

While this article is being written, India is engaged with China in the Ladakh region. China's growing assertiveness in the region has caused battle like conditions and has been a cause of concern for Indian policymakers. The recent brawl in the region that led to the targeted killing of [twenty Indian soldiers](#) is the direct repercussion of the Chinese aggressive posturing across the Line of Actual Control or the LAC. Though Ladakh is the recent one, it is not the only. There happens to be one more theatre which has the capability to develop as a potential confrontational field between the dragon and the elephant. This is the Indo-Pacific. Chinese growing naval capability accompanied by its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea in particular and the Indo-Pacific region, in general, is seen by some geopolitical experts with suspicion. India, along with the US, Japan and Australia, has emerged as a key player in the region and also has been a founding member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad. But the fact that Quad has achieved nothing till date which can be termed as a milestone is a question that needs an answer. One of the pertinent questions that have often been raised is the prospective role of Quad in the Indo Pacific. In an environment marked by a gloomy Quad's role in the Indo-Pacific, this question deserves an answer.

Any discussion on the prospective roles of Quad in the Indo-Pacific cannot remain oblivious of the fact that it is still in its nascent stage and nothing concrete has come out of the grouping. The fact that all the four members perceive the Indo Pacific in their own way, often depending on their own geopolitical interests, creates the problem of outlining a clear, pragmatic and viable definition of Quad. This is a major roadblock in having a coherent and comprehensive Indo Pacific strategy based on a perspicuous framework of Quad. Thus it would be no exaggeration to say that Quad remains a work in progress and its priorities to be defined yet. Despite that, what could be done so that the Quad emerges not only as a possible counter to China's assertiveness but also as a respected and accepted maritime model?

One of the prerequisite for an open, free and inclusive Indo Pacific is that the small island nations in the region remain sovereign and free while keeping their pace of growth and development. One of the major problems in this course of action is the Belt and Road Initiative of China. While China makes rising claims about the inevitability and viability of the BRI, on the ground, it has done more harm to the participating nations than benefit. China has used its heavily funded BRI to increase its footprints in the Indo Pacific. Countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Philippines are increasing under the Chinese debt trap and have lost critical infrastructural facilities to China. China has been using its debt-trap diplomacy through the BRI to further its ambitions in Indo Pacific. The Hambantota port of Sri Lanka is one such example. Thus it is the right time for the Quad members to come out

of their respective dilemmas and work towards ensuring not only a free and open Indo Pacific but a free, open, sovereign and inclusive Indo Pacific.

