

US convenes the “Quad”—a quasi-military alliance against China

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US President Joe Biden yesterday held the first-ever summit of the top-level leaders of the so-called “Quad” comprising the United States, Japan, Australia and India. While the virtual meeting was presented publicly as concerned with COVID-19 and climate change, its real purpose was unmistakable: to strengthen military and strategic ties to confront China throughout the Indo-Pacific and prepare for war.

Since coming to office, Biden has made clear that he will not only continue, but intensify, Washington’s aggressive stance toward Beijing that began with the “pivot to Asia” of the Obama administration, of which he was part, and was ratcheted up under Trump. Biden’s focus on China was underscored by the fact that the Quad dialogue was the first multilateral meeting he has hosted.

The joint statement issued by the four leaders—Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison—contained the stock phrases directed against China: “a free, open rules-based order,” “freedom of navigation and overflight,” and collaboration “to meet challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas.”

The demand that Beijing abide by the “international rules-based order” requires China to subordinate itself to the world order established after the end of World War II in which US imperialism was the dominant power and the rules were set in Washington. Under the Obama administration, the US transformed regional disputes in the South China and East China Seas into dangerous flashpoints. On the pretext of defending “freedom of navigation,” the US Navy has sent warships into territorial waters claimed by China around its occupied islets in the South China Sea. These highly provocative operations accelerated under Trump. The Biden administration has already carried out the first of these “freedom of navigation operations.”

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was more explicit about the discussions. Even though he denied the meeting was fundamentally about China, he acknowledged that “the leaders did discuss the challenge posed by China, and they made clear that none of them have any illusions about China.” He noted that the leaders talked about China’s “coercion” of Australia over trade issues, its alleged harassment of Japanese fishing boats near the Senkaku Islands [controlled by Japan, but claimed by China] and border clashes with India—all a product of the heightened tensions fuelled by the US.

Even the meeting’s headline-grabbing promise to provide COVID-19 vaccine to one billion people in the Indo-Pacific region is aimed at countering China. The proposal for the manufacture of the vaccine doses in India, financed by the US and Japan, and with Australia assisting in distribution, is to counter what the US refers to in derogatory terms as China’s “vaccine diplomacy”—that is, the provision of vaccines to countries that have been unable to source them elsewhere.

In strategic circles in Washington and the other three capitals, there is a clear understanding that the consolidation of the Quad is the preparation for war with China. Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor of the *Australian*, a pro-US hawk closely connected in Washington, bluntly declared in a comment entitled “China arms for war, as Quad fights back” published today: “Military conflict in the Pacific, which would certainly involve Australia, is becoming more likely. Those are not hysterical words.”

In line with US propaganda, Sheridan paints China as the aggressor, despite more than a decade of US military build-up, military provocations and efforts to undermine China economically and diplomatically throughout Asia. He did, however, note that war as a distinct danger in the near future was also “the explicit message of the US Indo-Pacific commander, the man who would have to fight such a conflict.”

Sheridan was referring to the testimony given this week to the US Congress by Admiral Philip Davidson, calling for a doubling of the Pentagon's military budget for the region, and warning that China could invade Taiwan within the next five years—a move that would trigger a US-China war.

It is not Beijing, but Washington, that has deliberately inflamed tensions over Taiwan. The Trump administration has overturned longstanding diplomatic norms that limited US contact with Taiwanese officials as part of the arrangements in 1978 to normalise US relations with China. Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province, and fears any move by the US to transform it into a strategic base of operations against China. Biden signaled his intention to continue Trump's forging of ties with Taiwan by inviting the de facto Taiwanese ambassador to the US to his inauguration. Taiwan was another issue discussed at the Quad meeting.

Sheridan was well aware that handing out COVID-19 vaccine and talking about climate action were window-dressing. As he put it—the Quad meeting was “careful of its image” and “full of welcome positives,” but “make no mistake, countering China—and avoiding war—is the Quad's existential purpose.” In reality, the Quad is about intensifying the US-led war drive, which is aimed at arresting the historic decline of US imperialism, and preventing any challenge, above all from China, to its global dominance.

Sheridan alluded to the underlying driving forces, noting that the Chinese economy could be larger in absolute terms than the American economy by 2035. Other analysts suggest that China could overtake the US economically much sooner. The fear in Washington, and the Pentagon, is that in the longer term the US may not be able to win a conflict with China, making war in the near future preferable, even inevitable.

Significantly, the Quad meeting also discussed the formation of a Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group to facilitate collaboration in hi-tech research and development, with a particular focus on telecommunications and securing “critical technology supply chains”—a key element in war preparations. The Trump administration's trade war measures against China, including hi-tech companies like Huawei, and accusations of “intellectual property theft” were driven by concerns that China could overtake the US in technologies, including those critical for war.

The first Quad summit was timed to coincide with China's annual National People's Congress—a week of

discussions that sets the overall economic and strategic orientation and policies for the coming year. Hopes in Beijing that Biden would be less confrontational than Trump have rapidly faded—a sentiment that found its reflection in speeches to the Congress. Chinese President Xi Jinping told an NPC panel discussion: “The current security situation of our country is largely unstable and uncertain... The entire military must... be prepared to respond to a variety of complex and difficult situations at any time.”

Biden has declared that China is “the most serious competitor” to the US and its taking steps accordingly. The Quad meeting yesterday is just one step in an unfolding diplomatic, economic and strategic offensive against Beijing. In the coming week, the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will make their first overseas trip early next week—to Japan and South Korea—where China will be top of the agenda. Later in the week, Blinken and National Security Adviser Sullivan will meet in Alaska with their Chinese counterparts for what is likely to be a fractious first meeting.

At the same time, Biden has shown that the Quad will not be simply a diplomatic showpiece. The meeting foreshadowed frequent discussions between the foreign ministers and other top officials of the four countries, as well as a further in-person meeting of the four leaders later in the year.

While it is routinely denied that the Quad is or will become a military alliance against China, Australia and Japan are already formal US allies, and India is in a strategic partnership with Washington that involves basing arrangements and arms sales. The four countries all took part for the first time last year in the annual Malabar naval exercises in the Indian Ocean.



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