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But the Quad's flexibility and malleability are perhaps the point. It is not a treaty or alliance with defined and constraining obligations. The Quad is instead best described as a shared strategic vision from Australia, India, Japan, and the United States of a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific and a developing, but loose, policy mechanism to advance it. Importantly, this vision goes beyond traditional hard power security and non-traditional security (public goods) by merging the two

Questions About the Quad

Perhaps due to its loose nature, debate as to the Quad's role in a world of proliferating partnerships, multilaterals, minilaterals, and alliances has arisen in recent years. Similarly, [questions](#) about its importance emerged after delays in the 2024 Leaders' Summit and the rise of alternative groupings like [the Squad](#) and a variety of trilaterals in the Western Pacific.

Indeed, regarding traditional hard power security, the Indo-Pacific already appears well equipped without the Quad. NATO [increasingly turns towards the Indo-Pacific](#), and AUKUS plays a key role for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Australia and Japan have mutual defense treaties with the United States and engage in a [Trilateral Strategic Dialogue](#). In recent months, [the Squad](#), made up of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, looks to shore up security cooperation within the first island chain.

described not as a unilateral or a network but rather a strategic vision and the policy mechanism to support its implementation. Indeed, the Quad explicitly depicts its **objective** as a “vision:”

Our vision for a region that is peaceful and prosperous, stable and secure, and respectful of sovereignty—free from intimidation and coercion, and where disputes are settled in accordance with international law. We seek a region in which all countries and peoples can exercise free choice on how they cooperate and trade based on partnership, equality and mutual respect. We share the belief that engaging openly, transparently and constructively creates more opportunity, greater economic vitality and better understanding of shared challenges, to the benefit of all.

This statement and **others like it** depict a rules-based order updated to accommodate a more multipolar world, the rise of the Global South, and serve as an attractive alternative to the one promised by the loosely aligned but determined revisionist coalition.

To enact this vision, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States have come together as “the Quad.” As stated in the **Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in 2023**: “The Quad is a diplomatic network of four democracies committed to supporting a free and open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient.”

Above all, the Quad is more than simply a traditional hard power security or diplomatic unilateral. It is decidedly not an “Asian NATO,”

because New Delhi does not want nor expect an Article 5-style mutual defense treaty with the other members. It is a more flexible and, hence, inclusive grouping than that. The Quad is also more than simply a security “dialogue.” The terms “diplomatic partnership,” used by the **Australian government**, and “diplomatic network,” as used in the **2023 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting**, also fall short given the Quad’s emphasis on concrete deliverables and public goods provision. Instead, the Quad is best understood as a shared strategic vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific and the (flexible) policy mechanism to accomplish it.

A Flexible, Holistic Approach to Indo-Pacific Security

The Quad’s public goods agenda and policy actions since its revival warrant additional attention.

The Quad is fundamentally about advancing a holistic conception of regional security that incorporates non-traditional security issues like climate and pandemics. Public goods ensure a resilient, prosperous, free, and therefore **secure** Indo-Pacific.

During its second iteration after 2017, an overt security element became politically unpalatable, both **domestically** and in the wider region. Yet, even with the Quad deemphasizing hard power security cooperation under its auspices, public goods contribute to security by offering regional states alternatives in a **region increasingly pulled in a cold war direction**. As the **2023 Leaders’ Vision Statement** describes, “[the Quad members] seek a region in which all countries and peoples can exLang (e8 5 297 Tm[(The Quad)30.1 (‘)112 (s pub

The Quad's current iteration therefore merges non-traditional and traditional security with the view that prosperity and the freedom to choose contribute to regional security in a complementary manner to hard power initiatives. A holistic approach to security mirrors a rethinking underway in the policymaking community, particularly in Washington, that reduces the conceptual barriers between hard power and non-traditional security.

Shoring up regional resiliency through public goods is an increasingly urgent need. Over the past decade, China has expanded its diplomatic and economic footprint in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. Countering these efforts by providing alternative investments, technical capacity, and other public goods both stabilizes the region and offers states the freedom to choose for themselves. From the technology standards-setting Quad Principles on Technology Design, Development, Governance, and Use to securing supply chains, the Quad actively advances a rules-based order.

Cooperation via the Quad framework is important because none of the Quad states can compete dollar for dollar with China's BRI on their own. A coordinated approach taking advantage of respective comparative advantages and strengths is necessary to provide quality and attractive alternatives to Chinese investments, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic pressure.

The Quad's maritime security efforts are perhaps the clearest example of the benefits of the grouping for the region. Indeed, the Quad was born in an ad hoc effort by the four members to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief after 2004's Indian Ocean tsunami. The four navies set a precedent for non-traditional security operations via the Quad, with their

humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts continuing today. For instance, the Quad recently organized to provide help during the 2024 landslide disaster in Papua New Guinea.

Even absent an explicitly hard power security agenda, many of the Quad's non-traditional security efforts, notably humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and maritime law enforcement, also contribute to traditional hard power security capabilities by improving contingency coordination between the four member states and providing a forum for discussing strategic issues. As some have argued, the Quad "should be able to better leverage and network their respective capabilities to advance a collective approach to defense cooperation on key maritime security tasks of mutual interest and significant value to the region." Through Quad consultations, dialogue, and maritime security activities, the four members gain experience and interoperability for traditional security in the event of a future crisis, even if that is not the primary focus.

