

PERSPECTIVE

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The Quad: Less than the Sum of its Parts?

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(L-R) US President Joe Biden, Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold a quad meeting on the sidelines of the G7 Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima on 20 May 2023. (Photo by Kenny HOLSTON/POOL/AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Quad has rapidly emerged as a key new form of ‘minilateralism’ in Asia. It is valued by its members as a venue to signal their cooperation on regional priorities, driven by their shared perception of China as a threat to the present regional strategic balance and to their individual security interests.
- Originally focused on security cooperation, the Quad has opted to work on collaborative endeavours purported to advance regional order through public goods provision.
- In recent years, the Quad has expanded its cooperative domains and initiatives, which gives the appearance of a dynamic and fast-developing grouping. This expanding range of initiatives has yet to produce meaningful results, and their implementation lacks coordination and coherence. At the same time, the grouping seems to neglect security matters, and its existence has done little to constrain China’s behaviour.
- The Quad has potential but needs to reform its approach by developing a narrower range of activities, focusing on delivery, and ensuring coherence between its order-building ambitions and the substance of its public goods provision.
- Although the Quad’s new minilateralism was created because of the perceived shortcomings of existing ASEAN-led multilateralism, the Quad runs the risk of becoming another talking shop if it fails to focus on substantive delivery.
- In an era of great power competition, building inter-state consensus, policy coordination and cooperation has become extraordinarily difficult for both established forms of multilateralism and new types of minilateralism.

INTRODUCTION

The third Quad leaders' summit had been expected to be a visually stunning affair at the iconic Sydney Opera House. The leaders of Australia, India, Japan and the US had planned to signal the Quad's coming of age with an expansive agenda of cooperation. Yet, Joe Biden's budget wrangling with House Republicans led to the cancellation of the event in Sydney and critics immediately highlighted how US domestic politics was damaging its global ambitions.¹ A compressed Quad summit was held at the sidelines of the G7 meeting in Hiroshima, which felt shorter than it took to read the various documents that were issued in its name.² The vision of the Quad offered at the summit, the shopping list of activities, statements and principles, are an underwhelming product for six years of much ballyhooed cooperation between four of Asia's most important democracies. Despite its high profile, the Quad has not yet found its place as a meaningful contributor either to regional stability or order building.

The Quad is one of the most prominent examples of Asia's 'new minilateralism'.³ This form is notable because such groupings tend to be exclusive and competitive, whereas the region's longstanding multilateral forms have been inclusive in their approach to participation, and cooperative in terms of their strategic dynamic.⁴ Furthermore, their creation has been prompted by a lack of confidence in the existing security architecture and they present a nascent challenge to ASEAN centrality in that architecture, and to regional cooperation more generally. The Quad has mobilised the attention of four significant regional powers and has rapidly developed a wide-ranging agenda focused primarily on the provision of international public goods. It has lofty ambitions to support and defend a broadly liberal vision of the region's international order and has relatively swiftly developed a considerable profile.

The grouping clearly has significant potential. Yet the Quad's ability to realise this has been hamstrung by a lack of focus, illustrated by an ever-expanding list of activities which have achieved little to date. Among a wide array of activities announced, none has made a meaningful contribution at the regional level. The Quad lacks a coherent plan to link its high-level aims to policy action that advances those goals. More pressingly, without a significant focus on substantive delivery, there is a very real risk that the Quad will become just another talking shop. This *Perspective* provides a critical analysis of the Quad, its strengths and limitations, and assesses its implications for the broader strategic dynamics in an increasingly contested region.

TAKING STOCK

First established in 2007, the grouping was formally referred to as the 'Quadrilateral Security Initiative'. It brought together Australia, India, Japan and the US to coordinate activity regarding shared regional security concerns.⁵ Japan's Abe Shinzo was the group's most visible advocate, although the idea had a strong undercurrent of American leadership, with both New Delhi and Canberra being somewhat reluctant participants. The group dissolved within 12 months, reflecting the lack of consensus among the four about the need for such a body.⁶ Ten years later, the Quad was brought out of the deep freeze to work on their increasingly shared concerns about the region's deteriorating security environment. While rarely articulated in public, the motivation for its resuscitation was a shared perception of the threat that Xi

Jinping's China presented to the strategic balance in Asia and to their individual security interests.⁷ Tellingly, the group has rebranded itself as the 'Quad', ditching the security initiative from its formal moniker.