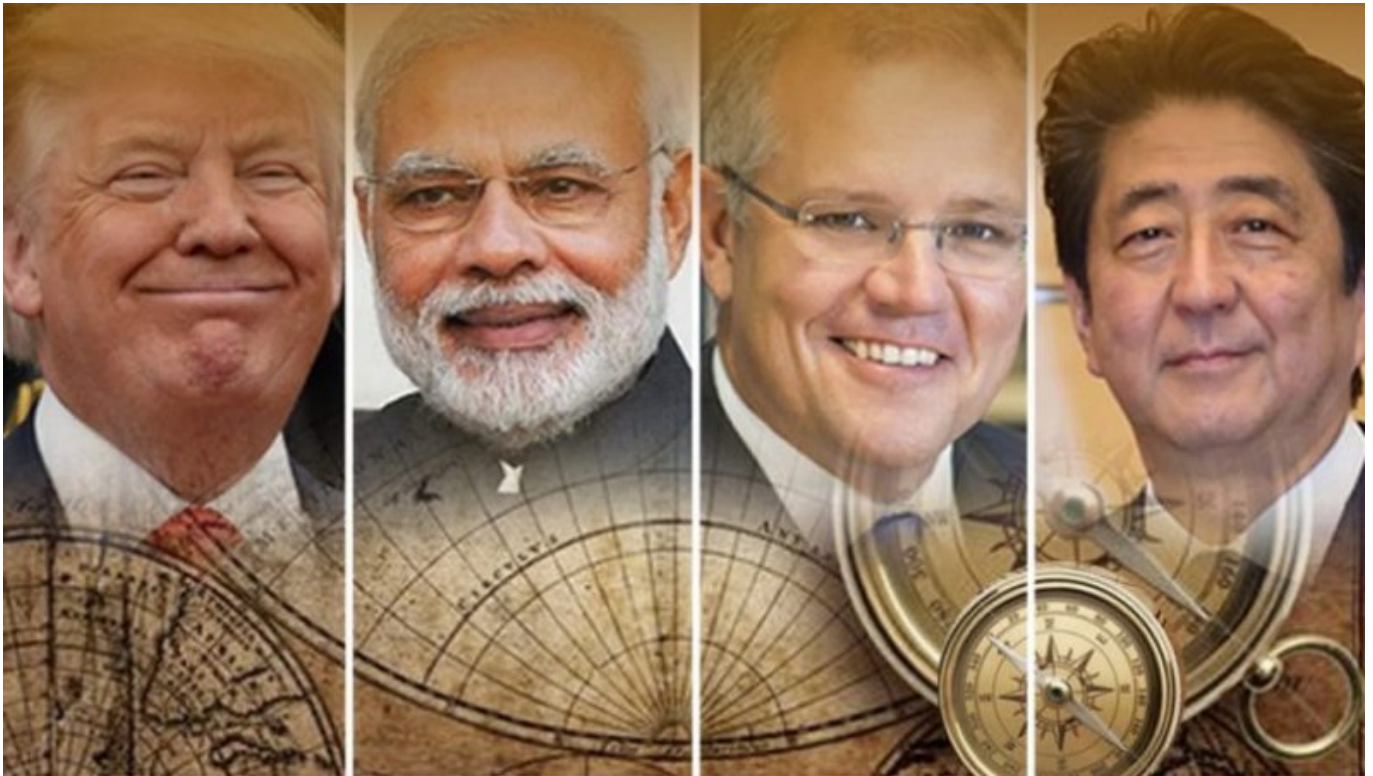


Image source: Griffith

The Quad members should look beyond the traditional security threat perception in the region while addressing pertinent questions of the Indo Pacific. Investing in infrastructure and critical connectivity projects along with extending coercion free line of credit to the vulnerable nations to Chinese debt trap diplomacy may be a good start. The Quad members may either engage as a collective institution or on bilateral or trilateral coordination. The Asia Africa Growth Corridor between India and Japan could be one such effort towards ensuring that Indo Pacific remains free, open and sovereign in true sense. Joint investments in infrastructure, development, energy, transport and tourism should be the new concerns of Quad.



Ships from the Indian Navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the U.S. Navy sail in formation during Malabar 2018. / Image source: U.S. Navy

The Quad members must understand the compulsions and the aspirations which compelled these island nations and lured them to the Chinese coercive debt-trap diplomacy. Addressing these compulsions and the genuine needs of these countries through synergized collective efforts could prove to be a breakthrough geostrategic move and will help these nations to play a proactive role in the Indo Pacific.

Quad members are not only among the world's most powerful economic and military powers but what connects them more is the shared ideals of democratic values. This shared concerns for democracy, liberty and freedom of choice should be the guiding principles of the Quad's engagement in the Indo Pacific. It should be noted that the Indo Pacific will be more vulnerable to Chinese assertions if the smaller countries in the region are under the command of autocratic leaders. The Maldives under Abdullah Yameen is one such glaring examples for understanding how China used this small island nation to increase its footprint in the region. Same happened in Sri Lanka when pro-China absolutist leaders lead the country on the brink of a debt crisis and gave China close access to the Indian coastlines through the Hambantota port. Thus investing in the democratic values in the Indo Pacific and investing in the soft powers of free, democratic and sovereign ideals will make the Indo

Pacific more conducive to navigational freedoms and inclusive characters.

The soft power dimension of the Quad's engagement in the Indo Pacific must join hands with an aggressive posture of the Quad members in the region. As per Major General S.B Asthana, "the Quad members must continue freedom of navigation exercises and military posturing in the Indo-Pacific as China continues to do so". Regular naval exercises like Malabar should be the part of the broader Quad's Indo Pacific strategy to ensure that the maritime model of the Indo-Pacific must be based on the idea of navigational freedom. Thus the Indo Pacific strategy under the Quad must work towards inhibiting China from unilaterally making its own rule and enforcing Sino centric order.

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