The Quad's holistic security approach speaks to how its flexibility and ambiguity constitute a strength rather than a burden. Flexibility can satisfy India's strategic autonomy, as well as differing domestic politics in all four states on issues such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine or democracy promotion. It enables the grouping to come together around shared interests and bypass stumbling blocks. Ambiguity also relieves some of the concerns raised by states in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Ocean regarding regional securitization, as well as counters Chinese propaganda about the Quad.

Moreover, this flexibility extends to the level of policy implementation. The Quad can accommodate a variety of initiatives and sub-arrangements. Indeed, the four members desire

The Quad in 2024

the flexibility to pursue their vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific unilaterally, bilaterally, and in other multi- and minilaterals. For instance, the newer Squad minilateral focuses narrowly

Republic of China is the largest threat to the Quad's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Lending further credence to this argument, the Quad reemerged in 2017 to 2021 precisely at a watershed moment in all four capitals when the geostrategic threat posed by China sharpened. In Washington, the Trump administration's [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) and [2017 National Security Strategy](#) highlighted China as the greatest threat facing the United States and signaled a bipartisan consensus on competition with Beijing. In Canberra, 2020 saw [Chinese economic coercion deployed against Australia](#), torpedoing bilateral relations. Thinking in Tokyo had also [shifted towards viewing Beijing as a threat](#) with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (perhaps the primary driver behind the first Quad) [pushing again for the grouping in the 2010s](#). For New Delhi, rising competition with Beijing across South Asia certainly played a role, but the [2020 clash along the Line of Actual Control](#) marked a sea change in India-China relations for the worse, locking in Sino-Indian rivalry for the foreseeable future. It is no coincidence that the first Leaders' Summit occurred in 2021 following these developments. While the Quad states' strategic interests in a secure and stable Indo-Pacific are not necessarily about China, they face their biggest threat in Beijing.

Importantly, the second strategic element raising the Quad's importance is India's continued and growing role in it. India provides a crucial value-add for the grouping: New Delhi's leadership within the Global South.

If the only countries prominently advocating for a rules-based order against China and other revisionist states are the United States and its traditional allies and partners — or, if the rules-based order is too status quo bound or out of touch with non-Western states — many

dissatisfied countries in the Global South will remain unpersuaded. The memory of the US-Soviet Cold War and colonialism, as well as [perceptions of Western hypocrisy](#), cast a long shadow in the Indo-Pacific. It informs some of the widespread concerns over potential fallout from US-China competition among small and medium-sized states in the region. With Beijing [presenting itself as the leader of the Global South and demanding reform of the international order](#), the Quad countries need a counter-narrative.

[India's buy-in to the rules-based order](#) and participation in the Quad is critical here, even if New Delhi [diverges with the other Quad members or acts contrary to established norms at times](#). At the same, India's partnership with the United States and its allies and partners in US security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific accelerates the transition from the traditional hub-and-spoke model to a [latticework model](#). India complements existing Australian, Japanese, and US efforts—among those of other [regional allies](#) and partners—to integrate capabilities and strategies beyond the traditional “[siloes](#),” as described recently by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

As relative US power declines and expectations of US allies and partners rise, bringing in new voices and redistributing responsibilities naturally evolve the rules-based order and other institutions in line with a changing world. [As Secretary Blinken describes](#): “When our allies shoulder their fair share of the burden, they'll reasonably expect to have a fair say in making decisions. We will honor that. That begins with consulting our friends early and often.” As such, India's role in the Quad serves to broaden the grouping from yet another arrangement for existing US allies and partners to one that can help modernize the rules-based order in

The Quad in 2024

ways that attract states in the Global South who

Six, the Quad's holistic approach to security makes sense given the all-encompassing challenge to the rules-based order. For instance, the Quad should keep the annual Malabar naval exercises de-linked from the Quad. It should also ramp up efforts to engage and partner with other countries in the Indo-Pacific on non-traditional security issues, such as [humanitarian aid and disaster relief](#).

Beyond this, the Quad also serves as a useful mechanism for sharing information, aligning views, and creating communication channels between the countries. Although the Quad is unlikely to become an Indo-Pacific NATO, it can ensure that the four member states remain on the same page and that the leaders have crucial face time on an annual basis.

Seven, despite alignment on the broad contours of a free and open Indo-Pacific, the four Quad countries still have serious disagreements on a variety of individual issues. While India's diverging views on Russia's invasion of Ukraine are well known, there are disagreements about approach within the Indo-Pacific. This is a long-term problem for strategic coordination, and there is a risk of the Quad members working at cross purposes on important issues in the Indo-Pacific.

Dedicating effort to sharing views and aligning as much as possible in the Indo-Pacific is important for ensuring strategic effect. For example, the United States is the most forward-leaning on democracy promotion, while the other three remain reluctant to close doors completely. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, the [Quad issued strong statements calling for a return to democracy](#). Although the United States soon issued sanctions and ramped up support for the pro-democracy resistance, Australia and Japan were disinclined to apply much pressure on the military junta in Myanmar out of concern

it would drive the military into China's orbit. India, meanwhile, driven by similar fears of Chinese influence and the added complexity of its [unstable Northeast](#),