The Quad held its first meeting at the sidelines of the 2017 East Asia Summit (EAS) at the senior officials level.⁸ This was followed by a number of meetings between officials and military officers, including a gathering of an admiral from each country at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi in 2018.⁹ In 2021, they established the annual Leaders' summit intended to signal the Quad's importance through the dedication of top political time as well as to ensure an ongoing focal point to sustain momentum. US President Biden hosted the first Quad summit; the most recent, originally planned in Sydney in May 2023, was hastily rearranged to be a 45-minute gathering in Hiroshima. The foreign ministers of the Quad countries took the opportunity of 2022's UN General Assembly in New York to convene their first annual ministerial meeting and the most recent one was held in New Delhi in March 2023.¹⁰

The annual leaders' summits have become the venue at which increasingly lengthy statements are made about the purpose of the Quad and where they lay out the ways in which the four are seeking to make good on their ambitions. The first of these reads as something of a foundational document. Their vision for the grouping is impressively ambitious: the Quad aims to promote "the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond".¹¹

The Quad began life as a security-focused grouping with an emphasis on concrete areas of security and defence cooperation. Initial discussions focused on coordinating security policy, and operational aspects of their shared maritime security concerns prompted by China's rise. Scholars and analysts had expected that the Quad would have defence and security matters at its core.¹² Since 2021, however, the Quad has ventured into broader areas of collaboration mainly related to public goods provision. It has become a body that works on a much more expansive and wide-ranging set of policy areas, and indeed those military-focused security matters are conspicuous by their absence. At the Hiroshima summit in 2023, the leaders issued a fact sheet which set out an extensive list of the Quad's key initiatives. These are in relation to infrastructure, maritime security, climate, health, critical and emerging technologies, space and even public-private partnerships.¹³ This widening-out of policy domains for cooperation has real potential but also some significant problems.

Despite the breadth of areas in which the Quad is seeking to cooperate, it does not have a substantive agenda working on economic matters beyond a number of programmes relating to infrastructure such as enhancing cooperation among their export credit agencies. There seems little appetite for taking this on in the future. Given the importance that the Quad members now put on the broader non-security contributions to order building and their emphasis on a particularly liberal vision for the region, their lack of an economic dimension is remarkable. It is doubly so given how China has been effectively using geoeconomic policies to advance its international policy goals. It is illustrative of gaps that exist between the Quad members on economic policy. It is also a function of the significant domestic problems that each member would face, especially the United States and India, were they to try to advance meaningful cooperation in economic matters along liberal lines. It also puts real limits on what they can achieve in trying to shape and defend a liberal vision for the region.

The Quad has put its label on a series of perfectly laudable and reasonable programmes that while worthy, are not really going to make a difference to the larger ambitions to protect a stable, rules-based liberal regional order in the face of the challenge presented by ambitious authoritarian powers. Take for example the Quad STEM Fellowship which allows scholars in various science and engineering fields to spend time in the US. The aim is to develop “a network of science and technology experts committed to advancing innovation and collaboration in the private, public, and academic sectors, in their own nations and among Quad countries.”¹⁴ It is run by Schmidt Futures, a philanthropic initiative of one of Google’s founders. It is clearly a worthy programme but when set against the aims of defending the international rules-based order in Asia, it seems an initiative on the wrong scale and time horizon.

Even in initiatives linked to maritime security such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, the grouping has so far delivered very little. There are three small pilot programmes whose contributions are not well known and the slowness with which the programme has developed provides little confidence that it can achieve the ambitions of improving maritime domain awareness in a maritime region as vast as the Indo-Pacific. Certainly, if the grouping could enhance the ability of states across the region, and not just the Quad members, to deal with maritime security issues such as illegal unreported and unregulated fishing, then it would be a real contribution.¹⁵ As yet, however, there’s not much to show for six years of problem-focused cooperation between four of the region’s most significant maritime powers.

