

**THE EVOLVING NATURE OF THE QUAD
AMERICAN STRATEGY,
ASEAN CENTRALITY AND
CHINESE RESPONSES**

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Executive Summary

1. Up until recently, the Quad has lacked a strategy that clearly differentiates it from the already-existing American alliance structure. It also faces difficulties in competing against key in-progress Chinese initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Vaccine Diplomacy. However, it has recently gained prominence when President Biden led the Quad Summit, the first American president to do so.
2. The Quad originated from the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami cooperation among India, Australia, the United States and Japan to provide naval assistance to relief efforts. From 2007 to 2020 Quad engagement was rather episodic and driven by individual personalities.
3. The annual Malabar naval exercise was one of the few visible activities of the Quad before the recent incorporation of the ASEAN Centrality principle into official statements.
4. Over the course of 2020, the Quad regained attention. The drivers of these developments were likely the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in Chinese strategic activity in the South and East China Seas and Taiwan Strait, and along the disputed border with India.
5. American strategic attention to the Quad has remained consistent across both Republican and Democratic leadership. This likely demonstrates a robust trend in American foreign policy. However, there has been relatively little domestic discussion or debate around the strategic merits of the Quad.
6. This may be attributable to the still-unresolved issue of how the Quad relates to the established American alliance structure that already includes Japan and Australia. Washington currently has formal allies that host American military facilities and/or have forces on ‘hot standby’.

7. One key area of observation is how the Quad interacts with Indonesia within the ASEAN Centrality framework. The grouping is likely to opt for a direct approach to Jakarta while coordinating with leading ASEAN countries.
8. It remains undetermined which Indian security challenges constitute an exclusive Indian problem with limited regional escalation and are of clear shared concern for the Quad. Without this being adjudicated, the 'Democratic Diamond' of the Quad could become an odd-shaped triangle of countries that were already allies (United States, Japan and Australia).
9. China appears to be forcing the hand of the Quad through its rapid military expansion across large sections of its disputed border with India. Current trends will likely propel the Quad to make key decisions on which Indian security concerns are domestic concerns and which are of clear relevance to the Quad.
10. Enhanced focus on the Quad may escalate tensions as China may seek to probe what risks and opportunities it faces under new strategic conditions.

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Quad Origins: 2007-2020

- 1.1 The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) was originally formed in 2007 under the initiative of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and consisted of Australia, India, Japan and the United States. The initial impetus was the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, with the Tsunami Core Group being established to facilitate the coordination of relief activities.¹
- 1.2 US Vice President Dick Cheney signalled American interest in a Quad dialogue in early 2007, which kickstarted a series of related diplomatic activities. Cheney discussed with Australian Prime Minister John Howard the potential modalities for the Quad during a visit in February 2007.²
- 1.3 Howard and Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee then travelled to Tokyo to underpin the momentum for the Quad. Aso and Abe's April 2007 visits to India and Washington were decisive for getting an agreement on a first Quad meeting.³

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¹ For more in-depth discussions on the origins of the Quad, see H D P Envall, 'The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Towards an Indo-Pacific Order?' *Policy Report*, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 9 September 2019.

Marc Grossman, 'The Tsunami Core Group: A Step toward a Transformed Diplomacy in Asia and Beyond', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2005.

² Patrick Buchan and Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, March 2020.

See also 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad"', Releases and Statements, White House, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>, accessed 14 September 2021.

³ Patrick Buchan and Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond'.

- 1.4 The first meeting was held in May 2007 on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Manila. This event was officially termed as an “informal grouping” that focused primarily on disaster relief. In September 2007 the only military exercise associated with the first Quad, an enlarged version of the US-India Malabar series, took place.⁴
- 1.5 The Malabar naval exercise of 2007 (Malabar 07-02) involved the four navies along with the Singaporean Navy operating in the Bay of Bengal. These exercises included exchanges of personnel and drills covering domains such as sea control and multi-carrier operations.⁵
- 1.6 Subsequent Malabar exercises have been conducted every year since 2007. France was reportedly expected to join the Malabar exercise in 2021.⁶ The Quad was initially keen to stress that concerns over China were not the driving force.
- 1.7 This initial flurry of Quad activity in 2007 was followed by a relative decline in attention aside from the annual Malabar exercises. However, in 2012 when Shinzo Abe (the original champion of the Quad) again became the Japanese prime minister, he referred to the Quad as a “democratic security diamond”.⁷
- 1.8 In October 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono jointly proposed a concrete resumption of the overall Quadrilateral dialogue format. Representatives from the United States, Japan, India and Australia (at the assistant secretary level) met on the sidelines of the Manila ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2017.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nicola Smith, ‘France sends navy mission to South China Sea as tensions build in Beijing’s back yard’, *Telegraph*, 7 March 2021.

