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CHALLENGES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

- The policy think tank NITI Aayog has conducted a comprehensive study on the state of school education in India and released a report highlighting the progress made over the past decade as well as the challenges that continue to persist.
- India has 1.471 million government and private schools, with 246.9 million students enrolled. While there are 730,000 primary schools across the country, there are only 164,000 higher secondary schools. Before completing Class 12, four out of every ten students drop out of school.
- Since free education under the Right to Education Act ends at the age of 14, factors such as family financial difficulties, high fees, transportation costs, expenses for textbooks, and private tuition contribute significantly to student dropouts.
- Across the country, 104,125 schools have only one teacher. This includes 3,671 schools in Tamil Nadu. More than 95,000 students study in these single-teacher schools in the state.
- Even today, 14,505 schools nationwide lack drinking water facilities, while 59,829 schools do not have handwashing facilities. Alongside these infrastructure deficiencies, students' learning outcomes remain a major concern.
- Among Class 3 students, only 27.6% of government school students and 47.5% of private school students are able to perform simple subtraction problems. Similar shortcomings are evident across other subjects as well.
- In an assessment conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) for students of Classes 3, 6, and 9, Tamil Nadu students scored an average of only 55.1 marks out of 240. In comparison, students from Kerala scored 140.3 marks, while Punjab recorded the highest average in the country with 150.4 marks.
- It cannot be denied that Tamil Nadu has increased student enrollment and reduced dropout rates through various welfare measures introduced by successive governments.
- These include : Breakfast and midday meal schemes, Free educational materials, Free textbooks, school bags, notebooks, and footwear for students from Classes 1 to 12, Woolen clothing and raincoats for students in hilly areas, Free bicycles, Free bus travel.
- As a result of these initiatives, Tamil Nadu remains one of the leading states in school education.
- In the past, students generally scored full marks only in Mathematics. However, in the Class 10 public examination results announced on May 20, 34 students scored 100/100 in Tamil, 10,476 students in Science, and 3,336 students in Social Science. Thousands of students scored above 490 marks overall.

- Regarding learning outcomes, a statewide assessment conducted in 2025 for students from Classes 6 to 9 identified 747,000 students as academically lagging behind. Special efforts were undertaken to improve their performance. Similar initiatives should be extended to all classes.
- In Tamil Nadu, 90.9% of boys' schools and 94.5% of girls' schools have toilet facilities. However, many public toilets are poorly maintained and unhygienic. School toilets must not be allowed to fall into such conditions.
- Before the Legislative Assembly elections, intermediate-grade teachers staged a protest for 37 consecutive days, demanding the resolution of pay disparities. Their grievances should be addressed.
- Government school teachers have also made a reasonable demand that separate personnel be appointed for non-teaching responsibilities such as : Student admissions, Record maintenance, Uploading student data to the EMIS portal, Monitoring breakfast and midday meal schemes, Distribution of free materials, Maintenance of related documentation
- This would enable teachers to focus more effectively on improving their teaching skills and student learning outcomes. The government should seriously consider this request.
- According to the NITI Aayog report, more than 5,000 teaching positions remain vacant in Tamil Nadu.
- These vacancies should be filled without delay. Additional teachers must also be appointed to the 3,671 single-teacher schools in the state to ensure better educational opportunities for students.

QUAD ALLIANCE AND COMMON CHALLENGES

- Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue Summit held in Singapore, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described the Trump administration's approach toward the Indo-Pacific region as follows:
- "The era of the United States funding the security of wealthy nations is over. America needs partners, not countries that merely depend on it for protection. The United States prefers alliances based on shared responsibility. It is unacceptable for countries to benefit from an alliance without contributing in return. The strength of an alliance is measured not by the number of member states but by the strength of its military capabilities. More than conferences, what is needed is combat readiness."
- In this context, an important question arises: Where will the Anglo-Saxon military alliance known as AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) lead the QUAD grouping (India, Australia, Japan, and the United States)?
- Origins of the Indo-Pacific Concept - In 1920, German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer was the first to conceptualize the region connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single geopolitical space.
- His vision was that Japan, China, and India—freed from colonial domination—should cooperate with Germany to counter Anglo-American imperialism.
- However, this vision bears little resemblance to today's QUAD.
- The modern Indo-Pacific concept was developed and named by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.
- After assuming office in September 2006, Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in a speech titled "Confluence of the Two Seas."

