



Locating the Quad: informality, institutional flexibility, and future alignment in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Australia, India, Japan, and the US are coordinating security activities in the Indo-Pacific under the guise of the ‘Quad’, a highly informal intergovernmental organization that some observers describe as an embryonic military alliance. For others, it is a loose group amounting to little else. Cutting a path through this confusion, this article poses and answers a series of interlinking questions. First, is the Quad purposeful? What do its members expect to achieve through its existence? If it possesses an identifiable purpose—which we claim is a shared need to meet the long-term challenge posed by China—why is the Quad’s format highly informal? Does this informality reflect the growing cascade of informal IGOs in international politics? We argue that although informality is a geopolitical necessity, it also provides a workable format for four diverse members to coordinate security activities whilst maintaining equivocal positions vis-à-vis China.

Keywords Quad · Indo-Pacific · China · Informality · Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) · Alliances

Introduction

There can be few issues in international politics that have moved from low-key existence to forefront of scrutiny than the future pattern of alignment in the Indo-Pacific. Scholars, pundits, and policy analysts frequently predict the development of a formal US-led regional alliance emerging in the region to counterbalance China’s power. For those expecting a replay of the rigid alliance systems of the Cold War (Woodward 2017), a future NATO for the region is all but inevitable. Indeed, for many commentators, the informal quadrilateral consultation, commonly known as

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the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (hereon called the Quad), formed of Australia, India, Japan, and the USA, is a proto-alliance of this kind (Bhaskar 2020; Bhatnagar 2021).¹ Chinese officials have at times denounced the Quad in roughly this way (MOFA, China 2018).

There are reasons to be hesitant about assessing the Quad according to how well it fits the mould of a formal alliance ‘in-the-making’.² Often, the standard of NATO is evoked, against which various analyses posit the prospects, but more usually the implausibility of this demanding form of multilateralism emerging in a region with a weak sense of collective identity and shared interests (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002). Rather than a proto-alliance, the Quad has hitherto displayed the markings of another minilateral—an extension of the bilaterals and trilaterals that have proliferated in the region since the early 2000s (Envall and Hall 2016).³

To be sure, 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. Although there are signs that the Quad’s format has become more routinized since it was revived in 2017 (Panda 2020a; He and Feng 2020), 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 (Zala 2018; Tow 2019).

Current official statements from the four members certainly downplay its hard balancing potential and play up the Quad’s less controversial activities such as efforts to mitigate climate change, counterterrorism, disaster relief, building quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, and, more recently, pandemic responses. In a truly Quad undertaking, for example, India is to manufacture US vaccines via the financial support of both the US and Japan with Australia providing logistical assistance. The Quad’s ability to function in an informal format for working on issues with a range of Indo-Pacific nations under the “Quad Plus” formula, points to a looseness and flexibility not usually associated with more formal organizations and especially military alliances (Panda 2020d).

¹ The quartet counts the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” as its most official name. The fact that this term is not evenly used across the four states reflects, in part, the silent, consensual nature that drives the Quad. In addition, because it is only one of many quadrilateral or quadripartite groupings found around the globe, it may be more definitively referred to as the ‘Quad in the Indo-Pacific’. The authors are grateful to David Brewster and Jagannath P. Panda for making these points. See also (Hakata and Cannon 2021b, 7).

² Koga (2020, 60) opines, on the one hand, that Quad meetings have “... facilitated cooperation among its members.” On the other, he notes, “The Quad grouping’s attempts to arrive at coordinated visions, policies and actions among its members have yet to be effectively institutionalized” (Koga, 2020, 72). He and Feng (2020a, 6), also question the possibility of the Quad’s greater institutionalization on account of a lack of executive leadership, particularly from the US during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021).

³ According to Tow (2019, 235), ‘Minilateralism is... a narrower and usually informal initiative intended to address a specific threat, contingency or security issue with fewer states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time. No consensus has yet been reached on how to precisely define “minilateralism” in the international security context’.



The Quad's lack of binding commitments from members has led some to condemn the project as an 'empty gesture' (White, 2017). We argue here, in contrast, that the Quad's informality currently suits members because it places minimal obligations on parties and allows avoidance of issues in which the members hold divergent positions. This half-way house—below the threshold of alliance but certainly more than a 'talk-shop'—provides a format for an emergent four-power alignment that facilitates coordination across various areas of common interest, especially in the maritime domain, without curtailing the autonomy of each sovereign member. The Quad emerged from a common security concern, China. As such, its lack of typical alliance behaviour—formal commitments and clear diplomatic statements that reference the threat—is an effort to signal amity among the four nations, outwards and to each other, without stoking tensions with Beijing. We make no policy judgements about the wisdom of this approach; we merely claim that this explains in good part why the Quad currently functions as it does.

To advance our main arguments, this article proceeds as follows. We first summarize key arguments about the growing prevalence of informal intergovernmental organization (IGOs)⁴ in international politics and synthesize these with theoretical discussions about International Organizations (IOs), including formal alliances. Against the backdrop of a cascade of informality in IGOs, we then examine the Quad's evolution, the interests of its members in forming a quartet, and thirdly the character of members' interactions. We then assess what the preceding theory-grounded and empirical analysis tells us about the organization's direction of travel, i.e. towards or away from deeper institutionalization and greater formality. The concluding sections discuss what the Quad says about the place of informal IGOs in international politics and, more narrowly, in the Indo-Pacific.

