

Possibility of an Asian NATO Under the Purview of Quad: Concerns for Pakistan

Maheen Ahmad

19 April, 2021

Overview

It is now obvious that the United States views China as a challenger to its global leadership position.¹ As such, the US has undertaken a policy to curtail the rise of China, the center-piece of which is its strategic alliance with India to prop it as a counter-weight to China. Some observers now believe that the US has been reinvigorating its alliances multilaterally in order to counter China's rise and is pitching the Australia-India-Japan-US Security Quadrilateral Dialogue – informally known as the Quad² – as the next military alliance in Asia. The merit of this hypothesis needs to be examined. The Malabar naval exercises, equipped with anti-submarine warfare, have become a crucial element of the Quad, and may testify to the assertion the Quad is taking a military hue. However, members of the Quad may be reluctant to warm up to military cooperation, as to not pitch themselves against China and consequently disturb their economic ties with an important trading partner. Therefore, present day circumstances are not conducive for Quad to truly metamorphose into a military alliance. Similarly, it is not likely, as some observers have suggested, that the Quad would expand to include ASEAN member-states and form an Asian NATO. Such an alliance would be impractical, cost-ineffective, and complicated, all of which are discussed as follows.

Analysis

The US would be at the forefront of sponsoring a military form of alliance, as it has a vested interest in giving Quad a greater role to counter China's rise. Right now, the loosely defined alliance appears to be simply serving the purpose of signaling unity of resolve among the like-minded democracies.³ Particularly after the Ladakh crisis, India too has shown some inclination⁴ towards deepening the international alliance, in order to signify that it has symbolic and substantive support, particularly in the maritime domain.⁵

However, it will require some time for the Quad to truly encapsulate the concept of a full military dimension of cooperation as some members of the Quad may be hesitant. Australia, for example, would be cautious as China is its biggest export market, with Australian exports to China valued at \$136.28 billion.⁶ Open confrontation with China under the purview of Quad will seriously dent Australia's export capacity. Already, China has applied selective sanctions on Australia for supporting the demand of launching international probe into the outbreak of Covid-19. Similarly, Japan has a sizeable investment in China, worth over \$124 billion⁷ and it is also China's third largest trading partner despite their strategic and historic rivalry.

¹ The US National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy both refer to China as an adversarial power seeking to displace the United States from the Indo-Pacific.

² Quad was resurrected in 2017 with the aim to support a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region. Over the years, it was essentially for sealines, which for the most part, the US dominated.

³ Derek Grossman, "How The U.S. Is Thinking About The Quad", Blog, *The Rand Blog*, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/02/how-the-us-is-thinking-about-the-quad.html>.

⁴ India welcomed the reintroduction of Australia into the Malabar exercises.

⁵ Saloni Salil, "Malabar Exercise And Quad 2.0: Intent And Significance", Blog, *Future Directions*, 2020, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/malabar-exercise-and-quad-2-0-intent-and-significance/>.

⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, "Australia's Trade Statistics at a Glance" (Australian Government, n.d.).

⁷ Brink News, "The China Japan Economic Relationship Is Getting Stronger", 2021, <https://www.brinknews.com/the-china-japan-economic-relationship-is-getting-stronger/>.

Considering the fact that Japan did not join the US trade war with China, it is safe to assume that Japan will also remain reluctant towards a military form of cooperation under Quad. Even India would have some reservations as it may not want to escalate its conflict with China.⁸ Even in the Ladakh crisis, it exercised restraint. It would be hesitant to tie itself in a military alliance losing what it calls its strategic interdependence in foreign policy⁹, which is why Indian media reacted negatively to US missile carrier SS John Paul passing close to Lakashdeep Islands.

It may be safe to assume that instead of opting for a military alliance, the Quad will be more motivated to opt for economic coordination in order to limit dependencies on Chinese money and markets and seek direct foreign investment elsewhere.

There are speculations to expand the Quad by including the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. This would be a kind of “Asian NATO”, modelled after the transatlantic alliance that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War to counter the Soviet bloc.¹⁰ China’s recent flareups in the South China Sea and border clashes with India in the last few months have inculcated fears of Chinese hegemony. It would then not be entirely implausible to suggest an alliance of sorts between the Quad and ASEAN nations to curtail China’s rise. After all, to this end, the US has persistently and strategically rebalanced towards Asia, and has sought stronger ties with countries of the ASEAN.

