



The Wilmington Summit: A Consolidation of the Quad

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Summary

The sixth Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit held at Wilmington, Delaware, Joe Biden's hometown, is a celebration of the outgoing United States (US) president's leadership in transforming the forum into an important part of Asian geopolitical architecture. The Quad's wide-ranging agreements, though not spectacular, have helped turn it into a valuable mechanism to deliver public goods in the Indo-Pacific.

Hosting his last summit of the Quad that brings together the leaders of Australia, India, Japan and the United States (US), President Joe Biden declared that the forum is [“here to stay”](#) beyond November 2024 when the US elects a new president. To be sure, there are apprehensions that the election of Donald Trump as the next president could cast a shadow over the forum. The fact though is that it was in 2017 under the Trump presidency that the Quad was revived after a decade of political coma. Equally important is the formation of a bipartisan and bicameral [‘Quad Caucus’](#) in the US Congress augurs well for the continued relevance of the Quad beyond Biden.

Meanwhile, Biden can take credit for elevating the Quad to the summit level within a few weeks of becoming president and sustaining it through the last four years. The Quad also marks an important strategic departure in the US' strategy towards Asia. As Biden's national security adviser, [Jake Sullivan puts it](#), “the Quad is part of Washington's move from the traditional hub-and-spoke model, rooted largely in bilateral alliances and bilateral partnerships, to a latticework approach with multiple institutions, overlapping partnerships, different configurations that all add up to genuinely new architecture for the Indo-Pacific.”

Meeting for the sixth time (and for the fourth time in person) at Biden's hometown Wilmington, Delaware, the [Quad summit](#) showcased a wide range of agreements – from curing cervical cancer to cooperation on cybersecurity, joint port development in the Indo-Pacific to the creation of an air logistics network in the region and laying the foundation for future-oriented cooperation in biotechnology and Quantum computing. Sceptics, however, will say the long list of Quad agreements is impressive but also point to the fact that most of these are “small bore” initiatives rather than grand strategic moves to alter the structure of Asian geopolitics.

The [critics of the Quad](#) in the US and elsewhere argue that the forum is ambitious in the scope of its declarations but does not have the substance to match it. They point to the lack of a tight-knit organisation and effective policy coordination to make a difference in the regional security environment in the Indo-Pacific. Others, however, point to the fact that [the Quad's emphasis](#) is on flexibility and avoiding a rigid organisational structure.

This approach was indeed necessitated by India's reluctance to join a formal military alliance and its preference for an informal forum for Indo-Pacific cooperation that has shaped the expansive evolution of the Quad in the last four years.

The smallness of the agenda does not mean the achievements of the Quad are inconsequential. In presenting itself as a forum for the provision of public goods in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad has avoided being branded as the "Asian NATO" and inviting the ire of the regional states that had no desire to see an American-led military alliance against China.

Over the last four years, the Quad has become [more acceptable](#) to the once sceptical Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which now can live with the small but regionally valuable agenda of the Quad. For India, which is the only "non-ally" of the US in the forum, the Quad has opened up an expansive agenda of regional cooperation with the US and its Asian allies and instituted an intensive habit of cooperation with them.

To be sure, the Quad leaders insisted, once again, that the forum is not directed against China. That does not mean deterring Chinese power is not on the minds of the Quad partners. In fact, China was at the very top of the conversations between the four leaders. [Biden's remarks](#) from a hot mic captured by the press corps said it all, "China continues to behave aggressively, testing us all across the region" on several fronts, "including on economic and technology issues." Biden added, "At the same time, we believe intense competition requires intense diplomacy".

Although the Quad remains non-military, the US is developing more explicit military instruments such as the Australia, United Kingdom and United States (AUKUS), deeper trilateral security cooperation with South Korea and Japan, and lending military support to the Philippines that is at the receiving end of Chinese aggressiveness on the disputed frontiers. As the statement issued after the bilateral talks between Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the margins of the Quad summit pointed out, India and the US are [steadily enhancing](#) the range and depth of their military cooperation.

In formally separating the Quad from their bilateral military cooperation, New Delhi and Washington have created much needed political room for themselves to sidestep the traditional Indian emphasis on "non-alignment" and the US' preference for security cooperation through "military alliances". The two sides deeply value the Quad framework that has allowed them to work together in promoting peace and security in the Indo-Pacific for the first time since India's independence.

Finally, there is an entrenched Indian perception that the Quad and the bilateral strategic partnership with the US have complicated New Delhi's ties with Beijing. However, the sophistication of the Quad's approach of vigorous competition and continued engagement towards China may be opening some space for [New Delhi's productive diplomacy with Beijing](#). Biden told his Quad partners that China's leader, Xi Jinping, is "looking to buy himself some diplomatic space" in order "to focus on domestic economic challenges and minimise the turbulence in China". There will be several opportunities in the coming weeks for Modi to test this proposition on tactical possibilities with Beijing when he might run into Xi on the margins

of many multilateral forums, including the East Asia Summit, Brazil, Russia India, China Summit and the G20 in October and November 2024.

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