to take on China may tempt China to once again exert pressure on the border. To add to this, there is some anxiety in India about the shape of Trump’s

strategy and policy towards China, especially in the context of Trump being keen to negotiate a “deal” with China which may come at the expense of Indian interests in South Asia and the IOR. This leaves Indian leaders in a bind and, at this point, they probably will wait till the QUAD Heads of State summit in India later this year to get a sense of how far Trump would like the QUAD to be transformed as well as his approach towards China.

India’s Omni-alignment Strategy

Thirdly, given that the QUAD is an important part of its omni-alignment strategy, India will again increasingly try to get non-QUAD countries to take part in certain QUAD activities and discussions, in the process once again reviving the idea of a QUAD-Plus grouping. This helps further Indian interests in two ways: (i) non-QUAD countries will see such expansion as a way of showing the United States that they are willing and able partners in burden-sharing in the hope of convincing the United States to stay connected to the Indo-Pacific region; (ii) in a seemingly transformed space, where friends and partners of the United States increasingly envisage a future in which more would need to be done without US involvement, a QUAD-Plus set-up may allow non-QUAD countries to partner with specific QUAD members without necessarily having the United States as the main driver. The issue here, however, is that non-QUAD countries in East Asia specifically will be highly reticent about taking part in QUAD-Plus activities that are more security-oriented and aimed at China. Thus if the United States wants to drive the QUAD in a more military-oriented direction, then QUAD-Plus activities will become difficult, especially with states in East Asia. However, South Korea and the Philippines may be exceptions to this tendency and one could reasonably expect them to be more willing to take part in such QUAD-Plus activities. Indian leaders will, however, continue their efforts via processes such as the Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to push for non-QUAD members, in East Asia specifically, to be partners with the QUAD countries in non-security domains such as maritime domain awareness, addressing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and redressing the effects of climate change in the region.

Uncharted Territory

India, like most partners and friends of the United States, seems to be in uncharted territory in global politics currently but the new US administration’s early commitment to the QUAD is a positive development for India. However, the manner in which the Trump administration wants to develop the QUAD, as well as the substance of the US strategy towards China, will be areas of some concern to India in the near term. One way to cope with such uncertainty is to leverage on non-QUAD states within East Asia to drive QUAD-Plus arrangements as these states deal with the uncertainty of the new Trump administration themselves.

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