The decision to move away from a security-first focus was in part prompted by the recognition that regional order is multi-dimensional and that a full-spectrum programme of collaboration was needed to deliver on the grouping’s aims; to defend a liberal order requires a good deal more than better coordination of naval capabilities and intelligence sharing. It was also an attempt to manage the regional consequences of creating a new and potentially influential grouping intended to limit China’s influence and contain its ambitions. The four did not want to be seen to be unnecessarily provoking confrontation. This desire to emphasise reassurance over deterrence seems to have two larger problems. Most obviously, the Quad’s attempts to advance the broader public goods elements have been unimpressive thus far. The issue areas are patchy and uneven, they lack coordination, and a coherent vision for its contribution is difficult to discern. The other problem is that the Quad seems to have taken its eyes off security matters. While it is entirely correct to recognise that regional security interests are wide-ranging and multi-dimensional, it is critical that the hard power elements are not neglected altogether. Some analysts have argued for this to be rectified in the lead up to the 2023 summit,¹⁶ yet it seems to no avail. Equally, there are reports that there is some frustration amongst the group, emanating most strongly from Washington, about the lack of focus on these matters; but these have not flared into public view as yet.

Despite this, the Quad remains significant for its members and for the region. One obvious area in which it makes a difference is the way that it structures the bureaucracies of the four states and improves their capacity to work together. One of the reasons why the Quad has found it difficult so far to deliver on its ambitions is the lack of experience working with one another in these new areas. The regularity of the meetings and interactions is going to increase this

capacity over time. For some members, most notably Australia and Japan, the Quad also acts as a useful focal point for their bureaucracies to sustain focus on India. Improving ties to the world's most populous democracy has been a priority stated by Australian governments for over a decade, but one that Canberra has found difficult to sustain due to capacity constraints within the various ministries. The Quad provides a key focal point for the Australian bureaucracy not only to work on the programme of collaboration between the four but also to sustain cooperative engagement with interlocutors in New Delhi in their bilateral ties. It also offers a way in which Tokyo and Canberra can exert leadership in a large and complex region where their geopolitical clout is decidedly second-tier.

The Quad has proven to be adept at moving from stasis to being a high-profile example of the new minilateralism. Yet, judged against its ambition to work “for a region that is peaceful and prosperous, stable and secure and respectful of sovereignty”,¹⁷ the Quad so far has done very little. It is a textbook example of attempting to do order building or strategic policy through press releases and leaders' vision statements. Unless changes are made, the ability of the Quad to realise its ambitions in a highly contested geopolitical space will ultimately be limited.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

From a Southeast Asian perspective, the Quad represents a potential challenge to ASEAN and its interest in remaining at the centre of regional security cooperation. Given the strategic and economic weight of its four members and the Quad's promise of concrete cooperation on security matters, one can see why supporters of ASEAN centrality might have been concerned. The speed with which the Quad moved from the sidelines of the EAS to high-profile leaders' summits may have been a source of some trepidation. The contrast between the Quad as a nimble start-up and the slow and tired incumbent ASEAN was striking.

The Quad has taken pains in recent years to speak at great length about the importance of ASEAN centrality and the Southeast Asian grouping more broadly.¹⁸ The members take almost every opportunity to emphasise that their grouping is fully compatible with ASEAN institutions, norms and practices. Yet, the stark reality remains that multilateralism, understood as a broader practice in which groups of states get together to coordinate policy settings, is in poor shape in the region. The Quad's re-creation reflected its members' lack of confidence in the ability of Asia's security architecture that had been created in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁹ ASEAN had been a critical player in creating many aspects of the network of multilateral structures and processes, such as the EAS and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). But these structures and processes did not provide the assurance that the Quad members felt was needed in the face of a deteriorating regional security environment. They thus opted to re-animate the entity that had been established a decade earlier.

