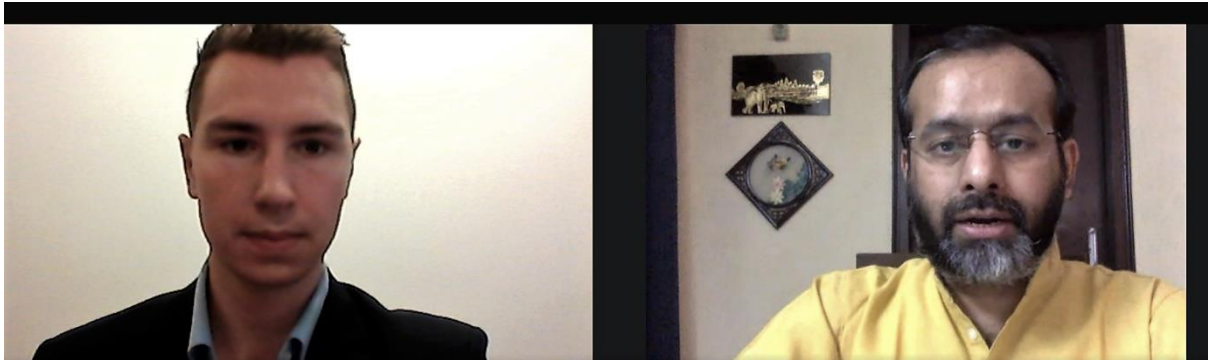


# Resisting the storm: India, US, China and the future of Quad. Online-Interview with Dr. Jagannath Panda

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**Since 2017, we have observed the gradual revival of Quadrilateral Security. How do you assess its current capabilities? How close or how far it is from a conventional alliance and what are the perspectives of its development?**

To start with, last year has been a very interesting time for the Indo-Pacific as well as India, and most of these developments that you mention were closely linked with India's foreign policy. Coming to your question on Quad, during the last two years we have observed the rising seriousness of all four countries as the consensus on China has started to emerge. This year, the way China responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the way it flexed its muscles in the land and maritime domains toward its Asian neighbours have contributed to the rising seriousness about the Quad process and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

We can observe that the Quad is being gradually institutionalized. The Quad meeting in Tokyo on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2020 gave a strong signal that the process will slowly institutionalized. It also showed that the format needs a blueprint for future collaboration to guide the Indo-Pacific initiative. These are big economies, big maritime powers and great democracies promoting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, as well as a liberal and rules-based international order. I think that the Quad process is going not only to stay but also going to gain momentum.

**In response to the positive dynamic of cooperation within the format, some commentators are referring to the Quad as the 'Asian NATO'. In fact, we can observe the intensification of political and military dialogues, maritime exercises, logistical agreements, and intelligence sharing, but some people, including myself, deem this comparison unjustified for several reasons. What is your take on this?**

I share this skepticism regarding the Quad process becoming the "Asian NATO", as there is no blueprint or action plan for elevating relations to that level.

However, Quad has the potential of emerging as the key security forum in the region, but not as a conventional military alliance. The US, Japan, India and Australia enjoy a good level of cooperation among themselves, especially in the post-Pandemic period. Nevertheless, I do not think the time has come for them to sign a single document that would provide the foundation for a short of military-alliance. Before the security dialogue is formalized as an alliance, there has to be a clear and concrete action plan on a range of issues. For example, who contributes what and where in terms of financial backing and military resources. Besides, if the Quad has

to emerge as an ‘Asian NATO’, then all the parties must agree to have a secretariat or head-quarter for such a close military alliance. An agreed military document must guide this grouping which is most unlikely at present.

In other words, in order to justifiably call Quad an “Asian NATO”, there has to be a binding alliance agreement, coherent strategy and permanent office. There also has to be a military budget and each year these four countries have to commit some specific amount of resources to make it happen. At the present moment, “Asian NATO” would be a hard-placed description, but as I said before, Quad has the potential to emerge as a key security organization, not a military pact.

