

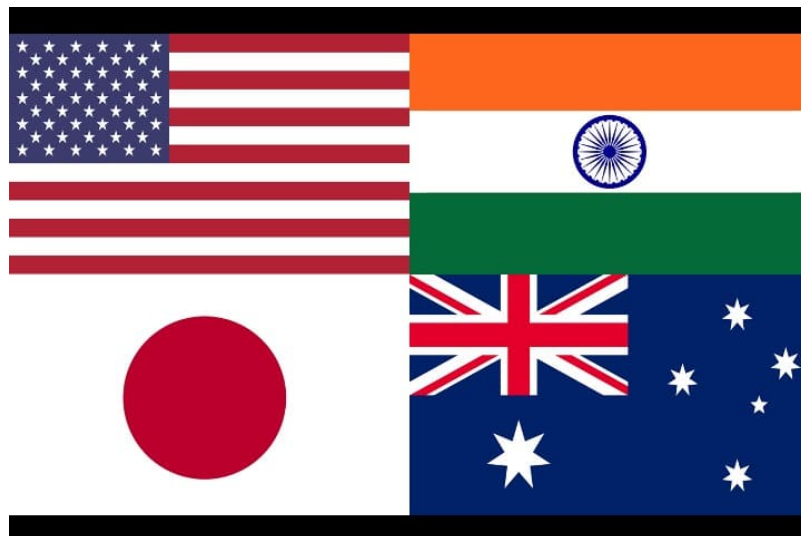


Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on May 22, 2023

Summit Cancellation Sows Doubts About Quad's Relevance

On May 17, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese confirmed the cancellation of the scheduled Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) leaders' summit — comprising the leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States — after U.S. President Joe Biden scrapped plans to head down under.

Biden, a Democrat, was expected to attend the scheduled summit of the Quad leaders in Sydney and Canberra, but met with a stand-off with House Republicans over conflicting budget bills and efforts to increase the debt ceiling, prompting him to ditch a part of his Asia-Pacific trip. Last year's October U.S. budget had earmarked a whopping \$23 million for summit costs.



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"The Quad leaders' meeting will not be going ahead in Sydney next week," Albanese said in Tweed Heads. The premier's announcement came less than 24 hours after he confirmed the itinerary for the summit. Organizing officials for the Quad had maintained last week that summit preparations were "full steam ahead" on the grounds that Biden would attend the event on May 24. "The decision by President Biden that he has been forced to make because of the holding-up of those budget issues in the United States means that the rescheduling of other arrangements is being made and those discussions are taking place respectfully over the course of today."

Albanese maintained that although the Quad meeting would not proceed, leaders from the four member countries would try to gather on the fringes of the Group of Seven (G-7) summit in Hiroshima this weekend. "We, though, will be having that discussion between Quad leaders in Japan. I thank Prime Minister [Fumio] Kishida for his invitation for me to attend the G7 and it is appropriate that we talk. The Quad is an important body and we want to make sure that it occurs at leadership level and we'll be having that discussion over the weekend."

Professor Rory Medcalf, head of the Australian National Security College, posited that the Quad "provides a kind of network for us in the region. It is not simply about dependence on the United States or indeed, if you like, capitulating to Chinese influence. The Quad proves that Australia can do smart diplomacy as a middle power with democratic partners but in a way that stabilizes the region."

Former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who played a vital role in setting up the Quad, hailed the alliance as one of the most crucial developments in Australia's security since Canberra signed an alliance with the United States. In response to Morrison's remarks, the director of the Southeast Asia Programme at think tank Lowy Institute, Susannah Patton, said:

That's a very strong statement. I'm not sure the current government would go quite so far, but it's very important in terms of enmeshing the role of the US in the region, achieving



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greater convergence with India and also partnering with Japan.

