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Issue Brief

Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting: Decoding the Joint Statement

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Summary

The Quad has come a long way from being an ad hoc grouping between India, Japan, Australia and the US to coordinate their relief efforts in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, to now becoming a major geopolitical factor that is bound to influence the strategic balances of the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century. Although Quad 1.0 had a short existence due to the geopolitics of the time, it strongly influenced the bilateral and trilateral engagements that took place among the four nations thereafter. By 2017, as the Indo-Pacific became the economic and strategic centre of gravity, the four nations once again regrouped for creating Quad 2.0. The growing consensus and expanding cooperation among the Quad nations is evident in the joint statements and press releases of the Quad summit, ministerial and senior officials meetings. The recent Joint Statement issued after the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Melbourne is yet another indicator that denotes the grouping's drive towards institutionalisation and coming close to achieving a concrete mandate for its existence. Decoding this Joint Statement will enable the evaluation of the progress achieved by Quad since its inception and charting the way ahead for Quad in the face of a turbulent global geopolitical environment.

Despite a cautious beginning on 12 November 2017, when the leaders of India, Japan, Australia and the US met in Manila during the sidelines of the East Asia Summit, the Quad 2.0 has significantly progressed in terms of forming a concrete mandate for its existence. This is evident from the comparative analysis drawn by inferring the brief joint statement made by the Quad nations post their first meeting in 2017 and the recent joint statement that was issued after the Quad Foreign Ministers’ meet that took place in Melbourne on 11 February 2022. The first Joint Statement issued in 2017 was devoid of any deeper meaning but drew a lot of international attention. On the other hand, the geopolitical changes that took place between 2017 and 2022 have resulted in the Quad moving towards greater institutionalisation. Despite the subtle differences in the language of the statements issued by the individual Quad nations, there has been a growing consensus regarding areas of cooperation between them raising the prospects for the formation of a concrete mandate for the Quad.

Evolution of the Quad

The growing strategic relevance of the Indo-Pacific region has underpinned the evolution of both Quad 1.0 and 2.0. Ever since the term Indo-Pacific was mentioned in the works of the German strategic thinker Karl Haushofer in 1924, it has figured prominently in many subsequent works of literature focusing on the geopolitics of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹ The contours of the Indian-Pacific maritime space encompass both the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific along with its littoral regions that include East Africa, West, South and East Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania.² This region has gained enormous strategic relevance due to the ensuing geopolitical factors post the Cold War, which include Asia’s rise as a global geo-economic centre of gravity with the maritime trade taking place in the Indo-Pacific becoming the lifeline of growing economies. This growing geostrategic significance of the Indo-Pacific has been accompanied by the hegemonic rise of an assertive China and the threat to the security of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) emanating from both traditional and non-traditional sources.

The origins of the Quad can be traced back to the 1991 Kicklighter Proposals wherein the then Army Commander of the erstwhile US Pacific Command Lt Gen Claude M. Kicklighter had suggested strategic cooperation between US and India to promote exchanges and explore areas of cooperation across the three services.³ But this inertia for defence cooperation between India and the West was subsequently

¹ Karl Haushofer, **“Geopolitics of Pacific Oceans”**, Berlin, Vowinckel, 1924.

² Gurpreet Khurana, **“Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation”**, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 139–53, 2007.

³ Rakesh Sood, **“The India-U.S. Defence Partnership is Deepening”**, *The Hindu*, 30 October 2020.

disrupted by India’s testing of nuclear weapons in 1998, and the most adverse reactions ironically came from the other three Quad nations. The 2004 Tsunami brought the four Quad nations together for cooperation in the subsequent Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations conducted across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This cataclysmic event marked the beginning of Quad 1.0 that created a maritime construct between India, Japan, Australia and the US. Even post tsunami, this maritime construct was retained in the bilateral and multilateral engagements between the four nations. But factors like the US preoccupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, change of government in Japan, India seeking China’s support in its bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group and the election of Kevin Rudd in Australia as its Prime Minister led to the disbandment of Quad 1.0.

The geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific region between 2007 and 2017 had a profound role in the resurrection of Quad. Before 2007 there was a raging debate among the international strategic community on whether China’s rise embodies benevolence or malevolence. But China’s territorial assertions in the South China Sea (SCS) where it promulgated its territorial claims based on the controversial Nine-Dash Lines and its rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) verdict revealed the malevolent undertones to China’s rise. The subsequent militarisation of SCS accompanied by the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) coercion against the smaller ASEAN nations showed China’s disdain for the rules-based international order. This coupled with the strategic narrative of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ championed by the four Quad Nations gave impetus to the formation of Quad 2.0.

Quad in the Indo-Pacific: An Axiom or a Conundrum?

