



THE QUAD'S FUTURE IS TIED TO SOFT SECURITY

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There has been much dialogue over the future of the Quadrilateral process (Quad 2.0) involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in the Indo-Pacific, with many envisioning a militarization of the Quad or a securitization of the Indo-Pacific through security-centric agreements. Such debates extend to the extreme of proposing an Asian equivalent to NATO in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China.

Outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo contended in October 2020 that formalizing the Quad could help build a "true security framework" to meet the challenges posed by Beijing. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has asserted that the Atlantic Alliance "must become global" and departing US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun affirmed that some speculative discussions on the prospects of forming an "Indo-Pacific NATO" had taken place on the sidelines of the US-India Strategic Dialogue. Such remarks further fuel discussions of a potential militarized Quad, a grand coalition in the Indo-Pacific to contain an increasingly assertive China.

Notwithstanding the merits of such a debate, it is worth exploring how the Quad can be institutionalized in the region, instead of only instigating a competitive power framework. This holds utmost importance, with new US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan aiming to "[carry forward](#)" the Quad format as a "fundamental foundational" aspect of America's Indo-Pacific policy, further highlighted with the Biden administration's recent proposal to hold a leadership summit of Quad members. For more than a decade and a half, the idea of Quad has survived in Indo-Pacific, starting with former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech titled "[Confluence of the Two Seas](#)" in the Indian Parliament in 2007, which triggered the debate over the Quad process. Since the mechanism's revival in 2017, Quad member states have held several high-level and high-profile ministerial meetings, symbolizing the significance of the grouping in their foreign outlooks. While Chinese expansionism is the central motivating factor, a lack of commonality over whether to "contain China" or, instead, manage China's influence and rise remains among Quad members, evidenced by the lack of a joint statement. How can member states institutionalize the Quad process while building a common security framework in the Indo-Pacific?

Above all, an attempt to institutionalize the Quad must be drawn on a practical and soft security framework that can gradually transform into a cohesive security (and, perhaps subsequently, a military) unit, shaped by the changing geopolitical situation. The goal of the Quad process, as it appears in their respective official statements, is to preserve a "rules-based order" in Indo-Pacific; a soft security framework must be drawn on their political, economic and ideological commonality. More importantly, such a framework must have a non-military connotation even though it would imbibe some maritime security features. Alongside such a soft security apparatus, the institutionalization of the Quad will invariably depend on building an exclusive Indo-Pacific identity, drawing its strength from democratic ideas and norms. The Quad is a political process, tied to immense soft and hard security objectives. Therefore, before (or alongside) exercising its military-economic muscles, the Quad must initiate deeper cultural and ideological

diplomacy tracks to build political synergy that could eventually—given the right strategic circumstances—translate to a tighter security, and eventually a military, arrangement in the Indo-Pacific. Like NATO, driven not only by the Soviet threat but also to promote European political integration, Quad states must seek to establish solidarity and synergy before militarization.

Extending such a soft power network to further an Asian NATO equivalent entails careful political, economic, strategic, and ideological maneuvering among Quad members, who have had a clear divide in their China policies in the last two decades. In the post-pandemic period all Quad states, including the US, continue to share strong economic or multilateral interactions with Beijing. The latest EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) is a reminder that the “China connect” is a strategic reality in regional and global affairs—and Quad countries are no exceptions. Regardless whether the Quad becomes a formalized platform, all member states will need to deal with China in regional and global affairs. Although Australia’s inclusion in the Malabar military exercises undoubtedly strengthens arguments for a securitized (or even militarized) framework in the Indo-Pacific under the aegis of the Quad, Canberra’s addition does not necessarily imply creating a larger regional nexus aimed at managing China militarily. The Quad must have a value-driven approach, having drawn its strength from the “rule of law,” preserving freedom of navigation and aiming to implement democratic ideals with a “free and open” framework.

The Quad states must, firstly, invest in capability development efforts to create multi-layered networks among educational institutions, promote think tank forums in concert with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) countries, and build scholarships or fellowship opportunities that promote ideological exchanges. Ultimately, the aim must be to build and sustain a stronger Indo-Pacific intellectual chorus challenging authoritarian and unilateral ideals and initiatives. The Quad countries need to promote a model for annual dialogues among think tanks, universities, and thinkers who could establish a platform for enhancing and amplifying such ideals. In this vein, an Indo-

Pacific university or defense university in the region, with joint investment by Quad countries, could also boost intellectual exchanges and studies on how to strengthen Indo-Pacific security through coordinated political and economic engagement, while building an identity for the region and boosting purposeful maritime cooperation and effective maritime governance.

For instance, the evolution of BRICS from an abstract assembly to a concrete consortium of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa illustrates this effect. As a grouping of ambitious rising powers, BRICS has tried to influence global governance debates in its favor, even if India and China are not on the same frequency over a range of matters. More importantly, BRICS has emerged as a cohesive unit to promote the New Development Bank (NDB) as an institution the Indo-Pacific region needs. If Quad states can draw inferences from the BRICS’ model while promoting a rules-based, fair, and equitable banking culture within the Indo-Pacific, it can expedite and form overtures to a maritime nexus and connectivity-focused infrastructure development, eventually boosting and complementing supply chain networks.

The second critical variable for institutionalizing the Quad entails drawing lessons from the post-Cold War era, especially regarding creation of institutions. If China’s belligerence is the biggest motivator for the Quad to strengthen its guard in the Indo-Pacific, then China’s institution-building capabilities should merit equal deliberations and discussions among Quad countries. The gradual evolution and formalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), from the informal, low-profile Shanghai Five to a well-established multilateral organization, is a successful example of Chinese enterprise in this area. The “Shanghai Five” was meant to address boundary disputes and cross-border terrorism between China and the Central Asian countries. Over time, Beijing systematically expanded the grouping’s canvas to include economic, political, and security objectives, thus building a cohesive multilateral institution in Eurasia. Today, such comprehensiveness has become the hallmark of China’s deepened and broadened security approach, aptly reflected in the SCO charter. Beijing defines security beyond expedient military

terms, touching upon critical economic and political domains. To compete with China, let alone build a cohesive military unit to this effect, the Quad members must first find synergy within their own strategic objectives across the spectrum—to expedite a network of intellectual engagement commensurate with their objectives in the region.

Given the onset of a new administration in the White House, and the political uncertainty in Japan owing to its upcoming October 2021 election, the time has come to invest greater thought vis-à-vis the Quad process and guide its intellectual future. Rather than a mechanism aimed only at contesting China, the Quad must emerge as a soft and succinct regional cohesive grouping that promotes a culture of democratic ideals and links intellectual persuasion with the Indo-Pacific architecture to further its acceptance and institutionalization.

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