Informal IGOs and the 'high politics' of security

IGOs come in all shapes and sizes. One dimension across which they vary is their level of formality. The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of *formal* IGOs and their prominence in global governance. Recent decades have seen an increasing trend, however, towards the standing up of, and participation in, more informal IGOs (and international institutions more broadly), such as the G20, MIKTA, or BRICS (Roger 2020). Informal IGOs are based on recurrent meetings among state representatives but are not legalized through a treaty and typically have no permanent secretariat. Beyond these commonalities, the scope and agenda of informal IGOs differ markedly.

The cascade of informal IGOs in international politics is, in part, thought to be a reaction to a credibility deficit in global governance (Payne 2008). This has been propelled by a degradation in the belief that capacity exists among formal IGOs to

⁴ We use the term IGO to specify that the discussion focuses on associations with state membership rather than the broader term International Organizations (IOs) which can include international actors other than states.



achieve stated goals (Keohane and Nye 2000), but also stems from declining perceptions that the system is fair (Ruggie 1992, 567). Rising powers are especially less inclined to work within formal structures and more likely to seek out alternative formats for intergovernmental interaction and cooperation.

Organizations, however, for the purpose of security are largely absent from discussions on *informal* IGOs. Vabulas and Snidal (2021) have recently challenged this conventional view, showing that states do associate in informal IGOs for specific issues related to peace and security, citing the Proliferation Security Initiative as an example (on the PSI see Kaplan 2006). Despite this revisionist work, nascent discussions on informal IGOs focus on those aimed at achieving shared security goals rather than those formed *against* something (on this distinction, see Liska 1962, 3). For confronting a shared foreseen threat from an adversary or adversaries, states, international relations theory largely presupposes, form alliances.

Though varying in the severity of commitments placed on members—ranging from non-aggression pacts to unilateral guarantees, through to collective security pacts—alliances are typically characterized as highly formal IGOs (Sunder 1997, 4).⁵ Indeed, alliances are usually characterized as IGOs with established formal mechanisms and practices that facilitate peacetime military coordination—a necessity, it is thought, for preparing for joint action (Leeds and Anac 2005; and below discussion).

This alliance paradigm, however, is not representative of the ways states may associate together to respond to a threat. Indeed, IGOs formed for the ‘high politics’ of meeting the challenge of a perceived threat have possessed greater informality—that is, lower levels of institutionalization and looser structures—than is commonly supposed (a point recognized by Walt 1987, 1). The Cold War NATO alliance and Warsaw Pact were highly formal IGOs with their own bureaucracies, command structures, and military forces permanently stationed under them. But as Posen observed (2014, 30), historically, ‘this kind of institutionalization has not occurred until well into a war, if at all’. Indeed, states often prefer informal associations when presenting a united front against an identified threat (Wilkins 2012). Coordinated diplomacy within ‘soft security institutions’ such as a strategic partnership (at the bilateral level) or alignment featuring two or more states (Wilkins 2019) is taken to convince the target that a formal alliance *would* or, at least, *could* form should hostilities break out. The Anglo-French 1904 Entente Cordiale is a prime example of this type of soft security institution.⁶

If rational functionality is a principal driver in forming IGOs, why would states prefer informality for the high stakes of security? Is greater institutionalization not desirable for IGOs formed to meet a threat? Formality, for instance, ensures unity of

⁵ Employing a *sensu stricto* interpretation of alliances, Snyder (1997) concludes that alliances are ‘*formal* [authors’ emphasis] associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership’.

⁶ The 1904 Entente Cordiale between Britain and France was highly specific and formalized in terms of what the two sides signed up to vis-à-vis each other, it only went as far as to coordinate diplomatic efforts towards German’s rising power. Confusingly, an entente can also mean efforts to reduce conflict between parties aligning.



purpose is regularly and systematically pursued. Furthermore, deeper institutionalization in IGOs created for confronting a threat buttresses the reliability of members and hence the credibility of deterrence. Indeed, explicit, formal security agreements, usually in the form of a treaty, ‘adds elements of specificity, legal and moral obligations, and reciprocity that are usually lacking in informal alignments’ (Snyder 1997, 8). Formality and deeper institutionalization are also thought to increase the combined military performance of the IGO if an actual conflict occurs (Morrow 1994; Smith 1995; Fearon 1997).

Surveying the universe of IGOs, Vabulas and Snidal argue that states often do prefer informality for reasons of rational functionality (2013, 2021). In short, states can coordinate in meaningful ways without written provisions.⁷ States might see useful functionalities in informality when banding together to confront a common, long-term security threat. First, informality means members can strategically align without having to sacrifice any autonomy to a supranational entity. Second, with decentralized structures, informal IGOs do not demand discipline or a strict hierarchy. 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 provide a flexibility that allows members to coordinate actions without concomitant obligations. To be sure, formal rules and processes are important for organizations to function, but so are extra-legal practices. Third, the inherent ambiguity of informal IGOs’ scope means that members can avoid close public scrutiny whilst at the same time sending general signals of members’ alignment to the target adversary. The trade-off, however, is that such ambiguity may lead to misperceptions and perhaps suspicions about the IGO’s real intentions.

The characteristics of formal and informal IGOs for countering a long-term threat are compared in the table below (see Table 1). As the above discussion makes clear, there are trade-offs in functionalities for states electing to keep their security-based association informal. Yet under some geopolitical circumstances, such as those under which the Quad members find themselves, informality is preferable—at least for now.

