

## The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States: more symptom than solution to the problem of growing instability in the Indo-Pacific

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# SWP Comment

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## The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States

More symptom than solution to the problem of growing instability in the Indo-Pacific  
*Felix Heiduk and Christian Wirth*

According to official statements, the main purpose of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) is to intensify cooperation between the four partner countries – Australia, India, Japan and the United States – in tackling urgent challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. These include climate protection, health policy and maritime security. However, it is primarily the rise of China and the associated challenge to US hegemony in the region that brings together the four partners. In this context mini-lateral cooperation formats such as the Quad are gaining global importance. But more than 15 years after the start of formal meetings, and despite increased cooperation, the security dialogue between the four unequal partners appears more a symptom of regional instability than a remedy for it.

Due to an impending debt default of the United States, President Joseph Biden had to cancel his trip to the Quad Summit in Sydney at the end of May at short notice. Instead, the heads of government of Australia, India, Japan and the United States met on the sidelines of the G7 Summit, which took place immediately before the Quad Summit on 20 May in Japan. It was the fifth meeting of Quad representatives at this level. The agenda included regional challenges such as climate change, critical and emerging technologies, cyber security, infrastructure, regional health security, maritime and space security, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief.

China, however, has not been explicitly mentioned in any official Quad statements so far.

This is remarkable because the escalating great power conflict between the United States and China represents the central security policy challenge in the region. In addition, the Quad was established in 2007 on the initiative of Japan’s then prime minister, Shinzo Abe, to counter China’s growing influence in the region, not least due to the background of the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and Beijing’s historically complicated relations with Japan. Several successive Japanese and US governments therefore shared



the view that India needed to be integrated into the regional security architecture, which has so far been based on US-centred bilateral military alliances and partnerships. The aim is to limit China's influence to stabilise the region. The guiding assumption for this strategy is that regional stability can only be secured by preserving the hegemonic position of the United States ("US primacy").

However, the first quadrilateral meeting in May 2007 and a joint naval exercise could not bring the heterogeneous group of states together for lasting multilateral cooperation. On the one hand, pushing for enhanced security cooperation seemed too confrontational vis-à-vis China. Beijing had criticised the Quad from the beginning as an initiative directed against China. In Tokyo the newly elected government of the Democratic Party of Japan, in Washington the administration of Barack Obama, and in Australia the government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd all put stronger emphasis on diplomatic engagement. On the other hand, Australia's refusal to export uranium to India strained ties among the two. India, which had developed nuclear weapons clandestinely, has not yet joined any of the non-proliferation treaties under international law. For these reasons, no meetings at the political level took place in the following 10 years. However, the four governments steadily strengthened their bilateral ties.

When Shinzo Abe, who had regained power for a second stint as prime minister, started talking about revitalising the Quad in 2017, the relations of all four states with the People's Republic of China had worsened. The conflicts in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and on the India-China border had escalated. In addition, Sino-US relations had deteriorated drastically due to President Donald Trump's economic war against China. Converging perceptions of China as a security and economic threat as well as the means chosen to counter China's growing claims to power led to the resumption of Quad meetings in late 2017. Initially based at the working level of for-

eign ministries, the ministers started to meet in person from 2019 onwards. After the Biden administration upgraded the Quad to a primary tool for implementing its Indo-Pacific policy, regular Quad Summits made cooperation a top priority starting in March 2021. Quad Leaders' Summits have been held regularly since March 2021. At the same time, the Quad has also become more institutionalised. Permanent working groups now cover a wide range of policy areas – from the provision of Covid-19 vaccines to the governance of outer space. But what role does the Quad actually play in stabilising the Indo-Pacific region?

## Quad and regional security

Chinese President Xi Jinping described the current regional security order, which is based on a system of US-led military alliances with Japan and Australia, as a relic of the Cold War. Thus, he suggested the formation of a new security architecture "by Asians for Asians". Since 2014, China has therefore been promoting its own ideas about the future of the regional order and begun to work on their realisation. This includes the comprehensive rearmament of the People's Liberation Army, the increased militarisation of the South China Sea as well as the expansion of bilateral partnerships, underpinned by increased economic cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Thus, it is the fact that China is challenging the historically developed US hegemonic position in the region that brings precisely these four states together in the first place. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is primarily a format for coordinating a coalition of "like-minded" partners with the aim of preserving the existing regional order. Some observers even see the Quad as contributing towards China's containment.

