



The evolution of the ‘QUAD’: driving forces, impacts, and prospects

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Abstract

The evolution of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as “the Quad”, from a senior-level security dialogue involving the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, to leader-level summit since 2017, speaks volumes about the rapidly changing strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific. From the very beginning, there have been three driving forces behind the rebirth, development, and improvement of the Quad: balancing China’s power and influence; promoting practical cooperation; and shaping regional order. The evolution of the Quad, especially its overt anti-China rhetoric and activities, has negatively affected political, economic, and security order in the region. Looking ahead, although the Quad is not envisioned to become an Asian NATO, it is poised to strengthen practical cooperation, policy coordination, and strategic consultations in efforts to balance and compete with China. That said, its future direction hinges on how China–U.S. relations evolve and is thus shrouded in uncertainty.

Keywords QUAD · Indo-Pacific · China–U.S. relations

1 Introduction

On May 24, 2022, the leaders of the Quad nations—the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—met in Tokyo for the fourth time (the second in-person meeting). Under U.S. President Joseph Biden’s watch, the Quad, which was revived in 2017 as a counterbalance against China’s growing power and influence in the Asia–Pacific, has been elevated from a minister-level meeting to a leader-level summit, and greatly expanded in its scope. The Biden administration and relevant parties aim to turn this informal dialogue into a premier platform for strategic consultation, policy coordination, and practical cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and a tool for shaping an

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emerging regional order favorable to the interests, values, and vision of the United States and its allies and partners (White House 2022a).

2 The evolution of QUAD

The Quad was first established in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami to coordinate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. “While the humanitarian relief mission ended in mid-January 2005, a new seeding of the Quad framework emerge in the leaders’ minds” (Pant 2022). In 2007, then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took steps to turn the four-nation response to the tsunami into a more formal, quadrilateral security dialogue, with the goals of enhancing maritime security along the “Confluence of the Two Seas” and facilitating cooperation among the four democratic nations in view of the growing influence of China (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2007). The four countries held their first Quad meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in May 2007 and conducted their joint naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal, together with Singapore. However, the Quad fell apart soon afterward, due to China’s suspicion and displeasure over the intention and orientation of this new group (Buchan and Rimland 2020), and the differing interests and considerations among the four countries (Marlow 2022; Liu and Xu 2021; Yang and Ren 2022).

Ten years later, the Quad was revived when Donald J. Trump became the U.S. President in 2017. But before the Quad returned, it was again the Japanese Prime Minister Abe who took the initiative and pushed it forward. In 2012, when Abe became Prime Minister for the second time, he published an opinion piece titled, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond” on an American think tank website, in which he expressed his worries about China’s activities in the South and East China Seas, claiming that “peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean,” and argued for “a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific” (Abe 2012).

In 2016, a year before Trump became President, Abe put forward Japan’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. In his 2016 address to the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Kenya, he declared that “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016). According to Japanese scholar, Abe’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy has three pillars: political, economic, and security. Politically, this strategy aims to strengthen democratic values in the region. Economically, Japan wants to promote infrastructure development and economic connectivity in the region together with the U.S., India, and Australia, to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. On the security pillar, Japan will deepen security cooperation with the U.S. and other Quad members and build closer ties with Southeast Asian countries (Takenaka 2022). According to a Chinese scholar, Abe’s interest

in and push for his Indo-Pacific strategy were mainly driven by two considerations: geostrategic competition and regional cooperation, with the former based on Japan's realistic strategic interest, and the latter cultivating a more favorable regional environment (Lu 2021).

After Trump entered the White House, the Abe administration successfully persuaded the Trump administration to accept Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" concept as an overarching strategic framework to unite like-minded partners, protect the U.S. values and interests, and guard against China (Hu and Meng 2020). In November 2017, officials from the United States, Japan, India, and Australia restarted the Quad after a decade's hibernation at the sidelines of the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila. The officials discussed a wide range of issues, including maritime security, North Korea, connectivity, support for the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept, and the promotion of a rules-based system in the Indo-Pacific region (Buchan and Rimland 2020).

