

Quad Evolving into a Security Institution

Yasushi Tomiyama*

Introduction

A quadrilateral cooperation framework among four Indo-Pacific democracies – Japan, Australia, India and the United States – is making a robust transition from a loose-knit consultative body to a full-fledged security institution. In March 2021, the four countries held their first-ever leaders’ summit in a teleconference format, opening a new chapter for the “Quad” history. Prior to the summit, the third quadrilateral foreign ministers’ meeting, held in February 2021 also via teleconference because of the novel coronavirus pandemic, marked changes of the times in the sense that the participants did not hide anymore the grouping is a security framework of the democratic camp to counter China’s forceful attempts to change the status quo.

The Quad that revived in 2017 as a senior officials’ meeting at the level of foreign ministry’s director-general or assistant secretary of state after an interval of 10 years has enhanced steadily the level of diplomatic and military cooperation by holding its first foreign ministers’ meeting in 2019, its first quadrilateral naval exercises in 2020 and now its first summit meeting in 2021.

15 years after Shinzo Abe proposed strategic cooperation between Japan, Australia, India and the United States that share universal values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law as the world’s first politician in his book¹ in 2006 shortly before he became Japan’s Prime Minister, Abe’s idea that the four countries discuss cooperation at a leaders’ level or foreign ministers’ level has become reality.

Mr. Yasushi Tomiyama is a research fellow and Planning Committee member at the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals and a former foreign news editor and bureau chief in Washington, D.C., London, and Bangkok for the Jiji Press.

¹ Shinzo Abe, 2006. *Utsukushii kuni-e* (Toward a beautiful country), Bungeishunju Ltd., Tokyo, p.160. Available only in Japanese.

The Quad has made evolution for the past few years due to nothing less than a rising sense of crisis on the side of the four countries that assertive and hegemonic activities of China's Xi Jinping regime could undermine existing international order as well as other countries' territorial integrity, political stability and economic prosperity.

Whether the Quad will further proceed with institutionalization by setting up a permanent secretariat or adopting a Quad charter, and whether the Quad will deepen military and defense cooperation by regularizing joint military exercises and organizing defense ministers' meetings might depend largely on China's behaviors. The U.S. Biden administration's new China strategy to be launched will also be an important factor. However, it is almost impossible for the Quad to develop into a military alliance like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There will be limitations to the Quad development.

First-ever leaders' summit

The first-ever Quad leaders' summit was held on the initiative of the United States in a teleconference format on March 12, 2021. Quad Leaders' Joint Statement³ issued after the meeting reaffirmed that the four countries share "universal values" and declared that they would promote a free, open and rules-based international order and support principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity. Specifically, the four leaders concurred to facilitate collaboration to meet challenges to the rule-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas. By expressing such stance that jabs at China's hegemonic behaviors in the region, the Quad leaders endorsed discussions accumulated at foreign ministers' and senior officials' meetings.

More importantly, the Quad leaders agreed as a measure to end the COVID-19 pandemic that the United States, Japan and Australia would provide financial and logistical support for expanded production of safe

² *Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad"* Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100159230.pdf> [Accessed March 13, 2021]

³ *Quad Summit Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100159237.pdf> [Accessed March 13, 2021]

and effective vaccines in India and their delivery to Indo-Pacific developing countries⁴. This is a countermeasure to China's "vaccine diplomacy" through which Beijing provides developing countries all over the world with novel coronavirus vaccines it developed on its own. The Quad countries are worrying that China might increase influence worldwide if the pandemic successfully comes to an end. This is the first time the Quad launched a specific policy in partnership rather than counteracting China with just abstract principles.

This agreement will also lead to strengthening India's pharmaceutical industry and help integrate India firmly into the Quad structure at least in the field of civilian cooperation. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised in his opening remarks⁵ for the summit that the cooperation on COVID vaccines and others would make the Quad a "force for global good" and emphasized that the summit meeting showed the Quad had "come of age" and the Quad would remain an "important pillar of stability in the region."

The leaders' summit also contributed to the institutionalization of the Quad. The previous three foreign ministers' meetings issued no joint statement while letting participants issue press releases respectively, indicating the Quad had not "come of age." A high-toned joint statement titled "The Spirit of the Quad" expressing a sense of exaltation was issued at the summit. Furthermore, the leaders agreed to hold an in-person summit by the end of 2021. If the summit is regularized, the institutionalization of the Quad will further proceed.

