

Opinion – A ‘Weakened’ Quad?

Written by Pak K. Lee and Lai-Ha Chan

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PAK K. LEE AND LAI-HA CHAN, MAY 27 2022

On May 24th, towards the end of Biden’s first Asia trip as US President, the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – Australia, Japan, India and the US – held an in-person summit in Tokyo; their first meeting since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Two issues are worth our attention. Firstly, after the war in Ukraine, there have been concerns that the Quad will be weakened by India’s ‘neutrality’ towards the war. India is the only Quad state that refuses to publicly condemn Russia over the invasion and impose sanctions. Shashi Tharoor, an Indian former diplomat and currently an opposition member of the Indian Parliament, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* on April 27th 2022 that: ‘The Quad has been weakened by India’s failure to go along with its other three members on Ukraine and on challenging the emerging geopolitical convergence between China and Russia.’

Secondly, Australia held a federal election on May 21st, three days before the summit meeting. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) returns to power, ending the nine-year rule by the centre-right Liberal-National coalition. The ALP leader, Anthony Albanese, swiftly went to Tokyo for the summit meeting shortly after being sworn in as Prime Minister. Will the new ALP government fully support Australia’s participation in the Quad? This is an especially salient question, given that the last ALP Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, withdrew from the Quad in February 2008, after winning a federal election in November 2007. Will this ALP administration follow suit?

By looking at the strategic narratives of the Quad’s summit meeting, this short essay argues that the Quad gives itself an identity as ‘a force of good’ for regional peace and security by both opposing any unilateral move to change the regional status quo and by bringing ‘concrete results’ to regional states. But the Quad is reticent about what policy measures the four states are going to take to preserve the status quo. Instead, to highlight their goal to deliver tangible and concrete results, they primarily focus on addressing non-traditional security issues in the region. The strategic narratives tell us that the Quad is not weakened by India’s pro-Russia stance in regards to the war in Ukraine, but, rather, by their lack of consensus on counterbalancing China.

According to Alister Miskimmon of Queen’s University Belfast, a key author of the concept of ‘strategic narrative’, strategic narratives are key for political leaders to exert influence over international politics. Strategic narratives provide a reason for being and a framework for forging shared meaning and understanding between actors.

Strategic narratives may come in three major forms: (a) identity narratives, (b) system narratives and (c) policy or issue narratives. To build domestic cohesion and exercise external influence, a major political actor (a state or an international organization such as the European Union) must project a narrative that articulates its collective identity, its vision of an international or regional order it strives for, and its stance on the challenges it faces – be that globally or regionally – alongside its policy responses.

This piece focuses on whether the Quad, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as well as the arrival of a new Australian federal government in May, can provide a coherent strategic narrative on the Indo-Pacific; specifically, a strategic narrative that can serve as the framework for the collective action of the four states to meet the objectives of the grouping.

The primary challenges the Quad is facing in the aftermath of the Ukraine war and Australia’s election are twofold and they concern the cohesion of this multilateral grouping. India prefers to continue its historical ties with Russia

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while a China-Russia axis is forging. When the summit meeting was underway, both Chinese and Russian nuclear-capable bombers were flying over the Sea of Japan in a joint military exercise. The demise of Quad 1.0 in 2008 has been widely attributed, albeit not undisputed, to the decision of Kevin Rudd of the ALP to pull his country out of the grouping. The Quad revived in 2017 when Australia was ruled by the Liberal-National coalition government. Uncertainties remain about whether the newly elected ALP government holds different policy preferences about China and the Quad from the previous Morrison government. Inside Australia there have been voices expressing hope that ‘an improved trajectory in Australia-China relations is a real possibility’ after the ALP victory.

The first in-person Quad summit meeting in Tokyo in the wake of both the war in Ukraine and the Australian election offers us an opportunity to see whether the four Indo-Pacific states manage to socially construct a shared mission for the Quad, despite the challenges.

In the Quad’s joint statement after the summit meeting, the four leaders first indicated the Quad’s shared identity. In this, they claim that the Quad is: ‘a force for good committed to bringing tangible benefits to the region’. Secondly, whilst they reiterated the previously emphasized principles of freedom, rule of law and democratic values, etc., they now put forward a new principle which signifies their common vision of the region. It is that they are opposed to ‘any coercive, provocative or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo’. The scope of the application of the new principle is open to different interpretations. The United States endorses such a principle for the Quad globally, covering both Europe and Asia, as President Biden said that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has served to underline the need for a free Indo-Pacific. The rest, with eyes on China, tend to focus on unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the Indo-Pacific. As the host, Japan’s Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, added that ‘unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force will never be tolerated anywhere, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region’. Anthony Albanese acknowledged that the Quad had discussed the China-Solomon Islands security pact in the context that China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, would be visiting eight countries in the South Pacific, including the Solomon Islands, between May 26th and June 4th 2022.

Although they agree on a pro-status-quo international or regional order, alongside the challenges faced by China, they do not offer any specific policy responses that would directly help preserve the status quo. The ‘tangible benefits’ they aspire to provide those in the region are all about non-traditional security over a multitude of issues. They include the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines and infrastructure assistance, climate change (thanks to the commitment from the new Australian government), cybersecurity, critical and emerging technologies, and space application and capabilities.

The four states decide to launch a new maritime domain awareness initiative, known as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and the Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indo-Pacific. But the IPMDA is not about maritime territorial disputes with China; it is rather about responding to humanitarian and natural disasters, and combating illicit fishing – although small states in the region may likely benefit from such public goods.

To summarize, the major takeaways from studying the strategic narratives of this summit meeting are: first, that the four states articulate a pragmatic, value-free identity as a force of good that can deliver tangible goods to the Indo-Pacific. Second, they warn China against resorting to any unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the region, implying the East and South China Seas, Taiwan, the South Pacific and the Himalayas. Third, whilst stressing the need to preserve the existing regional order, in terms of policy responses, the Quad is not prepared to counterbalance China directly and militarily. It is primarily focusing on addressing non-traditional security issues whilst strategic military tasks and operations are apparently left to AUKUS or JAUUKUS (if Japan joins the Australia-UK-US trilateral alliance) – without India’s participation – to handle. The Quad is not constrained by India’s ‘neutral’ stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, but rather by its reluctance to stand up to China, except in the Himalayas and South Asia. A wider implication for the region is that the Quad has a long way to go before it becomes an Asian NATO, even if some of the member states wish to do so.

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