However, the idea of a full-fledged, multilateral military alliance of the Quad in Asia is still a far-fetched idea and should not be expected to materialize anytime soon. Simply put, Asia is not ripe for a NATO style containment block against China. For the Asian NATO alliance to be successful, the support of the members of ASEAN is crucial, given their strategic position. Quad as a concept of a military alliance appears to be untenable as most countries on the Indian Ocean Rim, especially in ASEAN, and even East African and Gulf will be uncomfortable with the idea of a military alliance. They can validly ask as to what the threat is, and what the target is. They, maybe skeptical of signing up to such an alliance and would prefer being cautious as many of them have strong trade and economic ties with China. As such, they would not want to be pitted against China at the behest of the Quad. Even now, it is evident that their approach is to not take on China. This is manifested by the fact that despite provocations during the South China Sea crisis, the ASEAN countries chose to seek a resolution of the conflict through peaceful means.

Another factor to consider is that there is a palpable deficit of solidarity among diverse regional partners. For example, observers could argue that neither the rise of China nor the threat from North Korea has induced Japan or South Korea to come together.¹¹ Furthermore, formalization of such a multilateral alliance, which is explicitly and directly against China, would set a precedence and potentially drive all members of the alliance in each other’s disputes.¹² This

⁸ Prime Minister Modi implicitly referenced to the Quad in his keynote address in the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 and was quoted to have said “India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members.”

⁹ Ambassador (R) Riaz M. Khan, Email interview, April 16, 2021.

¹⁰ Rachel Zang, "Could A US-Led Quad Add Up To An Asian Nato Against China?", *South China Morning Post*, 2020,

¹¹ Zachary Keck, "Is An Asian NATO Possible?", *The Diplomat*, 2014.

¹² Hal Brands, "An Asian NATO? The U.S. Has Better Options For Its Allies", *Bloomberg*, 2020,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-09-23/an-asian-nato-u-s-has-better-options-for-its-allies-and-china>.

would be resisted by countries like India, that has often proclaimed “strategic autonomy” in the conduct of its relations and would be reluctant to drive others in its bilateral disputes, such as those with Pakistan or China.¹³

Even China would not wish to see the emergence of an Asian NATO. Currently, China is looking towards demonstrating itself as a responsible global superpower, and needs more time for its peaceful rise. Therefore, it has maintained a close contact with the ASEAN countries so as to pre-empt the chances of starting an Asian NATO. It generally enjoys the trust among many developing nations that its economic engagement does not lead to military pressures or political arm twisting.¹⁴ China has not actively engaged in any military conflict nor has it sought to escalate a military conflict. Even in the case of Taiwan, which China views as a part of its territory, China has not sought military confrontation and has so far handled its relations with care. This is also visible in its limited conflict with India over the Ladakh region. The reason for this is that China does not want to escalate a conflict that will eventually lead to the involvement of the US, as it is detrimental to its ability to gain an economic foothold. It is keen to avoid provocations or stop sovereignty disputes from getting out of hand. Any local confrontation will allow the US to intervene which will be disastrous for the economies of the region.

Even if an Asian NATO were to form, it would be far too impractical for such a military alliance to sustain itself. First of all, contrary to the popular belief, NATO today has a far more political accent than a military one. It is primarily a training and standards-setting organization,¹⁵ which uses the alliances as a political tool to plead and promote democratic values, while the military purpose has acquired a secondary position.

Secondly, dynamics are far too complicated because the US is already fatigued with the NATO alliance and it would be reluctant to contribute both militarily and financially for the Asian NATO. Moreover, for the Asian NATO to be formed, the US and other Quad members have to rival Chinese investment in ASEAN countries. While the US is the largest source of FDI inflows in ASEAN as of 2019, China’s investment has been increasing steadily with the advent of its BRI projects, and is valued at \$11.24 billion.¹⁶

Third, for the Asian NATO to be effective, one would expect a substantial increase in economic projects, military procurement and intelligence training. If the US continues to sponsor military cooperation under Quad, this may not sit well with Russia and it may drive Russia away from India, which may create more problems for India as it already depends on Russia for the bulk of its military hardware. It can also be expected that Russia, in its geostrategic rivalry with the US, too will side with China. Such a complex web of rival alliances could also force China’s hand, which may most likely react by suspending its cooperation with ASEAN countries or it may opt for a diplomatic boycott of the ASEAN. That is a large risk which the ASEAN countries will most likely avoid in the first place. For Pakistan, the implications are enormous because it will find itself increasingly involved in such a war of alliances due to its close ties with China. Countries like Pakistan, that are Indian Ocean Rim countries, must remain watchful

¹³ Ambassador (R) Asif Durrani, Personal interview, Islamabad, February 23, 2021.