In November 2019, in response to the proposal by the Trump administration, the Quad was promoted from a senior official-level dialogue to a ministerial-level dialogue. The foreign ministers of the Quad met for the first time in New York to discuss cooperation on counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security cooperation, development finance, and cybersecurity. They also looked forward to coordinating efforts to promote their shared vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" region (U.S. Department of State 2019).

During the 4-year Trump administration, the Quad not only came back to life, but also entered a new period of expansion and increased institutional consultations. The Quad members held a seven-round senior official-level dialogue, and a two-round ministerial-level dialogue, and their dialogue and consultation covered issues as wide-ranging as maritime security, counterterrorism and humanitarian and disaster relief, infrastructure and economic connectivity, and support for ASEAN centrality, among others.

When Biden came into power in 2021, he upgraded the Quad to a leader-level summit, holding a first-ever virtual leaders' summit in March 2021 and an in-person summit in September 2021. During the virtual summit, the four countries established three expert working groups, namely, the vaccine working group, the critical- and emerging-technology working group, and the climate working group, to combine efforts to jointly deal with the challenges in the above-mentioned issue areas and to provide a positive vision in the Indo-Pacific (White House 2021a). The Quad leaders held two more summits in 2022, a virtual summit in March and an in-person one in May. During the May summit, the four leaders established three more expert working groups in cyber, space, and infrastructure, greatly expanding the Quad's areas of cooperation. The Quad also launched a new initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), to support enhanced and shared maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific, in the name of responding to humanitarian and natural disasters and combating illegal fishing (White House 2022b).

By upgrading the Quad to a leader-level summit, regularly holding ministerial- and senior-level dialogue, and establishing six expert working groups to facilitate practical cooperation on issues of shared interest, the Biden administration is trying to turn the Quad into a premier informal strategic consultation platform, not only

to pool resources among the members and like-minded partners as a way to better compete with China, but also to provide “public goods” to increase its attraction and shape the emerging regional order in its favor.

3 Driving forces behind

Among the forces driving the formation, rebirth, and elevation of the Quad since 2007, three are outstanding:

3.1 Balancing China

Since its first formation as a quadrilateral security dialogue in 2007, “balancing China” has been the implicit and even explicit objective and driving force behind the Quad. For Japan, China’s growing power and economic influence overshadows what was once Japan’s leading economic status in Asia. What’s more, the diplomatic and political relations between China and Japan cooled and worsened since the beginning of this century due to historical issues, such as Japanese leaders’ repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese World War II war criminals were shrined and worshipped, and the rising territorial disputes concerning the Diaoyu Islands. Japan has increasingly viewed China as a rival to its economic influence in Asia and a security challenge, especially after Shinzo Abe came into power (Green 2022, 55–64). By formally establishing the Quad, the Abe administration hoped to forge a China-balancing group among the four democracies based on common values (Chen 2020).

As for India, China’s comprehensive strategic partnership with Pakistan and India–China border disputes has always been a thorn in the side for India. The commencement of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2014 only increased India’s sense of “encirclement” with India speaking openly against China’s Belt and Road Initiative in general, and CPEC in particular (Baruah 2018). Then, in June 2017, Indian and Chinese troops confronted each other at the Doklam plateau near the borders of China and Bhutan, after Indian troops crossed the border to prevent China’s road construction near Doka La pass. The 2-month-long military standoff is the most serious confrontation between the two countries in decades. Although China and India agreed to disengage troops to end the standoff, harm was done to bilateral relations, which prompted India to join the Quad dialogue in November 2017. Again, in June 2020, there was a deadly clash between Chinese and Indian soldiers at the border area of Galwan Valley, which left dozens of soldiers dead or wounded. After the incident, the Indian chief of defense, Staff General Bipin Rawat claimed China as “enemy number one” facing India (Times of India 2021, 2–21). Given China’s growing economic influence in South Asia and the border incidents, the Modi administration increasingly came to view China as a major security challenge for India and a strategic adversary. By joining the Quad, India hoped to enlist support from the U.S., Japan, and Australia in its competition with China (Liu 2021). Additionally, India needs the other parties’ help to make sure that Asia

will not become dominated solely by China, as India's famous strategist C. Raja Mohan points out (Mohan 2021).