Despite all the seemingly reassuring public statements made by politicians and analysts alike, Biden's withdrawal from the Quad summit in Australia has called into question the grouping's relevance. While it is too early to jump to conclusions about the future of the Quad, Biden's recent back-out reveals the limitations of the alliance amid an increasingly assertive China.

Biden's "no show" in Sydney has apparently shaken Australia's trust in the United States as a reliable regional ally, with local media reports even doubting America's ability to spearhead regional geopolitical dynamics.

Even more biting was China's reaction to Albanese's announcement. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s propaganda outlet *The Global Times* pulled no punches, mocking Biden's withdrawal as a "fatal blow" to the security grouping. In an article published on May 18, the Chinese state-run outlet gloated over the summit's cancellation as an "omen of Quad's fate."

"It is not just the US government which is facing a crisis, but is also Quad," it pointed out. "The dynamic of Quad will only decline. The cancellation of the Sydney summit is a fatal blow to Quad. It also foreshadows the fate of other US-led anti-China cliques."

The editorial even likened the United States to someone who "used to be loaded going on a shopping spree" only to realize "his credit card may be declined." "In other words, the US is failing to financially afford its global strategic objectives, which not only require huge amounts of money, but are also confrontation-centered and against the trend of the times," it said.

[Martyn Namorong](#), a blogger and political activist from Papua New Guinea, lamented, "The US keeps shooting itself in the foot as it stumbles to maintain its grip in the region. China doesn't have to deal with such internal squabbling."

And Daniel Russel, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs who is now at the Asia Society Policy Institute, remarked, "It will be seen in the region as a self-inflicted wound caused by political polarization in Washington that does not reflect well on America's reliability as a partner."

In light of the situation, Professor of International Relations and Political Science Aurel Braun at the University of Toronto acknowledged the importance of Biden overcoming domestic problems.

"If you are going to be powerful abroad, you need to be strong at home. And clearly, the crisis over the potential debt ceiling, the need to resolve that between the Republicans and the Democrats, is a crucial one," Braun said in an interview with Channel News Asia's *Asia First* on May 19. "The United States cannot afford to default. It sends the wrong kind of message." He elaborated that the Biden administration has to rapidly find a compromise "so they can focus on those foreign policy issues that are really pressing internationally and not allow domestic factors to overwhelm the ability of the largest democratic country to act in an effective way internationally."

At the first ministerial-level meeting of the Quad in 2019, then-U.S. Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#), under the administration of former President Donald Trump, declared: "We've reconvened 'the Quad.'... This will prove very important in the efforts ahead, ensuring that China retains only its proper place in the world."

However, with Trump out of power during the first Quad leaders' meeting in March 2021, leaders from



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the four participating countries portrayed the group as having a “positive, practical agenda to respond to the region’s most pressing challenges,” a far cry from the hawkish tone adopted by people such as Pompeo, who saw the Quad as potentially taking a hard-line stance on China.

Arguably, an increasingly self-confident India has perhaps unintentionally undermined the Quad’s effectiveness, with New Delhi prepared to step out of line with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra.

Take India’s unwillingness to openly condemn Russia for its actions in Ukraine as a start. Although Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and declared that “today’s era is not an era of war,” he nevertheless lauded both countries as having an “unbreakable friendship.”

Significantly, India also withdrew from talks about the trade pillar of the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and confirmed that it is holding “[advanced negotiations](#)” with Russia over a bilateral free-trade deal.

That being said, more optimistic analysts still contend that the Quad is here to stay for the long run. For instance, Professor Medcalf claimed that it was “quite reassuring” for him as an Australian analyst that there has been rising acceptance by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in recent years of the Quad as part of the multi-polarity of the region that can balance Chinese influence without inciting conflict.

Biden’s recent withdrawal from the Sydney summit, as well as other factors such as India’s inclination to adopt its own foreign policy actions, does not augur well for the group in general. While there is nothing inherently wrong in being optimistic, it may be a stretch to claim that the grouping is currently anything more than a diplomatic accomplishment for public consumption.



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