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The “Quad”: Security Cooperation Among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia

Overview

The Biden Administration has boosted the profile of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, aka “the Quad,” as a centerpiece of its Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at strengthening the United States’ position in and commitment to the region. The four-country coalition, comprised of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, claims a common platform of protecting freedom of navigation and promoting democratic values in the region. The first leader-level summit, held virtually in March 2021, produced the first-ever joint leaders’ statement. In September 2021, the four leaders met in person and released an expanded statement that outlined four broad areas of cooperation: vaccine production and distribution; climate change mitigation efforts and clean energy development; the promotion of transparency and high-standard governance in the field of critical and emerging technologies; and the development of a regional infrastructure partnership. Working groups in these areas are pushing forward with efforts to flesh out these priorities.

Since Biden took office, the Quad has focused on areas outside of hard security, but concerns about China’s growing influence and military assertiveness appears to underlie motivations for the framework. The September 2021 joint statement—while not explicitly referencing China—addressed the concern, reading, “we recommit to promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.”

When the partners first held a series of Quad meetings in 2007, China denounced them as an attempt to encircle it. The effort dissipated amidst member leadership transitions, concerns about economic repercussions from China, and attention to other national interests. The effort to revitalize the group, begun in 2017 and accelerated since 2020, is bringing similar accusations from Beijing, crystallizing the geopolitical and economic risks for the Quad partners. China is among the top three trading partners for all four countries, which are reliant on Chinese supply chains.

For Japan, Australia, and India, alarm about China’s intentions may be coupled with a perception that U.S. influence in the region is waning. Tokyo, Canberra, and New Delhi may be motivated to promote the Quad as a way to keep America engaged in the region.

Questions remain about how the Quad defines itself and its goals. Will the partners maintain Quad cohesiveness despite their different responses to the war in Ukraine or other geopolitical shifts? Does it compete or complement other regional groupings? Will it remain limited to the four

countries, or open its membership to other countries? Is it durable as a framework even in the face of leadership changes in member countries? Will India remain committed to the group? Can the Quad be effective without a strong economic pillar to counter China’s dominance in regional trade agreements? These questions may be of critical importance to Congress given its oversight responsibilities, interest in security alliances, and growing concern about China’s power and influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Security Cooperation

The annual Malabar naval exercises have emerged as a platform for Quad security cooperation. The exercises, originally bilateral between the United States and India, later added Japan as a permanent member in 2015, and since 2020 have included Australia as well. U.S. Defense officials say the exercise could be a potent war-fighting exercise that deepens trust and interoperability among the four militaries in the air and sea domains. All four militaries operate compatible anti-submarine warfare systems, making that a promising area of cooperation.

In addition to Malabar, Quad countries are increasing bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral exercises with one another that may accelerate the ability of the four countries to build integrated capabilities. Examples of these exercises include but are not limited to the India-Australia biennial AUSINDEX naval exercise, the Japan-India JIMEX exercise in the North Arabian Sea, and the large multilateral biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) maritime warfare exercise, which includes all four countries. As U.S. treaty allies, Australia and Japan regularly hold large-scale exercises with the U.S. military.

Criticisms of the Quad

Critics have pointed to questions about the group’s inability to speak with one voice on regional issues, absence of collaborative democracy promotion efforts, dearth of joint military operations, and lack of institutional structure as limits on its effectiveness. In the past, India and Australia have expressed wariness of provoking China and cornering it into a defensive posture. Despite Japan’s acute sense of threat from China, it has looked to stabilize relations with Beijing. All three may be hard-pressed to maintain a balance between advancing Quad cooperation and maintaining ties to China, given that further Quad-based initiatives are likely to come under more withering criticism from Beijing.

The exclusion of other regional countries and the potential marginalization of traditional bilateral alliances also draws criticism. U.S. treaty ally South Korea is not in the Quad, despite being a democracy with maritime interests and

growing naval capabilities. New President Yoon Suk-yeol has indicated he would like to work with the Quad’s working groups. While the United States professes to support Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality in regional multilateral efforts, member countries’ varied capabilities and views of China may make ASEAN members hesitant to cooperate with the Quad.