⁷ Patrick Buchan and Benjamin Rimland, ‘Defining the Diamond’.

⁸ Ibid.

- 1.9 The agenda of this meeting was considerably wider than the first May 2007 meeting. Officials discussed a range of strategic issues, such as the denuclearisation of North Korea, support for the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and the promotion of a rules-based system in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹
- 1.10 While the agenda of this meeting was more wide ranging, the discussions remained at foreign ministerial level and did not lead directly to any new activities. This could be attributable to President Donald Trump’s decision in May 2018 to establish the US Indo-Pacific Command to cover both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. The US Indo-Pacific Command has a declared mandate that overlaps with the Quad agenda discussed in November 2017.¹⁰
- 1.11 From 2016 to 2020, the United States shifted to an “America First” agenda, using established mechanisms. The Quad had limited activity from 2017 until mid-2020 when the COVID-19 crisis triggered another round of high-level interest.
- 1.12 A fundamental trend from 2007 to 2020 was the rather episodic (such as the 2004 Asian Tsunami and the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak) and personality-driven (i.e. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe) nature of the Quad strategic engagement. Comparatively, the newly formed US Indo-Pacific Command demonstrated a more consistent focus on the same set of strategic issues than the Quad did.
- 1.13 Key American regional initiatives, such as Freedom of Navigation exercises and weapons sales to both India and Taiwan were almost exclusively executed via US Indo-Pacific Command and, to a lesser extent, the US State Department.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ‘History of United States Indo-Pacific Command’, US Indo-Pacific Command, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/History/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Indo%2DPacific%20Command,to%20two%20other%20unified%20commanders>, accessed 22 July 2021.

¹¹ Interview with former Trump administration official, 14 July 2021.

Current Quad Status: Increasing Activity

- 2.1 Over the course of 2020, the Quad regained a level of attention and focus from the leadership of the United States, Japan, Australia and India. The driver of these developments was likely the various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with an increase in China's strategic activity in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait and the disputed border with India.¹²
- 2.2 The first-ever leader-level summit of the Quad was held virtually in March 2021 followed by another in-person Quad Leaders' Summit in September 2021. While it is significant that these meetings have been attended by the heads of state from Japan, India, Australia and the United States, the agenda and messaging have remained similar to the November 2017 meeting.¹³ The foreign ministers of Quad also met in-person on 18 February 2021 prior to the March event.¹⁴
- 2.3 The Quad's official statements were again focused on being united in a shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific that remains inclusive and healthy, anchored by democratic values and unconstrained by coercion. The Quad reaffirmed its commitment to promoting a free, open rules-based order that is rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.¹⁵
- 2.4 The Quad also pledged to respond to the economic and health impacts of COVID-19, combat climate change and address shared challenges such as those posed by

¹² For a more in-depth discussion, see Ryan Clarke, 'Is China Converting COVID-19 Into a Strategic Opportunity?' *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1545, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 9 July 2020.

¹³ 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad"', Releases and Statement, White House, 12 March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>, accessed 14 September 2021.

¹⁴ Łukasz Kobierski, 'The First Quad Meeting in 2021', Warsaw Institute, 19 February 2021. 'Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison, Prime Minister Modi, and Prime Minister Suga at Quad Leaders Summit', Speeches and Remarks, White House, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/24/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-prime-minister-modi-and-prime-minister-suga-at-quad-leaders-summit/>, accessed 5 October 2021.

