

THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE: TOWARDS AN INDO-PACIFIC ORDER?

Policy Report
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The quadrilateral security dialogue, or “Quad,” was reborn in 2017 to secure a “rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.” Bringing together the US, Japan, India, and Australia, the Quad was initially intended as a mechanism for responding to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. However, it quickly became entangled in growing strategic competition across Asia and collapsed in 2008. Although the four countries still sometimes differ in their views of the region’s strategic trends, the Quad’s revival points to a greater alignment of interests this time around. Nonetheless, major challenges to the Quad’s viability remain. First, it is unclear whether the four powers will be able to maximise opportunities for cooperation while ensuring that wider geopolitical rivalries do not again overwhelm the grouping. Second, given that it has been revived to support this “Indo-Pacific” order, the Quad is constrained by the vagueness of the Indo-Pacific concept and the absence of Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The revised “Quad”—the 2017 update of the informal quadrilateral security dialogue originally formed by the US, Japan, India, and Australia in 2007—represents a renewed attempt to shore up a “rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.”¹ Yet the Quad’s resurrection raises more questions than it answers. These relate not only to its members’ aims and interests. They also touch on questions concerning what the “Indo-Pacific” means as a region, why it requires further institutional support, and whether the Quad 2.0 is the right institution. This paper begins by outlining the Quad’s background, before examining the respective interests of its partners. It then draws out the specific areas for likely cooperation and potential obstacles. Finally, it concludes with an assessment of the Quad’s prospects. The policy brief argues that, while opportunities exist for future low-key cooperation, a significant risk is that larger geopolitical rivalries will overwhelm such opportunities. Further, as an attempt to support an Indo-Pacific order, the Quad is ultimately constrained by the vagueness of the Indo-Pacific concept and the absence of Indonesia.

¹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), “Australia-India-Japan-United States Consultations on the Indo-Pacific,” media release, November 12, 2017, <https://dfat.gov.au/news/media/Pages/aus-india-japan-us-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific.aspx>.

BACKGROUND AND TRAJECTORY

Quadrilateral cooperation was initially borne out of a natural disaster—the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. One such response was the “Tsunami Core Group” established by the US, Japan, Australia, and India to facilitate coordination of relief activities. This group was intended to address the immediate challenges presented by the tsunami and its aftermath, and so was never meant to be permanent.² But the quadrilateral idea soon evolved into something more.³ Japan was keen to establish values-based connections in order to create an “arc of freedom and prosperity” through the region.⁴ Accordingly, on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum summit held in the Philippines in August 2007, the four nations met to discuss options for further engagement. Later that year, they participated, along with Singapore, in major naval exercises, a development which drew criticism from China.⁵

However, these early efforts at cooperation immediately raised tensions over the Quad’s overarching purpose. By 2008, Australia had expressed concerns about the Quad and its impact on Sino-Australian relations and had withdrawn from further dialogue “of that nature.”⁶ India, too, was worried about the impact the Quad might have on its own foreign policies.⁷ Enthusiasm for the Quad subsequently dissipated, and the idea largely disappeared from national diplomacy. Yet the Quad was not dead but merely in hiatus. By 2017, a renewed interest in the dialogue had emerged.⁸ As such, the four countries restarted their dialogue, meeting once again in the

² Marc Grossman, “The Tsunami Core Group: A Step toward a Transformed Diplomacy in Asia and Beyond,” *Security Challenges* 1, no. 1 (2005), 11–14, at 11–12. See also H. D. P. Envall, “Community Building in Asia? Trilateral Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief,” in Yuki Tatsumi (ed.), *US-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2015), 51–59, at 53.

³ Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’,” *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>.

⁴ Taro Aso, “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan’s Expanding Diplomatic Horizons,” speech on the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar, November 30, 2006, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0611.html>.

⁵ Ramesh Thakur, “Australia and the Quad,” *Strategist*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-the-quad/>. For China’s response, see Brendan Nicholson, “China Warns Canberra on Security Pact,” *Age*, June 15, 2007, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/china-warns-canberra-on-security-pact-20070615-ge54v5.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>.

⁶ Stephen Smith, “Joint Press Conference with Chinese Foreign Minister,” February 5, 2008, https://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2008/080205_jpc.html. See also Frank Ching, “Asian Arc’ Doomed without Australia,” *Japan Times*, February 22, 2008, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2008/02/22/commentary/asian-arc-doomed-without-australia/>.

⁷ Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’.”

⁸ Thakur, “Australia and the Quad.”

Philippines, this time on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit. Later, they promised to pursue “continuing discussions and deepening cooperation based on shared values and principles.”⁹ The Quad, as Ankit Panda put it, was “back.”¹⁰

A CASE OF COINCIDING INTERESTS?