Japan’s Role

Japan has led recent efforts to invigorate the quadrilateral arrangement, with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in particular championing the concept. Japan’s eagerness to pursue the Quad appears driven above all by its concern over China’s increasing power, influence, and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as its own territorial disputes and history of conflict with China. Japan is anxious to establish a regional order that is not defined by China’s economic, geographic, and strategic dominance.

While the U.S. alliance remains fundamental to its security, Japan has worked steadily to build closer security ties with both Australia and India. For the past decade Japan has deepened defense relations with Australia, and the two concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement (similar to a Status of Forces Agreement) to define rules and procedures for visiting troops. As another U.S. treaty ally, Australia uses similar practices and equipment, which may make cooperation with Japan more accessible. Japan has inked an Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement with India, along with agreements concerning the protection of classified military information and transfer of defense equipment and technology. Bilateral exercises with both countries have grown in number and sophistication.

Australia’s Evolving Strategic Posture

Australia views the Quad as a key pillar of its Indo-Pacific agenda and a key diplomatic network that complements its other bilateral, regional and multilateral relationships. To some Australians, the context for the Quad is best understood as being “about the values, norms, rules and standards that should shape the future” as well as being about securing economic, military, and technological advantage.

Australia and the United States also cooperate through the Five Eyes intelligence group, which includes Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The 2021 Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) pact will give Australia access to U.S. and U.K. nuclear propulsion technology for its new fleet of submarines as well as access to other weapons systems and military capabilities.

Australia is updating its national security posture, including its relations with allies and partners, in large part because relations with Beijing continue to deteriorate due to China’s use of coercive statecraft in an effort to expand its influence in Australia. Australia is concerned about China’s recent security pact with the Solomon Islands, which some fear will open the way for a PRC military presence in the South Pacific. Australia has responded to growing geopolitical uncertainty by passing foreign interference legislation, expanding diplomatic ties, and increasing its defense budget, with plans to expand the size of its military.

Australia and Japan have solidified security and economic ties with a series of bilateral agreements. In June 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India signed a Mutual Logistics Sharing Agreement and announced the elevation of their bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

India’s Motivations

Delhi’s traditional pursuit of “strategic autonomy” in foreign affairs has led to an aversion to international alliances and wariness toward formalized multilateral engagements. India is the only Quad member operating outside of the U.S.-led security alliance system and the only to share a land border with China, although the two have no direct maritime disputes. Delhi’s skepticism about U.S. strategic intent in Asia lingers, and many analysts cast doubt on India’s ability to be a net-provider of security in the broad Indo-Pacific region. India’s neutrality on the war in Ukraine—Russia is a decades-old “strategic partner” to India—makes it an outlier among Quad members, leading to questions about Delhi’s commitment to the values of territorial integrity and rules-based order that are fundamental to the Quad’s conception. These factors led some observers label India the “weak link” of the Quad.

Still, Indian leaders identify China as their primary security challenge, and relations became more acrimonious after Indian and Chinese troops clashed along their shared (and disputed) frontier in 2020. Two years later, that military standoff continues, and Delhi has become more enthusiastic in joining with external actors to balance against Chinese “transgressions.” Ongoing Chinese economic and military support for India’s traditional rival, Pakistan, increased Chinese naval deployments to India’s region, and major Chinese infrastructure investment along India’s periphery undergird Delhi’s concerns. India has rejected participation in both Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in apparent resistance to a China-led Asia order.

India’s strategic partnerships with other Quad members have deepened significantly in recent years. Major defense purchases from the United States include heavy lift aircraft and anti-submarine warfare platforms, and 2020 saw the conclusion of the fourth and final “foundational” U.S.-India pact to deepen security relations and facilitate defense trade. India also has inked logistics support and base access agreements with both Japan and Australia. However, many Indians remain uncertain about how the Quad mechanism will fit into India’s regional strategy. India is likely to continue moderating the pace at which the grouping operationalizes its initiatives, particularly in security goals.

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