The scope of Quad is defined by both aspects of axiom and conundrum which is reflected through the perspectives of the individual Quad nations on the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. The axiom is denoted through the shared perspective of the four Quad nations that refutes the description of the grouping as an alliance or as an ‘Asian NATO’, but as a value-based partnership with a shared vision for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ and promotion of rules-based international order. Shared values on democracy, connectivity and regional stability are other binding factors that define the strategic convergences of the Quad nations. On the other hand, the elements of conundrum are reflected through the divergent interests among the Quad nations, the perception of the grouping by some observers as Cold War redux to blindly counter China and the absence of an institutional framework that contributes to the uncertainty in the sustenance of Quad. These axioms and conundrums are reflected in the joint statements that have been issued since 2017 and the nomenclatures that are mentioned in those statements which indicate both the convergence and the divergence amongst the Quad members.

Assessing Joint Statements (2017–2021)

The press statements issued by the individual Quad nations after their first meeting in 2017 showed a certain degree of divergent perspectives on certain key issues. For instance, the press statement released by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) did not contain any explicit reference to Freedom of Navigation (FoN) and overflight, respect of international law and maritime security that figured prominently in the statements of the other Quad nations.⁴ On the other hand, Japan’s press statement did not refer to connectivity which was mentioned by the other nations.⁵ The press release of the Quad nations’ next meeting that took place in November 2018 was notable for its inclusion of ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific discourse. It reaffirmed the ASEAN centrality as the cornerstone of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.⁶ This stance of ASEAN centrality was also endorsed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the Shangri-La Dialogue on 1 June 2018.⁷ The subsequent press statements make it clear that cooperation in the areas of development, connectivity, good governance, regional security, non-proliferation, shared democratic values and maritime cooperation are likely to remain the recurring focal points of the Quad meetings. The 2018 press release reflected a greater convergence of the Quad nations in these broad-based topics, but India continued to differ in its language to denote its advocacy for FoN, rules-based order and partnership with other nations in the region leading to differing interpretations on India’s expectation from the Quad.

However, despite the subtle differences in the language of the statements, the topics began to converge reflecting the evolving consensus and expanding cooperation taking place between the Quad nations leading to a common mandate. The assessment of the first joint statement given by the Quad nations after the virtual summit of their respective leaders on 12 March 2021 denoted a concrete resolve of the grouping towards cooperation in rules-based order, FoN, promotion of democratic values, countering coercion and the ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific. The subsequent in-person meeting among the Quad leaders held on 24 September 2021 highlighted the core values on which the Quad was structured. The joint statements of the two leadership level meetings of the Quad that took place in 2021 denoted that the areas of cooperation within the Quad became more institutionalised into the three core working groups namely:

⁴ **“India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations on Indo-Pacific”**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 November 2017.

⁵ **“Australia-India-Japan-U.S. Consultations on the Indo-Pacific”**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 November 2017.

⁶ **“India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations”**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 15 November 2018.

⁷ **“Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1 June 2018.

1. **Vaccine Production:** The partnership for responding towards the COVID-19 pandemic marked a historic new focus area for the Quad. The Quad Vaccine Experts Group has been established for building strong cooperation to support the Indo-Pacific Health Security and improving the region’s COVID-19 response capability. This reinforced the shared diplomatic commitment of the Quad nations towards mitigating the effects of the pandemic in the region through the production of safe, effective and affordable vaccines. The Quad has pledged to donate more than 1.2 billion doses of vaccines, of which 79 million doses have already been successfully donated across the Indo-Pacific as of September 2021.⁸
2. **Climate Change:** The Quad nations have pledged to work together to tackle the effects of climate change. The Quad Climate Working Group focuses on three thematic areas of climate ambition, which are: limiting the rise of temperature to 1.5⁰ C as agreed in the 2015 Paris Agreement, clean-energy innovation for achieving sectoral decarbonisation efforts and climate adaptation by the development of disaster-resilient infrastructure and climate information systems.⁹
3. **Critical Emerging Technologies:** Enhancing cooperation in cyberspace for combating cyber threats and securing the critical infrastructure of the Quad nations, is the central idea of the Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group. It has been set up to identify new collaboration opportunities in space technology for sharing satellite data for peaceful purposes like monitoring climate change, coordinating disaster response and facilitating sustainable exploitation of marine resources.¹⁰ Towards this end, the joint statement also mentioned about the inclusion of the Quad into the Blue Dot Network (BDN), which was earlier an exclusive Indo-Pacific initiative between the US, Australia and Japan for improving the standards of infrastructure investment in the region.¹¹

Overall, the joint statements from 2017 to 2021 have indicated evolving consensus and expanding cooperation within the Quad nations and with other regional stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific. This is also reflected in the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy that harmonises with the various stakeholders of the region including India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, United Kingdom and France along with regional organisations like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the European Union.

⁸ “**Joint Statement from Quad Leaders**”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 September 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jagannath P. Panda, “**India, the Blue Dot Network, and the ‘Quad Plus’ Calculus**”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Fall 2020.

