



“The Quad has come of age”

The Quadrilateral Security Cooperation as the Guardian of the Rules-Based Order in the Indo-Pacific?

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Abstract

China's growing strength is bringing the Quad closer together. Is the alliance emerging as the dominant security actor in the Indo-Pacific? The Quadrilateral Security Cooperation consisting of the Indo-Pacific democracies Australia, India, Japan and the United States is experiencing a "revival" driven by the common goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The analysis shows what the Quad aims to achieve, what differences exist, and to what extent cooperation with Germany and Europe is foreseeable.

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Analysis

“A New Dawn”¹: The Resurrection of the Quad

The Indo-Pacific region, powerful economic engine, hotspot of various conflicts and area of geopolitical competition, is increasingly becoming the centre of global foreign and security policy discourses. China’s military rise and the intensifying systemic rivalry with the United States not only causes regional tensions, but also a reorganisation of multilateral alliance structures. A prominent example of these upheavals is the revival of an informal alliance between the Indo-Pacific democracies Australia, India and Japan and the United States forming the so-called Quadrilateral Security Cooperation – Quad in short.

The Quad formed itself in the course of increased cooperation between the four countries following the devastating tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean in 2004, but fragmented in 2008, partly due to changes in Australia’s foreign policy.² In 2017, the Quad has been revived, in particular on the initiative of the US and Japan. As the first summit of the four leaders took place in March 2021, the alliance now seems to have “come of age”.³ Will the Quad be the central security alliance in the Indo-Pacific in the upcoming decade? How does China, the central counterpart to the Quad, and how do other regional actors react to this alliance? And what are the implications of this dynamic for Germany and Europe?

“A Match Made in Heaven?”: Differences despite Convergence

The central driving forces behind the renewed formation of the Quad are the converging threat perceptions of Australia, India, Japan and the US in the face of Chinese military build- up and expansionist ambitions. The four Quad members declare a “free and open Indo-Pacific” as a core common goal, which de facto translates into the prevention of Chinese supremacy. Despite agreement in that regard, the four regional and great powers show significant differences which critical voices see as a risk to survival and success of the alliance.

In the first place, these differences of interest derive from the different geographic locations and the varying character of the conflict with China. While India’s main concern is the protection of its land borders and its maritime influence in the Indian Ocean, the focus of the other three states is on the Pacific and particularly the South China Sea. The member states moreover face varying degrees of direct territorial threat from the People’s Republic of China; considerable differences also result from the sector-specific economic dependencies of the individual Quad members from China.

The traditional security policy preferences of India and Japan furthermore limit the Quad’s room for manoeuvre. For instance, the pacifist attitude of Japanese society and politics has so far prevented a constitutional amendment to strengthen the Japanese military. As a result, Japan cannot make a comprehensive military contribution to the Quad, despite its reinterpretation of peace article 9 of its constitution.⁴ India’s traditional striving for strategic independence and its rejection of formal alliances (non-alignment) represent a further

¹ The White House 2021: Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Modi of India, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Suga of Japan in the Virtual Quad Leaders’ Summit, 12.03.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3ucP5pN> [02.05.2021].

² Flitton, Daniel 2020: Who really killed the Quad 1.0?, 05.05.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/33u3xOt> [02.05.2021].

³ The White House 2021: Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Modi of India, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Suga of Japan in the Virtual Quad Leaders’ Summit, 12.03.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3ucP5pN> [02.05.2021].

⁴ Article 9 of its constitution commits Japan to renouncing the right to wage war as well as the military means of war. While the country has maintained so-called self-defense forces for purely defensive purposes since the 1950s, the article was reinterpreted in 2015 so that the armed forces can be used for collective self-defense alongside allies.



factor of uncertainty – even if, at the latest since the recent military conflicts between China and India in the disputed region of Ladakh, a rethinking is taking place in New Delhi. At the same time, Indian politics is increasingly criticised for its anti-democratic, Hindu-nationalist tendencies⁵ which in turn puts the democratic, value-based legitimacy of the Quad into question.

“Unity through Necessity”: Pragmatism before Morality

Despite existing differences, Beijing’s increasingly aggressive claim to hegemony, underpinned by the military build-up and territorial expansion under President Xi Jinping, ensures a high level of cohesion in the Quad. The four member states’ bilateral relations with China have deteriorated significantly compared to the Quad’s “first era” from 2004 to 2008. A renewed disruption of the alliance is therefore rather improbable at the moment.

The relationship between Australia and China has been massively damaged at the latest since Australia demanded an independent investigation of the origin of the corona virus in early 2020; sanctions by Beijing are putting Australia’s economy under pressure. In light of escalating border disputes with China, India is now more interested in an alliance with Australia, Japan and the United States. New Delhi’s invitation to Australian forces to participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise with the US and Japan for the first time again in 2020 is one sign for this development. Japan, meanwhile, has been facing an increased risk of direct confrontation over the Senkaku Islands since China’s new law on the use of its coast guard in January 2021, which legitimises the use of weapons against foreign vessels.

