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Quad plus and beyond: Blue print for operationalisation – Part 1

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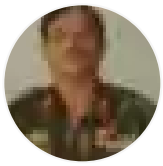

Dr Anil Kumar Lal

Dr. Maj Gen (Retd) Anil Kumar Lal is a Defence Analyst who has authored many path-breaking concepts on Nuclear and Space Warfare strategies. He feels that the future Military ... MORE

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War ships in the south China Sea

(During the First QUAD Summit, the four nations reaffirmed their commitment towards a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region based on shared values and principles and respect for international law)

XI Jinping's Miscalculation

1. Xi Jinping's miscalculation by orchestrating the timings of the Covid-19 Pandemic with a simultaneous belligerent assertiveness all across the South China Sea and the Indian Himalayas has in return boomeranged with the firming in of a Quadrilateral security Dialogue Forum between the USA-Australia-Japan and India (called as QUAD). There are already talks within the alliance of making QUAD as the central pillar of an Indo-Pacific security architecture which will also have ramifications on global security. There are also talks of expanding the geographic definition of the 'Indo-Pacific Region' (IOR) to include the Western 'IOR' comprising the African continent.

2. The success or failure will entirely depend on the Chinese counter moves through economic leveraging and consequently the American checkmate to keep this nascent and fledgling structure together binded and motivated. Nevertheless, the primary glue will always be, self defence against communist China, flexing its muscles and challenging the sovereignty of free independent nations. India happens to be at the forefront of these Chinese incursions and has been facing a massive build-up of the PLA in Tibet.

The QUAD Blueprint

3. The blue print for operationalization of this alliance needs to be articulated. This would involve almost similar steps that were taken to build up the NATO alliance, which has been mainly focussed against Russia. Let us therefore

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recapitulate the same model for the QUAD PLUS initiative. Let us also do a comparative analysis of the cumulative military strengths of the four member countries versus a kind of China's QUAD of PLA+ Pakistan Nepal +Sri-Lanka. This comparison will indicate the value of a credible deterrence as an effective instrument for 'South China Sea' (SCS) stability and to compel China to follow the international rules as enunciated by the UN. So that nations do not get overrun and suffer the fait accompli like Tibet (Tibet has been an independent country for most of its history. If Tibet was a free country, it would have been the 10 th largest country in the world) or like what has happened in Nepal and what is happening in Pakistan.

Comparison between PLA plus and the QUAD Combat Forces

4. Primarily, a cumulative comparison would be required of the respective navies and the supporting air power. According to the US Department of Defence, the PLA Navy (PLAN) is the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific, featuring at least 300 ships along with numerous submarines, amphibious ships, patrol craft, and specialized ships. They are all under command the Southern Theatre Navy. The dominance of SCS is ensured by four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), two nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN), 16 diesel-powered attack submarines, 11 destroyers (DDG), 19 frigates (FFG), 11 corvettes (FFL), three amphibious transport docks (LPD), ten tank landing ships (LST), nine medium landing ships, and 24 missile patrol craft. PLAN modernization also encompasses the deployment of a diverse array of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities such as ASCMs, ASBMs, land attack cruise missiles (LACMs), and mines as well as accompanying ISR support technologies. China's first aircraft carrier, the

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Liaoning, has also been seen operating here. Beijing has recently expanded its PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) with the strength equivalent to three divisions or a strike Corps Group for amphibious operations specifically in the SCS. For years the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) has served as Beijing's "third sea force." Described by the Pentagon as a subset of China's national militia.In addition add about 10-15 warships of Pakistan Navy(another 10 will be added within a few years) and a few naval assets of Sri Lanka.The total available war ships could be thus about 315 or operational deployment at any one time could be about 60 % of this total fleet is approximately 200 plus or so.

5. Consequent to the above massive PLA accretions it can be deducted that the military balance in the Indo-Pacific is becoming unfavourable to all the other users. The greatest danger is the erosion of conventional deterrence to assure a rules-based international order for a free and open Indo-Pacific. As a counter, let us stack up the available QUAD naval resources vis-à-vis PLAN and its allies.

6. The world's largest fleet command, the US Pacific Fleet comes under the US-INDOPACIFIC Command. It encompasses nearly half the Earth's surface, from Antarctica to the Arctic Circle and from the West Coast of the United States into the Indian Ocean. The US Pacific Fleet consists of approximately 200 ships/submarines, nearly 1,200 aircraft, and more than 130,000 sailors and civilians. It has the Seventh Fleet and the Third Fleet operating under it. The 7th Fleet operates out of Japan and covers regions from the International Dateline to about the India-Pakistan border. The Third Fleet operates out of San Diego and covers areas from the International Dateline to the US West Coast. In addition, the US has decided to recreate the First Fleet, and

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deploy it across the Indo-Pacific so that it could best assist the QUAD.

7. The Indian Navy's present force level comprises about 150 ships and submarines. The Indian Navy's perspective-planning in terms of 'force-levels' is now driven by a conceptual shift to war capabilities rather than platform numbers alone. As regards Australia, it has 46 ships and five operational submarines deployed at all times. Its main strength is the eight frigates and three destroyers of the surface combatant force. As regards Japan it has one of the world's largest navies and the second largest navy in Asia in terms of fleet tonnage. It has a fleet of 154 ships, 22 attack submarines and 346 aircraft and consists of approximately 45,800 personnel.

8. Thus cumulatively the total naval assets available to QUAD are about 500 plus ships of various categories. At one time the deployment could be again about 60% of available forces is about 300-350 warships. As can be seen, the QUAD completely outnumbers the PLAN. This then creates a credible deterrence in the SCS and consequently it ensures a free and open passage for trade without any coercion by the Chinese Coast Guard and other auxiliary naval forces. A similar analogy enables the superiority of air support to the QUAD naval assets. The PLAAF has been carrying out "air combat patrols" in the South China Sea, prominently featuring the strategic H-6Ks standoff bombers. However, as regards the US Air support, in spite of long distance from the SCS/mainland China, it has enough aircraft carriers with its fleets and also air support from the many island bases all over the seas. The most prominent deployment is the siting of the most sophisticated, B2 Stealth bombers operating from Diego Garcia and has a height ceiling of 40,000 feet. The PLA Air Forces (PLAAF) gets outclassed in almost all

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categories of Fighters and Bombers. Not to forget the Japanese, Australian and Indian Fighter aircrafts, which can all collectively provide overwhelming air power in the Indo-Pacific theatre and even beyond to the Western IOR?

9. No wonder that the completion of this crucial summit has been a concrete and successful first step to formalise a QUAD. This has obviously rattled China. Their latest statements are with a changed apologetic tone; because of the sheer hard power-combat ratio advantage- that these allied benign forces can create.

The Next Step: Integration of all Platforms

10. Having outnumbered the PLAN resources, the next step is to create the wherewithal to integrate all the platforms to enable integrated operations. Therefore, the need for operationalization of the total QUAD fleet at any one time needs to be coordinated by appropriate orders and war games. This now becomes the next step for the QUAD's success. Towards this, the integration through LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) is a natural synthesiser for such operations so as to achieve joint service synchronization through interoperability. However, the technology behind BECA and COMCASA is highly advanced and can take a few years to be fully functional and be able to generate the Common Operational Picture (COP) amongst the multi-national units. Implementation of LEMOA is physical in nature and is about the resource redeployment, setting up of repair facilities etc. Making the BECA, COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) and LEMOA shall be critical for achieving seamless operationalization and for closer participation with the other NATO alliance countries too. Last year's third annual US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue

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concluded these major Agreements including COMCASA These arrangements shall also make India an active participant in the US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.

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