**For decades the concept of strategic autonomy and simultaneous cooperation with all major powers has been the guiding compass of India's foreign policy. In recent years, however, the relations with the US have consequently gained prominence. On 26th and 27th, the US secretary, Mike Pompeo together with Mike Esper visited New Delhi to discuss future cooperation between the US and India. What can we expect from this meeting and what are the most promising areas for enhancing mutual ties?**

The goal of the meeting was to strengthen the security and military ties between India and the US under a 2+2 format. Both countries signed the BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) which will enable more in-depth and specific defense partnerships in times to come. In specific, BECA will help both countries in shaping the high-end military technological cooperation, particularly being helpful to India. It will also help India in obtaining and sharing the geospatial maps and classified military data. Besides, this agreement have enhanced the scope for India which can also draw relevant military-maritime information with the help of the high-quality GPS to navigate missiles with real-time surveillance or intelligence which will certainly help to track or accurately targeting adversary. This is a positive development as far as US-India bilateral relations are concerned as well as for the regional security cooperation within the Indo-Pacific. While saying this, I also think that it is a sign of India making some adjustments in its foreign policy to make it more defence-specific, deliberative, and realistic. But it does not mean that we are departing from strategic autonomy. If we look closely at what India is doing, it is concluding different, specific bilateral agreements not only with the US but also with other countries of the region. In June 2020, we concluded

a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement with Australia. The other example is ACSA (Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement), which was signed with Japan. All of this suggests that India is putting greater effort into a type of pointed alignment with powers within and outside the Quad, for instance, France, Israel, or Russia to strengthen Indian security, defence and economy. While implementing this pointed alignment strategy, India keeps in view China's rising assertiveness and its own economic deficiencies that have always been there.

**One more question regarding India's strategic autonomy. From the Polish perspective we put great attention to Russia as our relations have hit the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. India's experience is the opposite, as your country enjoys a very strong partnership with Moscow when it comes the cooperation in the military domain and numerous organizations and formats. That used to be the bone of contention in US-India relations. How, in your opinion, will India's relations with Russia develop?**

It is an interesting question. If we go back to Cold War history we could see that since then India has enjoyed strong and constructive relations first with the Soviet Union and then with Russia. The current relationship is partly based on these historical ties. At the same time, India's foreign policy is becoming more pointed and US-specific, having a robust partnership with Washington. However, it does not mean that New Delhi has to withdraw from its relationship with Russia. India still purchases majority of its military equipment from Russia, even though we pursued a policy of diversification in our defence equipment procurement policy over the last few years. The other fact is that India is strongly tied to Russia through a set of institutions and formats such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, or trilateral dialogue also including China. Then we have institutions like AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), where India is the second-largest shareholder after China, with Russia coming third. So to sum up, India's relations with Russia will continue as Russia is a vital component of its multi-aligned foreign policy.

**Thank you, Jagannath for this comprehensive response. My next question will now directly refer to China. During the last couple of years as its maritime power grew, so did its presence in the Indian Ocean, South and South-East Asia, considered to be India's traditional sphere of influence. China's presence in these regions increased both**

**on military and economic levels. Is there a chance of India joining the American Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea as a way to respond to these developments?**

It is very difficult to predict the future, but the one thing I can say is that we do not have a maritime dispute with China. We do have a significant boundary land dispute, but it is not a maritime dispute. Therefore, India would be very cautious to engage in any sort of maritime confrontation with China. While saying that, it is important also to consider China's rising aggressiveness to India. Especially since the beginning of the pandemic, China's actions have become particularly antagonizing, which has resulted in the death of more than 20 Indian soldiers in the Eastern Ladakh. When it comes to the maritime domain, China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea has not been in the interest of peace and stability in the region. This applies also to non-claimant countries that have considerable interest in the free and open Indo-Pacific. China has also been very aggressive toward Japan over East China Sea/Senkaku island dispute. We should not forget that India and Japan are stable and special strategic partners. I think that these are deliberate actions to provoke India and its partners. It is worth keeping in mind that India's foreign policy is becoming very realistic, very maritime oriented and there are some adjustments in its policy toward the US, Japan, and Australia. Therefore, in time to come, we can expect more joint maritime exercises to ensure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. India is also considering joining the Blue Dot Network. The initiative was advanced by the US, Japan, and Australia and is aimed at promoting quality infrastructure investments through a 'certification' process and economically viable connectivity in the Indo-Pacific Region. Furthermore, we now have the Malabar exercise scheduled for November which means that four Quad countries for the first time are joining forces to prepare for maritime security operations. All of this means that China should revise its current policy approach towards India and India's neighbours.