The relationship between the US and China has also changed fundamentally compared to the time of “Quad 1.0.” While the United States benefited from comfortable military superiority in both the conventional and nuclear domains in the 2000s due to its world’s greatest economic power, the situation had turned by the time the Quad was re-established in 2017. China is now the world’s largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity and has caught up considerably in terms of weapons technology, driven by immense economic growth. In military fields such as shipbuilding or land-based medium-range missiles, the People’s Republic has already overtaken the United States, at least quantitatively.⁶ The military and economic pressure has resulted in Washington placing its strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific and balancing China’s quest for supremacy with its “Pivot to Asia” initiated by Barack Obama.

However, not only the rise of the People’s Republic, but also further geopolitical developments such as North Korea’s nuclear armament have permanently changed the security situation in the region compared to “Quad 1.0” and stabilised the alliance, which has so far survived country-specific differences of interest and changes of government in its member states. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the Quad – unlike in 2008 – will not collapse as a result of political differences. However, with all the emphasis on the members’ common understanding of values, it is clear that the alliance remains a pragmatic union. The Quad is an “arranged marriage”⁷

⁵ Ganguly, Sumit 2020: India's Democracy Is Under Threat, Foreign Policy, 18.09.2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2QQTfFB> [02.05.2021].

⁶ The U.S. only began developing land-based intermediate-range missiles after withdrawing from the INF Treaty in 2019, while China already possesses several hundred to a thousand systems, cf. Reif, Kingston 2020: U.S. Continues Intermediate-Range Missile Pursuit, Arms Control Association, 06.2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2RbduO9> [01.06.2021] and Kristensen, Hans 2021: Chinese nuclear forces, 2020, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, 76, 6, pp. 443 -On the shipbuilding of China and the USA, respectively, see Lendon, Brad 2021: China has built the world’s largest navy. Now what’s Beijing going to do with it?, CNN, 06.03.2021, in: <https://cnn.it/3i4OZ04> [01.06.2021].

⁷ Bagchi, Indrani 2020: India should take the lead in the Quad, The Times of India, 18.10.2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2Slp5KJ> [02.05.2021].



– it derives its binding force less from a common value-based agreement than from a shared concern for the “Chinese elephant in the room”.

The increased cohesion is expressed in stronger efforts by the four states to cooperate in a sustainable, effective, and issue-based manner. In the 2000s, the Quad was criticised as a mechanism without a strategic mission. This has changed with the “Quad 2.0.”: The first leaders’ summit in March 2021 resulted for the first time in a joint final declaration under the title “Spirit of the Quad” and sent a clear signal of intensive and increasingly institutionalised cooperation for a democratic, rules-based and stable order. In addition to concrete steps in security and defence policy with a focus on cybersecurity, securing critical infrastructure and technology, and counterterrorism, the Quad is also dedicated to addressing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. Regular meetings of foreign ministers and another leaders’ summit in 2021 were agreed to follow. With this “plan, not promise”⁸, the Quad has – in contrast to the past – prepared a clear agenda of cooperation.

“An Exclusive Asian NATO?”: Reactions from the Neighbourhood

The quadrilateral alliance in its immediate neighbourhood has neither remained unnoticed nor uncommented by Beijing. Since the resurgence of the Quad, the People’s Republic has consistently opposed the formation of “so-called democratic states,”⁹ which it calls a “militaristic anti-China initiative.”¹⁰ Beijing contends that in contrast to US efforts to build an exclusive network to contain the People’s Republic, Chinese initiatives are inclusive.¹¹ According to the Chinese narrative, Japan and Australia as US appendages are supporting the United States solidifying their claim to power in a Cold War mentality and undermining China’s growing influence by building an Asian NATO.¹²

Beijing’s political rhetoric emphasises the differences among the four states, suggesting disunity among the members, for example by referring to the lack of a joint statement after the foreign ministers’ meeting last year.¹³ The sharp statements show that China does see the Quad as a serious competitor on par. The Communist Party is moreover concerned about a possible expansion of the grouping to include other Asian members: South Korea in particular is reportedly regularly questioned off the record about its intentions to join¹⁴, while smaller Asian states are clearly warned against joining.¹⁵ For its part, the People’s Republic tries to balance the Quad through increased cooperation with the Russian Federation. Beijing and Moscow have, for instance, repeatedly announced demonstrative joint initiatives shortly before Quad meetings.¹⁶

⁸ Russel, Danny 2021: Quad Leaders Have Put Forward a Plan, Not a Promise, *The Diplomat*, 16.03.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/2QFRkU5> [02.05.2021].

⁹ China Daily 2018: Trump’s kiss of life for the Quad, 25.01.2018, in: <https://bit.ly/3uJVSHO> [11.05.2021].

¹⁰ Hong, Cai 2017: Abe’s exclusive initiatives are contrary to the trend of times, *China Daily*, 06.11.2017, in: <https://bit.ly/3o6WLYg> [11.05.2021].

¹¹ De Silva, Shakthi 2019: The Indo-Pacific and Sri Lanka, *Daily Financial Times*, 11.03.2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3xfvt5u> [11.05.2021].