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- In that speech, he argued that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean should be viewed as a single strategic maritime space.
- His objective was to ensure that freedom and prosperity reinforced one another throughout this region.
- This vision later became the philosophical foundation and guiding principle of the QUAD.
- Early Setbacks - The effort to build the QUAD largely collapsed in 2008.
- During a visit to Beijing in February that year, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith adopted positions that weakened the grouping.
- The government of then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also withdrew from the Malabar naval exercises involving India, the United States, and Japan.
- Australia rejoined these exercises only in 2020.
- China's Growing Influence - Meanwhile, China's increasingly assertive behavior intensified, particularly in the South China Sea.
- Alongside its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—designed to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa and expand geo-economic influence—China also expanded its naval presence in the Indian Ocean.
- These developments fundamentally altered the strategic calculations of all four QUAD members.
- At the 2026 QUAD Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi, member countries approved enhanced cooperation in Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness, aimed at strengthening regional maritime surveillance and monitoring capabilities.
- Among all QUAD initiatives so far, this appears to be one of the most practical and operationally significant.
- Understanding What QUAD Is, To properly assess QUAD, one must first understand its nature.
- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi once compared QUAD to "sea foam," predicting that it would disappear as quickly as it emerged.
- While that may have been political rhetoric, QUAD did not disappear.
- At the same time, it is equally inaccurate to portray QUAD as an emerging "Asian NATO."
- The fundamental contradiction within QUAD is that it seeks to uphold a rules-based international order while operating through voluntary convergence of interests rather than legally binding obligations.
- It can facilitate cooperation, but it cannot compel action or provide formal security guarantees.
- Since QUAD's objective is to ensure freedom of navigation throughout the Indo-Pacific region, these limitations are particularly significant.
- Security Cooperation and Strategic Coordination - QUAD can help create a security framework through which member countries : Develop direct and deeper relationships. Share assessments of regional developments. Conduct joint military exercises. Coordinate diplomatic and foreign policy positions.
- Rather than relying solely on uncertain American commitment, QUAD's long-term contribution may lie in enabling stronger security and strategic cooperation among its other members.

- Technology and Innovation: A Major Opportunity, QUAD offers India an important opportunity to collaborate with three of the world's leading economies in research and development.
- The United States leads the world in artificial intelligence research and patent filings.
- Japan is a global pioneer in robotics and advanced manufacturing.
- Australia has emerged as a major center for quantum computing research.
- India, through its vast and rapidly expanding digital infrastructure and skilled workforce, strengthens technology deployment and implementation.
- QUAD working groups focusing on : Semi conductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Quantum Computing, Clean Energy, Advanced Telecommunications form the core of the grouping's long-term strategic significance.
- Its ability to coordinate technology governance, establish standards, and build resilient supply chains may ultimately produce more meaningful outcomes than military exercises alone.
- Immediate Challenges Facing QUAD - The most immediate challenge facing QUAD is that the national perspectives and priorities of its member states do not naturally align.
- Bringing them together requires : Continuous diplomatic engagement, High-quality policy coordination, Sustained political commitment, Long-term strategic planning
- Furthermore, mechanisms must be established to ensure that changes in government within member countries do not disrupt the alliance's objectives and cooperation.
- Expanding Partnerships - To realize the vision of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, QUAD must build a broader coalition.
- This requires deepening engagement with more countries across the Indo-Pacific region. Such expansion is essential.
- The Changing Global Balance of Power Under the banner of strategic realism, the United States is gradually reducing its involvement and influence in global affairs.
- It appears increasingly unwilling to continue bearing the responsibility of serving as the principal external force maintaining the global balance of power.
- In this environment, the danger identified by Chinese President Xi Jinping—that competition between a rising power (China) and an established dominant power (the United States) could escalate into confrontation—is becoming increasingly real.
- Therefore, it is vital that middle powers, alongside major and great powers, work together to preserve stability and prevent conflict.
- In an era of intensifying geopolitical competition, cooperation among countries such as India, Japan, Australia, and other regional partners may prove essential for maintaining peace, security, and prosperity throughout the Indo-Pacific region.