



WHY CHINA DISCOUNTS THE INDO-PACIFIC QUAD

BY JOEL WUTHNOW

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As the United States [rolls out](#) its initial Indo-Pacific strategy, one of the surprising early outcomes has been China's muted response to its signature pillar – the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, India, and Australia. Rather than raising alarm bells as they did over the original Quad a decade ago, Chinese officials and analysts have generally brushed it aside. The key reason is the assumption that economic reliance of Quad members on China will limit the grouping's future development. Such a dismissive perspective, while potentially underestimating the possibility that states could look past economic considerations in deciding how strongly to hedge against Chinese adventurism, suggests that the Quad's deterrent value remains rather limited. What is needed is for the United States and its partners to move beyond symbolism and give the grouping more operational substance.

The revival of the Quad is not the only demonstrable feature of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, but it is an important and highly visible one. The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* cites it as a product of efforts to develop a “strong defense network with our allies and partners,” and it clearly fits within the *US National Defense Strategy*'s vision of building a “networked security architecture” that would promote deterrence and stability by linking US allies and partners. The first iteration of the new Quad was held in [November 2017](#) in Manila at the working-level

while a second meeting was held at a more senior-level in Singapore in [June 2018](#).

China's official reaction to the Quad has been muted at best. A foreign ministry spokesman [reacted](#) to the first meeting with the vague observation that “various parties can put forward designs and call on ways to promote regional cooperation” so long as they “are in line with the overall situation.” The foreign ministry did not comment on the second meeting at all, indicating that the Quad was not deemed a high enough priority for Beijing to signal its discontent to an international audience. Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) has been dismissive of the entire notion of the Quad, comparing it to “sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they may get some attention, but soon will dissipate.”

These muted responses are surprising in light of China's consternation about the original Quad, which [came about](#) largely due to Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's efforts during his first term in 2006-7. Before the initiative could get off the ground, China sent *demarches* to all four countries and the new Rudd government in Australia backed off to avoid antagonizing Beijing. China's strong reaction in that case echoed the [warnings](#) of hawkish Chinese strategists that the US might be trying to weave its regional alliances and partnerships into a kind of “Asian NATO” (亚洲版的北约) designed to contain China's rise, just as NATO was formed to check Soviet ambitions in Western Europe. The absence of a strong response this time around suggests that those views may have lost currency an official level.

China's apathy is less surprising in the context of its responses to other US-led “minilateral” initiatives (referring to activities involving a handful of partners brought together by common interests or values) across the Indo-Pacific, which have blossomed in the last decade. As I [report](#) in a recent journal article, Chinese officials rarely comment on minilateral activities and focus much more intensively on developments in US bilateral alliances, especially the US-Japan alliance. This makes sense: minilateral activities tend to be short-term and feature limited operational cooperation while alliances often involve forward-deployed personnel and weapons systems,

extensive military cooperation, and concrete security guarantees – far more worrisome than occasional trilateral (or quadrilateral) dialogues or exercises.

Many Chinese analysts have concluded that unilateral initiatives such as the Quad are unlikely to evolve into something even vaguely resembling the institutional coherence of a military alliance. There are various reasons. One is the history of the previous US attempt to forge a multi-state Asian alliance system – the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization – which was [seen](#) as a “new form of Western colonialism” across the region and dissipated after the Vietnam War. Another reason concerns India’s predilection to conduct a non-aligned foreign policy, ruling out formal alliances. Yet another reason is historical animosity between Japan and South Korea, which constrains deep military cooperation and reduces the possibility that the two strongest US allies in the region would ever extend security guarantees to each other.

The most salient Chinese rationale for doubting the Quad, however, is that its participants are so economically tied to China – via trade and investment relationships that have grown significantly over the past decade – that they would likely abstain from a more coherent US-led bloc out of fear of economic reprisal. Australia is often cited as the weakest link. For instance, an analyst at the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations [argues](#) that Australia’s “decent economic ties” with China are making Canberra “less keen” on developing the Quad. But optimism about the efficacy of China’s economic leverage extends to the other Quad members as well. One Chinese Academy of Social Sciences scholar asserts, perhaps overly optimistically, that all four states have a “very deep economic dependence on China” that will reduce their willingness to adopt confrontational policies.

Such analyses of the Quad are hardly unique to China. Some non-Chinese analysts have also [argued](#) that economic linkages between China and the four states could limit the Quad’s development prospects. Yet it is striking that Chinese scholars are not persuaded by, or in some cases even seriously consider, the main counter-argument: states may be willing to accept

economic risks and costs to protect their security interests. South Korea’s deployment of the THAAD system over China’s protests is the clearest example. India and Australia are similarly [reassessing](#) challenges posed by China’s overseas military, economic, and intelligence activities and thus might adopt stronger responses, such as through a more robust Quad. Economic calculations matter, but could be offset to a degree as foreign firms exit China to pursue [cheaper manufacturing alternatives](#) elsewhere or due to the [difficulties of competing](#) with Chinese firms supported by government policy. That this alternative perspective has apparently not swayed Chinese analysts may reflect overconfidence about China’s economic leverage or an underestimation of the grievances that China’s behavior is stoking in all corners of the region.

For the United States and its partners, China’s benign perceptions raises a quandary: how to deter an adversary that discounts an important part of one’s strategy? The answer lies in strengthening military and strategic cooperation among the four states so that the Quad is not so easily dismissed. Merely convening two dialogues over nine months that have produced little more than diplomatic read-outs and promises of further discussions has simply not been enough to convince most Chinese observers that it could evolve into something more significant. Wu Zhenglong, a former Chinese ambassador to Croatia, thus [notes](#) that in the absence of a “feasible mechanism, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ will remain a paper concept, without strategies to back it up.”

There are various ways in which the Quad could be upgraded to help meet the goals of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Exercises such as *Malabar* could be expanded from a trilateral level to encompass all four countries (which would require India to overcome its [objections](#) to Australia’s participation), possibly even laying the groundwork for joint patrols to safeguard freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. An intelligence-sharing pact could be codified in targeted areas such as [maritime domain awareness](#). Or the four states could draw on their economic strength to offer coordinated infrastructure financing to those wary about China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The Quad does not have to evolve into a true NATO-like entity

to have an effect, but unless it can be operationalized in a more concrete form, Chinese strategists are likely to continue to treat it as a paper tiger.

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