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Why the Quad is not NATO: the indo-American impediments to its intergovernmental structure

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ABSTRACT

In the post-COVID19 global order, rising geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe and East Asia reflect the boiling tensions States face on multiple fronts. Within this, the United States is on two fronts as a major player and supporter of its allies that are directly facing hostility. Since the start of 2020, China's hard, military power maneuvering in the South China Sea, deteriorating political relations with Japan and Australia, and the Himalayan standoff against India have seemingly further substantiated the need for the formulation of *The Quad*, a proposed quadrilateral arrangement with a varying mandate of operations. The proposed structure would constitute India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. The grouping has repeatedly been touted as not as "anti-China." However Chinese interpretation of the mutual intent has equated them to being an "Asian NATO." Keeping this in mind, I draw upon Duncan Snidal and Felicity Vabulas' works on Informal Intergovernmental Organizations (IIGOs) and considers the inherent pitfalls that states may incur while negotiating through the contours of such a structure. Particularly in regards to strategic autonomy, asymmetry in resource contribution and control, and agreeing on a set of fundamental driving philosophies that are certain enough to tie the parties together for the foreseeable future. I focus on contemporary international relations theory, secondary research in the subject countries' Indo-Pacific policies, and the more significant geopolitical trends of securitization in Asia.

Introduction

The maritime domain of Asia has increasingly become a geopolitical center of tension since the start of the century. China is a major factor and player in this development. It's visible in its revisionist behavior vis-à-vis the United States of America (US), flagrant violations of international law and noncompliance with the decisions of international judicial bodies regarding the South China Sea, and politico-military hostility vis-à-vis major Asian and Oceanic players. These essentially summarize the current geopolitical configurations of the Pacific and Indian oceans. Therefore, it is easy to point to China as the cause of the reemergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between

India, Japan, Australia, and the United States in the newly established construct of the Indo-Pacific. But there are various other elements to explain why the *Quad* has reemerged in the way it has that do not relate to the China factor but rather have internal and non-traditional points of consideration. For clarity, the Quad may be a cumulative of certain national security prerogatives of the Member States, but in no way is it reflective of complete synchronization of their national interests. States will maneuver in the region outside the aegis of the emerging grouping. Nonetheless, the Quad serves as a critical juncture in Asian multilateralism. Furthermore, “members” in this paper refer to the four parties to this grouping; Australia, Japan, the US, and India.

The Quad was initially proposed by Japan’s Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the backdrop of his 2006 vision of a Eurasian chain of security, the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”¹ and 2004 coordinated Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief efforts of the four members in response to the tsunami that had rocked South-East Asia. The original conception of this security dialogue was on the lines of Japan’s foreign policy orientation, which wanted to use multilateral diplomacy to ensure mutual respect for the rule of law and freedom in its domains of principal interests. The first and only meeting of the Quad until ten years later was in 2007 at ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Manila.² For the purposes of this essay, the 2007 proposal of the Quad will be referred to as Quad 1, and the reemergence of the grouping in 2017 is Quad 2. Even at that time, the four-member states had repeatedly stated that the meeting on the sidelines of the ARF, and the general concept of the security dialogue is not oriented traditionally toward one specific state but rather is focused on the non-traditional issues that are applicable to all stakeholders in the Indian Ocean Region and Asia-Pacific region (these two regions were reconfigured as one, the Indo-Pacific in the second decade of the century, and fueled the rhetoric of the emergence of Quad 2.). But an antagonized China issued demarches against all four countries wanting to know the purpose of the official level meeting and considered this to be the first step toward creating an “Asian NATO.”³ The fragile basis of the bilateral relations of the United States and Australia with the East Asian state was given priority. The plug was pulled on the Quad before it even met the bare minimum of being considered some form of an institution or organization. In 2017, the conversation around the Quad was restarted. The “democratic security diamond” proposed by Shinzo Abe in 2012 in material was just a synonym for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. It was the first indicator of the revival of the grouping. Again, at an ASEAN summit in Manila in 2017, official representatives from all four states met on the sidelines to discuss a wide variety of issues, with the construct of the Indo-Pacific being a central theme.⁴ Two years after this, these meetings continued at a senior-ministerial level annually. Officials met twice in 2019,⁵ and once in October 2020 in Tokyo.⁶ On March 24, 2021, the first Leaders’ Summit was held virtually, signaling a clear intent to promote

Quad 2 as an informal grouping. Another three meetings at irregular intervals followed this; the 4th meeting was held on May 24, 2022, in person in Tokyo.