Australia has been an economic beneficiary of China's economic rise and rapid development for the past several decades. However, Australia is becoming increasingly worried about its economic dependence on China (Eisentraut and Gaens 2018) and China's perceived or potential "malign influence" in Australia (Searight 2020, 3–40). According to a Chinese scholar, Australia, along with Japan, are the two countries pushing the hardest for the establishment of the Quad. "Their intention of keeping the United States in the region and bringing in India as a check on China has become the fundamental driving force for the resumption and accelerated cooperation of the Quad" (Zhang 2019). In 2017, the Malcolm Turnbull administration published its Foreign Policy White Paper, in which it argues that the international order is undergoing great changes as anti-globalization intensifies, global governance is becoming harder, and rules are being contested. In the Indo-Pacific, the paper claims, China's power and influence are growing and, in some ways exceed, that of the United States. "Like all great powers, China will seek to influence the region to suit its own interests." As a result, "we will face an increasingly complex and contested Indo-Pacific" (Australian Government 2017).

Since 2017, and especially after Scott John Morrison became Prime Minister in 2018, Australia–China relations deteriorated rapidly. The Morrison administration claimed China interfered in Australian domestic politics and passed laws limiting Chinese investment in Australia and banning the Chinese company Huawei from participating in Australia's 5G telecommunication development. Furthermore, Australia also accuses China of changing the status quo of the South China Sea, and "asks" China to comply with the 2016 South China Sea Tribunal award, which China sees as illegal and void. As Australian–China relations deteriorate and Australia's concerns about China grow, Australia is more than happy to join the Quad to gang up against China.

After Donald J. Trump entered the White House in 2017, he not only put his "America First" foreign policy idea into practice, but also declared China the strategic competitor of the United States. The U.S. China policy transformed from a more balanced approach of "competition plus cooperation" to an unbalanced one of mainly focusing on containing China (Wang 2019). Under his watch, the U.S. initiated a trade war, a tariffs war, and a technology war against China, and published the first Indo-Pacific strategy aiming at balancing China's increasing power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. From the U.S. perspective, the traditional "hub and spoke" alliance system in the Asia–Pacific is not competent enough to deal with a rising and more "assertive" China, and needs to be complemented by adding more capable and "willing" partners (Chen 2020). By reviving the Quad, the United States can pool together the resources of the South Asia heavyweight India, the economic and technology powerhouse Japan, and the culturally similar and geographically important Australia to better compete with China and counterbalance China's power and influence in the Indo-Pacific.

3.2 Promoting practical cooperation

By establishing the Quad, the four countries also want to strengthen practical cooperation and provide regional “public goods,” collectively, to compete with China. Since 2017, the Quad members have taken a series of steps to strengthen their cooperation in the following areas.

3.2.1 Maritime security

Ever since the first senior official-level Quad dialogue in 2017, maritime security has been a top issue. For one thing, the tsunami in 2004 and earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011 underscored the devastating effects of natural disasters and humanitarian risks lurking in the maritime Indo-Pacific. For another, the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas concerning China and the relevant parties have ratcheted up in recent years, destabilizing relations in the region. Third, for the United States, China’s claims in the South China Sea run diametrically counter to the U.S. style “freedom of navigation and overflight” and if allowed to prevail, would negatively impact its Navy operations and power projection in the world in general and in the Indo-Pacific in particular. A report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service warned that, if China’s claims to the South China and its’ interpretation of freedom of navigation prevail, it “could potentially require changes (possibly very significant ones) in U.S. military strategy, U.S. foreign policy goals, or U.S. grand strategy” (U.S. Congress 2020).