¹⁴ Ambassador (R) Riaz M. Khan, Email interview, April 16, 2021.

¹⁵ Babones, S, “The Quad’s Malabar Exercises Point the Way to an Asian NATO”, *Foreign Policy*, 2020.

¹⁶ ASEAN, "ASEAN Key Figures 2020" (repr., Jakarta: The ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

of the direction of Quad because they are affected by any groupings meant for the security of the Indian Ocean region.¹⁷

In view of the foregoing, it can be deduced that military cooperation under the Quad has its limits and prospects of the establishment of an Asian NATO are rather slim. The main concern for Pakistan is the continuing and growing US tilt towards India in order to curtail China's rise. One relevant question to ask is whether India will be able to deliver on the US expectations, even if Quad does or does not transform into an Asian NATO. It is likely that India may not rise up to the US expectations, which could in turn, lead to US disappointment¹⁸ with India mainly for three reasons. Firstly, given that India's economy has hit a low and there is deep polarization in the country with the advent of Modi's domestic policies, India could get bogged down with domestic issues. Secondly, taking into account the deep strategic rivalry between the US and Russia, India would find itself in a difficult position because it still wishes to maintain its traditionally strong relationship with Russia. In fact, while the US has considerable investment in India, India cannot ignore Russia for being a major military supplier and ally. Thirdly, India has been reluctant to escalate any conflict with China which was evident during the Ladakh crisis.

Conclusion

In view of the aforementioned discussion, it is plausible that the Quad may acquire military dimensions, but because of divergent interests of its member countries, Quad is likely to remain a multi-pronged cooperation mechanism to pursue the overall US objective of containing the rise of China. As for a possible collective defense organization in the Asia-Pacific, it is unlikely that an Asian NATO will be formed largely due to reservations of the ASEAN nations. This is not to suggest, however, that the fast pace at which India is being empowered by virtue of the US tilt is not of an immediate and urgent concern. India assumes greater importance with the US due to the size of its economy and growing trade and military relations. Already bilateral trade between the two has reached \$150 billion. In fact, Pakistan should worry more on the US-India bilateral relations than the formation of Quad. It should remain vigilant of the implementation of recent US agreements empowering India's military and communications capacities like LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA, which India could well use to assert its hegemony in the South Asia region. Similarly, the US cannot stop China's rise as a major world power whose influence has grown tremendously over the past three decades and is likely to grow further in the coming decade. In all probability, the Biden administration would like to engage with China in areas where it can enhance its exports and negotiate issues of climate change, intellectual property rights, human rights, and situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. It must also be kept in mind that Russia factor must not be ignored in this emerging global landscape as Russia will also resist the formation of an Asian NATO or any such military alliance in Asia.

¹⁷ Ambassador (R) Riaz M. Khan, Email interview, April 16, 2021.

¹⁸ Ambassador (R) Aizaz A. Chaudhry, Personal interview, Islamabad, January 22, 2021.

Recommendations:

In view of the forgoing, following recommendations are proposed:

1. Pakistan should continue to monitor the activities of the Quad, and coordinate closely with China in this regard.
2. Even though, the US has shown a clear tilt towards India, Pakistan should continue making efforts to stay engaged with the US because of the latter's ability to inflict costs. However, Pakistan should single-mindedly pursue its cooperation with China, especially the completion of CPEC projects, which if pursued properly could be a game-changer for Pakistan's economic take-off.
3. Given the warming up of Pakistan's relationship with Russia, focus should be on further cooperation with Russia in economic and defense sectors.
4. Pakistan should maintain a close liaison with key ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia and Indonesia, and boost multifaceted cooperation with them bilaterally and as leading members of ASEAN. In this regard, Pakistan should vigorously pursue "Look East" policy aimed at forging substantive relations and efforts should be continued to seek full dialogue partnership with the ASEAN.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maheen Ahmad is currently actively engaged with the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) as an Assistant Research Associate. She pursued her post-graduate studies in International Public Management and Public Policy from the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and her undergraduate studies in Economics and Management from the University of London. Her research interests include conflict resolution and transformation, terrorism and extremism, social-psychological dimensions to peace and conflict studies, the study of behavior as a collective phenomenon, and the psychological and socio-cultural makeup of national identities. She contributes regularly to national and international newspapers, writing on various contemporary international and domestic issues. She tweets at @whatmaheensays.

Maheen Ahmad

Maheen Ahmad
maheen.ahmad@ipripak.org