

PROSPECTS OF MIDDLE EASTERN QUAD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In the contemporary international environment, the US has been exhausted financially in its prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, the Afghan and Iraq debacles, i.e., the fall of Kabul and political instability in Iraq, have also cost the US its prestige. For its compensation, the US is now involved in consensus-based network arrangements which have two prominent features. First is the US attempt to enable its allies in economic and military domains to formulate their own regional security framework. This will help the US in minimizing its own war cost. Second is the shift from multilateralism to minilateralism (i.e., region specific) which will converge the threat perceptions of the US with that of the regional states towards framing the mutual threat or challenge. The US initiative in the Middle East, dubbed as Quad 2.0, is the practical manifestation of its aforementioned policy. Middle Eastern Quad, comprises of US, India, Israel, and the UAE is yet to get formal recognition, nevertheless, its anti-China outlook is apparent. For Pakistan, this development is of utmost attention for two reasons, i.e., Pakistan's inherent interests in the Middle East and India's participation in the Middle Eastern security framework. This paper attempts to explore the probability or improbability of Quad 2.0 and to analyse its possible implications on Pakistan through open source secondary research.

Keywords: *Quad 2.0, Indo-Israel, Middle East, security, multilateralism*

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Introduction

The world has been witnessing an emerging international order shaped by the rising economic powers. The undisputed supremacy of the US is now challenged by China's rise and attached to it is the rise of other powers like Japan, South Korea, EU, India, Australia, and Brazil. Nevertheless, whereas these powers excel in economics, they still lag behind in military terms to assert their will geopolitically. With the exception of China which has built up its military might and has transformed itself into the 2nd largest military spender, other states still require defence assistance from the US. However, the contemporary dynamics of the US assistance to its allies are drastically different from the past for certain reasons. First, the nature of the threat has changed. During the cold war period, it was the communist threat while in the post-cold war era—especially after 9/11—it was terrorism which had tempted the US to engage other states in a multilateral security arrangement under its leadership. Today, the ideological rift has vanished and geopolitics has taken prominence in which the US is increasingly challenged by China's influence across Eurasia and Africa. Second, in the past, the burden of responsibility lied primarily on the US since Europe was financially incapable of leading the war against communism and the stakes of the US were higher in the global war on terrorism. Hence, the US had to lead the efforts against any threat while other states remained in a hub-and-spoke system in the alliance.

Today, however, the US is reluctant to initiate any formal arrangement against any other state owing to the fear of a domestic backlash and the emergence of new anti-US alliances. Hence, the US is adopting a similar strategy across various regions to build regional security frameworks. In recent times, the US has concluded two major joint security frameworks i.e., the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad (including Australia, India, Japan, and the US) and the new grouping of Australia, the UK, and the US, referred to, in short, as

AUKUS. In extension to these developments, the US has been adopting a new strategy in the resource rich region of the Middle East where it has managed to gather Israel, the UAE, and India to form Quad 2.0 or Middle Eastern Quad.

This paper is an attempt to explore the probability or improbability of Quad 2.0 and to analyse its possible implications on Pakistan.

Defining the Purpose of Quad 2.0

The Quad has gained momentum in the US policy circles in recent years. Having shifted its focus from the Middle East to Indo-Pacific as illustrated in former US president Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy, the US has been involved in formulating security arrangements with like-minded states to curtail China's rise.¹ In Quad, three other states—India, Japan, and Australia—also share similar apprehensions regarding China owing to border clashes and China's assertive role in the South China Sea. Since its formal proposition by Japan in 2007, Quad has largely been limited to an informal setting focusing on free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. However, during Donald Trump's presidency, the scope of Quad had been expanded to military collaboration as well. The foremost is the Malabar Naval Exercises of November 2020, in which all the Quad countries participated.² Apart from joint military exercises, Quad member states have security treaties (US-Japan and US-Australia), security cooperation frameworks (India-Japan and India-Australia), and defence collaboration (India-US) with each other as well.³ Nevertheless, the prospects of Quad becoming a formal military alliance is minimal because of two reasons. Firstly, the Quad member states are reluctant to institutionalise their cooperation that would give an overt impression of being anti-China. Forming a new NATO-like military alliance against any state wouldn't be received positively by the public as well. Secondly, unlike the US, other states in the Quad

have greater stakes vis-à-vis China due to their geographical proximity like India and Japan. Hence, these states, though wary of China's role, are less enthusiastic to actively confront it. It is imperative to assess the purpose of Quad 2.0 (Middle Eastern Quad) with this background of original Quad since the former is like an extension of the latter.