The Quad certainly shows many of the attributes of a highly informal IGO. Indeed, given its original name—a ‘security dialogue’—the Quad appears a poor candidate for anything more substantial or instrumental. The term security dialogue is redolent of cascading international or regional ‘talk-shops’ that have either sprung up or have morphed into major annual events, featuring major policy announcements and increasingly hyper-personalities alongside world leaders.⁸ The Quad is, as we show below, more consequential than a ‘talk-shop’. The next sections therefore detail the format the four-way alignment has taken to date, describe the motives of

⁷ One probable explanation for a lack of attention on IIGSOs is that models of IGOs have largely been based on formal attributes rather than on their actual behaviour. To consider organizations only in terms of their formal rules is comparable, Stone argues, to trying to understand computers only in terms of hardware (2013, 122).

⁸ Examples include the half-century-old Munich Conference on Security Policy and the IISS Shangri La and Manama Dialogues in Singapore and Bahrain, respectively.



Quad members and the behaviour and activities of the group, and judge whether it is likely to become more formal and institutionalized.

Unpacking the quadrilateral relationship

Before turning to how the Quad behaves and what it does, we first locate the situational context for its behaviour—the relationships between the quadrilateral’s units. This context is the product of both the *raison d’être* behind the quartet’s alignment and the interests and capabilities of each unit. Together, this informs the IGO format that has emerged for the Quad.

Origins of the Quad

The Quad was reportedly the brainchild of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his administration (Hemmings 2020; Panda 2020b). The Quad held its first informal group in May 2007, conforming closely to the Abe administration’s ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ concept,⁹ a network of Eurasian states linked by a more diplomatically assertive Japan to promote democratic freedoms and the rule of law. Further efforts to link the four through counterterrorism efforts—Tokyo’s attempt to complement Washington’s ongoing War on Terror—were strategically irrelevant for Japan and, to a lesser degree, India, and Australia. The Arc concept’s focus rapidly shifted to China (Lee et al. 2021a, b), with Abe increasingly emphasizing closer ties with Australia and India (Madan 2017).

Marking Abe’s first administration (2006–2007) as the starting point of the Quad is only partially correct, however. Some see the loosely coordinated responses of the four to the late 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as the beginning of the Quad (Grossman 2005; Chanlett-Avery 2018; Vasudeva 2019). This ‘Tsunami Core Group’ (TCG) had a narrow and necessarily determinate aim—providing aid and recovery assistance from four, well-equipped states with resources and delivery means in the wider region—but served as a template for later informal interaction.

More than this, deep bilateral or trilateral strategic relations already existed between three of the four. The 1960 US-Japan Security Treaty and the 1951 Australia, New Zealand, and United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty being the most prominent. Taken together, the multiple treaties and agreements between Japan, Australia, and the US mean, at times, all three have decades of interlinking and close relations in the security domain. In this way, the Quad is inseparable from the extant strategic relations between Australia, Japan, and the US: a trilateral within the quadrilateral. Indeed, building on these firm Cold War foundations of ties, Australia, Japan, and the US, pioneered a three-way IGO called the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) five years prior to the Quad’s inception, in 2002. It was upgraded to the ministerial level in 2005. While largely a counterterrorism coordination forum

⁹ The speech was delivered by Abe’s foreign minister, Taro Aso, on November 30, 2006. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0611.html>.



Table 1 Characteristics of highly formal (the alliance paradigm) and informal IGOs formed to counter a threat

	Alliance paradigm (e.g. NATO)	Informal (e.g. Quad)
Membership	Unitary states	Unitary states
Structure	Centralized/hierarchical	Decentralized/flat
Political visibility	High	Low-Medium
Legalized obligations	Present	Absent
Unit relations	Treaty-based	Trust-based
Scope	Focused and fixed	Ambiguous and flexible
Bureaucracy	Highly developed	Little to absent

Authors' composite table drawn from the literature and related research

to facilitate mutual strategies in reaction to the al-Qaeda attacks on 9/11 against the US, the TSD also included discussions about nuclear non-proliferation, with North Korea's missile programme topping the list. Worried that Washington's narrow focus on al-Qaeda would leave the Asia–Pacific theatre ignored, Japan and Australia used the dialogue and related efforts to seek a continuation of US strategic commitment to the region in the face of an increasingly powerful China.

Convening the TSD brought instrumental benefits for all members; there was, and continues to be, something in it for everyone. For Japan, trilateralism enhances deterrence whilst providing Tokyo with greater strategic flexibility. Canberra, the weakest of the three, uses the TSD to expand joint exercises and deepen institutional connections with its two most important regional allies. For Washington, the TSD serves 'What the US cares the most about, regional architecture building' (Pollman 2015).

Perhaps most significantly in the long run, the TSD has provided an informal IGO setting through which to facilitate closer strategic relations with India. Indeed, the first Quad meeting, in 2007, was in fact a TSD meeting held in the wings of the ASEAN Regional Forum. The only difference, albeit laden with geopolitical and strategic significance, was that it included India's prime minister.¹⁰

New Delhi's alignment with the trilateral

Though the TSD can be said to have incubated the Quad (Paik and Park 2020), moving from a three- to four-way Indo-Pacific alignment has been slow going. First, India is geopolitically the odd one out—it is an Indian rather than a Pacific Ocean state.¹¹ Second, India experimented for decades with non-alignment and seemed

¹⁰ The Quad was initiated in Manila as a dialogue by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, with the support of US Vice President Dick Cheney, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India.

