

Eyes on China: The Quad Takes Scattered Aim

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has had its fits and starts, but nothing encourages such chats than threats, actual or perceived. In 2017, Japanese **Foreign Minister Taro Kono** felt that it was time that a strategic dialogue between Japan, the United States, Australia and India should be revived. The Quad, as it was termed, was on the way to becoming a more serious forum, having had its tentative origins in the cooperative efforts of the four countries in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Formally launched in 2007, the initiative petered out.*

The evolution of such a forum typically begins at senior official level, followed by a ministerial upgrade. Levels of seniority get roped in until the leaders of the countries take the reins. But at its inception, brows creased in Beijing. These were not, however, meant to reach the level of full blown frowns.

The prospect of this somewhat misnamed “Asian NATO” was not to be taken too seriously, though officials in the Trump administration did contemplate a collective with teeth and persuasiveness. In October 2020, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was all about [using the grouping](#) to combat China. “This is for the soul of the world. This is about whether this will be a world that operates ... on a rules-based international order system, or one that’s dominated by a coercive totalitarian regime like the one in China.” At the time, Pompeo had to settle for a more mild-mannered proposal – that of the [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) – an idea advanced by **former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe** in 2016.

Nonetheless, the four powers have been painting a picture that will not find cheer in **President Xi Jinping’s** quarters. At a press conference in September last year, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Wang Wenbin**, when asked about the government’s views on the upcoming October Quad meeting, curtly [spoke](#) of being against the “forming of exclusive cliques”. The “targeting of third parties or undermining third parties’ interests” was surely less preferable to conducive cooperation towards “mutual understanding and trust between regional countries.”

Last month, the Quad’s four foreign ministers met. Japan’s **Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi** [described](#) “candid talks about cooperation toward the free and open Indo-Pacific and on regional and global issues.” US State Department spokesperson **Ned Price** noted in a [statement](#) that discussion also included “the priority of strengthening democratic

resilience in the broader region” and maintaining “support for freedom of navigation and territorial integrity.”

The Biden administration is also making an effort to elevate the status of the Quad. The president intends holding a virtual meeting on March 12 with the prime ministers of Japan, Australia and India. White House Press Secretary **Jen Psaki** [rolled out](#) the now frequent message that such meetings demonstrated Biden’s keenness to take allies and partnerships seriously. According to the press secretary, topics to be discussed will include “the threat of COVID”, “economic cooperation” and the “climate crisis”. Only the dimmest of dolts could avoid the prospect that China would not come up in the virtual chat feast.

A senior administration was more forthcoming in [telling](#) Reuters that, “This sends a very strong signal of common cause and purpose. And the goal here is basically to introduce the Quad as a new feature of regular diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific.” Similarly, Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** [spoke](#) of the Quad becoming “a feature of Indo-Pacific engagement,” a gathering of “four leaders four countries” and not “a big bureaucracy with a big secretariats”. And just to make the point of a counterweight to Chinese power clear, without naming Beijing, Morrison envisaged the arrangement as an “anchor of peace and stability in the region”.

Each of the nations, however, have their individual differences in how to deal with China. Australia remains obsessed with foreign interference and Chinese moves into regional Pacific politics, piggy backing on US power in order to stem that influence. Japan considers good relations with China important, while still happy to concede ground to the US as being the dominant Asian-Pacific power.

India remains the most cautious participant. Its foreign policy harks back to the days of non-alignment maintained during the Cold War. Unlike Japan and Australia, there is no fondness for the idea of having one dominant bully in the playground, dressed up in the clothing of strategic primacy. But its relationship with China remains fractious. The border dispute in the Himalayan region, which also features a competition to build infrastructure, turned bloody in June 2020 [in a Galwan Valley clash](#) that left over 20 Indian soldiers dead. Accusations about provocations by both sides have been traded with increasing frequency since last year, with a mutual disengagement between the Indian Army and the People’s Liberation Army from disputed points yet to take place.

In November 2020, New Delhi invited Australia to participate in the annually held Malabar naval exercises, frequented by US and Japan. **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** seemed to be turning. This week, India confirmed that he would be attending the virtual conference, with the Ministry of External Affairs [revealing](#) that discussions would cover the ground traversed by the foreign ministers in February. “The leaders will discuss regional and global issues of shared interest, and exchange views on practical areas of cooperation towards maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.”

Despite much common ground, the prospects of the Quad flowering into a security arrangement that will ring-fence China seem unlikely. Provocative as it may well be, the more measured sages in Beijing will consider the differences between the four powers and deal with each of them accordingly. The cannier ones might even choose to manipulate them.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Articles by: **[Dr. Binoy
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