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Is US' 'Quad Plus' vision enough to contain China in Indo-Pacific?

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The First World War was fought in Europe – for completely European concerns. The Second World War was also fought largely in Europe and primarily for European concerns, though there was a side show in Japan regarding Asian dominance. Global wars have never been fought for Asian supremacy. Until now.

The next decade will be about dominance in the Indo- Pacific region. It is for this reason that the United States has revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Japan and Australia.

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This comes as South China Sea is likely to witness heightened tensions as the US looks to regain some of the lost ground on the global negotiating table. If Obama years saw America attempting to pacify Beijing despite its growing aggression, the Trump era can be characterised as those that saw America leaving a gaping hole in international leadership.

In three years, Quad has been brought back from the dead, enhanced with new exercises and ministerial level dialogue. The US is now proposing that the block should also fill a trade vacuum in Indo-Pacific. This is unlikely to happen, for several reasons. Despite growing and clear points of convergence, the Quad faces several challenges and unless it addresses these it risks a similar fate as it did in 2007.

Firstly, there has to be complete clarity amongst member nations what does the grouping signify. Is it an attempt to militarily come together against China or will other aspects of partnership like trade also be part of it? To consider trade aspects of relationships is complicated by the sheer scale of bilateral trade that all nations have with China. Beijing is Canberra's largest trading partner.

Another question to consider is if there are any clear and well defined limits to

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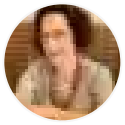
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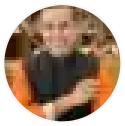
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which the block will go to protect interests of other nations?

Should the grouping include nations that have been directly impacted by China's militarisation- Vietnam, South Korea, Philippines or Indonesia. Ideally, 'Quad Plus' should be considered to ensure the blatant violation of rules by Beijing is stopped. But remember the main purpose of China's island building activity in SCS is to ensure it is able to exert enough diplomatic and military pressure on its smaller maritime neighbours so that they willingly abandon their sovereign rights. This is a perfect non-military strategy, backed by the threat of a disproportionate military muscle power. A peaceful coercion. In such a scenario, whether Quad will be able to include these nations is highly unlikely due to their reluctance to join an open 'anti-China' alliance.

But it is these unanswered questions that critics say indicate its limited ability to stall Chinese aggression.

Of course, one of the reasons why Quad 2.0 is expected to succeed unlike the earlier initiative is due to the growing closeness of ties between the four nations. In the decade between the two avatars of Quad, Australia, India, USA and Japan have forged multiple treaties – bilateral and trilateral- indicating the

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growing closeness and convergence of priorities. In this decade, the Chinese threat has also become clear and pronounced and needs immediate global action. As things stand right now China has either entered into the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of sovereign nations or has captured islands that form part of international waters. It has militarised Spratly Islands that give it a first mover advantage in the event of rise in hostilities between the US and China. All these acts violate the international maritime law. The facilities on these island bases, with a large number of coast guard ships and many militia vessels have succeeded in the harassment of law enforcement agencies of the neighbouring countries. Large presence of Chinese naval power and airpower in the area has discouraged and intimidated its maritime neighbours to resist any of its illegal activities. There has not been any escalation of resistance by any of the smaller nations in the regions for clear reasons- they cannot match Beijing's naval and military power.

For the United States to ensure the Indo Pacific is not dominated by Beijing, it has to ensure that its security partnership with India, Australia and Japan is more robust and able to foresee challenges. For instance, presently all four nations are governed by parties that are right of the centre but the mechanism has to be

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robust enough to survive a change of leadership by one or more countries.

Likewise, there will be a counter reaction to any furthering of security partnerships in the region. The China-Russia nexus runs deep in the Middle East and Eastern Europe; its extension to the Indo Pacific cannot be ruled out. This could lead to a more kinetic situation in the region for which there has to be greater preparedness. Presently, the fleet of US, Japan, India and Australia outnumber the three Chinese naval fleet in the region; but the possibility of Russian naval presence to support China cannot be ruled out in case there is a rise in hostilities.

Quad's success will be determined by how motivated all members are. As things stand, growing aggression and isolation by China has resulted in an alternate arrangement that's aligned and willing to take on Beijing. Its objective has to be to make it prohibitively expensive for Beijing to violate international rules that govern the seas. How it's achieved will determine the world after 2020.

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Ms.DWIVEDI must be informed by now that rapid developments are taking place as we discuss in GEO_STRATEGIC&GEO_POLITICAL arenas

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