¹¹ Admittedly, Australia has a lengthy Indian Ocean coastline. Nonetheless, its power, population, and strategic assets—indeed its outlook—have been decidedly Pacific-oriented in nature, particularly after World War II (Brewster 2021).



wedded to geopolitical autonomy after the Cold War. Third, when it has chosen external partners in the past, New Delhi, for reasons of history as much as intellectual sympathy, eschewed the West in favour of the Soviet Union and, after its downfall, Russia (Chari 1979; Rossiter and Cannon 2019, 361–362). Consequently, American, Japanese, and Australian bilateral relations with India got off to a much slower start in the post-Cold War period.

The reasons for India's reversal of its non-aligned status—from its growth into a great power to its nuclear-armed status to its strategic role as *the* Indian Ocean state—are covered at length elsewhere (Berlin 2011; Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada 2018). Nevertheless, that India chose to align itself, at first modestly and then, after a period of hesitation, more fully with the other three through the Quad in 2007, is evidence that New Delhi's strategic calculus was undergoing a slow but steady shift. Reaching more or less Tokyo's and Canberra's conclusion, New Delhi increasingly saw its place in a quartet as the best strategic bet to advance India's long-term interests—the first amongst which was ensuring territorial integrity (Rajagopalan 2017).

Admittedly, India remains a nationalistic country with lingering suspicions of the US (Gilboy and Heginbotham 2012, 9–12, 69–71). But New Delhi may have taken, albeit unwittingly, a page from Japan's playbook which it, in turn, took from China's *Thirty-Six Stratagems*. Specifically, a well-known dictum in Japanese, 'Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbouring one' (*enkō kinkō* in Japanese, *yuan jiao jin gong* in Chinese), is frequently used in reference to Japan's 'all-in-one' policies aimed at countering China (Hakata 2021, 82). For its part, New Delhi has adopted a similar strategy as evidenced through creating, by joining with the TSD members, the Quad.

The attraction for the TSD members of bringing in India is obvious. Put simply, by dint of geography, population and GDP growth, India is an emerging great power. That India is a democracy is also important from a normative standpoint. Rhetorically, the fact that all four members of the Quad are democracies is cited as a cause for their alignment by policymakers. For example, Abe, attempting to revive the Quad circa 2012, emphasized what he termed a 'democratic security diamond.'¹² Coupled with New Delhi's growing power and complicated relations with Beijing, including numerous, festering border disputes, India is indisputably an attractive strategic partner for the TSD members.

¹² Koga (2020, 59) termed this formulation of a democracy—a new Quad of Japan, the US, Australia, and India as a “coalition... to protect the maritime commons, including freedom of navigation in both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean in response to China's aggressive moves in the East China and South China seas.” Perhaps a coalition is what Abe wished for, and the informality of Quad 2.0, while by no means a coalition in the strict sense of the term, is nonetheless a group of state leaders who agree to potentially act together, possibly on a temporary basis, to achieve something.



Quad 2.0

The Quad's beginnings as an IGO were patently inauspicious. After meeting only once in 2007 to discuss shared concerns about China and related maritime security issues across the Indo-Pacific, it disbanded. Under pressure from Beijing, which viewed the initiative as one of attempted containment, Australia and India quickly left the Quad, fearing membership would endanger their healthy (and lucrative) bilateral relations with China (Madan 2017; Paik and Park 2020: 40). On autopsy, the Quad perhaps moved too fast towards four-way defence exercises and what appeared as a military agenda (Graham 2018).

The IGO laid dormant for nearly a decade. Yet, informal security coordination continued during what we term the Quad's occultation, often using experiences and templates from member states' previous multilateral actions. During the Quad's occultation, the Australia-Japan-India (AJI) trilateral held its first dialogue in 2015, with discussions about maritime security and freedom of navigation.¹³ While each worried about a separate geographical location, the connections from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific to the East China Sea meant the maritime security interests of all three states converged. But it was Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour across the region that 'provided the glue' binding this trilateral together (Rajagopalan 2020). Tellingly, the trilateral moved the important Malabar joint naval exercise at this time to locations in China's backyard.¹⁴

If China birthed the AJI trilateral and led to upgraded and increasingly high-profile Malabar exercises, Beijing's actions also rejuvenated the Quad and reified its existence for all four member states. The AJI trilateral and the TSD, with their overlapping memberships and growing experience in security coordination with China in mind, were the engines which drove the resuscitation of Quad 2.0 in 2017 (¹⁵).

In late October 2017, for example, a flurry of statements accompanied back-door channel communications between Quad foreign ministers. As Madan (2017), recounted:

In a speech on Oct. 18, [US Secretary of State, Rex] Tillerson remarked that there was "room to invite others, including Australia" to join US-India-Japan engagement. A senior State Department official envisioned a quadrilateral "anchoring" the Indo-Pacific. On Oct. 25, [Japanese Foreign Minister, Taro] Kono confirmed that Japan would officially propose a revival, which he'd previously discussed with his American and Australian counterparts. The Indian

¹³ Chacko and Wilson (2020) argue that the governments of Australia, Japan and India began functioning as a semi-formal, minilateral coalition from around 2008.

¹⁴ 'Exercise Malabar, initially a joint naval exercise involving India and the US, in which the Japan Maritime SDF has participated since October 2015 as a permanent member. With Australia's return in November 2020, Malabar ensures the continued and growing maritime military aspect of the quadrilateral partnership, albeit not directly linked to the Quad itself' (Hakata 2021, 91). The exercises have been strategically moved closer to China in recent years: from India's west coast and the Arabian Sea to the alternating locations of the Bay of Bengal/East coast of India, the coasts of Japan and the Philippine Sea.