As such, the Quad can be seen as an indication that the United States is no longer able to achieve its declared strategic goal of maintaining regional hegemony on its own. As the United States is visibly losing relative

power vis-à-vis China, even the established system of bilateral military alliances is apparently no longer sufficient for stabilising the region. The network of cooperation must be expanded to include like-minded partners such as India.

In contrast to the existing, predominantly bilateral military formats, the Quad intends to promote common regional interests. This strategy, which is more oriented towards shaping than merely preserving regional order and the pertinent institutions and norms, seeks to secure sea lanes, expand free trade, promote democracy and protect human rights. These broad objectives show that the successful implementation of this agenda depends on support and acceptance beyond the four like-minded Quad partners.

Consequently, under the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, a first virtual “Quad Plus Meeting” took place in March 2020. Among the participants were representatives of Vietnam, which held the ASEAN chair, New Zealand, which is a member of the Five Eyes alliance of Anglo-Saxon intelligence agencies, and South Korea, another important US ally. In May 2021, Israel and Brazil were invited to consultations on vaccination strategies, too.

This demonstrates that, since the beginning of 2021, the Quad partners, under the leadership of President Biden, have been making increased efforts to counter criticisms – especially from South-East Asian and Pacific Island states – that the security dialogue was merely an instrument of great power politics. Policy-makers in Washington and Tokyo recognised that many Asian states welcome an active role of the United States in the region. However, this is only the case if the US engagement is lasting, appears credible, and does not lead to a further escalation of the conflict with China and division of the region. In order to allay these concerns and back up their own claim of providing public goods for the benefit of all, the Quad states established six working groups in March 2021. These deal with the topics of health security, climate, critical and emerging technologies, maritime and space security, infrastructure and cyber security.

Nonetheless, the debate on the actual purpose and further development of the Quad remains lively, as the lowest common denominator of the four partners’ interests is still relatively low. It is to limit China’s influence and to strengthen their own status and influence in the region.

But this common ground is fraught with potential conflicts of interest. And despite the ostensibly united appearance, different views prevail even on what kinds of threats China poses and with what priorities and means they should be countered. India’s approach to the challenges in the Indo-Pacific is a prime example.

### **India’s key position and the different interests of Quad members**

Within the Quad, India occupies the key position. Without India, the format would hardly have any added value. Other bi- and trilateral formats already serve to enhance US cooperation with its Japanese and Australian allies. India, however, is taking its own stand, despite grave concerns about a Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and repeated clashes with Chinese military units at disputed border sections in the Himalayas. For a long time, Delhi did not even use the term “Quad” in government documents out of concern about being too confrontational towards China. India is also still considered to be a brake on efforts to develop the Quad into a stronger military-oriented grouping focussed on China. This is partly because Delhi is pursuing a much more inclusive concept for the Indo-Pacific, and partly because India is economically the weakest and the only Quad member that directly borders on China.

Unlike Japan and Australia, India is not an ally of the United States, is critical of bilateral military alliances and regularly emphasises its independent role in an international order that it sees as becoming increasingly multipolar. This is reflected, among other things, in India’s official stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: India neither supports Western sanctions

against Russia, nor has it clearly condemned Russia as an aggressor yet.

Japan and Australia are in a different situation. Both have maintained very close relations with the United States since the 1950s through their alliances. Although these were strongly influenced by the East-West conflict during the Cold War, they hardly lost their importance after the fall of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, even before the start of the global war on terrorism – in which Australia actively participated and which heralded Japan's departure from a security policy strictly oriented towards territorial defence – military cooperation had been deepened with an eye on a rising China.

Over the past three decades, it has become apparent that the security policies of Australia and Japan – varying slightly, depending on the global political situation and party-political constellations – have, on both sides of the Pacific, been dominated by concerns about the stability and strength of the respective alliances. The fear of being abandoned intensified with the deterioration in Sino-US relations, and because of the historically difficult relations between China and Japan – also in times when relations between the United States and China improved and the risk of Japan of being sidelined seemingly increased.

In principle, Australia has always been willing to support US strategies for safeguarding global security, including through the contribution of combat troops, such as in the global war on terrorism. Therefore, the contradiction between Australia's increasing dependence on agricultural and raw material exports to China on the one hand, and the tightening alliance with the United States on the other, remained without major consequences for a long time.

In contrast, Japanese decision-makers have found themselves in a much more difficult position, especially since the end of the East-West conflict. This has been due to Japan's unresolved issues related to the memory of the pre-1945 expansionist war, and ongoing disputes with Russia, South Korea, China and Taiwan over maritime

and territorial claims as well as the constitutional prohibition of engaging in military campaigns abroad.