Euan Graham argues that the future of the new Quad will be shaped primarily by the degree to which there is alignment between the four partners’ threat perceptions and national interests.¹¹ But what are these interests? And do they now coincide? The Quad’s long hiatus shows that these interests have not always aligned, with China at the heart of many of the Quad’s differences. Indeed, that Australia baulked in 2008 highlights China’s growing capacity to shape the strategic choices of countries around Asia, leading to doubts amongst the other parties, especially India, over Australia’s strategic positioning in the region.¹² Still, Australia has not been the only Quad partner to have struggled in this respect. In 2009–2010, Japan explicitly sought to move closer to Asia, especially China, but its policy collapsed with the worsening of Sino-Japanese relations from 2010.¹³

Greater alignment exists this time around, although differences persist. The US’ grand strategy is confused by the presidency of Donald Trump but still exhibits a strong focus on maintaining its regional hegemony and resisting China’s rise.¹⁴ Japan and India are also seeking to maintain or advance their own regional leadership, check Chinese power, and where possible hedge between the US and China.¹⁵ For Australia, as the Quad’s lone middle power, building closer relations with the great powers of the Indo-Pacific has long been viewed as an important national interest. Australia

⁹ DFAT, “Australia-India-Japan-United States Consultations on the Indo-Pacific.”

¹⁰ Ankit Panda, “US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation,” *Diplomat*, November 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/us-japan-india-and-australia-hold-working-level-quadrilateral-meeting-on-regional-cooperation/>.

¹¹ Euan Graham, “The Quad Deserves its Second Chance,” in Andrew Carr (ed.), *Debating the Quad*, Centre of Gravity series paper 39 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2018), 4–7, at 4.

¹² Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’”; Thakur, “Australia and the Quad.”

¹³ H. D. P. Envall, “Clashing Expectations: Strategic Thinking and Alliance Mismanagement in Japan,” in Yoichiro Sato and Tan See Seng (eds.), *United States Engagement in the Asia Pacific: Perspectives from Asia* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), 61–88, at 71–72.

¹⁴ Louis Nelson, “In Asia, Trump Keeps Talking about Indo-Pacific,” *Politico*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/07/trump-asia-indo-pacific-244657>.

¹⁵ H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, “Are India and Japan Potential Members of the Great Power Club?” in Joanne Wallis and Andrew Carr (eds.), *Asia-Pacific Security: An Introduction* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 63–81, esp. 68–69, 73–75.

sees that traditional alliances (i.e. those led by the US) might be usefully supplanted by unilateral arrangements to extend shared norms and rules around the region.¹⁶ In this respect, the Quad reflects the wider proliferation of strategic partnerships across Asia.¹⁷

In fact, what divided the four powers in 2007–2008—China’s rise—is arguably now bringing them closer together. This was not a recent shift but has been apparent since 2010.¹⁸ It became even more obvious in 2012 when Xi Jinping assumed power in China. Xi began dismantling the “hide your strength, bide your time” strategy, moving instead toward a “community of common destiny.”¹⁹ China’s growing assertiveness has challenged the regional order across a range of issues, including territorial disputes (e.g. in the South China Sea) and economic relationships (as a result of China’s Belt and Road Initiative).²⁰ For Japan, India, and Australia there is also the issue of how to keep the US in the region despite Trump’s “America First” agenda. The new Quad thus holds out the promise of achieving enmeshment as well as balancing objectives.

The four partners’ common interest in a “rules-based” order is clear (notwithstanding the complications of “America First”). In recent years, Japan has been especially active in making this case, such as by promoting the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP11). In 2012, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzō Abe envisaged a “democratic security diamond” that would help “safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian ocean region to the western Pacific.”²¹ In 2016, while meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Abe argued that

¹⁶ See William T. Tow and H. D. P. Envall, “Australia Debates American Primacy in Asia,” in Sato and Seng (eds.), *United States Engagement in the Asia-Pacific*, 297–323, at 313; William T. Tow and H. D. P. Envall, “The US and Implementing Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific: Can Convergent Security Work?” *IFANS Review* 19, no. 2 (2011), 49–72, at 51–52.

¹⁷ H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, “Asian Strategic Partnerships: New Practices and Regional Security Governance,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016), 87–105, at 88–89.

¹⁸ H. D. P. Envall, “Japan: From Passive Partner to Active Ally,” in Michael Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 15–30, at 27–28.

¹⁹ See Liza Tobin, “Xi’s Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/12/xis-vision-for-transforming-global-governance-a-strategic-challenge-for-washington-and-its-allies/>.

²⁰ “China Has Militarised the South China Sea and Got Away with It,” *Economist*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/06/21/china-has-militarised-the-south-china-sea-and-got-away-with-it>. On the prospects for an integrated Chinese-led order, see Nick Bisley, *Integrated Asia: Australia’s Dangerous New Strategic Geography*, Centre of Gravity series paper 31 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2017).