¹⁵ Authors' online interview with Jagannath Panda, 12 January 2021



foreign ministry subsequently confirmed its openness to working with “like-minded countries,” as did Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop.

Various officials from one capital to the next made remarks that the Quad represented a convergence of shared interests and perhaps ideology, and this was emphasized as the reason for Quad 2.0. Then-US Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Biegun, declared in August 2020:

And so, at its core, what the Quad is is a combination of democracies. But... what also illuminates those four parties is a sense of responsibility and willingness to uphold the responsibilities, to extend the benefits of democracy, extend the benefits of economic development, and extend the benefits of security throughout the region.¹⁶

Emphasizing what Quad 2.0 stands for nevertheless fails to mask what it is against. Upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and/or defending the principle of freedom of navigation in the high seas begs the question: upholding and protecting these from what threat? Although not stated publicly at the time, concerns shared by the quadrilateral states vis-à-vis China, which at times has verged on outright exasperation, propelled the Quad’s re-emergence in 2017. Despite Chinese assertiveness, members have so far eschewed declaring commitments of mutual defence and have shown little appetite, to date, for the Quad’s deeper institutionalization. The next section explains why the Quad remains informal despite a worsening strategic environment for its members.

Explaining the Quad’s informality

Since its resumption in 2017, the Quad has received considerable attention and speculation about its geopolitical significance (He and Feng 2020, 164–166). Much of the focus, however, is future orientated, centred on what the Quad might become. Its activities and behaviour as an emerging IGO are largely ignored. This is a mistake. The Quad, like any IGO, is an association, but it is also a creation of the interactions that take place between its members. Casting light on interactions and behaviour is even more critical for trying to understand those IGOs, like the Quad, with low levels of institutionalism and devoid of official treaties or formal agreements (Morrow 2000).

Quadrilateral interactions: substance and style

The Quad’s rebirth was a ‘slow convergence rather than rapid institutionalization’ (Buchan and Rimland 2020), and it remains a highly informal IGO.¹⁷ On the

¹⁶ Remarks at the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, August 2020.

¹⁷ Lee (2016, 29–31), noted that both Australia and India expressed their preferences for informal formats of cooperation prior to Quad 2.0’s launch in 2017.



surface, it is 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.¹⁸ 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.

The Quad has no budget set aside, only vague statements of purpose (only a few of which have been issued jointly), and no pacts or treaties. Rules and commitments, perhaps beyond a tacit understanding of confidentiality, remain near non-existent. Unlike formal security or political IGOs, there is no attempt to negotiate, let alone impose, binding rules or codes of conduct on the Quad members. In short, the members ‘dues’ to the club remain fuzzy to say the least.

Detractors of the Quad’s significance and durability often point to its informality as a weakness. This is engendered by the Quad’s confidential, exclusive clubbiness, and vagueness about its agenda.¹⁹ To outsiders, it appears to be doing everything—upholding a rules-based order, for example—and nothing all at once. The lack of specificity about the Quad’s role—in 2007 or in 2022—and under-institutionalization have led some to conclude that it will quickly fold-up shop (O’Neil and West 2019; Park 2020).

Yet the ambiguity and informality that characterizes the Quad may not be as disadvantageous as is presented. It is true that the Quad expects rather little of its members; they do not need to commit resources beyond sending representatives to meetings. Privileging a club-like model means the Quad emphasizes areas of converging interests—interests that would have likely been discussed in bilateral and trilateral configurations—and downplays points of tension and disagreement. Such congeniality and avoidance of hard issues creates an impression of amity.

Equivocal statements issued from three quartet members when India faced off with China, first in Doklam in 2017 and then, more explosively, in Galwan in 2020 (Panda 2020c, 32) have only bolstered the idea that the Quad is purely symbolic. But perhaps there was little need for the Quad to make formal declarations denouncing Chinese actions. After all, in early May, when Chinese troops entered Indian territory in and around Galwan, high in the Himalayas, they seemed intent on enforcing Beijing’s claims to the entire valley. Similar episodes occurred in north Sikkim. On 15 June, Indian and Chinese troops clashed for over six hours resulting in the deaths

¹⁸ Quad 2.0 has witnessed seven working-level meetings in five years: from 2017 to 2022. There have been two ministerial meetings, one in New York in September 2019 and the Tokyo Summit in October 2020. In March 2021, the first-ever leaders’ summit was held online. This was followed by the first in-person leaders’ summit in Washington, D.C. in September 2021. An in-person leaders’ summit will reportedly be held in Tokyo during the first half of 2022.

¹⁹ For more on the ‘club model’ of diplomacy, see (Heine 2013).



of 20 Indian soldiers and an unidentified number of Chinese.²⁰ This resulted in an outpouring of Indian nationalism that seems to have galvanized India's desire to continue with the Quad. Soon thereafter, India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, stated how 'imperative it is for like-minded countries to coordinate responses to the various challenges...' (Laskar 2020).

The Quad's perceived efficacy is evidenced by actions members have taken in spaces above, below and around the Quad. Its activities dovetail with the Indo-Pacific concept and the related strategies unveiled by the quartet's members—strategies that direct policies and resource allocation (Scott 2020, 56–60; Panda 2020a, b, c).²¹ As Hakata and Cannon (2021a) highlighted,

The Indo-Pacific concept... has come to provide the quartet with a solid geo-strategic 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.