Thus, China's economic rise and military build-up have dramatically increased Japan's security dependence on the United States. At the same time, the discrepancy of these ties with economic dependence on China has come to the fore. Especially from the 2010s onwards, it has become increasingly difficult for Japanese security policy to firmly keep the United States in Asia, on Japan's side, while limiting China's political influence. Thus, even more than for Australia, the integration of India into the regional security architecture seemed to offer Japan an option for dealing with this dilemma more effectively. This became possible through the expansion of military activities beyond the Asia-Pacific into the rediscovered geopolitical realm of the Indo-Pacific.

The election of Donald Trump, whose image of Japan was based on memories of the US-Japan economic war of the 1980s, as US president in 2016 could not have come at a worse time. Prime Minister Abe felt compelled to pull out all the stops to keep Trump in a good mood to avert economic pressure and prevent demands to make significantly higher financial contributions for maintaining the US military presence. At the same time, Prime Minister Abe succeeded in persuading President Trump about the Indo-Pacific idea.

For the United States, the expansion of the strategic Asia-Pacific space into the Indian Ocean would not only help to secure the support of India for counterbalancing China. Australia and Japan, as regionally much more active partners, could also be involved to a greater extent in the effort to preserve US hegemony.

Other states in the region have different perspectives on the causes of the rising tensions in their neighbourhood and of possible strategies for stabilising it. They are primarily concerned about the increasing risks of conflict and the detrimental effects on economic development due to the escalating great power rivalry. These threat per-

ceptions unite many otherwise heterogeneous regional actors such as South Korea – itself a US ally – ASEAN member states and the island states of the South Pacific.

## **The Quad as a symptom of regional insecurity**

The Quad format, like other minilateral initiatives, appears to be increasingly complementary, both to the traditional bilateral alliances geared towards military assistance and to the ASEAN-centred multilateral forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum. From a functional perspective, the Quad is quite robust in this respect: It is based on close bilateral relations between the partners and – in contrast to the established multilateral forums in the region – much more output-oriented than process-oriented. For example, the Quad’s Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness seeks to support states in the region in combating illegal maritime activities. The Quad does this by providing satellite data on vessel movements. This information can be cross-checked with data obtained from automatic identification systems (AIS). As many illegal fishing boats deliberately switch off their AIS, the provided satellite data offers new possibilities for locating and apprehending these boats.

As a result of such initiatives, the Quad now enjoys a degree of legitimacy beyond its narrow membership. Minilateral formats like the Quad are also becoming of interest to countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia. For instance, the Presidency of Indonesia, which currently holds the ASEAN Chairmanship, recently described the Quad as a “partner, not a competitor” in ASEAN’s efforts to maintain regional stability and peace. The reasons therefore are flexibility, output orientation and the fact that these formats are located below the threshold of military alliances. This, in turn, means that established multilateral ASEAN-centred organisations will continue to lose importance.

Regardless of this progress, more than 15 years after the first meeting and despite increased cooperation – especially to maintain maritime security – the Quad is more a symptom of regional instability than a solution for this problem.

This is mainly because the Quad does not offer an answer to the structural problem of the conflicting claims of the United States and China to regional hegemony. The format is primarily an institutional response to this rivalry. Chinese hegemonic claims directed at the entire region clash with efforts to maintain US primacy there. This rivalry necessarily follows a zero-sum logic.

Although its members praise the Quad for being a contribution to regional stability and cooperation, the format is in this respect an integral part of the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. It can therefore only be considered a contribution to solving the problem of regional instability on the premise that regional stability is to be achieved by decisively pushing back against China. However, this premise is shared neither by the majority of states in the region nor everywhere in Europe. Moreover, even in the case of short-term success in limiting China’s influence, it remains questionable whether such a quasi-containment strategy – should it find sufficient support in the future – could be enforced effectively. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that China will respond and redefine its security policy goals – declared as national “core interests” – or to, at least temporarily, cease pursuing them. No such scenarios are realistic and no such tendencies discernible. To the contrary: Almost without exception, stronger US pressure results in more decisive push-back from China.

Through the military build-up of the last decades and under the political imperative to defend its “core interests”, China is able to destabilise its neighbourhood at any time and create “new normal” facts, such as in the case of the military outposts in the South China Sea. Moreover, in this process, China is increasingly enhancing its strategy to encompass responses at the geo-economic

level. Through initiatives such as the BRI and the application of other foreign economic policy instruments, the Chinese leadership is trying to exploit the needs of lesser developed states for rapid economic growth, including through the provision of communication infrastructure. The Quad members have so far been unable to come up with satisfactory responses, either qualitatively or quantitatively. In addition to significantly greater investments in development cooperation, the functioning of the capital markets and the rules of world trade would also have to be reformed in the interests of developing states. Furthermore, the Quad members would have to curtail their own protectionist measures and comprehensively intensify bilateral relations with developing states across a wide range of areas.