¹⁵ 'Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad"'.

cyberspace, critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investment, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as maritime domains. The Quad committed to expand safe, affordable and effective vaccine production and equitable access to speed economic recovery and benefit global health.¹⁶

- 2.5 One more specific public-health related item was the Quad commitment to donate one billion doses of the COVID-19 vaccine by 2022. Some have assessed this move as a direct response to China's 'vaccine diplomacy'. However, the Quad's initiative is unlikely to undo the strategic impact of Beijing's Sinovac donations across the Asia Pacific, including in American-allied countries such as Thailand.¹⁷
- 2.6 Beijing's 'first mover advantage' will also challenge any subsequent efforts to position the Quad as the primary 'scheduler' that can drive regional public health agendas and attract partial members to engage in this specific domain. Early decisive Chinese actions have likely achieved a degree of fragmentation that render a single Quad-led forum approach infeasible.
- 2.7 Further, countries that still have acute unmet demands for COVID-19 vaccines, such as India itself, face many challenges that limit the potential of Quad vaccine diplomacy. Issues include some industry perceptions of a lack of adequate patent protection and reliable cold chain infrastructure.
- 2.8 There are also serious concerns over regional pharmaceutical production and supply chains that remain overly centralised and prone to substantial disruptions. Notably, some of the challenges that have limited Chinese vaccine diplomacy will also likely limit any subsequent Quad-driven vaccine diplomacy.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with healthcare executive in Thailand, 22 July 2021.

¹⁸ Assessment based on the author's experience working in public health and healthcare investment banking.

- 2.9 The Quad has also made high-level statements around intentions to develop infrastructure and raise living standards and increase connectivity throughout the Asia Pacific. However, as of yet no specific details have been put forward nor is there any current Quad-led infrastructure projects underway.¹⁹
- 2.10 Similar to the challenges faced by the Quad's vaccine diplomacy, any Quad infrastructure initiative faces distinct disadvantages when in competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Unlike China's command economy, Quad economies are market-driven and their financial institutions can only be incentivised to finance large (and possibly high-risk) infrastructure projects and cannot be directed (as is the case with Chinese state-owned banks).
- 2.11 China's BRI has also been successful in countries neglected by international capital markets due to concerns over corruption, the lack of rule of law and an unpredictable security environment. It is unclear how the Quad will overcome these longstanding structural challenges to credibly compete against the BRI. However, more details may emerge following the next Quad meeting planned for late 2021.

American Bipartisan Support for the Quad: Consistent but Lacking Depth

- 3.1 Despite the aforementioned challenges, American strategic attention on the Quad has remained consistent across both Republican and Democratic leadership. This likely demonstrates a robust trend in American foreign policy. However, there has interestingly been little domestic discussion or debate around the strategic merits of the Quad or America's involvement in it.²⁰
- 3.2 This may be attributable to the still-unresolved issue of how the Quad relates to the established American alliance structure that already includes Japan and Australia. A

¹⁹ For more in-depth discussions, see Branko Milanovic, 'Competition Can Be Good for the Developing World', *Foreign Affairs*, 21 May 2021. Sebastian Strangio, 'US Official Flags Future Quad Infrastructure Push', *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2021.

²⁰ While there is huge domestic debate around China particularly within the US government and among media organisations, academic institutions and think tanks, it is framed largely through the prism of China-US competition and rivalry. Quad considerations only represent a small fraction of the overall domestic American discussion.

key strain in American strategic thinking appears to be that Washington currently has a range of formal allies that host American military facilities and/or have interoperable militaries on ‘hot standby’.

- 3.3 The recently announced AUKUS trilateral defence partnership between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom may further enhance this line of thinking in Washington. The first priority of AUKUS is to jointly develop an Australian nuclear submarine fleet in Adelaide. While Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison did make one general reference to the Quad in his official remarks, it was alongside ASEAN, the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty countries, bilateral strategic partners, the Five Eyes countries, and ‘our dear Pacific family’.²¹ The strategic effects of these nuclear submarine building and deployment activities will likely scale along the established parameters of the post-World War II security architecture.
- 3.4 This regional security architecture also includes other formal American allies such South Korea, Taiwan,²² the Philippines and Thailand. In addition, these calculations factor in other countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, or Indonesia that could potentially and ‘tactically bandwagon’ to counter hostile Chinese actions. Given this, it can be assessed that many American strategists believe that the Quad in its current form is a ‘nice to have’ option.
- 3.5 Irrespective, there is a small but influential group of strategic thinkers in the Biden administration who believe that the Quad can be essential to the regional security architecture and play a more prominent role in containing China’s rise. This group, which includes current National Security Council Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt

²¹ ‘Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS’, Speeches and Remarks, White House, 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aucus/>, accessed 5 October 2021.

²² The United States and Taiwan are not formal treaty allies. However, Taiwan is protected by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 which commits the United States to Taiwan’s defence if attacked.