As a result, the Quad members have coordinated their positions concerning the East and South China Seas disputes and freedom of navigation and overflight “right” in the South China Sea, conducted joint maritime exercises in the Indo-Pacific, provided maritime assistance to Southeast Asian countries to improve the latter’s maritime law enforcement and humanitarian aid and disaster relief capabilities, and launched the IPMDA to “support enhanced, shared maritime domain awareness to promote stability and prosperity” in the Indo-Pacific (White House 2022b). Through those measures, the Quad members hope to speak with “one voice” against China’s maritime claims and activities in the East and South China Seas, provide regional maritime “public goods”, and win the goodwill of the regional countries.

3.2.2 Infrastructure development

Infrastructure development is another area where the four countries cooperate to provide an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. During the Trump administration, the United States, Japan, and Australia established a Blue Dot Network in 2019 to assess and certify infrastructure development projects worldwide on measures of financial transparency, social, and environmental sustainability, and impact on economic development, with the goal of mobilizing private capital to invest (U.S. Department of State n.d.(a)). The Trump administration even revamped its overseas finance development agency and established the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation in place of the Overseas Private Finance Corporation. The underlying motivation of the Quad’s moves was to write the rules

of infrastructure development, undermine the appeal of China's BRI, and act as a counterbalance to China's soft power in the region (Liu 2019).

Under Biden's watch, the Quad held a first-ever Quad Leaders' Summit in Washington in September 2021, where the four leaders announced new Quad infrastructure partnerships to "coordinate our efforts, map the region's infrastructure needs, and coordinate on regional needs and opportunities," and "will cooperate to provide technical assistance, empowering regional partners with evaluative tools, and will promote sustainable infrastructure development" (White House 2021b).

Through the years, the Quad's cooperation on infrastructure evolved from naming and shaming China's BRI to tentatively providing an alternative. They know from their interaction with regional partners that it will not work just to say "bad things" about China's infrastructure development; they must provide something concrete and satisfy the region's growing infrastructure needs (Lew and Roughead 2021). By acting together and leveraging their respective comparative advantages, the Quad members hope to not only discredit China's BRI, but to provide an alternative and win "the struggle of heart" in the region (Zhai 2022; Liu 2019).

3.2.3 Technology and supply chains' security

After the Trump administration initiated the trade war with China in 2018, it soon turned its eyes on China's hi-tech companies and strategic emerging industries, including semiconductors, 5G, EV batteries, Artificial Intelligence, quantum technology, biotechnology, and autonomous robotics. The U.S. not only imposed sanctions on China's hi-tech leaders, such as ZTE and Huawei, and banned their 5G services in the U.S., but also welcomed and coordinated with other Quad members to ban Huawei and ZTE 5G services (Hartcher 2021). The US even launched "the Clean Network" to pressure and dissuade other allies and partners from using Huawei or ZTE 5G services, among others (U.S. Department of State n.d.(b)). The motivation behind the Trump administration's hi-tech war was colored and reinforced by growing negative attitudes toward China, the U.S. strategic establishment, and the impacts of China's indigenous innovation rush on U.S. economic, technology, and security interests (Sun 2019). By those measures, the Trump administration aimed to kill three birds with one stone: strengthen policy coordination among the Quad and beyond, exclude Chinese hi-tech companies from the U.S.-launched "Clean Network" supply chains, and prevent China's technology dominance.

The Biden administration largely inherited the Trump administration's technology Cold War against China and sees technology and supply chain security cooperation with other Quad members as a high priority. At the first virtual Quad leaders meeting in March 2021, the four leaders agreed to establish a critical and emerging-technology working group to facilitate cooperation on international standards and innovative technologies of the future (White House 2021a). Six months later, the Quad announced that it would launch a semiconductor supply chain initiative "to map capacity, identify vulnerabilities, and bolster supply-chain security for semiconductors and their vital components". In addition to technology supply chain security, the Quad also intends to cooperate on "secure supply chains" for vaccine production

and clean energy (White House 2021c), and has deepened its collaborative efforts in climate change, public health, space, and cybersecurity. In doing so, the Quad hopes to increase the “stickiness” of the grouping, improve its image as a regional public goods provider, and enhance its collective ability to compete with China.