The new minilateralism was created because of the perceived shortcomings of the existing regional forms of multilateralism. Yet, the contested geopolitical dynamics and the diverging interests at play in this large and complex region means that building consensus and achieving policy coordination and cooperation to address critical issues are extraordinarily difficult, even within a small grouping of self-styled 'like-minded' states such as the Quad. The visible gaps that exist between its members in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a clear reminder

of the challenges involved in aligning the interests of the four countries. While they have found it relatively straightforward to build a consensus about the challenge China poses, forging a shared view about broader ranging issues at the international level is much more difficult and will likely continue to bedevil efforts to drive a more substantive agenda.

The logic of the Quad opting to focus their efforts on public goods for collaborative endeavour was sound. It showed an understanding of the complex nature of security as well as a degree of diplomatic caution. It was also about finding areas that are politically more straightforward to cooperate. It is always easier to collaborate on relatively less controversial matters such as export credit agencies and education exchange than high matters of state and national security. Equally, public goods have clear spill-over effects. For example, delivering high-quality outcomes in relation to maritime domain awareness can benefit countries across the region and align their interests with those of the Quad members. But what we have seen play out is that geopolitics and rivalry are making the business of cooperation much harder than it was before. Indeed, beyond the shared security concerns about China, the four do not have especially well aligned complementarities in areas of functional cooperation or public goods provision.

Critically, the Quad is compounding the problem by diverting resources away from cooperation in the existing collaborative structures.²⁰ The logic of free trade that informed the multilateral trading system created after 1945 was that the widest possible base was needed to provide benefits at the scale that would provide incentives for states to participate. That same basic logic – that collaboration needs to be on the widest base possible – remains critical to advancing a collaborative agenda today. But the intrusion of geopolitics is fracturing that base. On top of this, exclusive forms of collaboration, which are in turn suffused with geopolitics, further limit the breadth of interaction and thus the benefits which it can create. Finally, if the purpose of the Quad is to constrain China's behaviour, there seems to be little evidence that Beijing is responding with heightened moderation in its approach to regional order.

CONCLUSION

The Quad's progress, beyond that of profile, has been unimpressive, having little of substance to show for more than half a decade of cooperation beyond an ever-growing shopping list of activities that are of marginal consequences to the regional ambitions of the four countries. But considerable potential remains in the structure in which four liberal democracies work together to provide much needed international public goods at a time of heightened competition, nationalism and a zero-sum logic at work.

Considerable work needs to be done before that potential can be realised. Most obviously, the Quad needs a much clearer and sharper sense of purpose. The rousing rhetoric of order building is appealing, especially at leaders' gatherings, but there needs to be a clearer and more systematic link between the Quad's higher-level ambitions and what exactly they will do together to advance those goals. At the moment, the activities are a grab-bag of things that might in some indirect way contribute to orderly relations in the region and benefit other states. But they have little overall coherence and no clear line between what they are trying to achieve and the larger ambitions of order protection and construction. Most obviously, the Quad needs to make a clear decision about whether or not it is a security grouping, or one focused on public

goods. At the moment, it seems to have defaulted into a grouping that pursues public goods as an indirect and circuitous path to some vaguely conceived security goals. A much clearer sense as to just what kind of grouping they are trying to be would go a long way to developing a priority of work programmes that are coherent in advancing a collective agenda. Presently, the public goods are too diffuse and lack a larger strategic plan, and coordination among the Quad members in the delivery has been underwhelming.

Equally, the Quad needs to change how it is trying to advance public goods. The experience of institution building in the early 2000s can be instructive. Regional groupings like the ARF and EAS burnt through their political capital by taking on too expansive an agenda and delivering too little. The Quad, wittingly or not, risks repeating that mistake. It needs to begin by paring back the number of things it is working on and focusing more resources, time and energy on a smaller number of meaningful public goods programmes. These can then build momentum and confidence in the cooperative endeavour and have non-members see the benefits that the Quad can create for the region more generally. Unless or until substantive cooperative outcomes begin to be delivered and in which others take note and see a benefit, the Quad is unlikely to generate either public goods or indirect security benefits. If it continues on its current path, it is likely to end up being little more than a photo opportunity and glad-handing amongst dignitaries. This would be a tragedy given the deep levels of support that liberally oriented regional order needs now and in the coming years.

ENDNOTES

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