²¹ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe#5R2zcYPpL6wLTzTF.99>.

a “free and open Indo-Pacific” was “vital to achieving prosperity in the entire region.”²² Abe has also pushed to reform Japan itself, especially in the security realm.²³

COOPERATION: OPPORTUNITIES OR OBSTACLES?

Can the Quad meet its partners’ interests in practical ways? Quad cooperation could take two basic forms: a narrow functional approach or a broader regional approach. Greater functional cooperation might cover working jointly to deal with region-wide disasters through a combined disaster relief policy.²⁴ A broader regional approach, by comparison, might bring in new actors to address major topics of regional concern, such as the issue of maritime accidents. Either way, as Ian Hall suggests, the Quad needs to be better at communicating core objectives, coordinating policy efficiently, developing an agenda that is more focused, and diversifying the arrangement beyond the current membership.²⁵

Greater functional cooperation could cover deeper forms of capacity-building in incremental rather than radical ways. Cooperation on military readiness, such as through joint military training, offers a low-key alternative to grand announcements regarding mutual defence pacts, although it may still antagonise China. Establishing the Malabar exercises as a Quad undertaking, thereby bringing Australia back into these exercises, would constitute a shift toward such cooperation.²⁶ Wider defence cooperation, particularly in terms of sharing military technologies or establishing procedures for greater intelligence sharing, may also be possible. Indeed, Japan has already undertaken substantial reforms in recent years to extend its intelligence-sharing cooperation.²⁷

²² Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-India Joint Statement,” November 11, 2016, 1, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202950.pdf>.

²³ H. D. P. Envall, “The ‘Abe Doctrine’: Japan’s New Regional Realism,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2018), 1–29, doi: 10.1093/irap/lcy014.

²⁴ Kate Stevenson and H. D. P. Envall, “The ‘Quad’ and Disaster Management: An Australian Perspective,” in Yuki Tatsumi and Jason Li (eds.), *International Disaster Response: Rebuilding the Quad?* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2019), 13–23.

²⁵ Ian Hall, “Advancing the Quad through Diversification,” *Lowy Interpreter*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/advancing-quad-through-diversification>. See also Ian Hall, “Meeting the Challenge: The Case for the Quad,” in Carr (ed.), *Debating the Quad*, 12–15; H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, “Strategic Partnerships: Helping or Hindering Security?” *East Asia Forum*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/06/15/strategic-partnerships-helping-or-hindering-security/>.

²⁶ Thakur, “Australia and the Quad.”

²⁷ Tsukasa Hadano, “Japan Lends its Vision to ‘Five Eyes’ Intelligence Alliance,” *Nikkei Asian*

A major challenge for broader cooperation remains finding practical ways to deploy the Quad to support the regional order. Again, the risk is that this would trigger accusations of containment. Already, the Quad is moving to cooperate on supporting regional infrastructure projects.²⁸ The focus here should be on finding projects that better integrate the Indo-Pacific as a coherent maritime regional order. A more ambitious order-building endeavour would be to use the Quad to push for a more sophisticated Indo-Pacific investment and trading order. This would require the Quad partners to engage with other regional entities, such as the TPP11. Inevitably, there are complicating factors here too. Trump's apparent preference for trade wars (or the threat of such wars) is fundamentally opposed to such a vision. Likewise, India is also a reluctant trade liberaliser.²⁹

US and India's approaches to global trade policy offer an insight into the difficulties involved in deepening Quad cooperation. The resulting ambiguity about their outlook and role in the Quad reduces the scope for meaningful cooperation. Externally, Chinese criticism that the Quad represents encirclement and "Cold War thinking" continues to shape arguments about the Quad's value. Australia's decision to withdraw from the Quad in 2008 continues to raise questions, particularly from India, as to whether Australia is "potentially compromised by Chinese influence."³⁰ Yet India's commitment to the Quad is complicated by its relationship with China and attachment to non-alignment. However, the contention that the Quad will trigger a security dilemma and subsequent arms racing scenario becomes ever less persuasive: increasingly, the Quad can be seen not as a trigger but as a response to China's growing assertiveness.³¹

Review, January 10, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-Relations/Japan-lends-its-vision-to-Five-Eyes-intelligence-alliance>. See also H. D. P. Envall, "Japan's 'Pivot' Perspective: Reassurance, Restructuring, and the Rebalance," *Security Challenges* 12, no. 3 (2016), 5–19, at 13.

²⁸ "US-backed 'Quad' Quietly Gains Steam as Way to Balance China," *Straits Times*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/us-backed-quad-quietly-gains-steam-as-way-to-balance-china>.

²⁹ Biswajit Dhar, "India's Free Trade Woes," *East Asia Forum*, October 9, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/09/indias-free-trade-woes/>.