The formation of Middle Eastern Quad is actualised after the idea of 'Quad-plus' in March 2020 when representatives from New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam also participated in the Quad meeting.⁴ Their participation symbolised the inclusion of 'like-minded' countries to jointly take up the responsibility of the Indo-Pacific region. Since then, the US has been engaging other states elsewhere to form regional security frameworks, including the Middle East. Officially, the Middle Eastern Quad is purposed to increase cooperation in the domains of energy, economic, maritime, and Covid response.⁵ Nonetheless, the inclusion of India in an otherwise different regional settings imply a renewed US approach of tackling China beyond the Indo-Pacific region through upgrading the status of India as the pivotal state in countering China's rise.

However, the functioning of Middle Eastern Quad is far more complex than the original one for various factors.

Limitations

First, the original Quad comprises of states with similar political structures, i.e., democracies, and can advocate their policy of 'rule-based navigation' with a greater intent. Contrary to that, in the Middle Eastern Quad, UAE is a monarchy while Israel is more of an 'ethnic democracy' since the Palestinian citizens do not enjoy the same rights. This differentiation in the internal political structures contradicts the very notion of 'like-minded states'. **Second**, in the Indo-Pacific region, certain states do share their apprehensions over China's role, although, they are not willing to confront China yet the resentments exist. In the Middle East, however, neither the UAE nor Israel perceive China as a concern let alone a threat to their interests.

Instead, both these states view China as a welcome power, necessary to elevate their economic status and the region in general.⁶ It is evident by the fact that the UAE and China have signed the 'comprehensive strategic partnership'—the highest level of engagement by China with any country—while Israel is consolidating its commercial ties with China by granting its companies infrastructure projects (i.e., construction of container facility at Haifa Port) and being interested in importing the 5G technology.⁷ From their point of view, their cooperation with China is also vital to curtail China's overwhelming association with Iran which further emboldens the latter in the region. **Third**, the issue of Russia is paramount. Russia has already expressed its concern with the original Quad which has led to divergence of strategic objectives between Russia and India.⁸ It is noteworthy that unlike the Indo-Pacific, Russian interests in the Middle East are far more entrenched and Russia's response to the US-led security initiative in the region would be a lot more robust. In this regard, the major consequences would be faced by India and Israel. India imports nearly half of its military hardware from Russia and, hence, fostering security initiatives with Russian rivals would not be the policy preference for India. Similarly, Israel requires close ties with Russia to thwart Iranian influence from its border with Syria and, thus, cannot afford to be a part of the US-led regional security framework. Although it receives \$3.8 billion in military aid from the US, it is only to maintain its 'qualitative military edge' over its regional neighbours. **Fourth**, by participating in a security framework which includes the US, Israel, and the UAE, all of whom are averse to Iranian role in the region, India is putting its relations with Iran in jeopardy. Indo-Iranian ties have already witnessed a decline in recent years for various reasons like consolidation of Indo-Israel ties, reinstatement of US sanctions on Iranian oil under the 'maximum pressure campaign', and Iran's increasingly vocal stance against Indian atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir. By engaging in yet another minilateral security partnership

over which Iran shares deep concerns, India would fall into the complexities of regional conflicts. **Last**, competition with China in the Middle East is also not pragmatic for India. Both China and India depend on Middle Eastern energy resources for their economies and both have enjoyed good relations with the Middle Eastern states. In fact, the Middle Eastern states require both China and India to invest in their infrastructure for the diversification of local economies as outlined in various regional economic visions, i.e., Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 and Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, etc.

