

Will South Korea Become a QUAD+ Member?

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The US government is seeking to include Korea in an expanded version of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a strategic forum created in 2007 to contain China. The Quad is made up of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, but the US wants to expand it by inviting South Korea, New Zealand and Vietnam. This project is known as QUAD Plus.

So far the QUAD is relatively informal, but even under Trump there have been attempts to turn it into something greater, preferably the equivalent of an “Indo-Pacific NATO,” which would be both an economic and a military bloc. In this context, it is essentially a reincarnation of the concept of SEATO, but four countries are not enough for the functioning of a full-fledged military bloc, which is why it needs allies like South Korea and even Vietnam. As noted by US **Deputy Secretary of State Steven Bigan**: “The Indo-Pacific region lacks strong multilateral structures. It has nothing like NATO or the European Union there.”

NEO expert Vladimir Terekhov notes that since late 2019, the QUAD has begun to become more institutionalized, but for now it remains one of many forums where the US and its allies discuss pressing regional issues. However, if its format is expanded, the likelihood of it becoming an “Asian NATO” will [grow significantly](#).

The change of administration had no effect on these plans, and the anti-Beijing and anti-Pyongyang course only intensified. So on March 12, 2021, **Joe Biden** and his colleagues from Australia, India and Japan reaffirmed their commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea and stressed the need to immediately resolve the issue of the Japanese citizen [abducted](#) by North Korea.

But Seoul does not want to damage its relations with Beijing and so far has shown a rather ambiguous stance. When asked on September 25, 2020, ROK **Foreign Minister Kang Gen-hwa** was asked if her country would be willing to join Washington’s initiative to expand the QUAD, which currently includes Australia, Japan and India, her response was mostly negative. “We don’t think something that automatically shuts down and excludes the interests of others is a [good idea](#)”.

On November 13, 2020, **Seo Joo-seok**, deputy director of the National Security Administration, stated that South Korea had not received a formal request from the United

States to [join](#) the QUAD.

On February 18, 2021, US **Secretary of State Antony Blinken** agreed to meet regularly with his colleagues from the other three QUAD member countries. The agreement was reached during a virtual meeting [attended](#) by Australian **Foreign Minister Marise Payne**, Indian **Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** and Japanese **Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi**.

On February 22, 2021, **Ned Price** of the US State Department stated that the United States will continue to [develop](#) the QUAD:

“This is an example of the United States and some of our closest partners coming together in the name of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.”

On March 8, 2021, **Hwang Ji-hwan**, a member of the South Korean Presidential Policy Advisory Panel, told the American Journal that South Korea “may be considering joining the QUAD in an attempt to influence US policy [toward](#) North Korea”. Afterwards, however, **First Deputy Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kyung** disavowed this: “South Korea has consistently opposed the creation of a regional structure that excludes a [particular country](#)”.

On March 10, 2021, the Blue House stated that South Korea would consider joining the QUAD in a “transparent, open and inclusive” [manner](#). Moreover, this time again, he did not confirm whether or not the US request for South Korean participation had been formal.

The QUAD issue has not yet been mentioned in the joint statements of **Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** during their visit to South Korea or in the program of **Defense Minister Seo Wook**’s visit to India: “The upcoming talks will focus on defense cooperation between the [two countries](#)”.

Let us draw some conclusions. At the moment, the QUAD is more of a regional forum that has not yet acquired the features of a political or military bloc. This allows Seoul to maintain a certain distance and hold its ambiguous stance.

On the other hand, there has been no official request for Seoul to join the QUAD+, and without it, there has been no response.

It is likely that the United States expects that further confrontation with China and/or North Korea as a forced ally of China will lead to some developments that could push Seoul to join the QUAD as a necessary response. In this sense, the situation resembles the THAAD story, when Park Geun-hye said neither yes nor no for a long time, and then quickly and without prior preparation made this decision in the face of the North Korean nuclear tests.

From the author’s point of view, the accession of the ROK to the QUAD is inevitable — if not under Moon, then under his successor. At best, Seoul will reprimand itself with somewhat of a special status, which will allow this to be presented to domestic audiences as a diplomatic victory: “We negotiated, not capitulated.” The worst would be full acceptance of US conditions, very likely justified by the current activity of North Korea.

The fact that this has not happened so far is due, on the one hand, to fears of harsh Chinese sanctions and, on the other hand, to Moon Jae-in’s populist image as an independent politician. In this context, it is undesirable for Moon to take measures that would harm his

public image, unless there is a clear justification in the form of, say, North Korean provocations. In addition, his status as a “lame duck,” which doesn’t really help him in the long-term future, for now allows Moon to stall for time. The process of forming an anti-Chinese alliance will take time in any case, its final stage could happen as early as 2022, and then the burden of choice will fall on his successor.

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