Given significant overlap in areas related to regional and maritime security, the Quad does have an unwritten mission: to enhance security in the Indo-Pacific where and when common security interests occur. The prominent Malabar naval exercises, now featuring the full quartet with Australia's renewed participation, is perhaps the Quad's most explicit activity in the defence space.²² Maritime security cooperation among Quad members—such as disaster relief or anti-piracy activities—is less confrontational and will likely have benefits for their wider association and the sorts of security concerns that all four states share, regardless of whether or not the IGO is an effort to keep the Chinese out and the Americans in (Percy 2018, 23). What is more, multilateral maritime security cooperation can be effective with very informal structures and need not bear any resemblance to a traditional alliance.

Chinese actions, Quad reactions

A potential advantage of the Quad's informality is that it gives the IGO the flexibility to ratchet up or dial down according to Chinese behaviour. But this plays both ways. Beijing's actions directly impinge on the ebbs and flows of the Quad's interactions, activities, and its level of institutionalization (Lee et al. 2021a, b).

²⁰ 1975 was the last time such incidents occurred on the India-China border.

²¹ The 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' or FOIP, like the Quad, was the brainchild of Abe. Launched in 2016, in part to reenergize the Quad, its purpose (for Tokyo) is to maintain the existing international order and thereby act check China's behavior, particularly in Japan's maritime near abroad (Lee et al. 2021a, b; Rossiter and Cannon 2020).

²² In 2020, Exercise Malabar was held in two locations, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea and saw the inclusion of Australia for the first time in 13 years. Australia participated again in 2021 when exercises were held first in the Philippine Sea and then in the Bay of Bengal. This made the manoeuvres a Quad activity in all but name.



In 2020 alone, and during the worst global pandemic in a century, China heightened its unilateral terrestrial, maritime, and punitive economic actions taken against Quad states. In April, it sent bombers into the Miyako Strait, between Taiwan and the Japanese island of Okinawa. Its navy deployed the *Liaoning*, its first aircraft carrier, through the Miyako Strait for exercises for the first time. In late Spring and early Summer, Chinese soldiers crossed into Indian territory in Galwan and Sikkim and fought pitched battles, as noted above. In October, two Chinese government vessels stayed in Japan's territorial waters around the disputed Senkaku Islands for over 48 hours, their longest single intrusion, to date. Australia, geographically more distant from China, suffered economic pressure on account of what Beijing termed Australia's 14 grievances; imposing customs taxes on Australian exports, targeting barley, wine, beef, and seafood.²³ By way of explanation, a Chinese government official told an Australian reporter: 'China is angry. If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy' (Kearsley et al. 2020). Beijing's anger was reciprocated in New Delhi, Tokyo, Canberra and, significantly, Washington, which doubled down on its all-out trade war and war of words with Beijing, actions which continued across both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations.

The essential role played by China in how the Quad behaves as an IGO can be divined by recent Quad meetings. The October 2020 Tokyo Summit was the Quad's first standalone meeting (previous ministerial and working group meetings occurred on the sidelines of summits). Significantly, three foreign ministers flew from Washington, Canberra, and New Delhi to Tokyo at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic for in-person meetings. This was quickly followed by a virtual summit in March 2021, that brought together the leaders of the quartet, to include Abe's successor, Yoshihide Suga, and the recently elected US president, Joe Biden, as well as another in-person meeting organized by Biden in Washington, D.C. in late September. These point to evidence that events since 2017 have made the Quad the go-to forum for coordinating high-level policy among the four Indo-Pacific partners. Nonetheless, while informality remains the Quad's most pronounced feature, the results of the leaders' summit are telling vis-a-vis shifts from informality to possibly more formality.

All three summits were highly publicized affairs, but what was discussed remained exclusive to the Quads' leaders and confidential. In Tokyo, no formal joint statements were issued, reflecting a club-like informality akin to previous Quad summits, and demonstrating a continued resistance to institutionalization. Instead, all four states released their own statements, or readouts, separately. In contrast, at both subsequent summits, perhaps because of their higher-level and, thus, added significance, joint statements were released. This represented a marked departure from previous summits, but perhaps one more laden with symbolism than substance. The statements, for instance, offered a clearer agenda that touched on regional security issues, ASEAN's centrality, and vaccines. Yet, these ingredients were also found in

²³ These included but were not limited to government funding for 'anti-China' research, 'spearheading a crusade' in multilateral forums on China's 'internal' affairs and calling for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19.



the separate releases and tweets after the foreign ministers' meeting in Tokyo. What remained missing in all three cases were references to China. Indeed, after Tokyo, only the US mentioned China by name. At first blush, the specificity of then-US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in naming and criticizing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) struck a note of defiance from Washington that was in stark contrast to the other three club members. Nevertheless, direct mentions of China from the US or the other Quad members did not resurface in either of the joint statements issued in 2021. These statements did include remarkably blunt (and nearly identical) sentences aimed squarely at Beijing: The Quad states will '... [f]acilitate collaboration, including in maritime security, to meet challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas' (White House 2021a) and '... [w]e will continue to champion adherence to international law, particularly as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to meet challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the East and South China Seas' (White House 2021b).

The quartet has yet to hammer out common positions on the most critical sovereignty issues faced by individual members vis-à-vis China. But perhaps this is the point. Japan would never commit up front to action against China over India's Arunachal Pradesh; neither, for that matter, would India for Japan's Senkaku Islands. Precisely because the most difficult questions are simply avoided, informality, even after the 2021 leaders' summits, means the four members can coordinate with one another regularly at a regional level. As President Biden noted at the Washington summit, '[t]his event demonstrates the strong solidarity between [the] four nations and [their] unwavering commitment to the common vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific' (White House 2021c).