¹² China Daily 2018: So near yet so far for Japan and India, *Global Times*, 31.10.2018, in: <https://bit.ly/3vWz8nZ> [11.05.2021].

¹³ Yi, Shen 2018: US Quad meeting a ruthless and toothless photo-op, 18.02.2018, in: <https://bit.ly/33yQGKJ> [11.05.2021].

¹⁴ Yonhap News Agency 2021: No talks with China on S. Korea’s joining of Quad: defense ministry, 26.04.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3vCz4K4> [02.05.2021].

¹⁵ Press Trust of India 2021: China warns of ‘substantial damage’ to relations if Bangladesh joins US-led Quad alliance, *EastMojo*, 11.05.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/2Q9YJL1> [11.05.2021].

¹⁶ Conley, Heather et al. 2021: The Return of the Quad: Will Russia and China Form Their Own Bloc?, *CSIS*, 06.04.2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3f94NMj> [11.05.2021].



“The More the Merrier?": The Future of the Quad

An expansion of the Quad is currently not foreseeable. However, this is not so much due to the reticence of the Quad – joint exercises by the four powers such as Sea Dragon 2021 with Canada or La Pérouse naval 2021 with France, as well as close bilateral relations with the European Union and its member states confirm the fundamental openness of the alliance. The aim to intensively support and cooperate with the states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the recognition of its central role in the region highlights regional integration. However, since the Quad’s argument for inclusiveness in fact does not include the People’s Republic, neither obvious candidates for membership such as South Korea nor the ASEAN states will so obviously choose sides and risk their relations with China by joining the Quad.

“Far, far away”: Implications for Germany and Europe

Despite the rising importance of the Indo-Pacific in terms of foreign and security policy, the potential for intensified cooperation between the Quad and Germany remains limited in the medium term. There is no question that Germany is politically in favour of the Quad as a multilateral alliance of democratic states. With the German government’s Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific from September 2020, Berlin underscored the desire to intensify partnerships with the states participating in the Quad. The goal of strengthening the international, rules-based order, as included in various strategic documents, coincides with the Quad’s objectives. Both the German government and the relevant foreign policy and defence departments therefore see support for the Quad as being in Germany’s interest.¹⁷

Notwithstanding this political support, German cooperation with the Quad, in particular in the area of defence policy, will remain limited due to a lack of resources on the German side. Military engagement in the Indo-Pacific will – if at all – mainly take place in the maritime domain; however, the capabilities of the German Navy are currently too limited to ensure a permanent presence beyond selective deployments, such as the frigate Bayern to the region from August 2021 on. Military cooperation with the Quad will therefore continue to be limited to symbolic contributions, such as the deployment of smaller contingents for exercises or of military liaison officers on ships of other states.

Germany will instead seek to close ranks with the Quad states at the political level, for example through more frequent visits by ministers and participation in regional conference formats. This approach also seems likely for the European Union, which aims to intensify relations with the states and alliances of the Indo-Pacific with the Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy on the Indo-Pacific published in April 2021.

A more realistic – albeit indirect – way for Germany and Europe to support the Quad would therefore be to make a greater contribution to conventional alliance defence in Europe, in line with Washington’s long-standing call for more equal burden-sharing in the NATO. Reducing the burden on the US, especially in view of Russia’s aggressive actions in Europe’s eastern and southern peripheries, would ultimately allow the United States to focus their military resources more on the Indo-Pacific. In this way, Germany and Europe would make a decisive contribution to supporting US policy in Asia and to the Quad.

In addition, German and European policymakers should give greater recognition to the strategic-political dimension of trade and investment relations with China and coordinate more closely with the US and the Quad

¹⁷ This view was expressed to the authors in confidential background discussions with officials of responsible ministries.



in this regard. The failure to coordinate with the US during the negotiations on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), currently on hold, under the German Council Presidency at the end of 2020 – just a few weeks before a change of office in Washington – is one example of the considerable need for improvement here.

Also, within the NATO framework, cooperation with the Quad will remain limited and will tend to be conducted bilaterally at the member state level – particularly by NATO members such as the United Kingdom and France with a special interest in the Indo-Pacific for strategic and historical reasons. Within the NATO, the alliance’s relationship with China is currently gaining increased attention as part of the so-called reflection process. Among other aspects, this process results in intensified cooperation with global partners such as Australia and Japan (since 2016), not least due to the strong interest of the United States. For example, in 2020, the Pacific global partners for the first time participated in a NATO foreign ministers’ meeting. However, further institutionalised cooperation between the alliances remains unrealistic at this moment in time.

Conclusion

For the time being, Germany’s and Europe’s cooperation with the four Quad states will be limited to political support for the alliance and intensified bilateral cooperation with the member states. Against the background of various recently published strategic documents on the Indo-Pacific, however, this is likely to remain below the expectations generated in the region. Despite some diverging views, the Quad currently remains without alternatives for Australia, India, Japan and the US in view of China’s growing supremacy. The alliance will thus remain a linchpin for joint decision-making and coordination processes in the Indo- Pacific in the future.

Comment: The article reflects the personal views of the authors.

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