

Towards a Quad-Plus Arrangement?

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The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



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It is probably too early to sense the shape of the post-COVID world. But there are some early hints of how international partnerships might be shaped by the crisis. Recently, senior officials of the four “Quad” countries (Australia, India, Japan and the United States) teleconferenced about how to respond to the pandemic.

Quad meetings are no longer unusual. But this one was special because it included three additional Indo-Pacific powers: New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. The call, **reportedly initiated** by the US Deputy Secretary of State Steve Beigun, was intended to exchange notes on how these powers were tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

But it also raises a broader question: Is this a sign of possible expansion of the Quad mechanism, and how might such an expansion be feasible?

Indeed, whether this was even a “Quad-Plus” meeting is an open question. It appears that only the Indian government formally announced that this meeting was held, and true to fashion, New Delhi did not reference the Quad at all.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in a **readout** of the March 20 meeting only said that these countries had a telephonic conference to share best practices and collaborate in their efforts to contain the spread of the virus.² It will reportedly occur on a weekly basis, and covering a range of issues include cooperative vaccine development, addressing questions around stranded citizens, and minimising economic impacts.

However, a press report from a prominent Indian foreign affairs correspondent was more direct, **stating that** the meeting was also an

“attempt to keep the Quad-plus countries within a certain sphere of influence and strategic direction.”³

The Quad-plus countries have held subsequent meetings, discussing not just battling the current pandemic situation but also sharing of technologies, and more importantly, ways to **get the global economy back on track** without significant setback.⁴ They also appear to have agreed on the need to initially focus on the public health dimension of the crisis, and therefore will first target the development of vaccines, manufacture of equipment and calibrating treatment options.

Each of the “plus three” parties are an important partner the Quad countries. **Vietnam is an important strategic partner for all four Quad members.**⁵ South Korea is also, despite the latter’s somewhat troubled relations occasionally with Japan and the US. Importantly, Seoul has managed COVID-19 successfully in comparison to other regional governments.



Perhaps the most surprising country in the list is New Zealand. Its inclusion is noteworthy because, despite being one of the Five Eyes nations, Wellington has generally been reluctant to be perceived as targeting China in any way. It did not initially endorse the Indo-Pacific concept, presumably because it may have strained ties with China. At the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, the New Zealand Defence Minister **Ron Mark** stuck to the old formulation of Asia-Pacific and resisted the term Indo-Pacific.⁶ In October 2018, speaking at the MFAT@75 Conference in Wellington, **Ben King**, Deputy Secretary Americas and Asia Group at Ministry of Foreign and Trade Affairs (MFAT), defended and emphasised its preference for the term Asia-Pacific.⁷ Given New Zealand's heavy **economic dependence on China**, its positioning was probably understandable.⁸

However, New Zealand's view has changed recently, with the country **formally adopting** the Indo-Pacific formulation in February 2020, presumably the result of Wellington's growing security concerns about China.⁹ New Zealand appears to have taken yet another step forward in joining the telephone diplomacy along with other key Indo-Pacific powers.

New Zealand's path to the Quad mirrors the evolution in Indian thinking. Like New Zealand, India too had traditionally shied away from choosing between the United States and China. But China's aggressive behaviour in attempting to deny India the strategic space it seeks in the Indo-Pacific, as well as in global platforms such as the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) has propelled New Delhi to shift increasingly towards partnerships with others in the Indo-Pacific.

Like others, India had been somewhat uncomfortable with the Quad because of the perception that it was a containment effort against China. But it appears now, in light of recent developments, to be fully invested.

All of this is a big advance for the Quad. Initially labelled the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), the Quad made a **comeback** in November 2017 when officials from the foreign ministries of India, Australia, Japan and the US met in Manila on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summits to discuss areas of common interest in the regional and global context.¹⁰ This was the first time that the officials from these countries met after the initial efforts to form the Quad fell apart a decade back.

According to the MEA's **press release**, discussions focused on the

“converging vision and values for promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in an increasingly inter-connected region that they share with each other and with other partners.”¹¹

Subsequent meetings amongst officials in 2018¹² and 2019¹³ have concentrated on similar concerns. In a sign of further progress and political commitment, in 2019 Quad meetings were elevated to the **foreign minister** level.¹⁴

These institutional developments indicate that the concerns that gave rise to the formation of the original Quad in 2006-07, and its revival in 2017, not only remain relevant but have deepened.



The strategic consequences of China's rise, its aggressive military posturing and the tendency to use threat of force have become more prominent in the Indo-Pacific. If the Quad's progress has been somewhat hesitating, the reason is not hard to find: most countries in the region have significant economic exposure to China. This dependence constrained their capacity to participate in a mechanism which the Chinese government has **expressly opposed**.¹⁵

But as China's behavior has become increasingly assertive, many government's strategic calculus has begun to change. The very fact that there are more countries over the last year endorsing the Indo-Pacific concept is an indicator of things to come. ASEAN's adoption of an **Outlook on the Indo-Pacific** in 2019, following previous reticence to explicitly use the Indo-Pacific formulation, is a telling example.¹⁶

The slow but steady institutionalisation of the Quad suggests that its future expansion is a real possibility.

Efforts to coordinate responses to COVID-19 by the Quad-Plus countries may be a means to expand the original formulation at a pace that would be comfortable to potential new members and without eliciting a Chinese rebuke. It would be hypocritical for China to oppose countries collaborating on COVID-19 **when it has itself made precisely such calls**.¹⁷ But such cooperation also sets the stage for further Quad dialogue on other problems these countries face, potentially including security problems.

Indeed, a Quad-Plus expansion makes sense for a number of reasons. One is the common security concern these countries share regarding China's behaviours. Each have faced Chinese pressure plays in recent years, and harbor concerns regarding China's military and political expansion into areas they consider their 'neighbourhood'. Additionally, none are in a position to effectively challenge China on a bilateral basis, making minilateral cooperation with likeminded partners a better approach.

Together, these factors provide a pragmatic path to greater security cooperation via a Quad-Plus arrangement in future years. Expanding the Quad is not going to be easy, and will bring with it challenges of divergent concerns and burden-sharing problems. But there is clearly an impetus for Quad expansion that will begin to find expression in coming months.

Endnotes

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