

QUAD IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: ROLE OF INFORMALITY IN COUNTERING CHINA

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The Quad, a highly informal intergovernmental organization in the Indo-Pacific, is a high-profile security grouping composed of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. For some, the Quad's informality and lack of clear security commitments means it is little more than a "talk shop". For others, it is an emergent military alliance. This issue brief¹ shows that the Quad's overriding purpose is a bit of both via its core mission to meet the long-term security challenges posed by China to each Quad member and the quartet collectively. But rather than turning to an interlocking security alliance, the quartet looks for collective security and the protection of jealously guarded sovereignties via the Quad's informality. Indeed, informality is a geopolitical necessity for the Quad as it provides a workable format for four diverse members to coordinate security activities whilst maintaining equivocal positions vis-à-vis China. In the process, Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. have progressively strengthened bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral defense and security ties.

Introduction

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad, is an informal group comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. The Quad in the Indo-Pacific is responsible for coordinating security activities between the four members and sits on top of (and is supported by) a web of interlinking bilateral and trilateral groupings. Some view the Quad as an embryonic military alliance, while others see it as a loose group with little purpose. This issue brief aims to clarify

the purpose of the Quad and explore why it has chosen to maintain an informal format to confront the existential security challenges posed by China.

The Quad countries were motivated to form a security grouping to address the long-term challenges posed by the rise of China and its resultant territorial and political demands. While there is broad consensus about China within the Quad, its members all wish to jealously guard their sovereignty of action and avoid rule-taking from one another. For these reasons,

the Quad’s informality provides in-built flexibility and adaptability to respond to the challenges posed by China. It also allows the participating countries to pursue their own foreign policy interests while enjoying the benefits that come from cooperation with their Quad partners. The result is that Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. can send reassuring signals to one another without a more formal arrangement that may lead to an alliance replete with security guarantees. At the same time, it can send signals to China that it aims to deter aggression or predation on the part of Beijing collectively. While its ultimate utility and deterrence can be questioned (will it really act against China should push comes to shove?), the informal Quad grouping has already done much to reshape security dynamics across the Indo-Pacific and the global distributions of power. It has also played a role in shaping regional norms and values.

The Importance of Informality

The level of attention the Quad is currently receiving in media and policy circles stands in marked contrast to its organizational maturity, which remains largely stillborn.² Although there are signs that the Quad’s format has become more routinized since it was revived in 2017, no budgets have been allocated, no agreements signed, and joint statements have only recently been issued. Few obligations or commitments—tacit or otherwise—are placed on its members. Instead, the Quad’s purpose is ambiguous, its format highly informal, and its activities largely non-controversial.³

Informal intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are a type of organization that allows states to coordinate on issues of mutual concern without requiring a high level of formal commitment or agreement. They come in various forms and can serve a range of purposes. Some scholars have argued that states often prefer informality in IGOs because it allows them to align strategically without sacrificing their autonomy to a supranational entity.⁴ As such, a “cascade” of informality in IGOs has been posited by scholars.⁵ The Quad’s informality, thus,

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can be said to reflect the growing trend of informal intergovernmental organizations in international politics such as MIKTA, the G20, and BRICS.

Informal IGOs also tend to have decentralized structures, which means they do not require strict discipline or a hierarchical structure (see also Table 1). This allows for “trust-based” relations among members who might otherwise be resistant to rule-taking from stronger parties with whom they may have conflicting issues. Informal IGOs offer flexibility, allowing members to coordinate actions without incurring obligations. This can be particularly useful for states that are seeking to counter a common, long-term security threat.⁶

Table 1: Main characteristics of formal alliances compared to informal security coordination

	Paradigmatic formal alliance	Informal security coordination
Membership	Unitary states	Unitary states and possibly NGOs
Structure	Centralized/hierarchical	Decentralized/flat
Political visibility	High	Low-Medium (depends on signaling)
Legalized obligations	Present	Absent
Unit relations	Treaty-based	Trust-based
Scope	Focused and fixed	Ambiguous and flexible
Bureaucracy	Highly developed	Little to absent

Source: Authors’ composite table drawn from the literature and related research.

Because of its informality, some have criticized the Quad for its lack of binding commitments from its member-countries and have called it an “empty gesture.”⁷ However, we assess that the informality of the Quad is a suitable arrangement for its members because it places minimal obligations on them and allows them to avoid issues on which they hold divergent positions. The informality of the Quad allows for coordination across various areas of common interest, especially in the maritime domain, without curtailing the autonomy of each sovereign member.

The Quad’s informality plays two vital roles. First, informality is meant to signal amity among the four countries and, second, it avoids stoking tensions with Beijing. Chinese leaders can mutter about the Quad being an alliance but lack the proof to make such accusations stick precisely because of the organization’s informal, club-like nature. After all, the Quad lacks typical alliance behavior such as formal commitments and clear diplomatic statements that reference the threat of China. Indeed, the word China rarely figures in the statements issued after the Quad’s various meetings and summits. While the wisdom of this informal approach can be debated, it is nevertheless a key factor in why the Quad currently functions as it does and its longevity.