Having these limitations in the Quad 2.0 proceedings, it is important to address the respective interests of member states to better understand their motivation behind joining this security framework.

Divergent Interests of Quad 2.0 Member States

For any political or security alliance to succeed, it is necessary that its member states have similar objectives. For example, during the cold war and the post-cold war era, NATO emerged as the premier security alliance as all the member states shared the idea of collective security against communism and terrorism. EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) became the frontrunners in the domain of integrated economy which strengthened the indigenous economies of member states. On the other hand, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) couldn't succeed as the notion of regionalism was blown into smithereens due to prevailing Kashmir Issue, border tensions, and India's ambition to dominate the region. Similarly, for the Middle Eastern Quad to be recognized as the pivotal forum of bringing peace in the region, it is important that the interests of member states converge, however, it seems unlikely.

The US

The motive of the US behind spearheading the Middle Eastern Quad is primarily to counter Chinese influence, alongside its policy of

disengagement from the region and its urge to pass on the responsibility of regional security to regional states as evident from Abraham Accords. By aligning its regional allies into an integrated framework, the US also aims to deter anti-US forces—most notably Iran and its proxies—from threatening its interests or its partner states. This will help the US in multiple ways. First, it could reduce tensions among the US allies in the region that could draw a global powers' competition. Second, it could promote stability in which a coordinated counter-terrorism effort can flourish. Third, the security of Israel, being a paramount issue for the US, can be ensured as Arab supporters of Palestine are now more inclined towards having a diplomatic solution. Fourth, the US seeks to establish its sway over regional affairs through forming its own bloc where its global competitors (China and Russia) are consolidating their military and political relations with its regional adversaries (Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah).

India

The most astonishing participant of a Middle Eastern security framework is India. India neither belongs to that region, like the UAE and Israel, nor has trans-regional interests, like the US. The US purpose for bringing India to the front seat of Middle Eastern security is to utilise its economic potential for regional development vis-à-vis China. However, Indian intent of countering China in an otherwise alien region is questionable. It is also supported by the fact that India's motivation behind joining the Middle Eastern Quad drastically differs from that of the US. Instead of being engulfed in great powers' rivalry, India is primarily concerned with having its footprint in the Middle East for two basic reasons. First, it would allow India to increase its bilateral economic relations with the Arab States which are vital for its financial (through remittances) and industrial (through oil imports) requirements.⁹ Secondly, by enhancing its diplomatic presence in an otherwise Muslim-dominated region, India is seeking to shift the focus

away from the pertinent Kashmir dispute and anti-Muslim policies (like communal violence) inside the country.

The UAE and Israel

It is the first time that an Arab state is formally engaged with Israel to coordinate the joint security apparatus for the region. Previously, both Arabs and Israelis have remained either in a state of warfare or cold peace. However, in the contemporary regional proceedings, their mutual threat perception has changed. Instead of viewing each other as adversaries, both of these actors now perceive Iran as a threat to their territorial integrity. For the UAE, the issue of three islands located strategically in the Strait of Hormuz is the major bone of contention with Iran along with the latter's incessant threats in the Persian Gulf. Iran and the UAE are also in opposition to each other in Yemen where the former supports Houthis while the latter backs the Southern Transitional Council (STC). On the other hand, Israel feels itself steadily encircled by Iran through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian-backed militias in Syria, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hence, both the UAE and Israel have joined hands solely to counter the Iranian influence in the region by nurturing their security ties with the US. However, none of them seems interested to counter Chinese influence as mentioned previously.

Implications for Pakistan

From the aforementioned analysis, two deductions can be made. First, Quad 2.0 or the Middle Eastern Quad is presently a preliminary framework which is yet to be formalised. Before its formalisation, its functioning will remain ineffective. Second, even if in the near future Quad 2.0 gets formal recognition yet three out of its four member states would remain unwilling to counter China. Nevertheless, the platform would inevitably enable the member states to strengthen their bilateral relations. For India, it would be beneficial as its political, defence, and economic ties with the US and Israel

would be consolidated and, hence, the ripple effect would be borne by Pakistan.