3.3 Enhancing voice and status in regional affairs

If serving as a counterbalance to China and promoting practical cooperation are the common denominators, for India, Japan, and Australia, the “junior partners” of the U.S., the Quad also serves as a vehicle to improve their voice and status in regional affairs. India has long aspired to be an influential power in regional and world affairs. In February 2015, less than a year after he took office, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, “the world is keen to embrace India, and India is moving forward with confidence.” He challenged India’s diplomats to “use this unique opportunity to help India position itself in a leading role, rather than just a balancing force, globally” (Indian Press Information Bureau 2015). With the Quad, as the Vice President of Studies and Foreign Policy at Observer Research Foundation at New Delhi said, “India can rise above its middle-power status” and even project its influence beyond the Indo-Pacific (Pant 2022). Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar viewed the growing Quad grouping as a reflection of the “rise of Asia” as well as “the repositioning of big powers”, and said: “From an Indian perspective, it is also a statement of its growing interests beyond the Indian Ocean.” He said that India’s place within the Quad made sense given its “growth, confidence, and worldview”, and emphasized that “the firm establishment of Quad” is one of the major diplomatic accomplishments of the Modi government (Krishnankutty 2022).

For Japan, the primary driver behind the rebirth of the Quad is “uniting its Quad partners around its own vision for the Indo-Pacific” as a “significant success for Japan’s reinvigorated diplomatic agenda,” and “indicative of the greater efforts that Japan is investing in its external relations as part of its vowed ‘proactive contribution to international peace’” (Wilkins 2022a). Given the U.S. unwillingness to bear responsibility and retreat from the world stage under the Trump administration’s America First banner, by establishing and joining the Quad, Japan hopes not only to “entrap” the U.S., but also acts as a leader by default in setting a regional agenda to better serve Japan’s national interests in an increasingly uncertain world. Japan can also use its technological prowess, military potential, and economic power to consolidate its “leading role” in the Quad’s practical cooperation (Koga 2022). “Tokyo’s sustained championship of mini-lateral cooperation through the Quad and other mechanisms is testament to the emerging leadership role the country has assumed in regional affairs” (Wilkins 2022a).

Australia, a middle power whose relations with China have soured in recent years, is more than happy to embrace the Quad. For Australia, the Quad not only binds the U.S. in an exclusive small group, but also provides an additional assurance by forging more close relations with other major Asian powers besides the U.S., in a time of growth in the “looking inward trend” in the U.S. By joining an exclusive “club”, together with the U.S., India, and Japan, to set the agenda in regional affairs,

expand practical cooperation in infrastructure, maritime security, supply chains, among other areas, and help shape the regional order, Australia can elevate its voice and status in regional affairs. As one Australian scholar emphasized, “its interaction with these major powers, gains access to advanced defense technologies and acquires a more influential voice in shaping the regional security environment.” He adds: “In this respect they add another powerful instrument to Canberra’s diplomatic and strategic toolkit as Australia faces unprecedented challenges to its national security” (Wilkins 2022b).

In addition to the above-mentioned reasons, as an informal security dialogue mechanism, the Quad has its own “comparative advantage”. It is small with only four members sharing “democratic values”. It’s informal without the burden of formal treaty. This flexibility enables it to expand the issue areas on which it focuses as situations dictate.

4 Impacts on regional order

The rebirth and upgrading of the Quad coincided with the deterioration of China–U.S. relations and heightened the rhetoric of a new Cold War in the Asia–Pacific. Despite Biden’s repeated claims that he does not “seek a new cold war or a world divided into rigid blocs” (White House 2021d), many worry his actions and “bloc politics” did just that (Shidore 2022).

The Quad’s development and evolution in the past several years have negatively affected regional order in four ways.

