

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Elevated at Head of State Level: Emerging Platform for Multilateral Diplomacy Among Indo-Pacific Democracies

The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”)** Summit of March 12 holds a **historic significance**: established in 2004, as an informal mechanism to properly respond the catastrophic tsunami in the Indian Ocean, it has been **recently elevated at head of state level**, stressing on the high importance all the member states (*Australia, India, Japan, and the US*) attach to multilateral diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific.

Textually, the **Joint Statement** at the end of the Summit recalls its **historical roots** and refers to the **on-going pandemic, climate change and security challenges** as the **main reasons for its renewal**. The participating states committed to promote a *“free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond”*, while supporting *“rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity”*. While the **values jointly set by the Quad overlap with the commitments of ASEAN**, whose **Centrality has been textually acknowledged** (*“We reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality”*), the Statement seems to **loosely define its geographic area** (*“Indo-Pacific and beyond”*), **prospective partners** (*“We commit to work together and with a range of partners.”*) or **scope of action** (i.e. *“maritime domains”* leaves much room for interpretation). In this regard, it might be interpreted as a **purposefully broad and inclusive statement, positioning the Quad as a flexible informal mechanism**, unlike formal regional organisations governed by founding treaties or charters. Naturally, the *“threats to both the Indo-Pacific and beyond”* remain **mostly inferred**, a wording rather common in the international documents (*the NATO founding treaty or associated joint statements, for instance, never specifically pointed at a third state*). It is perhaps in this key of broadness that one may interpret the scarce specific official reactions of third Indo-Pacific states.

Symbolically, the Quad Summit’s **high relevance** similarly resides in its **novel approach**: unlike previous treaties or informal alliances, **the Quad does not start from the public assumption of a direct confrontation, focusing instead on each party’s priorities, identifying common denominators and finding ways to strengthen multilateral relations by mutual support**. Not surprisingly, the opening speech of the American President focused on climate issues. Another central theme of discussion was represented by the **anti-Covid-19 vaccination campaign**, especially with the commitment to **provide the ASEAN countries with a billion vaccine doses** by the end of next year. In this regard, one may comment that **strategy meets the pandemic**. Besides having been acknowledged their Centrality and Unity in the Indo-Pacific region, the ASEAN member states’ existence free

from external interference seems to have squeezed them between major geo-strategic interests.

The Summit seems to also iterate a **novel direction** in the multilateral approach of its participants: **generating consensus around realistic and constructive goals, instead of being guided by temporary needs as it might have been the case in the previous administrations** (*unbearable trade deficit, financing military troops stationed abroad, e.g.*). It is hence in this key that the reactivation of the Quad at the highest level could be interpreted: **the geopolitical center of gravity has been extended from East Asia to the Indo-Pacific, an area where the world balances of the 21st century reside and could be addressed. The Indo-Pacific, as a meeting point of the East-West trade routes, promises to become an area of collective synergies reuniting the economic potential of India, Japan as a robust development driving engine, Australia as an embodiment of successful Western political values in a non-Western geographic setting and the United States as a convenor legitimized by its consistent commitment, inspiring political values and economic strength.** Of course, the **ASEAN Unity and Centrality, strongly supported by the joint communique** of the Quad leaders, remains **paramount to the success of the Quad as a platform for multilateral diplomacy.**

According to a statement of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam hopes the Quad will *“maintain cooperation and respect the central role of ASEAN in the forming regional structures”*. **Whether the ASEAN Centrality will be acknowledged by constant references to the concept, inclusion of the Association in the Quad or of some of its member states is yet to be decided.** In this regard, a **Quad “Plus”**, i.e. extended format of the mechanism, **is not to be excluded.** Talks in the South Korean academia have made the case for a **possible enlargement**, referring to a renewed **“Quad Plus” format to include South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand.** According to the South Korean Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Choi Jong-Geon, the US have never used *“an official window”* to request South Korea’s participation in the format.

The case for extension talks, as well as the use of the Quad *per se*, signals an **organic link between the domestic aspects of the US and the international power relations**: the American power, as explained by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, rests on its economic, social and institutional efficiency and vitality. Realpolitik hence does not imply an abandonment of the **democratic-liberal factor**, but its very reinforcement. As National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan put it, the vaccination plan for ASEAN is realistic thanks to a formidable combination: *“With Indian manufacturing, US technology, Japanese and American financing & Australian logistics capability, up to 1 billion (#COVID19 vaccine) doses would be delivered to ASEAN, the Indo-Pacific & beyond by end of 2022.”* The **ASEAN vaccination**, Sullivan seems to indicate, is only a **proof of concept**, as **major developments are expected by the end of the year.** As the Quad leaders agreed to **meet in person in 2021**, a set of **emerging technology groups in Artificial Intelligence, 5G and Cyber are set to be launched.**

Undoubtedly, a Security Dialogue could not lack a certain military dimension in the broader key of the international developments in the Indo-Pacific Region. In this regard, the **Quad seems not to lack the ability to leverage and project various forms of power at Indo-Pacific level.** According to Former Defense Minister James Mattis, the Quad could provide added security value to at least **four fundamental sectors: defense of shipping**

routes, securing the supply-chain, technological cooperation and Asian diplomacy. The relevance of the Quad hence **transcends the symbolical aspects of multilateral military cooperation.**

Of course, in terms of military cooperation with regard to the Indo-Pacific, in the light of the **ASEAN Centrality** in the region, the **ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)**, established in 2006, and the **ADMM Plus**, jointly held with **Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, ROK, Russian Federation and the United States**, remain of **pivotal importance**. In a similar key, **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)** remains a **highly relevant venue** to foster constructive dialogue on security and political cooperation in the region. Obviously, **the comparative advantages of the Quad** format in terms of security cooperation – or their complementarity for that matter – **are yet to be assessed** in the light of the future international developments in the region.

The scheduled visits of US Secretary of State Blinken to Tokyo and Seoul, where he will be accompanied by the US Defense Secretary Lloyd, will generate **a clearer contour of the overall strategy of the Quad**. At the same time, the US continues to remain open to explore a **selective dialogue based on a reinforced position with Beijing**. A meeting of the US Secretary of State with his Chinese counterpart is expected to take place in Alaska this Thursday.

Essentially, **the Quad Summit remains a test for the potential of multilateral, constructive diplomacy that seeks to generate consensus instead of confrontation, militarization or appeasement**. The success of such project, along with **the impact of a potential European presence** with common, clear and realistic objectives, may set a **new, higher standard for multilateral cooperation among the world's democracies**.

S.F.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.