The Summit was presided over by Biden who implemented the new administration's idea of placing the Quad as the foundation of its Indo-Pacific policy. Besides Modi, Prime Ministers Scott Morrison of Australia and Yoshihide Suga of Japan joined the summit.

The foundation for the leaders' summit was laid by the third foreign ministers' meeting a month earlier.

⁴ White House, *Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Modi of India, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Suga of Japan in the Virtual Quad Leaders Summit*, March 12, 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/12/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-modi-of-india-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-suga-of-japan-in-virtual-meeting-of-the-quad/> [Accessed March 13, 2021]

A turning point

A press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan⁶ after the third Japan-Australia-India-U.S. foreign ministers' meeting of February 18, 2021, was surprisingly different from one⁷ after the second such meeting of October 6, 2020, held in Tokyo.

The press release after the third meeting offered perceptions shared by the four countries about the international situation, with China in mind, that “the existing international order has been under challenge in various fields including unilateral attempts to change the status quo,” and then said the four countries “share basic values,” making clear that they stand on the side of those who strengthen a “free and open global order.” The press release specified that Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi expressed “serious concern” about the China Coast Guard Law that threatens Japan’s effective control of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and expressed strong opposition to “unilateral and forceful attempts to change the status quo” in the East and South China Seas as a unified position of the four ministers.

In contrast, the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s press release issued after the second foreign ministers’ meeting of October 2020 included no expression of concern - explicit or implicit. As the second meeting was the first foreign ministers’ meeting since the spread of COVID-19, the Japanese press release listed first “the response to various challenges which have come to the fore with the outbreak and spread of COVID-19” as a theme on which the four ministers exchanged views. Concerning the China problem, the press release only said like a side remark: “The four Ministers also exchanged views on regional affairs such as North Korea and East and South China Seas.

Still, even hinting at China’s problematic activities in the East and South China Seas was a progress. Japanese Foreign Ministry’s press release after

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Meeting*, February 18, 2021. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000172.html [Accessed February 22, 2021]

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *The Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers’ Meeting*, October 6, 2020. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e_000244.html [Accessed February 22, 2021]

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Ministerial*, September 26, 2019. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page3e_001112.html [Accessed February 28, 2021]

the first quadrilateral foreign ministers' meeting in New York⁸ mentioned neither the East China Sea nor the South China Sea. In addition, Japanese press releases after the first and second foreign ministers' meetings did not mention about sharing of basic values by the four countries.

But everybody knows the Quad is a gathering of four major Indo-Pacific countries that share values. It is also well known that behind the revival of the Quad on November 12, 2017, as a senior officials' meeting at the level of assistant secretary of state after an interval of 10 years lies an intention to counter China's military, economic and political expansionism⁹. That the Quad participants began to speak openly about their common values and opposition to China without hesitation clearly showed change of the times.

The third foreign ministers meeting also took a major step toward institutionalization of the Quad. According to the Japanese Foreign Ministry's press release, the four ministers reaffirmed "to make sure that they will meet every year." They agreed at the second meeting to "regularize" their meeting but did not say they would meet every year. Earlier, at the first quadrilateral foreign ministers' meeting, they only expressed their expectation for a senior officials' meeting without agreeing even on the regularization of the foreign ministers' meeting. Considering the development, we can say the institutionalization of the Quad has been making a steady and rapid progress. The institutionalization went one stage further with the realization of the leaders' summit.

Apart from Motegi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, participated in all of the three Quad foreign ministers' meetings. The United States was represented by the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of the Trump administration at the first two meetings and by Secretary of State Antony Blinken of the new Biden administration at the third meeting.

Although it was a teleconference, the fact that the Biden administration agreed to hold the third foreign ministers' meeting in less than a month since

⁸ See, for instance, Yasushi Tomiyama, "Quad" from the Japanese perspective, *National Security*, Volume 1 Issue 1, August 2018, Vivekananda International Foundation, pp109-123. Available at: <https://www.vifindia.org/2018/july/31/national-security-vol-1-issue-1> [Accessed March 2, 2021]

the January 20, 2021, inauguration could be said as indicating the administration's emphasis on the Quad.