Campbell, has argued that the Quad can be used more effectively to ensure balance of power and primacy of commerce over conflict in Asia.²³

- 3.6 They point to what they believe to be relevant historical analogues, such as the partnership between the United Kingdom and Austria to manage European rivalries in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Campbell and others believe that these activities enabled the ‘100 Years of Peace’ in Europe from 1815 to 1914 and that the same key strategic principles can be applied to Asia.²⁴
- 3.7 Whether this argument will translate into American policy changes towards the Quad is unknown. Regardless, shared concerns over China’s overall trajectory could serve as the ‘strategic glue’ that pushes them closer together over time.
- 3.8 The rate at which this occurs will be conditioned by internal Biden administration policy debates on the merits of ‘going with what works’ versus placing a stronger emphasis on a relatively untested Quad.²⁵ Bureaucratic dynamics between Biden’s civilian leadership, such as Kurt Campbell, and the uniformed leadership of US Indo-Pacific Command (and other Commands) will also be critical as the latter is accustomed to being in the primary position.

Chinese Assessments: Consensus on Quad Hostility, Divergence on Severity

- 4.1 China has been consistently suspicious of the Quad and has openly questioned the motives of the grouping. There do not appear to be any identifiable voices in China that have a more conciliatory approach to the Quad or view it in more neutral terms.
- 4.2 However, below this strategic consensus is some mild divergence as to the immediacy and severity of the threat that the Quad poses to China. For example,

²³ For a more in-depth discussion, please see Kurt M Campbell and Rush Doshi, “How America can shore up Asian Order”, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 January 2021.

Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

²⁴ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*.

²⁵ For example, see ‘Biden’s China Doctrine’, *The Economist*, 17 July 2021.

some voices in China have openly stated that the Quad is specifically designed to contain China and prevent Beijing from realising its various territorial claims and medium-term strategic ambitions as a great power.²⁶

- 4.3 Others do not necessarily dispute this view but tend to believe that China's comprehensive national power and geographic reach have already attained a sufficient level to render any Quad containment ambitions inert.²⁷ This view does not suggest passivity or inaction, but rather a continuation of existing Chinese strategy towards the Asia Pacific.
- 4.4 The Quad presents an interesting structure that does not readily lend itself to the formation of an 'Asian NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation)'. Both Japan and Australia are US Treaty Allies with American military maintaining bases and related infrastructure across Japan.
- 4.5 While American presence in Australia differs somewhat, both militaries are largely interoperable from both a doctrinal and technological standpoint. However, India presents a range of variables that could move in multiple directions.
- 4.6 The current situations in the Taiwan Strait, South and East China Seas are indeed serious and should not be trivialised. However, in the short run, the China-India border dispute and broader strategic rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi likely have more rapid escalatory potential. Some Chinese state-run media appear to acknowledge this.²⁸

²⁶ For example, see Zuo Xiyang, 'Upgrading Quad and Malabar exercise shows US anxiety about China', *Global Times*, 11 August 2021.

Su Hao, 'Why Washington's Quad fantasies for China will hardly succeed', *Global Times*, 23 July 2021.

Lan Jianxue, '“Minilateral” mechanisms can lead Indo-Pacific, not hostile Quad', *Global Times*, 9 June 2021.

Zhang Jiadong, 'QUAD desires 'Asian NATO,' but China has smarter solutions', *Global Times*, 11 October 2020.

'China must resolutely counterattack India's opportunist move', *Global Times*, 1 September 2020.

²⁷ For example, see Xin Qiang, 'Expanding Quad to economic sphere easier said than done', *Global Times*, 17 May 2021.

Xie Wenting and Zhang Hongpei, 'Quad cannot replicate NATO, given internal divergence and China's economic clout', *Global Times*, 12 March 2021.

²⁸ 'China must resolutely counterattack India's opportunist move', *Global Times*, 1 September 2020.

- 4.7 China and India do not have the same type of immediate, established remedies and de-escalation mechanisms in place for the South and East China Seas. It is therefore the Indian component of the Quad that needs to be more fully assessed and understood as it will determine whether the Quad will develop into a ‘Democratic Diamond’ or regress into an odd-shaped triangle of countries that were already Allies before (the United States, Japan and Australia).