4.1 Political fault line

When Abe proposed the establishment of Quadrilateral security dialogue, he viewed it as an “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond” to guard against an “undemocratic” China’s influence and activities in the maritime Indo-Pacific. In other words, from the very beginning, the Quad has had a strong flavor of ideology competition between an “authoritarian” China and the “democratic” Quad. After Trump declared China a U.S. strategic competitor and long-term security challenge and revived the Quad, the U.S. increasingly saw its competition with China through an ideological lens. The Biden administration vows to unite democracies in Asia and around the world and make the Quad a premier group for providing regional public goods and safeguarding “democratic values” (White House 2022a).

The “democracy vs. authoritarianism” and “us against them” rhetoric and mindset not only increasingly raises China’s concerns and even hostility, but also puts great pressure on countries in the region that do not want to choose sides, threatening to create a political fault line in the Asia–Pacific. Chinese government has made its view on the Quad very clear: China is against establishing any exclusive, anti-China group or any Cold War-style camp, or any self-claimed group of democracies that preaches “democracy vs. authoritarianism” confrontation and conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2022a). China’s

Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that the Quad is the backbone of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and seeks to establish an Asian NATO, to promote an outdated Cold War mindset, confrontation and geopolitical struggle, potentially endangering East Asia's prospects for peace and development and spirit of win–win cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2020). Singapore, an AECAN member, who has close relations with both the U.S. and China, has expressed its worries of increasing geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China and potentially being forced to choose sides. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that Singapore is worried about the growing geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China, and does not want to “pick sides”, similar to many other ASEAN countries (Tham 2021).

4.2 Economic fragmentation

As China's economic rise accelerated after China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has gradually replaced the U.S. and Japan as the economic engine and driving force for economic integration in East Asia. In 2010, the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area came into force, which was the first agreement of its kind signed by ASEAN. In 2013, China initiated the BRI to facilitate the “Five Links” between China and the relevant parties. As BRI attracts more countries to join in, the U.S. and other Quad members became increasingly concerned. They viewed BRI not only as an economic initiative, but also a strategic master plan to squeeze the influence of the U.S., Japan, and other countries, and to create an economic and even political sphere of influence for China (Russel and Berger 2020). In other words, the Quad increasingly views China's strategy as a zero-sum game requiring action by Quad members. Initially, the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia took a more negative strategy by “naming and shaming” in the hope of scaring away potential participants and sabotaging China's BRI. When this proved ineffective, the Quad changed their strategy and coordinated to offer alternatives to BRI by launching Quad infrastructure partnerships to compete directly with China. In May 2022, under the Biden administration's initiative, the Quad members, together with nine other countries (Fiji joined later as the 14th founding member), launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), to coordinate and cooperate in the area of trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy, to compete economically with China.

Theoretically, more options are better for the region, and healthy competition will offer more good products and increase overall wellbeing. However, the Quad's infrastructure and economic initiatives all exclude China and the four countries even established technology and supply chain mini-lateral groupings to de-couple from China's technology and supply chains. If this trend continues, it will disrupt the momentum toward economic integration of the region and will likely lead to economic fragmentation. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned against this in a speech to the Asia Society in September 2022. He said, “Ideology driven, the U.S. has overstretched the concept of national security, built ‘small yard, high fence’, clamored for decoupling and cutting supply chains, pushed for ‘friend-shoring’,

conceived the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and formed the Chip 4 Alliance. This is clearly not healthy competition. Such moves are not helpful to the U.S.'s own development. They will also disrupt global economic cooperation" (Wang 2022).

4.3 Maritime security

Under the joint efforts of China, the Philippines, and ASEAN, the situation in the South China Sea has improved considerably since 2016. China and the Philippines signed economic agreements to improve economic and diplomatic relations while shelving their maritime disputes (Baguisi 2021). China and ASEAN have also stepped up their dialogue and consultations on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea with an eye to reach an agreement on COC before the end of 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022b).