Quad participants other than Japan also stressed shared values among the four and expressed opposition to China in recognizable wordings.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne in her media release¹⁰ underscored the importance of the Quad for her country, placing it as “a key pillar of Australia's international agenda.” She said the Quad is a grouping of “four like-minded democracies committed to respecting and upholding international rules and obligations,” referring to the four countries' common values such as democracy and respect for international rules.

The Indo-Pacific should be the region “where the rights of all countries are respected and disputes are resolved peacefully, free from coercion, and in accordance with international law,” she said, objecting to China's disregard of international law and its unilateral attempts to change the status quo, without mentioning China by name.

“Despite the significant disruption COVID-19 is causing, [the Quad] remain focused on responding to these longer term challenges [by China],” she said.

India's Ministry of External Affairs after the third foreign ministers' meeting said that the participants “highlighted their shared attributes as political democracies, market economies and pluralistic societies” and that “the changes underway in the world make a strong case for their countries working closely together.”¹¹

⁹ Minister for Foreign Affairs/Minister for Women/Senator the Hon Marise Payne, *Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting*, February 19, 2021. Available at: <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/quad-foreign-ministers-meeting> [Accessed February 24, 2021]

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *3rd India-Australia-Japan-USA Quad Ministerial Meeting*, February 18, 2021. Available at: <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33540/3rd+IndiaAustraliaJapanUSA+Quad+Ministerial+Meeting> [Accessed February 24, 2021]

¹¹ Pritesh Kamath, “QUAD Opposes Chinese Attempts to Alter Status Quo in Indo-Pacific; EAM Attends Meet,” *Republicworld.com*, February 18, 2021. Available at: <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/quad-opposes-chinese-attempts-to-alter-status-quo-in-indo-pacific-eam-attends-meet.html> [Accessed February 24, 2021]

The Ministry's press release further said: "The Ministers emphasized their commitment to upholding a rules-based international order, underpinned by respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation in the international seas and peaceful resolution of disputes." While the depiction is the same as before, Indian media explained the participants agreed to strongly oppose any attempts by China to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific by force or coercion¹².

The Spokesperson for the U.S. State Department said in his readout¹³ that the four ministers agreed to hold the foreign ministers' meeting at least annually "to strengthen cooperation on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region, including

It must, however, be added that the U.S. readout, unlike three other participants' press releases, listed, before anything else, cooperation on COVID-19 and climate change as a theme discussed at the meeting. Criticism or expression of concern about China's unilateral attempt to change the status quo was largely muted at least in the readout. This may reflect the fact that the Biden administration is too new to fix China strategy, but will not eliminate U.S. allies' and partners' anxieties that the administration might put climate change above China.

Looming threat from China

Promotion and institutionalization of the Quad has been a long-term ambition of Japan's former Prime Minister Abe, but it was also a parting gift of the former U.S. Trump administration. In October 2020, when he visited Tokyo for the second Japan- Australia-India-U.S. foreign ministers' meeting, then Secretary of State Pompeo told Japan's Nikkei newspapers that he would like to formalize and potentially broaden the Quad into a "true security framework"

¹² U.S. Department of States, *Secretary Blinken's Call with Quad Ministers*, February 18, 2021. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-quad-ministers/> [Accessed February 24, 2021]

¹³ Hiroyuki Akita and Eri Sugiura "Pompeo aims to 'institutionalize' Quad ties to counter China," *Nikkei Asia*, October 6, 2020. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Pompeo-aims-to-institutionalize-Quad-ties-to-counter-China> [Accessed February 27, 2021]

to meet Chinese challenges¹⁴.

“You know, at the appropriate time, once we’ve institutionalized what we are doing, the four of us together, we can begin to build out a true security framework, a fabric that can counter the challenge that the Chinese Communist Party presents to all of us,” Pompeo said.

He was talking about a framework where democracies cooperate not only in military field but also economy, the rule of law, protection of intellectual property rights, trade, diplomatic relations and other fields.

The Biden Administration basically follows the previous administration’s policy of placing importance on the Quad. Biden’s national security advisor Jake Sullivan called the Quad “a foundation upon which to build substantial American policy in the Indo Pacific region.”¹⁵ The three countries other than the United States also support strengthening the Quad cooperation as indicated by the individual press releases after the third foreign ministers’ meeting. Needless to say, wariness of and opposition to China’s hegemonic behaviors lie behind their unity.

