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

Overview

In October 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his three counterparts from Australia, India, and Japan convened an in-person meeting in Tokyo. The focus was on boosting the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, aka “the Quad,” a four-country coalition with a common platform of protecting freedom of navigation and promoting democratic values in the region. The gathering released no joint statement, but Pompeo stated that the purpose of the group was to “protect our people and partners from the Chinese Communist Party’s exploitation, corruption, and coercion.” Although the three other ministers framed the meeting differently in their opening statements, fears of China’s growing influence and assertiveness in the region loom large. Tensions with China have worsened for all four countries in 2020, driving increased defense cooperation among them. Despite this confluence, the Quad faces major challenges in defining itself and its goals. Does expanding defense cooperation provide meaningful strategic advantages? Will the Quad broaden its activities on democracy promotion? Is it durable as a framework even in the face of leadership changes in member countries? 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 region.

Earlier iterations of the Quad faltered. The grouping originally arose from the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami: in the disaster relief effort, the four navies coordinated, providing inspiration for more maritime cooperation. In 2007, a series of “Quad” meetings was denounced by China as an attempt to encircle it. The effort dissipated amidst member leadership transitions, concern about economic repercussions from China, and attention to other national interests.

The renewed effort, begun in 2017, is bringing similar accusations from Beijing, crystallizing the geopolitical and economic risks for the Quad partners. All four members are heavily reliant on Chinese supply chains, and each of the four are significantly more economically integrated with China than with one another, especially India and Japan. China is the first or second largest trading partner for all four countries, underscoring the risk of angering Beijing.

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. For years, Asian states have expressed fear that the United States’ power is diminishing in the region. These fears may have been heightened by Trump’s 2016 “America First” policy,

particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement.

A Shift to Operations?

Skeptics of the Quad earlier pointed to the group’s lack of operationalization. Shortly after the October 2020 meeting in Tokyo, India announced that Australia would be invited to join the United States, Japan, and India for the annual Malabar naval exercises slated for November. The exercises, originally bilateral between the United States and India, later added Japan as a permanent member in 2015. Defense officials say that 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 all four countries in the large multilateral biennial Rim of the Pacific maritime warfare exercise. 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 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. Japan, arguably the country with the most acute concern about China’s rise given the history of conflict and ongoing territorial disputes in the East China Sea, has in recent years looked to stabilize relations with Beijing. Under new leadership since September 2020, Japan will face choices about how far to push a new framework that is likely to come under withering criticism from China.

Another critique involves the exclusion of other regional countries and the potential for marginalization of traditional bilateral alliances. U.S. treaty ally South Korea is not in the Quad despite fitting the description of being a democracy with maritime interests and growing naval capabilities. South Korea is likely reluctant to be included in a group that antagonizes China, but it may also chafe at exclusion. 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 raise questions about how ASEAN or individual member countries might interact with the Quad. Chinese opposition to the Quad may limit opportunities for the regional forum to be convening platform if ASEAN countries come under pressure from Beijing.

Japan’s Role

Japan has been at the forefront of pursuing the quadrilateral arrangement, with former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020) 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. Expanding a concept of the region to include the Indian Ocean and South Asia broadens Japan’s strategic landscape. In theory, engaging India eastward could compel Beijing to divert some of its resources and attention to the Indian Ocean. Japan is anxious to establish a regional order that is not defined by China’s economic, geographic, and strategic dominance, and seeks a broader framework.

Japan has also 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 reportedly are nearing completion of a Reciprocal Access Agreement (similar to a Status of Forces Agreement) to define rules and procedures when troops are stationed temporarily in each other’s country for joint exercises or disaster-relief activities. 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.

Leaders in Tokyo may find the absence of South Korea an additional advantage of the quadrilateral grouping. Tokyo and Seoul have often been at odds and resistant to U.S. encouragement of closer trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. The Quad provides another venue for Japan’s Self Defense Forces to increase security exercises with the U.S. military.

Australia’s Changing Strategic Posture

Australia’s approach to the Quad has changed significantly since it took part in the Malabar naval exercise in 2007. The following year, Australia withdrew from the exercise over concerns its participation could damage relations with Beijing. Relations between Canberra and Beijing have deteriorated since Australia called for an inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus, leading China to retaliate economically. In response to pressure on the rules-based order and China’s use of coercive statecraft to expand its influence in Australia and the region, Canberra is adjusting its strategic posture. It is rejoining Malabar in 2020, increasing defense spending, and developing regional ties.

Australia’s Quad ties strengthen existing bilateral and multilateral security ties with the United States, Japan and India. Australia and Japan signed a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, a Comprehensive Partnership

in 2008, and a Special Strategic Partnership in 2014. In June 2020, Prime Minister 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 “nonalignment” in foreign affairs—more recently articulated as an approach that seeks “strategic autonomy”—has led to a deep aversion to international alliances and a wariness toward formalized multilateral engagements beyond the purview of the United Nations. India’s views on the Indo-Pacific region typically emphasize “inclusiveness” and have not targeted China. India is the only Quad member to share a land border with China and the only to operate outside of the U.S.-led security alliance system, often known as the “hub and spoke” architecture. Many in Delhi remain skeptical about U.S. strategic intent in Asia, leading some observers to label India as the “weak link” of the Quad. Prime Minister Modi’s 2018 efforts to “reset” relations with China after a militarized mid-2017 territorial dispute and his rejection of Australian participation in the Malabar exercises, led many analysts to conclude that the Quad’s prospects had dimmed.

Subsequent developments in India-China relations, culminating with violent clashes between Indian and Chinese troops along their shared (and disputed) frontier in the spring of 2020, appear to have driven India to strengthen ties with external forces to balance against Chinese assertiveness. Along with China’s 2020 military encroachments into India’s Ladakh Union Territory, this has included ongoing Chinese alignment with India’s traditional rival, Pakistan, increased Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean, and major economic and infrastructure investment along India’s periphery. India’s rejection of participation in both Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership appear to demonstrate its leaders’ intent to resist creation of a China-led Asia order.

India’s strategic partnerships with the United States and Japan have deepened significantly in recent years. Major defense purchases from the United States include heavy lift aircraft and anti-submarine warfare platforms. India has inked logistics support and base access agreements with both Japan and Australia, and the United States and India concluded a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, the final of four “foundational” pacts to deepen military-to-military ties. However, India has no direct maritime disputes with China and remains wary of the Quad mechanism. While India’s government takes steps toward more engagement with the Quad, there remains considerable confusion among many about what the Quad is and how it will fit into India’s regional strategy.

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