Defining the Quad

The Quad was first initiated in 2007, when an inaugural meeting was held on the margins of the East Asia Summit in Manila. The forum, nevertheless, quickly became inactive for a variety of reasons, foremost of which was the 2008 resignation of its architect, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In 2017, the Quad (or what is often referred to as “Quad 2.0”) was revived, and the participating countries began to hold regular meetings and dialogues again.

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platform for the participating countries to coordinate on regional security issues and to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Indeed, because the Quad remains highly informal, it seems to be chiefly a mechanism of dialogue for self-described “like-minded countries”; it is formalized only in that meetings occur regularly, albeit with no set plans, few announcements, or locations.

Because the Quad’s unit relations are not bound by rules, there is a sense of equality among the four as members of an exclusive club. This allows for an easy distribution of convening and hosting functions. Since 2017, the Quad’s meetings have been held from Manila to Bangkok and from Tokyo to Washington, D.C., as well as online. The only precondition seems to be reaching consensus about the dates and locations. That being said, as the incubator of Quad 1.0 and the pusher of Quad 2.0, Japan reportedly does much of the heavy diplomatic lifting, arranging meetings and putting together amenable, agreed-upon agendas. Nevertheless, after showing initial skepticism for the Quad, in 2007, during the presidency of George W. Bush, the U.S. has become a firm believer in the minilateral’s utility as a foreign policy tool to protect American interests in East and South Asia.

After the Quad’s resurrection, which was supported fully by Washington, the U.S. reportedly led efforts to create “Quad-light” groupings or minilaterals that were supported by India. One of these minilaterals, the Quad Plus, represents an atypical approach

to security diplomacy in that it wooed of a grab bag of states such as South Korea, Israel, Brazil, New Zealand, and Vietnam within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ Another spin-off is the so-called West Asia Quad or I2U2 composed of the U.S., India, the UAE, and Israel. I2U2, in particular, is perhaps indicative of the Quad's efforts to demonstrate that the informal security grouping is about more than just China. Instead, the Quad can oversee "... a wide-ranging ambit from global health and climate change to regional connectivity and security threats. Such smaller groupings [like I2U2] are finding resonance because they enable plurilateral arrangements to flourish through common agendas and challenges, allowing for greater consensus and strategic maneuvering."⁹

For critics, such dalliances do little to shape power politics or deter Chinese aggression whether in the high Himalayas or the South China Sea. These same critics also point to the Quad's informality as a weakness and that it will quickly disintegrate because it is vague about its agenda and lacks institutionalization.¹⁰ They point to the Quad's exclusive and confidential nature as well as its lack of specific goals as signs of its instability. However, we assess that the informality and ambiguity of the Quad may not be as disadvantageous as they appear. As noted, the Quad places minimal obligations on its members and does not require them to

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commit resources beyond sending representatives to meetings. This allows the Quad to emphasize areas of converging interests and downplay points of tension and disagreement, creating an impression of amity among its members. The informality of the Quad may also allow it to be more flexible and adaptable in responding to regional challenges.¹¹

The Quad's Bill of Health

Understanding how and why the Quad functions despite major political differences between its members can tell us much about its overall health. India, for instance, is highly resistant to pressure from its fellow Quad members for a variety of historical and systemic reasons. Such resistance can clearly be seen in the reactions and responses of the quartet members to the Ukraine War. Australia, Japan, and the U.S. all adopted harsh, unequivocal stances in opposition to Russia's invasion. Sanctions were leveled against Moscow and arms as well as political support were offered to Kyiv. India, in contradistinction, maintained a broadly neutral stance and, thus, warm ties with Russia. Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public call on September 16, 2022, that "Now is not the time for war," India's stance clearly suits Delhi's short- and long-term political, economic, and security interests.¹² According to Jagannath P. Panda, "India's fundamental strategic position on the Ukrainian war, comprising hedging, neutrality,

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stress on dialogue, and abstentions in international forums, including at the UNSC, has not altered by much. India also does not appear to support the Western sanctions against Russia, primarily because of their impact on the India-Russia oil and arms trade.”¹³

Despite its hardheaded realpolitik vis-à-vis the Ukraine War that has put it at odds with Tokyo, Canberra, and Washington, the Quad’s informality means that India can remain an integral club member while maintaining constructive relations with Russia that support Delhi’s national interests. This is a product of not just informality but also geopolitics. Washington, at the end of the day, understands that the bulwark against Russian aggression in western Eurasia remains, foremost, NATO. The Quad in the Indo-Pacific, on the other hand (complemented by U.S. bilateral alliances) now forms the prime defense against China. As such, initial calls to penalize India for what some deemed a pro-Russia stance quickly gave way to an understanding that the Quad, on the one hand, and NATO, on the other, do different things, act

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This understanding is critical in terms of the Quad’s development of Indo-Pacific strategies. When the rationale for NATO’s grand strategy to contain the Soviet Union disappeared in the early 1990s, it appeared untethered and rudderless for a time. Its *raison d’être*, its strategy whereby it converted military power into policy effect had, almost overnight, disappeared.¹⁴ Only when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 did NATO’s rationale for existence reappear to some visionaries. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 atomized any doubts about Russian aims, and Europe found the political will required to not only reinvigorate NATO under America’s aegis and backed by US power, but also expand it.