Japan particularly is on the extreme alert for China coming to seize the Senkaku islands by force with effectuation of its coast guard law on February 1, 2021. The law empowers the quasi-military China Coast Guard to forcefully expel foreign government ships that conduct acts that violate Chinese laws and to take all necessary measures including use of force against infringement on China’s sovereignty or jurisdiction.

According to the counting by the Japan Coast Guard, a total of 14 CCG ships intruded into Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkakus for 6 days in February, the month in which the CCG Law became effective. It was a sharp increase from January when a total of 6 ships intruded for 3 days and from December when 8 ships intruded for 3 days. CCG ships intrude into Japan’s territorial waters based on Beijing’s unilateral claim that the Senkakus are its own territory. They often approach Japanese fishing boats in the area and demand to leave. A Japan Coast Guard ship patrolling nearby would

¹⁴ See Jake Sullivan’s remarks at the event “Passing the Baton 2021: Securing America’s Future Together” organized by the U.S. Institute of Peace on January 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Passing-the-Baton-2021-Transcript-FINAL.pdf> [Accessed February 23, 2021]

interpose itself between a CCG ship and a fishing boat to protect the latter.

If the CCG Law is applied literally, the CCG ship can use force against the JCG ship and the fishing boat in such a case. The Japanese government declared on February 26 that JCG and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships can shoot at CCG ships under the current laws if the Chinese ships intrude into Japan's territorial waters for the purpose of landing on the Senkakus. If JMSDF is mobilized, Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy would naturally be dispatched. Japan and China are in a very volatile situation over the Senkaku Islands.

A turning point for India to engage proactively with security cooperation within the framework of the Quad came in June 2020, when the military clash with China occurred on the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh in the north in which India lost twenty soldiers. India's change was symbolized by the invitation of Australia to the trilateral India-U.S.-Japan Malabar naval exercises of November 2020. India's invitation led to the first-ever quadrilateral Malabar exercises.

India had been reluctant to invite Australia to the Malabar exercises up to then. India had been unable to shake off a sense of mistrust in Australia because Australia's withdrawal from the Quad in 2008 under pressure from China had led to the collapse of "Quad 1.0" in less than one year after its start. Additionally, India was suspicious that Australia might have leaked some sensitive information to China in the past. But India, which had part of its territories taken in the 1962 border war with China, realized a growing Chinese military threat when it experienced the first deadly military clash in 45 years in Ladakh.¹⁵

Australia, unlike India or Japan, has no territory threatened by China. But its democratic institutions are being threatened by China's infiltration attempts and its important industrial sectors are being threatened by China's economic harassment. This prompted Australia's China policy review and closer relations with other Quad members.

¹⁵ On India's change, see Arvind Gupta, "India favours gradual evolution of the Quad," *Japan Institute for National Fundamentals*, October 19, 2020, and Gupta, "Australia joining the Malabar exercises will strengthen the Quad," *JINF*, October 19, 2020. Available at: https://en.jinf.jp/author/arvind_gupta. Also see Brahma Chellaney, "India will shape the Quad's direction," *JINF*, October 19, 2020. Available at: https://en.jinf.jp/author/brahma_chellaney. [Accessed February 28, 2021]

It was exposed in 2016 that a large amount of money had flown into the Australian political circles from Chinese businessmen thought to be connected to the Chinese Communist Party. Opposition Labor Party Senator Sam Dastyari, whose cozy relationship with China after having received political donation was strongly criticized, had to resign in 2017. China has tried to expand its influence in the Australian society by infiltrating not only the political circles but industries, universities, think tanks and trade unions.¹⁷

After the Australian government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison asked for international investigations about the origin of COVID-19 in April 2020, with an eye on the possibility of the novel coronavirus having diffused from a virology institute in Wuhan, the Chinese government, refusing to accept responsibility for the pandemic, took retaliatory measures such as suspending some beef imports and imposing 80.5% additional import duties on barley. Wine and Coal imports were also restricted. The retaliation was a coercive warning not to challenge China.

