

At the Quad, forming habits of cooperation

The institutionalisation of the organisation has begun and it is a chance for India to work with the advanced economies



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The first in-person summit of the Quad powers – Australia, Japan, India and the United States – has clearly advanced the work begun by the virtual summit in March. The September 24 meeting, hosted by U.S. President Joseph Biden, drew global attention both for its symbolism and substance. The photograph showing the four leaders sitting behind separate desks imaginatively placed in a circular format in the elegant East Room of the White House, conveyed a signal of mutual warmth, purpose and resolve. It is necessary to critically analyse the summit's outcome in order to appreciate the development and formalisation of a new plurilateral and its direction in the coming years.

Self-perceptions

The opening remarks by the Quad leaders were remarkably succinct. Mr. Biden portrayed the Quad as a group of democratic partners “who share a worldview and have a common vision for the future”. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was confident that the Quad would “play the role of a force for global good”.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison blended a preview of upcoming agreements with a dose of sharp Aussie candour by laying stress on the point that the grouping wanted the Indo-Pacific region

to “be always free from coercion”. It was a thinly-veiled criticism of China's policy. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga was the only participant who addressed the U.S. President as “Joe”. He projected the Quad as “an extremely significant initiative”, designed to promote “a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific”. Another dig at Beijing.

Practical cooperation

The joint statement issued following the summit, began with the compromise formulation crafted last March, to emphasise the leaders' commitment to “a free and open Indo-Pacific, which is also inclusive and resilient”. Promoting security and prosperity in this region is the *raison d'être* of the Quad, a goal to be achieved through practical cooperation among the four powers.

The Washington summit added new areas of collaboration: infrastructure; cybersecurity and space; education and people-to-people relations. On the first, the plan is to promote “sustainable infrastructure”, with a stress on aligning the Quad with the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership, based on the G20's quality infrastructure investment principles. Here, the Quad can focus on four key B3W elements: digital connectivity, climate, health security and gender equality infrastructure. There was no mention of any specific projects or countries where they are envisaged. However, the formation of an infrastructure coordination group composed of senior officials was announced. It will map and coordinate infrastructure needs and catalyse priv-



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ate-sector investment.

On cybersecurity, the Quad will cooperate on combating cyber threats and securing critical infrastructure. On the space front, the plan is to identify new collaboration opportunities, especially sharing of data to monitor climate change, disaster response and preparedness, and sustainable uses of ocean and marine resources. A senior cyber group and a new working group on space will be established. On education, the Quad fellowship programme will award 100 graduates – 25 scholars from each Quad country – opportunities in leading STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programmes in the U.S. This is not a government programme but a philanthropic initiative.

The three working groups on vaccines, climate and emerging technologies established last March, have reported progress. On vaccines, the Quad stands committed to donate over 1.2 billion doses globally, although only 79 million doses have been delivered so far. The production of “at least 1 billion doses” of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2022 is on track. Vaccines are slated for free distribution in the Indo-Pacific region, beginning next February. Ample funding has been assured by Japan and Australia.

Besides, new measures are contemplated to conduct research and step-up preparedness to handle future pandemics.

The Quad working group on climate change has focused on three thematic areas: climate ambition, clean-energy innovation, and climate adaptation and resilience. The Quad leaders emphasised enhanced action for achieving global net-zero emissions preferably by 2050, with an important caveat – “taking into account national circumstances” – added at India's instance. A Quad shipping task force has now been launched to build a green-shipping network and green port infrastructure. As regards critical and emerging technologies, a slew of steps is under consideration relating to 5G and beyond 5G networks; supply chains of critical minerals including semiconductors; and emerging advances in biotechnology. To be successful, building the supply chains will need expert resources and coordination from each country. A contact group on Advanced Communications and Artificial Intelligence will focus on standards-development and foundational research.

Political facets

Cooperation among the Quad members in the six areas mentioned will help the grouping to address the economic and technological challenges posed by China.

But what of the pressing strategic, defence and maritime security aspects of the challenge? Those will stay outside the formal framework of the Quad for now. Maritime security will continue to be strengthened through bilateral 2+2 Ministerial tracks; the four-powers

Malabar Exercise; and other bilateral or trilateral arrangements such as AUKUS (the new trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S.). Defence cooperation will not be lowered in priority; it will just be handled differently. The Quad wants a positive orientation, rather than be seen as an ‘Asian NATO’.

Regionally, the Quad sees the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as “the heart of the Indo-Pacific region”. Together with the small island States in the South Pacific, ASEAN countries will stand to benefit from growing cooperation within the Quad. So will the European Union (EU), whose new EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was welcomed by the four leaders. On Afghanistan, the decision to “closely coordinate” policies and next steps will be watched as the U.S. comes under strong pressure to show flexibility towards the interim Taliban government.

The institutionalisation of the Quad has begun to gather speed. For India, this grouping is critical. It is the first major plurilateral organisation in years where India is on the ground floor, an equal partner of the new P4. It has much

to contribute and leverage, beyond its market. This is an opportunity for India to work with the advanced economies to “build habits of cooperation”, while confronting the 21st century challenges in its Indo-Pacific neighbourhood

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