THE QUAD: TURNING POINT FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) summit, comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia took place on 12 March. The recent revival of QUAD, which was founded in 2007 and reestablished in 2017 but remained as an ineffective initiative, is due to the uneasiness over Chinas rise and the security threat it is perceived to pose to the international order. However, there was no direct reference to military security considerations against China in QUADs first joint statement. Rather, the most important results of the summit were related to COVID-19 vaccine production, facilitating cooperation on emerging technologies, and preventing climate change.[1] In addition, it was agreed to create a supply chain to reduce Chinas monopoly in high-tech industries ranging from mobile phones to radars.[2] Yet, it is no coincidence that the pace of QUAD meetings and military exercises has increased in recent years as China has begun to exploit its East Asian neighbors and encroach on the Indian Ocean region.[3]

Regardless of Chinas economic and military rise coupled with its human rights violations and autocratic form of government, all four QUAD countries continue to be deeply intertwined with the Chinese economy, as China is their largest trading partner. This increasing strength of China in military, economic, and technological terms deepen the competition felt by the US and it may find itself increasingly isolated if it continues its fight with China. Instead of dealing with Chinas political-economic, diplomatic, and technological development through armed combat or threats, the US has turned to the aim of determining common policies with countries that it can trust in Asia through initiatives such as the QUAD.[4] In terms of military power, China poses a technologically advanced threat to US interests in South Asia, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea. In terms of the economy, China is a major player in global supply chains and it is currently the top vaccine supplier. It is a rapidly rising power that has reached large capital and investors globally through the Belt and Road Initiative. As the joint statement focuses on establishing working groups on vaccine development and critical technologies, QUAD aims to inhibit the shifting of the global order to China.[5]

In line with these developments, the US Joe Biden administration is trying to increase the power of the US by establishing closer relations with the allies in the Asia-Pacific. At the virtual QUAD summit, Biden stated that his strategy to face up to the Chinese challenge is to reinforce ties with democratic countries in the effort to make China play by the

international rules and to make the US ready for the Fourth Industrial Revolution for which Beijing has been making substantial investments. We will have strong competition, but we insist China play by international rules: fair competition, fair practice is fair trade he added. [6] In his speech, Biden also described Chinese President Xi Jinping as a smart, smart guy who doesnt have a democratic – with a small D – bone in his body.

After the speeches at this meeting, Chinas reaction to QUAD was swift. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman accused the group of undermining Chinas interests. Meanwhile, the Chinese Defense Ministry said the group hangs on to Cold War mentality, pursues group confrontation, is keen on geopolitical games, uses the so-called China challenge as an excuse to form cliques, and openly incites discord between regional countries. Some commentators have described QUAD as a platform that cannot speak with one voice and lacks a true institutional structure. Others fear it might turn into an Asian NATO that will provoke Chinas backlash. Therefore, QUAD has been the focus of concerns and criticism in China.[7] The formation of QUAD as a mechanism to stop Chinas global rise is seen as the proof that China has the potential to gain strength in the near future that will rival and perhaps surpass the US.

Without a strategy to fill Chinas economic role in the region, there will be no prospect for achieving an effective balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Beijings use of economic pressure is evident in its harsh attitude towards India and Australia. This situation has pushed the QUAD economies to create new economic integration models. Accordingly, the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, launched by India, Japan, and Australia in September 2020, heralded QUADs upcoming economic focus. Despite QUADs intentions and policy initiatives, it is not easy to reduce Chinas economic presence in the Indo-Pacific. Among the worlds largest economies, only China has managed to record a positive growth rate in 2020, with exports at an all-time high. Beijings ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with the EU was another signal of its determination to become the central economic power of the region. Nevertheless, QUAD will be a useful coalition in the long run, as it pays attention not only to the balance of military power in the region but also to economic power.[8]

Ultimately, QUADs determination to challenge Chinas monopolies and create new patterns of economic integration sends a signal to Beijing that the QUADs members are willing to suffer short-term losses to reduce their vulnerabilities in the long run. QUAD will also address the skepticism expressed by ASEAN and other countries in the region, which has the potential to destabilize the precarious balance of interests vis-à-vis China in particular. [9] The renewed focus on rallying against China reflects the shifting balance of power. In sum, QUAD is an initiative that has the potential to threaten Chinas hegemony in the region so long as its members manage to act in unison.

**Photograph: The leaders of QUAD countries - Source: Nikkei Asia*

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[8] Will the Quads focus on vaccines, rare earths help it win friends in ASEAN?

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Şevval Beste Gökçelik graduated from the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University in 2019. Following the completion of her bachelor's degree, she began a graduate program with a thesis in Eurasian Studies at the Middle East Technical University in 2019. In 2018, she took undergraduate and graduate courses at Università di studi degli Siena (University of Siena) as part of the Erasmus program.

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