However, despite China and ASEAN's efforts, the Quad still puts the South China Sea disputes at the core of their maritime security cooperation and "concerns" and links it with the East China Sea disputes between China and Japan, the situation in the Taiwan Straits, and the issue of "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the Quad members' positions on the South China Sea, the constant freedom of navigation and military exercises in the South China Sea, and military assistance to the Southeast Asia, together with their launching of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, complicate maritime security in the Western Pacific at least in three ways. First, it may distract the joint efforts of China and ASEAN countries to reach a practical COC in the near future. Second, it will ratchet up maritime competition between China and the Quad, with each side sticking to its own interpretation of maritime interests, security, and rights. Third, it may encourage other parties of the South China Sea disputes to initiate bolder activities and thus reignite the maritime tension in the South China Sea.

4.4 ASEAN centrality

In the past several decades and especially since the beginning of this century, ASEAN and ASEAN-centered institutions have been the driving force behind East Asia (Southeast Asia included) economic integration and serve as bridges between the major players in the Asia–Pacific. This ASEAN centrality in setting the regional economic, and even security agendas has gradually been accepted by the major players in the region. Upgrading the Quad from a senior-level dialogue held at the sidelines of ASEAN and East Asia summits to leader-level summits to be held on a rotational basis, along with expanding the scope of the Quad's areas of cooperation, greatly overshadows the role of ASEAN and threatens its centrality (Tang et al. 2020).

From the very beginning, it was clear that "most Southeast Asian states are not publicly and fully embracing the Quad, even though they are not energetically working to challenge or denounce the nascent dialogue." Among the ASEAN countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia are top skeptics of the Quad. Indonesia is especially worried about the sidelining of ASEAN, and Singapore is

worried about the sharpening of the US–China competition (Laksmana 2020). According to the 2021 State of Southeast Asia Survey, less than half of the respondents thought that the Quad made a “positive” or “very positive” contribution to regional security. Just as Jonathan Stromseth said, “most ASEAN nations remain suspicious of the four-country grouping, seeing it as a challenge to ‘ASEAN centrality’” (Stromseth 2021).

5 Looking ahead

As an informal group, the Quad has developed from an obscure senior-level dialogue to a multilayer leaders’ summit. The dialogue has become more institutionalized with regular senior-, ministerial-, and leader-level meetings, and the cooperation among the members has expanded, especially in the areas of maritime security and economic development. Given the rapid development in the past several years, one cannot help but wonder how the current trajectory of the Quad will unfold in the future? Will it turn into, as many predict, an Asian NATO? What areas of cooperation might be added in the years ahead? What challenges might the Quad encounter in its future development?

5.1 An Asian NATO?

Since the revival of the Quad in 2017, there have been talks of forming an Asian NATO based on the Quad. In 2020, when China–U.S. relations hit a new low due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration even floated the idea of turning the Quad into an Asian NATO. Then Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun suggested that the Quad could be the beginning of a NATO-style alliance in Asia. “It’s something... that would be very much worthwhile to be explored,” he said at a U.S.–Indian strategic dialogue in August 2021 (Taylor 2020). However, the idea never bore fruit. India, which is not a treaty ally of the U.S. and has a long tradition of nonalignment, never agrees to join a U.S.-led alliance. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar dismissed the notion that the Quad is an Asian NATO as “completely misleading” and warned “interested parties” who advance the idea “not to slip into that lazy analogy of an Asian-NATO” (Economic Times 2022).

ASEAN, the support of which the U.S. and the Quad both try to attract, also expresses its concerns about forming an Asian NATO and the potential to draw the region into a new cold war. As Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cautioned: “In Asia, the history is different. There was never a grouping in Asia which was the equivalent of NATO... So I think that that is a better configuration than one where countries are divided along a line and one bloc confronts another” (Prime Minister’s Office Singapore 2022). Given the inherent hurdles of forming an Asian NATO based on the Quad, the Biden administration makes its position very clear: The Quad will remain an informal grouping, and will not become an Asian NATO, even though it will become a premier grouping in the Indo-Pacific (White House 2021e).

In summary, the Quad will not turn into an Asian ANTO in the near future. As Gregory Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said, “There is just not enough shared strategic interest or shared desire to accept risk on the military front” (Akhter 2021). Nevertheless, the Quad will continue its cooperation in the maritime security, cybersecurity, and other military-related cooperation and consultation, and supplement the US-centered “hub and spokes” bilateral alliances in Asia.