From the perspective of German foreign policy, however, it must be noted that multilateral cooperation formats such as the Quad are becoming increasingly important in a regional order that is in a phase of transition.

### **Quad: Implications for Germany and the European Union**

The growing importance of the Quad, also for Europe, became evident already in 2021. In its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the European Commission expressed interest in cooperating with the format. However, dealing with the Quad confronts Germany and the European Union (EU) with a dilemma, at least superficially. On the one hand, European actors – Germany, for example, in the Indo-Pacific Guidelines – promote UN-centred, effective multilateralism and inclusiveness under the central concept of the rules-based order. On the other hand, many of the “like-minded” Quad partners tend to favour exclusive bi- and multilateral approaches. This is despite the fact that all Quad working groups deal with problem areas that could also be dealt with – possibly even more effectively and sustainably – at the regional or even global multilateral level.

At the same time, the relevance of multilateral regional institutions such as ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum continues to wane.

Moreover, the supposedly shared democratic values of the Quad members – one of the central features of the format – are often not in line with the understanding of democracy of most political actors in Europe. This discrepancy between reality and rhetoric is due to the fact that the emphasis on democratic values in the context of Indo-Pacific security policy serves mainly to differentiate the Quad states from autocratic China. In fact, until the recent changes of government in the incumbent administrations in Washington, Tokyo and Canberra, none of the four Quad leaderships had been noted for their democracy-friendly policies. On the contrary, the focus on authoritarian China and its illegitimate and illegal practices tended to distract attention from the Quad ruling parties’ attacks on their own democratic institutions. Serious tendencies of democratic backsliding remained under the radar. This is particularly true in the cases of the United States and India. These inconsistencies may be the reason why the previously strongly emphasised common democratic values do not appear in the Quad’s most recent *Vision Statement*.

The aforementioned dilemma for the EU, however, is more theoretical than practical. Since Europe’s power to influence Indo-Pacific security policy is extremely limited, the EU has, in practice, been focussing on expanding mostly exclusive, primarily bilateral cooperation with “like-minded” Quad partners. Examples are the newly established so-called 2+2 dialogue formats between German foreign and defence ministers and their counterparts, as well as the participation of the German Navy, Air Force and Army in exercises with the armed forces of Australia and Japan.

The essential question therefore seems to be a much more pragmatic one: What added value, if any, does the Quad – and cooperation with it – offer for preserving regional stability in the Indo-Pacific? The answer to this question is incongruous.

On the one hand, the Quad is increasingly trying to respond to specific regional challenges in various non-military policy fields. These functional, output-oriented approaches have received largely positive acclaim in the region and increased the Quad's legitimacy. The Quad could therefore open up corresponding unilateral initiatives for other states. Such a move would offer the possibility of making the Quad's role in the region more inclusive and would possibly even contribute to the multilateralisation of specific Quad initiatives through the active participation of states that do not belong to the format.

On the other hand, the Quad is more a symptom of the problem of regional instability, rather than a solution to it. Regardless of whether it is mainly the leadership in Beijing or the Sino-US great power rivalry itself that is seen as the cause of instability, it is clear that neither government – in Beijing or in Washington – will be able to break the spiral of escalation.

There is no doubt that Chinese territorial claims in the East and South China Seas and to Taiwan are direct sources of tensions. Yet, in other respects, the deepening rivalry between China and the United States indirectly increases the level of insecurity in Japan and Australia in particular, due to their steadily growing security dependencies on the increasingly indispensable – but also unpredictable – US ally.

As a consequence of this destabilising interaction between China and the United States (as well as Japan and Australia as allies of the United States), it is advisable that European decision-makers take care not to limit their cooperation with regional actors to Quad members. This does not mean turning a blind eye to the growing importance of the Quad and other unilateral initiatives. At present, however, it seems necessary to defuse the escalation of tensions between China and the United States and its allies by engaging a larger number of regional partners, preferably those who do not harbour ambitions for

great power politics. Within such a circle of actors, ideas for managing the great power rivalry would have to be developed jointly; the main focus should be on preventing the outbreak of military conflicts. Germany and other European states should signal their support for such future initiatives.

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