Indo-US Relations

Indo-US relations have been gaining momentum since 2005 and the commitment of mutual collaboration has been reiterated through various agreements. The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal (2008), Defence Framework Agreement (2005 and 2015), Strategic Partners on Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (2015), and Major Defence Partners (2016) are some of the vital pacts which have helped India to cultivate its relations with the US. Owing to the US apprehension about China, Indo-US ties have been rejuvenated, yet the US policy of granting favours to India has upset the status quo in the region. During the same time as the US was favouring India, its relations with Pakistan gradually withered. In 2009, the US policymakers coined the term 'Af-Pak' to hyphenate or combine Pakistan and Afghanistan into a single theatrical operation.¹⁰ This policy of the US completely neglected the traditional geopolitics of South Asia which is marked by incessant Indo-Pak rivalry. Moreover, in his eight-year tenure as president, former US president Barack Obama never visited Pakistan while at the same time appeared as the Chief Guest on India's Republic Day in 2015. This symbolic downgrading of relations took a practical turn when President Trump suspended \$300 million worth of economic assistance to Pakistan in 2018.¹¹ Because of this policy outlook of the US, the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan is being neglected as India has increased militarisation on its side of Kashmir after the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A of its Constitution in August 2019 to abolish the special status of the state and convert it into two union territories. Considering this background, the Indo-US partnership in Quad 2.0 would lead to further intensification of ties between two countries much to Pakistan's concern. Owing to its centrality in the Indo-Pacific Quad and Middle Eastern Quad, India may use this leverage to further its regional

ambitions through the US. It is already evident from the CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) legislation. According to CAATSA, the procurement of any energy or defence related equipment from the US adversaries (Iran, Russia, and North Korea) is prohibited. Nevertheless, India is planning to purchase S-400 missile defence system from Russia over which the threat of US sanctions is looming. Still many analysts in the US are lobbying to provide India the waiver citing the pivotal role India could play against the US adversaries.¹² These circumstances point towards the fact that Indian influence over the US policy for South Asia would be detrimental for Pakistan, especially when the US and Pakistan disagree over the future discourse of Afghanistan. Furthermore, this could also embolden India to increase its activities inside Kashmir and Balochistan that could weaken Pakistan's case internationally and destabilise the internal security situation, respectively.

Indo-Israel Relations

More challenging for Pakistan is the consolidation of Indo-Israel ties. Already in the upward trajectory, Indo-Israel relations further thrived when PM Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017 followed by Netanyahu's visit the following year. Both countries cooperate extensively in the defence sector. India is the largest buyer of military equipment from Israel while Israel is the second largest exporter (first being Russia) to India in the defence sector.¹³ Both the countries share a similar vision on terrorism and Islamic militancy. Although India does not openly support Israel's strikes over Gaza, its condemnation of Israel over its policy regarding Palestine is merely limited to rhetoric. On the other hand, Israel explicitly weighed behind India's treatment of Kashmiri Muslims. Much to the distress of Pakistan, in 2008 and 2009, the two countries jointly launched the Israeli TecSAR border control imaging satellites.¹⁴ India and Israel also collaborate on cyber security and it was revealed that India has purchased Israeli spyware software, named Pegasus, for

surveillance and disinformation. These steps, now under the renewed partnership of Middle Eastern Quad, are expected to grow in future. The Middle Eastern Quad has also allowed India to freely engage with Israel and Arab states simultaneously without having the fear of backlash from either side. Thus, the Abraham Accord and now the Middle Eastern Quad have paved the way for India and Israel to increase their mutual cooperation that would be challenging for Pakistan's security.

Options for Pakistan

For Pakistan, Quad 2.0 itself doesn't pose any threat. It is the prospects of more deepening ties of India with the US and Israel under the auspices of Quad 2.0 which are the main cause of concern, both for its internal security and regional interests. To counter the Indian inroads into the Middle East and the US policy circles, Pakistan's response must be vigilant. Pakistan can secure its interests through the following ways.