Signalling without blowback?

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.²⁴ Its flat hierarchy means that none is pressured to adopt unequivocal and public lines, like Pompeo's, about China. Instead, the release of four separate readouts in 2020, and two joint leaders' statements in 2021, demonstrated the continuation of the mutually constitutive process of 'virtual understanding' to take the Quad forward. This reciprocally built context will complement all four states' national security interests (Panda 2021b, See footnote 15).

²⁴ At a ministerial meeting held in February 2021, for example, Japanese Foreign Minister, Toshimitsu Motegi, recalled how he had conveyed Japan's serious concerns to the other Quad members about a recent Chinese law that explicitly allows the Chinese coast guard to use weapons against foreign ships that it sees as illegally entering its waters. After the meeting, Motegi also noted that all four members had voiced their strong opposition to any attempts by China to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region by force (Kyodo News 2021).



It is the fact they continue to meet together, online or in-person, across administrations and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, that matters most. This mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing environment resonates in the club capitals—the band is back together again... and again. It also resonates in Beijing where Washington's direct language in 2020 along with the loosely veiled statements issued by other quartet members²⁵ led China to issue statements decrying 'exclusive cliques' and 'closed and exclusive small circles' targeted at third parties (Johnson and Sugiyama 2020). The Quad members are sending signals of their resolve but not so overtly that China can claim them to be a threat.

Informality also allows for members to play different roles and send different messages. Instead of wringing their hands at the specificity and implicit bellicosity in Pompeo's 2020 statement, the Quad states see opportunities. Japan, for example, relishes Washington's hardline stance vis-à-vis China because it means Tokyo need not issue direct statements on its own (Lee et al. 2021a, b). Rather, during the Trump administration, American language and actions created the necessary space for Japan's Abe administration to propose cooperation with China on quality, affordable and transparent infrastructure, albeit under certain, stringent conditions (Aizawa and Rossiter 2020). In other words, as the US plays 'bad cop', Japan can play 'good cop' and engage in 'subtle diplomatic language... [that] is arguably suited to the increasingly complex international environment as it offers various diplomatic options to Tokyo and makes Beijing's calculations much more complicated' (Hakata 2021: 89).

It is not clear how far this signalling strategy has worked. Demonstrating an almost schizophrenic view of the Quad, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi famously stated in 2018, '... they [the Quad states] are like sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean... They may get some attention but [it] will be short-lived' (Xinhua 2018). But two years later, Wang argued that strategic cooperation between the Quad states was tantamount to an 'Indo-Pacific NATO' (Jaipragas and Sukumaran 2020). Whether this was pure rhetoric or Beijing beginning to take the Quad seriously remains to be seen.

Signalling the quartet's resolve without being provocative is a tight line to walk. Each member will have to grapple with the prospect that this ploy may backfire; that is, they could be stoking China's suspicions without gaining much in the way of deterrence, which, after all, is predicated on material strength as well as the appearance of and willingness to deploy it. As Zala (2018, 22) argues forcefully: 'The potential risks associated with sending containment-like signals to Beijing in the short-term and the potential for misperceptions over ambiguous commitments during a future crisis in the longer-term clearly outweigh the benefits of the current vague aspiration to cooperation with no clear purpose'. The political visibility of the Quad and the message it sends across the Indo-Pacific—foremost to China—may already be producing this effect. Certainly, Chinese President Xi Jinping thinks so.

²⁵ Australia's Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, asserted that Quad countries were committed to a region that was 'governed by rules', while her Indian counterpart advocated 'upholding the rules-based international order.'



In early 2021, Xi boldly stated, ‘To build small circles, or start a new Cold War; to reject, threaten, or intimidate others; to wilfully impose decoupling, supply disruption, or sanctions; and to create isolation or estrangement, will only push the world into division and even confrontation’.²⁶ One wonders how much the Quad was the target of his speech.

The Quad’s likely direction of travel

The Quad can currently be characterized as the opposite of a formal, binding, institutionalized IGO. Will the Quad shed its informality skin and emerge with characteristics closer to an alliance? There are reasons to think not. Quad members, especially Japan and India, for differing reasons, do not want tighter and more disciplined institutional arrangements in the future, preferring the strategic flexibility of an informal format.²⁷ Washington, from its side, wants its key allies to do more for their own defence. It may therefore decide (based on its experience with NATO) that a formal alliance committed to mutual defence but underwritten by US military power could lead its partners to ‘cheap ride’. Also, Quad members have varying commitments to extant global and regional governance structures. Not all are in favour of raising the Quad’s profile to the detriment of these.

Besides, even if the desire existed, deepening intermilitary arrangements under an organization and the bureaucracy to manage this takes time to develop. It requires members to make hard compromises on autonomy and narrow national interests. Borrowing from what we know of the turn towards informality in international institutions and governance, more informal IGOs allow members to refrain from addressing issues where there are underlying tensions between them (Cooper and Farooq 2013, 427–428). In the absence of outright military aggression, the prospects for deeper institutionalization are limited by an array of ideological differences, economic divergences, and strategically competing issues among the Quad’s core members. This point is even more apposite when we add the so-called Quad Plus to the mix.