5.2 Areas of further cooperation

The Quad will remain informal for the foreseeable future. However, the practical cooperation, policy coordination, and strategic consultations will deepen. In the next several years, maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific will be a top priority of the Quad, because, by providing a unified maritime picture, the Quad hopes to realize three objectives. First, it can keep close track of China’s maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific; not only of China’s navy activities, but also China’s large fishing fleet. Second, it can present itself as regional “public goods” provider. From the Quad’s perspective, a unified and real-time maritime picture will enable Southeast Asia countries and Pacific Islands countries to better “protect” their maritime rights, especially fish resources from being exploited by China (Pandlai and Singh 2022). Though unstated, the implicit target of the initiative is China, which the U.S. has accused of being the largest exploiter of global fishing (Zhang 2022). And third, it will likely assist the Quad in winning support from regional countries. Most Southeast Asian countries and Pacific Islands countries lack the necessary technology and means to have sufficient maritime domain awareness and therefore welcome the Quad’s offer. Representing itself as a regional public goods provider to help them will no doubt win their praise.

Supply chain and infrastructure cooperation will be the other two priority areas where the four countries hope to reduce their dependence on China’s technology and supply chains and provide an alternative to China’s infrastructure related to both “standard” and project financing. As Moody’s Vice President Nishad Majmudar said, “The economic realignment will benefit (the Quad) member countries’ technology and energy sectors as they seek to reduce reliance on Chinese-produced critical materials and technologies that are key inputs to tech and renewable energy products” (Anand 2022).

In terms of policy coordination, the Quad will further coordinate their positions on the East and South China Seas disputes, the situation in Taiwan Straits, and other hot-button issues in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The Quad will also enhance their cooperation in climate change, public health, space, and cybersecurity. In the area of strategic consultation, the Quad will focus on China’s foreign policy orientation and major diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives, and react in a coordinated way.

5.3 Potential challenges

As an informal grouping aiming at balancing China, promoting practical cooperation, and raising its voice and status in shaping an emerging regional order to its advantage in the context of growing US–China strategic competition, the Quad has made considerable progress in mechanism building and cooperation. Nevertheless, it may still face three potential challenges as it evolves. First, how to maintain its informality while its mechanisms become more institutionalized and areas of cooperation have multiplied. One of the virtues of the Quad is its informality and ability to offer more flexibility and comfort to its members. However, as its functions expand and mechanisms multiply, can the Quad still stay informal and resist the temptation to turn into a formal military alliance as the Trump administration once attempted? And if future US administrations again attempt to formalize the Quad, how will India, who is uncomfortable with a formal military alliance with the US, react? What impacts it will have on the cohesion of the Quad?

Second, how can it avoid mission creep? The Quad has evolved from an informal senior-level security dialogue into a multi-layered leaders' summit covering a wide range of issues from maritime security, to infrastructure development, climate change, supply chain resilience, critical and emerging technology, and cybersecurity. As its mission expands, so its focus will dilute. Will the Quad morph into something that covers all issues of importance, while its members are not in a position to solve them and just become another cheap talk show? South Korea also expresses its interest in joining the Quad, though the Biden administration says it has no plan to invite South Korea to join for fear of further antagonizing China (Kang 2022). For how long can the Quad resist the temptation of inviting new members into its club?

Third, how can the Quad reconcile its intention of turning itself into a “premier grouping” in the Indo-Pacific and maintaining ASEAN centrality and unity? The rebirth of the Quad has already triggered concern and discord among ASEAN members. Even though ASEAN's attitudes toward the Quad improved after the Biden administration and other members repeatedly assured ASEAN that they support ASEAN centrality and unity and intend to orient the Quad more in the direction of regional public goods provision, suspicion, and worries remain. In the context of China–US strategic competition and the Quad as a “premier grouping” in the Indo-Pacific to serve as a strategic dialogue mechanism, it will inevitably overshadow the role of ASEAN and its centrality in regional affairs.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no competing interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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