Decoding Joint Statement of Quad Foreign Ministers

The three-page joint statement that was issued after the foreign ministers of the Quad nations met in Melbourne in February 2022, comprehensively points out certain key areas of cooperation that can be categorised as follows:¹²

1. **Support to Regional and Sub-Regional Mechanisms:** The joint statement reiterated Quad’s commitment for supporting both regional and sub-regional mechanisms including the Mekong sub-region’s efforts to address regional challenges on maritime security, HADR operations, cyber security, disinformation and terrorism. Through the statement, the Quad nations have pledged to work towards shared projects and partnership that goes beyond the traditional ambit of security and is deemed necessary for achieving regional stability and prosperity in order to secure the region’s political and economic future.¹³
2. **Focus on ASEAN Centrality:** Akin to the preceding joint statements of the Quad leadership summit, the Foreign Ministers’ Joint Statement too pledged Quad’s unwavering support for ASEAN unity and centrality in the Indo-Pacific region. The statement reiterated Quad’s commitment towards the practical implementation of ASEAN’s outlook on the Indo-Pacific. This outlook for the Indo-Pacific includes the commitment towards strengthening openness, transparency, inclusivity, rules-based order, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention and adherence to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) and other international and regional treaties.¹⁴
3. **Capacity Building and Technical Assistance:** The statement has expressed Quad’s determination to deepen its engagement with regional partners for providing capacity-building and technical assistance for countering cyber and information threats. The statement has highlighted the need to build resilience for countering disinformation which can be interpreted as a subtle hint to China and Russia for their alleged use of social media for manipulation. Also, these measures are to assist regional partners across the Indo-Pacific in addressing the growing threat of ransomware by building a resilient cyber security framework. The statement also endorses the implementation of the UN Voluntary Framework for Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace for promoting international peace and stability in cyberspace.

¹² “**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.

¹³ “**Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meet Resolve to Work Towards Free, Open Indo-Pacific**”, *The Indian Express*, 11 February 2022.

¹⁴ “**ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific**”, ASEAN, January 2021, p. 3.

4. **Maritime Security:** On the second page of the statement, there has been extensive focus on the issues pertaining to maritime security as the Quad recognises that international law, peace and security in the maritime domain underpins the development and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. For this purpose, the Quad has expressed its determination to deepen its engagement for strengthening Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), ensuring FoN and overflight, protecting SLOCs and combating Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.
5. **Countering Terrorism:** The statement has categorically denounced the use of terrorist proxies for cross-border terrorism and advocated the elimination of safe havens for terrorists, disruption of the financial channel and the infrastructure support that sustains and enables the cross-border movement of terrorists. The statement unequivocally called on all nations for ensuring that their territory is not used to launch terror attacks and to apprehend and persecute the perpetrators of such attacks. The statement condemned the 26/11 Mumbai and Pathankot terror attacks in India. The Quad reaffirmed UNSC Resolution 2593 that demanded the Afghan territory not to be used for terrorism-related activities.
6. **Countering Economic Coercion:** Through the statement, the Quad opposed coercive economic policies and practices that run counter to free, open and economic practices. The Quad has pledged to work collectively to foster economic resilience against such actions. Although not explicitly stated, this aspect of the statement can be attributed to China’s alleged ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’.¹⁵ The statement’s denouncement of economic coercion is complementary to Quad’s fundamental commitment towards creating ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ that is devoid of all forms of coercion including economic, military and political.

Apart from these key aspects, the statement sets out an agenda for the future course of activities of Quad which includes the hosting of the Indo-Pacific Clean Energy Supply Chain Forum by Australia by mid-2022. Also, the US has pledged to promote exchange programmes for capacity building in the core focus areas of Quad and explore the feasibility for initiating a track 1.5 dialogue between the strategic thinkers of the four nations. The joint statement also expressed grave concerns regarding Myanmar and North Korea.

¹⁵ Humeyra Pamuk and Kirsty Needham, “Quad Ministers Address Indo-Pacific ‘Coercion’, Climate, COVID”, *Reuters*, 11 February 2022.

Key Takeaways

As the foreign ministers met for the first time since the Quad leadership summit, the joint statements are likely to become a regular feature in all high-level meetings of the Quad, in future. Institution-building is a process that takes considerable time as it involves extensive diplomatic engagements and the Quad has undergone this phase which will ultimately lead to greater institutionalisation of the grouping. It must be noted that every mandate of Quad is complemented by the individual efforts of each of its members. For instance, as the Quad promotes the concept of ‘ASEAN Centrality’, it is complemented by the efforts of each of the four nations’ foreign policy for forging greater strategic relations with the ASEAN members such as India’s ‘Act East Policy’. The Quad as a value-based partnership must be able to persuade the ASEAN nations to partake in Quad’s vision for the Indo-Pacific region. Also, the focus on terrorism indicates that it is likely to become a regular feature in the future joint statements of all high-level Quad meetings. This can be viewed as a major diplomatic success for India in garnering international support for denouncing cross-border terrorism. The Joint Statement also indicates that the mandate of Quad is not to oppose any particular nation, but to holistically facilitate greater cooperation among the Quad members and the regional partners to address wide-ranging security issues emanating from both traditional and non-traditional sources. Overall, despite the evolving consensus and expanding cooperation, institutionalising Quad 2.0 still remains a work in progress. However, the Quad process is progressively shaping more like an axiom than a conundrum.

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