In the United States, new President Joe Biden has called China “our most serious competitor,” expressing readiness to confront China over its unfair economic practices, aggressive and coercive regional behaviors, human rights abuses against the Uighurs and crackdown on pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, and infringement of intellectual property rights.¹⁸ The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance¹⁹, made public on March 3, 2021, designated China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”

The Biden administration inherited the slogan of “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” originally advocated by Japan and adopted by the Trump administration as a de facto counterproposal to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, although some in the Biden team felt hesitant about using the

¹⁶ See Clive Hamilton, 2018. *Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia*, Hadie Grant Books, Melbourne, 376 pp.

¹⁷ White House, *Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World* February 4, 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/> [Accessed March 1, 2021]

¹⁸ White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> [Accessed March 8, 2021]

same terminology as the one used by Trump. The Quad functions as an engine to materialize the FOIP.

The Biden administration, however, is positive about working with China on the global warming issue and COVID-19 countermeasures. This position looks quite different from that of the former Trump administration that was hostile to the Chinese communist regime and denied the engagement policy per se. John Kerry, a former secretary of state who joined the Biden administration as Special Presidential Envoy for Climate and is regarded as conciliatory to China, has stressed the United States would never compromise on important divisive issues in order to elicit cooperation on the climate change. We need to watch if the new administration will put his words into action.

An Asian NATO?

Beijing is nervous about the Quad evolution. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on October 13, 2020, shortly after the Quad foreign ministers agreed to “regularize” their meeting, that strengthened collaboration between Quad member countries was part of U.S. efforts to create an “Indo-Pacific NATO.” His remark was noticeably different from poking fun at the Quad two years before, when he predicted it would soon dissipate like a “sea form,” indicating a growing alarm on the part of China.²⁰

However, the Quad is very unlikely to develop into an Asian NATO as a practical matter. It is little known outside Japan that Tokyo imposes on itself very strict limitations to the exercise of collective self-defense right, making Japan virtually impossible to exercise it by regarding an armed attack against one member as an armed attack against all, as the article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty stipulates.

The Abe government decided to change the previous interpretation of the constitution and permit limited exercise of collective self-defense right in July 2014. Relevant bills passed the Diet on September 19, 2015. However, conditions to allow use of force as a measure for collective self-defense are so stringent that an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close

¹⁹ Abhijnan Rej, “China and the Quad: From Sea Foam to Indo-Pacific NATO,” *Diplomat*, October 15, 2020. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/china-and-the-quad-from-sea-foam-to-asian-nato/> [Accessed March 2, 2021]

relationship with Japan has to “[threaten] Japan’s survival” and pose a “clear danger” to “fundamentally overturn” people’s right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. It is also required that “there is no other appropriate means available” to repel the attack and use of force is “limited to the minimum extent necessary.”²⁰

Following the 9-11 terrorist attack on the United States, the NATO exercised the right of collective self-defense to attack Afghanistan whose government had an extended sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. However, Japan cannot fight with India against China, if India were to be attacked by China unless the attack is judged to threaten Japan’s survival and pose a clear danger to fundamentally overturn people’s right to life, etc.

Japanese government officials who were involved in the 2015 national security legislation say it would not be possible for Japan to broaden the permissible scope of collective self-defense more without amending the war-renouncing constitution. Prime Minister Suga who succeeded Abe last September is not negative about the amendment, but he can’t help but be preoccupied with COVID-19 countermeasures and a recovery of sluggish economy for the time being. As the prospect of constitutional amendment is dim, the Quad with Japanese membership is almost impossible to become an Asian NATO in a foreseeable future.

Whether the Quad will develop into a “true security framework” as proposed by Pompeo, if not a military alliance like the NATO, may largely depend on India. India and China withdrew their troops in late February 2021 based on a mutual agreement from a contested area where deadly military clashes occurred in 2020. China may be trying to interrupt the development of the Quad by easing military tensions with India. On the other hand, if China chooses to repeat provocative military actions against India, it would drive India into the direction of enhancing the Quad.

The Biden administration may also hold a key. As the administration is in the process of developing a comprehensive China strategy that covers both trade and security areas, it is still not clear how the emphasis on the Quad

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan’s Security Policy*, April 12, 2016. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000084.html [Accessed March 2, 2021]

might be transformed into specific policies apart from the initiative to cooperate on the production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccine announced at the leaders' summit. Whether the Biden administration will move to materialize the Pompeo proposal of expanding the Quad into a "Quad plus" to include democracies in Europe and Southeast Asia and building a "true security framework" to counter China will become clear before long.