Indian Strategic Priorities: (In-Progress) Shifting from Islamabad to Beijing

- 5.1 Since the founding of modern-day India in 1947, multiple Indian prime ministers have maintained a strong focus on threats emanating from Pakistan.²⁹ These threats span the entire security spectrum, from terrorism to nuclear weapons.³⁰
- 5.2 The continuity of these assessments has substantial impacts on the structure, training and doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces as well as the activities carried out by India’s diplomatic corps and even corporate leaders.
- 5.3 Despite having roughly 120,000 square kilometres of disputed territory with China and a recent armed conflict in August 2020 in the Galwan Valley, the majority of the Indian Army’s mechanised divisions remain on the border with Pakistan.³¹
- 5.4 India’s dual-use critical infrastructure development activities near the border have also been traditionally anaemic. This has resulted in India facing a range of

²⁹ For a more in-depth discussion on ensuring patterns in Indian strategic behaviour, see Stephen Cohen, *Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum*, Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India’s Military Modernization*, Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power*, Brookings Institution Press, 2002.

³⁰ For example, see Ryan Clarke, “Lashkar-i-Taiba: The Fallacy of Subservient Proxies and the Future of Islamist Terrorism in India”, US Army War College, January 2010.

³¹ Stephen Cohen, *Shooting for a Century*.

See also Ryan Clarke, “Sino-Indian Strategic Relations: Assessing the Risk of Great Power Rivalry in Asia”, *EAI Working Paper*, No. 157, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 4 August 2011.

asymmetric situations in both conventional military and other domains, especially in water security.³²

- 5.5 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be breaking from tradition and has developed a clear view of the threats that China poses to India. Following the Galwan Valley conflict, Prime Minister Modi and US President Donald Trump established more robust defence cooperation with a strong emphasis on American intelligence support and select weapons systems provisions.³³
- 5.6 While these developments might appear mundane, they marked a substantial strategic shift in the US-India relationship, placing it on a markedly different trajectory. However, this trajectory remains embryonic and can be reversed.
- 5.7 For example, many in India are concerned that some of the over 600,000 American weapons that were recently lost in Afghanistan will be used by terrorist groups in Jammu and Kashmir. There are also concerns that American unmanned aerial vehicles, night vision goggles and encrypted radios will also be used. These tactical concerns are in addition to a widespread perception in India that the poorly executed American withdrawal from Afghanistan has enabled Pakistan to establish undue influence in the country.³⁴
- 5.8 While India does indeed also have disputed territory with Pakistan in Kashmir, India has demonstrated through multiple wars in 1947, 1965 and 1999 (as well as multiple military standoffs from 2001 to 2021) that it can effectively control the situation. None of these conditions apply to disputed border territories with China.

³² For more in-depth discussions, see Brahma Chellaney, 'Water: Asia's New Battleground', Georgetown University Press, September 2013 and Brahma Chellaney, 'Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis', Rowman & Littlefield, March 2015.

³³ For a more in-depth discussion, see Ryan Clarke, 'China-India Border Conflicts: Geopolitical and Environmental Drivers and New Partnership Modalities', *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1554, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 27 August 2020.

³⁴ Interviews with Indian security analysts, 16 September 2021.
See also Idrees Ali, Patricia Zengerle and Jonathan Landay, 'Planes, guns, night-vision goggles: The Taliban's new U.S.-made war chest', Reuters, 20 August 2021.

- 5.9 The disputed territories are in considerably more sensitive locations, especially in and around the Siliguri Corridor (often referred to as India's 'Chicken's Neck') that connects Northeast India to the main body of India via a slim 22 kilometre-wide stretch of land.
- 5.10 Given this reality, this evolution in Indian strategic focus accelerated by American defence cooperation likely represents an irreversible shift in New Delhi's calculus. In addition to having substantial domestic implications, there will also be implications for the Quad and its collective approach towards China.

Practical Realities of the US-India Strategic Relationship and Their Quad Implications

- 6.1 India and the United States were on opposite sides of the Cold War and had a relationship characterised by mutual suspicion until very recently.³⁵ India today still has some vestiges of Soviet influence, from military hardware to residual elements of central planning.
- 6.2 This has posed a range of challenges ranging from military interoperability to strategic trade/economic synchronisation. While many of these challenges can be sidestepped in the initial tactical phases of a strategic partnership, they will likely amplify as the relationship develops further and more serious challenges surface.
- 6.3 Since independence, India has viewed itself as the natural leader of South Asia and as a key (if not the central) civilisational power in Asia. This approach has sometimes alarmed India's smaller neighbours, especially Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and pushed them to opportunistically engage China to generate alternative options.

