

Questioning the Quad's Rhetoric

One should gauge the Quad's true intent by its actions, not spin

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In the wake of the rancorous China-US [standoff](#) at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Quad looms ever larger in importance.

The [Quad](#) – short for Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – is a loose but rapidly evolving security arrangement of Australia, India, Japan and the US. As it evolves and expands its participants in Quad-Plus “initiatives,” it is a good time to parse its intent and direction. The Quad leaders’ [statement](#) of May 20 from their fifth meeting provides a starting point.

In the leaders’ words, the core intent of the Quad is to maintain a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and uphold “the rules-based international order.”

This is code for the international system primarily built and dominated by the US and the West and that preferentially benefits them. The leaders think it is increasingly under threat from a rising China and this must be deterred. They hope to do this by [coordinating](#) their strategy to constrain, contain and, if necessary, confront China.

The Quad’s agenda includes traditional security issues like “upholding peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain” and “adherence to international law, particularly that reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea,” or UNCLOS.

The Quad has already held joint military exercises and its Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness could well [provide](#) a basis for cooperation on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance targeting China’s military. This is but the tip of an iceberg of ongoing and planned traditional security cooperation.

However, it has deftly merged the United States’ real raison d’être with an agenda that

includes cooperation on non-traditional security issues like climate change, disaster risk, pandemics, infrastructure, and cyber and maritime safety.

The non-traditional part of the security agenda is a sop to wary India and Japan and the sensitivities of Southeast Asian countries.

Anti-China agenda

Indeed, the Quad's evolution toward a hardcore security arrangement would have moved much faster but for India's non-alignment policy and markedly [different](#) worldview – as evidenced by its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and Japan's constitutional constraint against deploying offensive weapons.

[Australia](#) also doesn't want it to move too quickly toward a defense alliance because of the sensitivities of China and Southeast Asia.

While these factors may slow the pace of its evolution into a full-blown anti-China defense arrangement, Japan and India seem to be changing their political tune in response to an increasingly aggressive China and moving toward the US goal.

The US intent of the Quad for the time being is for it to be a US-driven “[quiet and implicit deterrent](#)” against an increasingly aggressive China. Certainly China and many other countries in the region see it this way.

But the Quad's spin doctors hide its real intent. The recent Quad Leaders' Joint Statement repeats what has become the standard language for its intent: “We reaffirm our steadfast commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient.” A key word is “inclusive” as advocated by India and Southeast Asia. But in US eyes it doesn't seem to include China.

Indeed, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [told](#) the Shangri-La Dialogue that the United States is “doubling down” on regional alliances and partnerships “at every stage of defense planning.”

“Our shared goals are clear: to deter aggression and to deepen the rules and norms that promote prosperity and prevent conflict,” he said. “So we're stepping up planning and coordination, and training with our friends from the East China Sea to the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.”

The Quad Statement says: “We seek a region where no country dominates and no country is dominated – one where all countries are free from coercion....” This is aimed at China. But the US coerces countries militarily and economically around the world – including in the Indo-Pacific.

Examples include its co-called “freedom of navigation operations” challenging others' maritime claims with warships and its [sanctions](#) imposed on such countries as China and even some of its leaders, such as Defense Minister Li Shangfu, to try to force a change in policies and actions. Amazingly, it then complains that he won't meet with his US counterpart.

Even the leaders' self-serving claim to be responsible for the security of the Indo-Pacific region is questionable. Australia is the only Quad member that is a genuine geographic

Indo-Pacific country bordering both oceans.

The US does border the Pacific Ocean and has many possessions there left over from the colonial era and World War II. But what is the basis of the US claim to be an “Indo” country? If it is its military base on Diego Garcia that is currently controlled by the UK, that is quite a stretch.

Many African countries border the Indian Ocean. That doesn’t make them “Pacific” countries. India is not a “Pacific” country and Japan is not an “Indo” state, unless one counts its dependence on its sea lanes for its oil and gas imports.

The US has created this fuzzy Indo-Pacific concept and grouping by cobbling together countries at the extreme edges of the region in its strategy to surround China. This verbal geographic sleight of hand seems to be based on conceptual imperialism.

Indeed, the key for the US is that it has security interests and military bases in the area and deploys its military there. By this definition, the US is a global country.

The Quad leaders reaffirmed their “consistent and unwavering support for ASEAN centrality and unity.” This assertion is now included in all Quad statements to try to spin reality. But rather than supporting ASEAN centrality, the Quad – if effective – will become central to regional security management, particularly in the South China Sea.

Indeed, the US and its allies wanted to use the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or some of its members as a bulwark and buffer against China. But they would not cooperate to the extent that the Quad leaders sought. So the US and its allies went around and over ASEAN to form the Quad and its ancillary AUKUS, an Australia-US-UK defense pact. As a result, ASEAN centrality in regional security affairs has been weakened.

The Quad leaders emphasize the importance of adherence to international law and UNCLOS. But the US has not ratified that treaty, and some of its practices and claims, as well as those of Australia, India and Japan, are [contrary](#) to its provisions. Moreover all of them – just like China – have defied the rulings of international panels.

The point is that one should not rely solely on the Quad’s pompous rhetoric but instead gauge its intent by its actions. For perceptive analysts and policymakers, reality trumps spin.

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