**From your previous answer, I assume that there is a small chance of India joining FONOPs, therefore I have another question concerning this topic. In June this year, there was an article published on your website authored by Sujan R. Chinoy, who is the Director General of Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, in which he argued that India should leverage Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and that it should enhance its military and logistical infrastructure en route to the Malacca Strait.**

**Can that be another answer?** Yes, partly it can be an answer as it could help improve our maritime protection against traditional and non-traditional threats. China at some point might create an unexpected adventure in the land or maritime domain so I think it is time to bring the full-scale maritime infrastructure, greater intelligence sharing and that is exactly what is happening with regards to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well in other parts of the Indo-Pacific. Another point is to improve the web of outposts across the Indo-Pacific map for stationing, maintenance, and refueling of the Indian Navy to revitalize its power and elevate cooperation with Indian Ocean Countries. There are also maritime initiatives, those are commercial and security oriented, to preserve links with the Indian coastal states, but all of these projects need financial backing either from the Indian government or from Indo-Pacific partner countries, if these cooperation need to be actualized or reaches that level.

**You brought up the topic of the Blue Dot Network which is an economic initiative, but with strong geopolitical underlining. And my next question will relate specifically to the strategic dilemma on the boundary of economics and geopolitics. During the last couple of months in India's political discourse, there has been a stronger political push for an economic decoupling from China. Simultaneously, these topics are also discussed in the US, Japan, or the European Union. At the same time, India's economy is five times smaller than China's, and this year it will contract by over 10%, all while China's will grow by 2% according to IMF projections. What is your take on this? How do you reconcile overcoming recession and decoupling from China?**

China's economy indeed recorded a significant improvement in recent months, but I still doubt the data provided by the Chinese government and I remain skeptical when it comes to information about China overcoming the recession. With regards to India, I think that most of the world's emerging economies will face the recession and that is why the Indian government adopted a series of domestic policies, including “Atmanirvar Bharat” (*Self-Reliant India*) aiming to address this challenge by supporting and believing in India's industry and economy. All of these come down to recovering from the recession as quickly as possible and that goal is also embedded in our foreign policy which tries to attract foreign investors from partner countries.

**And that was exactly the point of my question. There is a lot of speculation about American, Japanese, and South Korean companies moving certain elements of their value chains to India or other countries of South and Southeast Asia. After all, India is the largest democracy in the world and a strategic partner for both US and Japan.**

I was going to that point. Apart from the domestic initiatives, one of the priorities is to welcome foreign companies in India and facilitate the process of relocating factories. We are already witnessing the development of a trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) among India-Australia-Japan to reduce dependency on China, necessitated by Beijing's aggressive political and military behavior. So there is a concrete action plan being prepared exactly for the scenario you mentioned. The Indian government recently revised some FDI (foreign direct investments) policies to make it easier, and this applies especially to the cooperation with Japan. However, a lot needs to be discussed, planned and concretized before the SCRI comes into any kind of actualization. It is not going to be easy to ask your companies to withdraw from China, especially for countries like Japan. Therefore, the execution of the SCRI needs a thorough and concrete discussion. It needs to be built in an inclusive manner and the cooperation of countries like the US, UK including South Korea will be crucial.

**Thank you, Jagannath, for this fascinating discussion. I think that your perspective will be very valuable for European and Polish readers, as it was for me.**

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