

Column

The Revival of the Quad amidst Great Power Competition

As the U.S.-China great power competition unfolds, the quadrilateral security cooperation (Quad) among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India is gaining prominence. The Quad is a coalition of four countries that share fundamental values, such as the rule of law and human rights, and attempt to strengthen a free and open international order. How have Quad partners deepened their cooperation?

The Quad traces its origin to the cooperation among the four countries to support areas affected by the 2004 earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. In 2007, the holding of a senior officials' meeting and the Malabar four-way military exercise built up expectations for the Quad's progress. Nonetheless, the framework had completely lost momentum by the end of that year. This was partly a result of Australia and India's strong aversion to provoking China. It was also an outcome of coinciding domestic political changes. Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo, who was a driving force behind the Quad initiative, resigned, and Kevin Rudd, who had affinity with China and was less enthusiastic about the Quad, took office as prime minister of Australia.

However, the Quad gradually revived as the world entered an era of great power competition. In November 2017, senior officials from the four countries met in Manila for the first time in nearly a decade, and the first-ever Quad foreign ministers' meeting was held in September 2019.

Beginning with the video conference in March 2021, summit meetings have been conducted four times, both in-person and virtually, by the end of 2022. Compared to Quad 1.0, which temporarily gained steam in 2007, the four countries have shared a stronger bond in “Quad 2.0” since 2017.

The most defining aspect of Quad 2.0 is its diverse areas of cooperation. In addition to shaping a rules-based international order for the realization of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and strengthening the Malabar exercise and other maritime security cooperation, the Quad has recently announced a series of initiatives in new areas. At the March 2021 virtual summit, the leaders agreed to establish working groups on COVID-19 vaccines, critical and emerging technology, and climate change. In September 2021, working groups were also set up on infrastructure, cybersecurity, and space. All of these areas broadly relate to security and indicate the Quad’s recent expansion of non-military cooperation.

Alongside the efforts of Quad 2.0, the four countries have advanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation, resulting in multi-layered security cooperation networks in the Indo-Pacific region. Bilaterally, all four countries conduct foreign and defense ministerial meetings (2+2) with one another. Furthermore, they have entered or are entering into security agreements, such as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the Reciprocal Access Agreement. In October 2022, the announcement of a new Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the first such agreement in 15 years, garnered attention. Multilaterally, the launch of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) was announced on May 23, 2022 (a day before the Quad Leaders’ Meeting in Tokyo).

Meanwhile, Quad cooperation also faces challenges and limitations. At the top of the list is the divergence between India and the other three Quad countries. There is a gap in the means of security between the United States and its allies—Japan and Australia—on the one hand, and India on the other, as the latter seeks strategic autonomy. While the Narendra Modi government of India has shown a clear commitment to strengthening the Quad as well as India’s bilateral relations with Japan, the United States, and Australia, it continues to pursue autonomous diplomacy, as seen in its import of Russian arms and participation in Russia’s Vostok-2022 military exercise. Additionally, India has refrained from explicitly condemning Russia over the war in Ukraine and has not joined the economic sanctions on Russia. Although the situation in Ukraine was discussed during the Quad Leaders’ Meeting in March 2022, it was symbolic that the joint statement did not mention Russia. While all four countries share a common view of order based on such principles as adherence to international law and inclusiveness, the Quad is not a monolithic group by any means.

That said, the Quad partners have continued to strengthen their cooperation, primarily in practical areas. The reasons behind this include the following. Firstly, the four countries have a shared perception of the China threat to some extent. Looking back at Quad 1.0, Australia and India at times denied the security implications of the Quad, or indicated to China that they were not keen on the Quad. Since then, the threat perception gap has decreased considerably following the clashes along the China-India border, China’s economic coercion and domestic interference against Australia. The United States, too, which previously made a conscientious effort to engage with China, shifted to a competitive approach toward the country. In this regard, the threat perception was the biggest factor bringing the four countries together.

Secondly, the Quad serves as a framework that connects Japan, the United States, and Australia to India. For the three countries, India has become a crucial security partner amidst the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition. Furthermore, India holds significant economic importance as a rapidly growing market. Therefore, the Quad has advanced practical cooperation by focusing on issues on which all four countries, including India, can form a consensus, despite the existence of the strategic gap. In fact, at the Quad Leaders’ Meeting in May 2022, Prime Minister Modi identified areas of cooperation, such as vaccine supply, climate change, resilient supply chains, disaster response, and economic cooperation. It can be inferred that India’s intentions aligned to a great extent with the recent Quad trend of diversifying its areas of cooperation.

Conversely, it means the Quad is not a framework that pursues consensus regarding issues on which the four countries are divided. This is evident from the fact that Japan, the United States, and Australia did not apply strong pressure on India to condemn Russia over the war in Ukraine. Given India’s strong strategic culture to seek autonomy, forcing India to align with the other three countries would make the Quad itself no longer sustainable. Therefore, it appears that the three countries are aiming to cooperate with India in a way that ensures the country is not isolated.

While the Quad has seen remarkable progress, it has both strengths and limitations. The Quad should be monitored in a level-headed manner, considering it as no more than one of the cooperation mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region.

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