But comparisons between NATO and the Quad are akin to comparing chalk to cheese. The Quad is nowhere close to being an Asian NATO, despite what both its detractors and its cheerleaders say. Rather, the Quad’s perceived efficacy is evidenced by actions members have taken in spaces above, below and around it. Its activities dovetail with the Indo-Pacific concept and the related policies unveiled by the quartet’s members—policies that direct resource allocation. The Indo-Pacific concept “... has come to provide the quartet with a solid geostrategic perspective, a hook on which to hang geopolitically inspired policies and strategies that address the globe’s foremost challenges... The idea, however, is hollow without its implementing architecture. [And] [t]his is where the Quad comes in. It acts as a mutually constitutive force driving the Indo-Pacific concept and concretizing them through policies and actions.”¹⁵

The Quad’s Unwritten Aim

Given this significant overlap in areas related to regional and maritime security, the Quad clearly has an implicitly understood mission: to enhance

security in the Indo-Pacific where and when common security interests occur. And this is where, more than anyplace else, China comes front and center into the picture. Identifying the object of what may guide the rationale for an eventual conflict represents a first, vital step in the Quad developing coherent policies that, taken together, may form a grand strategy. This would involve the coordination of resources among the four states and likeminded partners toward the attainment of a clear policy objective. Certainly, China has brought the Quad together. But it is unlikely that its members have candidly discussed any grand strategy related to a conflict with China. This is where informality is both a boon and a handicap.

A potential advantage of the Quad's informality is that it gives this informal IGO the flexibility to ratchet up or dial down according to Chinese behavior. Beijing's actions directly impinge on the ebbs and flows of the Quad's interactions, activities, and its level of institutionalization.¹⁶ Chinese actions over the course of 2020, for example, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic are a case in point: armed skirmishes in Galwan, naval and air infringement over Japan's Senkaku Islands, a Chinese aircraft carrier in the Miyako Strait, Beijing's undiplomatic trade embargoes and posturing against Australia, as well as the bitter recriminations and trade war with the U.S. This led the Quad to strengthen its commitments to one another and led directly to its first Leaders' Summit in Washington in 2021.

Informality, it should be remembered, is a double-edged sword and cuts both ways. A distinct disadvantage of informality is that the object of the strategic dialogue is left implicit rather than explicit. If China is not explicitly the focus, the levels of strategy—from policy to grand strategy to military strategy—will be left blank. This seems a grave oversight given the possibility of a major conflict looming on the horizon in East Asia with the most likely flashpoint being Taiwan.

Can such an Achilles' heel be overcome? Probably not

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at this point given the squeamishness of politicians and the public in the four member-states about words or actions that may precipitate a conflict. Nevertheless, the Quad continues to trundle on. In and of itself the fact that the Quad not only exists but has progressed in terms of institutional maturity is worth remembering. After all, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi predicted that the group would dissipate like “sea foam.”¹⁷ This was backed up by numerous other assessments that claimed, in part, that the Quad's hold-all nature and informality were almost certainly self-destructive.¹⁸ Rather than fold up shop, however, the Quad has held progressively frequent ministerial meetings and, as of 2021, leaders' summits. An in-person summit in Australia in 2023 was announced at the close of the May 2022 Tokyo leaders' summit, for example.

It was during the Tokyo summit that both China and Russia chose to put on a show of force by flying six strategic bombers near the Japanese archipelago. Yet, if the Quad is merely a talk-shop, what is the source of Beijing and Moscow's concerns? The simple answer is that the Quad's informality continues to deliver sufficient instrumental benefits for its members without asking too much of them. Members can be candid with one another behind closed doors within the Quad, providing a useful forum for officials to exchange information and to socialize future policy initiatives within the group. Its flat hierarchy means that none is pressured to adopt unequivocal and public lines.¹⁹ This mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing environment

resonates in the club capitals. As importantly, it also resonates in Beijing where the loosely veiled statements issued by the quartet have led China to issue statements decrying “exclusive cliques” and “closed and exclusive small circles” targeted at third parties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe we can anticipate that informality and institutional flexibility will remain the hallmarks of the Quad as its core members prefer not to be bound to alliance commitments. These traits also enable engagement with a range of regional partners under the Quad Plus dialogues. While the informality of the Quad allows it to be flexible and adaptable in responding to regional challenges, it may not be sufficient to address more overt and aggressive actions by China. In fact, the Quad’s ambiguity and equivocation about China may backfire and increase China’s suspicions without providing significant deterrence, which is based on both material strength and the appearance and willingness to deploy it. However, if China’s actions become more aggressive, it is possible that a more formal alliance arrangement could emerge. Consolidating this emerging alignment would depend on the willingness of the Quad countries to tolerate and even support each other’s unshared interests, such as India’s and Japan’s territorial disputes with China.

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Endnotes

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