³⁵ For example, see Bruce Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon: America, India, and Pakistan to the Brink and Back*, Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

Ashok Kaur, *Beyond Pokhran, India's Nuclear Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

- 6.4 When assessing these developments, Indian leaders from multiple political parties and the bureaucracy have a tendency to assume the worst and believe that Chinese strategic encirclement is the driving force.³⁶
- 6.5 Despite having a strong naval tradition, India's naval fleet has fallen behind China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) both in terms of absolute number of ships and overall warfighting capabilities of those ships.³⁷
- 6.6 This has real implications for what diplomatic and/or military remedies that India has in relation to perceived maritime threats emanating from some of its South Asian neighbours with Chinese assistance.
- 6.7 This is a markedly different strategic environment from India's other two fellow regional Quad members: Japan and Australia. Both of these countries have controlled for many of these maritime variables through a formal military alliance with the United States. India is the only Quad member to have a land border dispute with China as well.

**To-Be-Determined Lines Between Indian Interests and Quad Interests:
A Key Limiting Principle?**

- 7.1 India faces one of the world's most complex security environments that involve a range of both domestic and regional concerns and considerable interaction between the two.³⁸ Indian leaders tend to assign high priorities to both domestic challenges, such as insurgencies in Kashmir and across multiple North-eastern states, as well as regional rivalries.
- 7.2 This has resulted in the Indian Army becoming a highly experienced force that also has advanced combined ground-air capabilities alongside the Indian Air Force.

³⁶ This view is based on the author's professional experience working with various Indian defence and security communities within India as well as regionally.

³⁷ James Holmes, 'Who Will Win the Great China-India Naval War of 2020?' *Foreign Policy*, 7 August 2018.

³⁸ For a more in-depth discussion, see Ryan Clarke, *Crime-Terror Nexus in South Asia: States, Security, and Non-State Actors*, Routledge, 2011.

- 7.3 While not trivialising these capabilities, they have primarily been honed by dealing with insurgent groups operating with small arms and light weapons and in relatively small and dispersed cell structures.
- 7.4 Additional capabilities have also been developed during conventional conflict with Pakistan although this represents a smaller, but still important, share of the Indian Armed Force's overall breakdown of activities. While both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, India has clear conventional military superiority over Pakistan.³⁹
- 7.5 It is unclear how much of the previous combat experiences, weapons platforms and doctrine of the Indian Army and/or Air Force would apply to a border conflict with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).
- 7.6 While the PLA may have less combat experience, it has the world's largest ground force; the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) is also one of the world's most formidable in terms of inventory and capability. China also has an established track record of indirectly supporting insurgent groups operating against China's adversaries.⁴⁰
- 7.7 As such, it is difficult to objectively determine which specific Indian security challenges constitute an exclusively Indian problem with limited regional escalation and which are of clear shared concern for the Quad. For example, there are recent Indian reports emerging that the PLA is arming and training a militia in the Chumbi Valley near India's Siliguri Corridor.⁴¹
- 7.8 If accurate, this poses a clear strategic challenge to India given its various sensitivities. However, it is unclear as to what American and/or Quad interests are challenged by these developments.

³⁹ Stephen Cohen, *Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum*, Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

⁴⁰ For a more in-depth discussion, see Bertil Lintner, *The War of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*, Silkworm Books, 2021.

⁴¹ Rezaul Laskar, 'China raises new militias of Tibetan youth, deploys 1st batch in Chumbi Valley', *Hindustan Times*, 22 June 2021.

- 7.9 The net result is that there are numerous areas of potential misunderstanding between Indian expectations of American and/or broader Quad support versus what the latter is willing and able to provide India.
- 7.10 Another key area of potential misunderstanding is the Taiwan Strait, a top priority for the United States and Japan, but not for India. It is unclear what risks New Delhi would be willing to take in the event of a Taiwan Strait contingency.
- 7.11 While such strategic friction has yet to be observed, a determination of what qualifies as an exclusive Indian concern and responsibility will need to be made if India is to fully integrate into the Quad. If this is not accomplished, India could potentially become a less functional (or even non-functional) member of the Quad.
- 7.12 ‘An attack on one is an attack on all’ NATO-style approach in all likelihood will not apply. India likely has too many vectors of attack pointed in its general direction from multiple domestic and regional angles.

Possibility of An Asian NATO in 2021?