Quad Plus refers to a minilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific that expands the core Quad members to include other crucial emerging economies (Panda 2020a). Quad Plus dialogues assemble officials and experts from the Quad countries along with a rotating external partner to explore areas of common interest. These ‘Plus’ partners have included the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, France, and Sri Lanka (Smith 2020). What really breathed life into the Quad Plus concept was a unique Quad meeting initiated by outgoing US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun on 20 March 2020 at the foreign secretary level. The

²⁶ The speech was delivered online at the Davos Agenda on January 25, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NTLUaxuils.

²⁷ India and Japan both wish to maintain robust diplomatic relations with Beijing. According to Koga (2021, 92), better relations with China do not mean Japan’s firm diplomatic stance on its national interests, such as its sovereignty, democracy, human rights, and rule of law, will dissipate.



consultation—instituted as a weekly meeting—was meant to enable an exchange of assessments of members’ COVID-19 pandemic situations and synergize participant nations’ responses to contain the virus’ spread. It significantly extended the Quad forum to South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand, raising critical questions about whether such a broadened platform could be sustained and whether it could feasibly translate into a mechanism for security coordination. For Panda (2020a, 5):

the Quad Plus would allow participating nations to create a strategic alignment that has otherwise proved difficult to materialize. The potential grouping could, therefore, reinforce the liberal international order in the Indo-Pacific and, by extension, the world. Due to its composition of like-minded states, the Quad Plus could indicate a growing, or at least temporary, embrace of a US-led order in the Indo-Pacific region while still not becoming part of a set “alliance framework”.

Yet the Quad Plus concept is currently an abstract one, depicted as an amplified version of the Quad framework. Pooling the quartet’s strengths around vaccine diplomacy and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) are useful public goods. Touting such cooperative ventures within the Quad—outward to the Quad Plus—has three modalities. First, it defuses opposition within the Quad, particularly from India to more overt forms of security cooperation and military links. Second, it nods at India’s emphasis on a free, open, and *inclusive* Indo-Pacific (Panda 2021b; Hakata and Cannon 2021a, b, 9–10). Third, and relatedly, it further distances the Quad from the more formal NATO model and provides an accent on multi-faceted functionality. These three modalities point to perhaps the most salient feature of a Quad Plus mechanism: its plural, inclusive nature. For this reason, an expansion of its scope, or a shift in its priorities from pandemic-induced disaster relief to containing China, remains an unlikely scenario for many of the potential partners in the forum. Almost all participating Quad Plus nations have elaborate economic ties with Beijing, even if they are wary of China’s coercive, unilateral, and destabilizing actions (Grossman 2020).

Whilst we see that no effort will be made to force a common position over key areas, these four states will increasingly seek closer strategic alignment as China’s relative power grows. But this may occur on a bilateral or trilateral level between the various parties rather than through a binding alliance structure or with a third party state as seen in the late 2021 creation of AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Perhaps irrespective of the levels on which these strategic alignments occur (bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral/formal or informal), China is the glue that binds the Quad. This is the case whether Washington pointedly references the CCP as *the* problem or Tokyo speaks of upholding a rules-based order. Implicit in the Quad’s emphasis and efforts to uphold a rules-based order is their position as both norm beneficiaries and norm upholders (Hatakeyama 2017) and, relatedly, their common agreement that China has no claim to dominate common seas and airspace across the Indo-Pacific. Stopping Chinese regional hegemony, then, smacks of containment in all but name. A danger emerges if either China is too big to contain or the



quartet does not possess the wherewithal or will to pursue a joint containment strategy. It would seem that both possibilities are true.

Conclusion: Quad in an age of informality?

Each era has shaped the characteristics of the international institutions and practices that emerged. The nineteenth century had ‘conference diplomacy’, the following century had ‘the era of international organizations’, and this century is increasingly seeing the cascade of informal IGOs (Pentilla 2009). Informal IGOs possess an innovative quality and institutional flexibility that allows members to maintain close relations and coordinate actions without concomitant obligations.

The preceding analysis has argued that the Quad’s informality and institutional flexibility have been moderate assets but, more than this, they are functional necessities. An overt focus on the Quad as a military organization to counterbalance China would have failed to enable the range of possible coordinated activities undertaken by the core members. It would have also hindered the integration of other states preferring, for the time being at least, to maintain a more equivocal position vis-à-vis China. There is simply not the will among the quadrilateral members or the felt need to enter into a more explicit and binding IGO for mutual defence. Instead, the Quad members have channelled their attention under the IGO to shared common interests—foremost China, but also pandemic recovery and other non-traditional security areas—in order to work on them, no matter how incremental the progress. They prefer informality as they believe it signals alignment without provocation and, more importantly, it works for everyone, albeit for different reasons. That it sends signals to both Beijing as well as the four club capitals is the point. Ambiguous or not, the Quad possesses political capital even if, as an informal IGO, it cannot yet effectively aggregate the power resources of the units. Rather, what it does is perform the vital function of identifying friends in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad communicates some degree of mutual support but leaves the members a fairly easy ‘out’ if things get too hot.

We 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 and enables engagement with a range of regional partners under the Quad Plus dialogues. These conclusions, however, do not preclude a more formal alliance arrangement emerging should China’s actions become more overtly hostile and aggressive. The historical record reveals to us that balancing coalitions do not take full shape until aggressors have made significant conquests. Even so, parties will have to be reconciled to the idea that consolidating this emerging alignment will depend on toleration and perhaps even support for unshared interests, such as India’s or Japan’s territorial disputes with China. If the Quad solidifies and matures it will increasingly be viewed as hostile by Beijing, heightening tension in the region, which, in turn, will either spur the four to pull closer together or to seek cover under the shade of greater ambiguity and informality.



Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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