³⁰ Jeff M. Smith, "India and the Quad: Weak Link or Keystone?" *Strategist*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/india-and-the-quad-weak-link-or-keystone/>.

³¹ See Rory Medcalf, "An Indo-Pacific Quad is the Right Response to Beijing," *Australian Financial Review*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.afr.com/news/economy/an-indopacific-quad-is-the-right-response-to-beijing-20171108-gzh3c7>; Hugh White, "Why the US is No Match for China in Asia, and Trump Should Have Stayed at Home and Played Golf," *South China Morning Post*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2120010/why-us-no-match-china-asia-and-trump-should-have-stayed-home>; Hugh White, "The Indo-Pacific: Talking About It Doesn't Make It Real," *Strategist*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-talking-doesnt-make-real/>.

Beyond these obstacles there are deeper questions for the Quad. What exactly does it mean to be an Indo-Pacific forum? How would the Quad engage with established regional institutions, such as ASEAN? And how might it better link the “Indo” with the “Pacific”? That such questions generate controversy is already apparent in the Australian debate. Here, Quad believers tend to see the Indo-Pacific as a coherent strategic construct while Quad sceptics dispute this. For example, Quad believer Rory Medcalf contends that the Quad offers a way to manage the uncertainties of regional rivalries by embedding them in the Indo-Pacific region, while Quad sceptic Hugh White not only views the Quad as an “empty gesture masquerading as a policy” but also disputes the coherence of the Indo-Pacific as a single international system.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

What are the Quad’s prospects? The immediate challenge is one of aims. A persistent criticism of the Quad is that it lacks a common purpose or substantive agenda.³² Further, amongst all the objectives cited as reasons for bringing the four states together, none are exclusive to the Quad. Other actors and institutions already exist in the region for these purposes (e.g. ASEAN-based bodies). The Quad partners need to better articulate their own unique rationale for cooperation.³³

So far, however, the four states have created a context whereby the possible benefits of the Quad are vague, but the costs obvious. As Benjamin Zala argues, seeking to constrain Chinese power “is an extremely important downside.”³⁴ Indeed, the lingering sense of strategic containment may easily hamper low-key initiatives—improved disaster policy coordination, for instance, might be stymied by controversies associated with Sino-American rivalry.³⁵

Yet the strategic perceptions surrounding the Quad’s purported balancing role may now be unavoidable. This raises doubts on benefits of welcoming Chinese engagement with the Quad.³⁶ It also suggests that the Quad’s

³² Andrew O’Neil and Lucy West, “Why the Quad Won’t Ever Be an Asian NATO,” *Strategist*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-the-quad-wont-ever-be-an-asian-nato/>.

³³ See Benjamin Zala, “Taking the Potential Costs of the Quad Seriously,” in Carr (ed.), *Debating the Quad*, 19–22, at 19–20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁵ Stevenson and Envall, “The ‘Quad’ and Disaster Management,” 17.

³⁶ See Nick Bisley, “Is there a Problem with ... the Quad?” *China Matters*, July 2018, <http://chinamatters.org.au/public-outreach/policy-brief-july/>.

prospects will be shaped most by the logic (or lack thereof) of an emerging Indo-Pacific strategic geography. If the Indo-Pacific concept has any strategic value, it is to be found especially in the idea that a more integrated maritime geopolitical complex is emerging—one that links the US, China, and India across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.³⁷ If these linkages prove to be important, the Quad might conceivably help with their institutionalisation.

Geopolitically, the crucial juncture between the Indo and Pacific sub-regions is maritime Southeast Asia and, especially, Indonesia. Indonesia is adjacent both to the region's most complex maritime territorial dispute and to its major shipping routes. It is also democratic, a rising power, and has an uncertain relationship with China. As a new piece of the Indo-Pacific strategic architecture, the revised dialogue might be boosted if it swapped its "quadrilateral" format for a "pentagonal" one. Yet Indonesia is largely absent from debates about the Quad.³⁸ This may be due to its own ambivalence regarding the grouping, preference for non-alignment, or ambition to maintain at least a cordial relationship with China.³⁹ At present, Indonesia's absence reinforces both the Quad's underdeveloped status and the persistent doubts as to whether the Indo-Pacific is in fact a single, coherent region. As it stands, the Quad remains an idea whose time is yet to come.

³⁷ Graham, "The Quad Deserves its Second Chance," 5. See also Bisley, *Integrated Asia*, 3.

³⁸ Graham, "The Quad Deserves its Second Chance," 6.

³⁹ Shafiah F. Muhibat and M. Habib Abiyan Dzakwan, "Indonesia and the Quad: Can't or Won't Decide?" *Strategist*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesia-and-the-quad-cant-or-wont-decide/>.

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