- 8.1 Naturally, many have begun to make comparisons between the Quad and NATO. NATO consists of 30 nations in Europe and North America and operates under a collective defence arrangement.
- 8.2 For example, if Lithuania is attacked by Russia, then (in principle) Canadian soldiers need to be prepared to fight and risk their lives to protect Lithuania from such aggression. While some admire the ethics of this collective defence principle, it poses a range of practical challenges.
- 8.3 A country like Lithuania generates a range of exposures and liabilities that could draw the NATO alliance into a broader and highly costly confrontation with Russia.
- 8.4 However, it is unclear what assets and/or other strategic benefits that Lithuania contributes to NATO itself. Structurally, this is a rather asymmetric relationship that

objectively enables Lithuania to accrue considerably more benefits relative to what it contributes.

- 8.5 This principle becomes arguably even more blurry in, for example, the case of Turkey when there is a border conflict with Syria. The question of whether Danish troops would be deployed to eastern Turkey remains unanswered. While this is also a hypothetical situation, it highlights some of the major strategic challenges associated with any collective defence system, even amongst relatively small, geographically proximate and culturally similar countries with a deep shared history.
- 8.6 The aforementioned principles can be credibly applied in the case of the Quad. While India presents the clearest case, these grey areas also permeate American, Japanese and Australian considerations as well, even in relation to the shared concerns over China.
- 8.7 In the event of a fishing dispute in the East China Sea that escalates into a military conflict between China and combined US/Japanese forces, it is unclear what strategic actions and risks Australia and/or India would be willing to take to defend Japanese interests.
- 8.8 While Australian contributions under such a scenario would probably be welcomed by the Quad, they would not likely make a material difference in the overall effort. The same is likely true for India.
- 8.9 Nonetheless, these actions would also generate considerable risks for these two countries. They could also manifest themselves in very different ways given their respective geographies, economic structures, demographics and varied supply chain dependencies.
- 8.10 In its current form, the Quad appears to represent an organisational structure and platform for meeting, sharing assessments, conducting military exercises and consolidating views on various strategic issues in the Asia Pacific. While this

includes issues such as natural disaster preparedness, shared concerns over China will continue to figure most prominently.

- 8.11 The net result is that challenges will likely be managed on a case-by-case basis though nominally under the Quad framework. This allows the degree of strategic flexibility that the United States in particular requires to manage expectations of two Treaty Allies and the world's second largest country.

Implications for ASEAN Centrality

- 9.1 Given that unilateral (in the case of India), bilateral and occasional multilateral modes of interaction will likely remain consistent under the Quad, the question is where the concept of ASEAN Centrality fits in and will ASEAN position itself as a partner of, and potentially even an extension to, the Quad. There is also the question of whether ASEAN is even able to formulate a coherent policy and ensure consistency across the entire grouping.⁴²
- 9.2 In the current strategic scenario, Indonesia is arguably the most critical ASEAN country that remains unaligned and has the potential of 'going either way' with regards to having a more friendly orientation towards the Quad or closer strategic alignment with China. Some have even suggested that Indonesia could serve as a 'Quad Plus'⁴³ member although evidence of this is presently lacking.
- 9.3 While there have been naval standoffs at locations such as Indonesia's Natuna Islands,⁴⁴ China and Indonesia maintain strong trade and investment linkages that appear to have been relatively unimpacted by these developments. A fundamental

⁴² For an in-depth discussion on structures, see Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*. Routledge, 2020.

⁴³ Quad Plus generally refers to countries that may align some of their strategic priorities and actions with the Quad without officially joining the grouping. For example, a Quad Plus country may officially share the position of the Quad on disputed Chinese claims in the South China Sea while remaining noncommittal on other broader Quad issues.

⁴⁴ Kiki Siregar, 'Chinese vessels leaving Natuna after days of stand-off with Indonesia', Channel News Asia, 9 January 2020.

question is to what extent China can translate this trade and commercial influence into strategic considerations under current conditions in the heart of ASEAN.