Outreach towards Middle Eastern States

In the Middle East, Pakistan has three sorts of allies. First, the Arab States which are a vital source of energy and finance for Pakistan. As per a research study in 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have remained the largest remittance providers of Pakistan.¹⁵ Pakistan also shares strategic ties with Saudi Arabia as nearly 5,000 Pakistan troops are stationed in the country to defend the kingdom. Second, Turkey has emerged as the major ally of Pakistan in recent years. Both Prime Minister Imran Khan and Turkish President Rəcəp Tayyib Erdoğan are vocal against Islamophobia while Turkey has also been supportive of Pakistan's stance over Kashmir while condemning the Indian suppression in the Kashmir Valley. Third, Iran is yet another crucial state in the Middle East for Pakistan. In recent years, especially after the lifting of sanctions in the post-2015 period, both the countries have been collaborating on various issues like border security,

situation in Afghanistan, and bilateral trade. All of these developments indicate that Pakistan has both substantial stakes and significance in the Middle East. Furthermore, Pakistan is also an active member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Under these circumstances, Pakistan's stance on Islamophobia and its support to Palestine, in collaboration with Turkey and Iran, could prove to be a major rebuttal for India in that region. India's partnership with Israel can also be exploited by Pakistan through associating with Turkey and Iran, the latter being a major energy partner of India, provided that both these states share aversion towards Israel and openly support the Palestinian cause. Lastly, Pakistan cannot neglect the role of Arab States. Although the Arab states are drawing closer to Israel, Saudi Arabia, the most crucial Arab States, has not established formal relations with it. This testifies that at the societal level, Arabs are still wary of Israel's role in their region. On the other hand, the ill-treatment of Muslims in India, especially in the state of Assam, has also irked the Middle Eastern people to the extent of launching a 'boycott Indian products' campaign.¹⁶ Hence, whereas at the state level, Pakistan could increase its commitment with the Arab states, specifically by inviting them to join CPEC, at the societal level, Pakistan can have its public outreach through highlighting India's attitude towards Muslims.

Assessing Relations with the US

Although in the second decade of 21st century, Pak-US relations have degraded and Pakistan has shifted towards China yet in Pakistan's interests, it is vital to maintain a balance between two global powers. In the context of Indo-US relations, Pakistan can adopt two policies. First, Pakistan can expand its relations with China and Russia in the domains of economics and defence. Pak-China joint venture of CPEC has already consolidated mutual ties. With Russia, Pakistan's relations have also been growing, especially after the finalization of Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline Project which is to be built by Russia. Apart from economic affairs, Pakistan is crucial for both the states

owing to the security situation in Afghanistan. Russia has a historic legacy in Afghanistan. But more than that, it fears the spill-over of instability in Afghanistan into Central Asia. On the other hand, China also shares similar fears owing to Uyghur community which shares religious affinity with Afghanistan. Hence, this provides Pakistan an opportunity to seek a regional consensus on Afghanistan and reiterate its status as a pivotal state of the region. However, Pakistan cannot afford to completely align itself with China and Russia while ignoring the US. In relation to current Afghan situation, Pakistan can utilise this leverage to revamp its deteriorated ties with the US. An understanding with the US over Afghanistan can grant Pakistan the space to expand this cooperation to the entire region, at least in view of its relations with India. Such an approach could diffuse the threat for Pakistan even if India and the US continue to work on their partnership.

Conclusion

From the aforementioned discussion, it can be concluded that the formalization of Quad 2.0 is yet to be actualised. Even if it is to be fully functioning, the objectives of its member states drastically vary from each other. Through this perspective, Pakistan's interests are less likely to be affected. However, such an arrangement is always a prelude for extended state-to-state relations and it is precisely what Pakistan should be analysing. The bilateral relations of India with the US and Israel are a major source of concern for Pakistan and to address that concern, it is essential that Pakistan actively engage with the region, not to the extent that it may engulf Pakistan into a regional crisis but to safeguard its interests. On the other hand, Indian over-ambitious approach and policy of becoming a trans-regional power is far-fetched and is likely to result in a backlash owing to the intra-regional crises of the Middle East. Nevertheless, in this ever-changing international structure, Pakistan's interests are linked with its strategy of balancing the global powers especially with regards to the regional situation.

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