- 9.4 Indonesia can lean towards the Quad, orient more towards China, or even continue to ‘fence-sit’ in a rather non-committal position. Jakarta’s decisions will likely generate an outsized effect on ASEAN’s broader strategic orientation under the current circumstances.
- 9.5 It is in this context that China’s maritime probing in or near Indonesian waters should be considered. A similar approach should likely be taken towards assessing China’s May 2021 naval rescue operation to help locate a lost Indonesian submarine that Beijing conducted at its own cost. The operation was ultimately unsuccessful.⁴⁵
- 9.6 It is likely that the Quad will opt for a direct approach towards Jakarta. A core component of this strategy would involve close coordination with other leading ASEAN countries, namely Singapore, as well as formal American allies such as the Philippines and Thailand.
- 9.7 Even if there was a clear declared Quad preference to formulate and execute this strategy via an established ASEAN infrastructure, which there is not, this would be nearly impossible given current domestic challenges and heavy economic dependence of some ASEAN member states on China.

Implications for Chinese Strategy

- 10.1 As evidenced by the substantial increase in strategic activity by the PLA in 2020 and 2021,⁴⁶ much of which could be classified as probing and testing the responses of other countries, China appears to assess that the post-COVID-19 environment presents an array of new options.

⁴⁵ Laura Zhou, ‘China sends rescue ships to help recover lost Indonesian submarine’, *South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2021.

⁴⁶ For a more in-depth discussion, see Ryan Clarke, ‘Is China Converting COVID-19 Into a Strategic Opportunity?’

- 10.2 Circumstances have somewhat altered Chinese strategic behaviour. When combined with the lack of a realistic prospect of a NATO-like Quad or a robust ASEAN Centrality doctrine, China faces a complex strategic canvas of both risks and opportunities.
- 10.3 It is possibly aware of many of the dynamics outlined earlier and has exercised considerable discipline to continue to probe in the South China Sea while avoiding any actions or new military facility construction that could raise alarm bells.
- 10.4 Such actions could further accelerate and remove friction from many of the current strategic trends that are not necessarily in China's favour.⁴⁷ The one fundamental exception to this is India.
- 10.5 Once international attention related to the August 2020 Galwan Conflict subsided, China embarked on an ambitious military base and airfield construction programme across Tibet and other sensitive areas near the disputed border with India. These projects have been of such a size and magnitude that even commercial satellite imagery providers were able to clearly detect them.⁴⁸
- 10.6 The scale, scope, speed and apparent lack of concern for concealment likely indicates that Beijing has the strategic space to escalate this situation further, irrespective of Quad considerations. Notably, there was an increase in Chinese military construction in June 2020 prior to the Galwan clashes in August.⁴⁹
- 10.7 Near-term Quad reactions will drive the discovery of how major strategic challenges originating from China will or will not be effectively addressed by the grouping. While Chinese probing will likely continue in traditional hot spots, there is finite amount of new information that China can discover by doing so. However, China

⁴⁷ Interview with former Senior Naval Intelligence Officer, 1 July 2021.

⁴⁸ Vishnu Som, 'India-China Posts Just 150 Metres Apart In Feb, Show New Satellite Pics', NDTV, 29 June 2021.
'China's military build-up at disputed border worries India, foreign minister says', *South China Morning Post*, 23 June 2021.

⁴⁹ Rahul Singh, 'Satellite images capture China's PLA build-up in Ladakh', *Hindustan Times*, 25 June 2020.

appears to believe that probing of India can generate new information and China is seeking to push forward.

Net Assessment

- 11.1 The reinvigorated Quad is unlikely to materially alter the strategic environment in the Asia Pacific over the near-term. It appears to be a still-evolving initiative for providing a more structured regional platform to manage strategic issues on a case-by-case basis. At present, there is little evidence of a joint grand strategy formulation beyond what already exists via the American alliance structure.
- 11.2 Whether by design or not, China appears to be forcing the hand of the Quad through its rapid military expansion across large sections of its disputed border with India. Current trends will likely compel the Quad to make key decisions over the near-term regarding which Indian security concerns are purely domestic concerns and which are of clear relevance to the broader Quad.
- 11.3 Overall ASEAN Centrality appears to be relatively unimpacted by regional developments. However, this direction has the potential of changing in the event that Indonesia seeks to position itself as a friendly party towards the Quad or develop stronger ties with China. These developments would likely occur over the medium-term.
- 11.4 Regardless of which direction the aforementioned issues move, there are several likely irreconcilable structural issues that render the Quad incapable of evolving into a NATO-style alliance with all of the related collective responsibilities, obligations and protections.
- 11.5 As such, enhanced focus on the Quad may in reality prove escalatory over the medium-term as China seeks to probe the Indian component to determine what risks and opportunities are available to Beijing under these new strategic conditions.