The recently declassified US Indo-Pacific Strategy document directly calls for creating a Quadrilateral security framework between itself, Japan, India, and Australia.⁷ The presupposed creation of Quad 2 in the coming years raises a few fundamental questions: 1) What is the orientation and purpose of this security grouping in 2023? 2) In what manner will this security grouping manifest? And 3) what will the impact be on the unilateral operations of its member states and other regional parties? I believe the answer to the first and third questions can be found by categorizing the Quad as a type of international organization. In response to the second question, Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, in their 2013 paper, attempt to theorize the concept of Informal Intergovernmental Organizations (IIGOs), which are becoming increasingly common in today's geopolitical landscape.⁸ Additionally, reflecting upon the 2021 paper of Biersteker, Abbott, and Westerwinter, I aim to identify the significant drivers for the push for this form of informal governance.⁹ The paper argues that there exist various international groupings that have influence over the workings of the international order in multiple domains but do not necessarily meet all the requirements of a Formal Intergovernmental Organization (FIGO). Furthermore, the paper will attempt to categorize the current structure and nature of the Quad as a possible IIGO, its constituting variables, and its possible evolution.

No matter what the Quad's constituting members claim to be the true nature of this multilateral grouping, its perceived implications on Asian geopolitics cannot go unaddressed. While China has offered a relatively subtler response to Quad 2 in comparison to the one in 2007, its politico-military behavior and its economic outreach in the Belt and Road Initiative have become the metric with which policy analysts and scholars are now charting the East Asian giant's response to developments in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, questions have been raised about the impact of an institutionalized Quad on the other regional states and organizations. India and the US, on a number of occasions, have stated that their vision for the Indo-Pacific revolves around ASEAN centrality. But states have voiced their concerns about the possibility of hyper-securitization and pooling of competition in South-East Asia would be the consequence of the materialization of the Quad. In light of this, this paper will analyze the scope and applicable domains of the Quad. The question being pursued here is, "is the Quad truly headed toward being a security alliance such as NATO?"

Theory of IIGOs

Felicity Vabulas and Duncan Snidal, in their 2013 paper, attempted to theorize IIGO-related state behavior. They state international

organizational theories only consider “international choice as a binary decision between decentralized cooperation and FIGOs.”¹⁰ They further argue that there is a broader spectrum of significant informality in modern-day multilateralism, and IIGOs representing this spectrum are an intermediary between non-institutionalized interactions and FIGOs.¹¹ IIGOs have charted the way forward for various developing and rising powers in the international order to navigate the powerplays of powerful states, especially after the end of the Cold War. Such informal organizations play an influential role in the domestic operations, non-institutional interactions of states, and even some FIGOs. A critical difference between FIGOs and IIGOs is the element of institutional capability. An IIGO, due to its character, would not hold any hard power capabilities to implement its will, and there will be a dependence on a formal constitution to enable it to do so.

On the other hand, IIGOs’ character also allows states to engage in negotiations and agreements that would not have been possible under the rigid constitutions of FIGOs. This has created a mutually beneficial circle between these two types of international organizations (IOs). For example, the Group of 8 has enabled its participating members to overcome various deadlocked issues in FIGOs. Still, it was dependent on the International Monetary Fund for its long-term implementation and binding these states to these commitments.¹² IIGOs can also be trans-domain in nature and are not centered toward one theme or area of issues. This prevents it from being contained in one specific area of international politics. The negotiations undertaken within these organizations have a wide scope of various domains, and states tend to undertake a multipronged approach while interacting with other members. This character of IIGOs has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. A clear advantage is that the organization is casual and non-structured and, therefore, can be molded to meet the members’ interests with no constitutional constraints, *greater flexibility, and management during high uncertainty*.

Furthermore, states can engage with other members without the constraints of being bound to any formal commitments; *greater state autonomy*. Lastly, IIGOs tend to attract states that want to unite on a common set of rules, norms, visions, and beliefs; they are established on the premise of existing confidence and need active confidence-building measures (CBMs) to be implemented. The fact that IIGOs’ creation is based on the chronicity of inter-state interaction rather than a charter-based formality highlights this confidence; *low short-term transaction costs, speed in new arrangements*. But these organizations can turn disadvantageous if there are no formal mechanisms outside of it to ensure members’ adherence to the agreed commitments. It is to be noted that IIGOs can turn formal over time to

constitutionalize their operations and create binding parameters for all its members.

The two authors define IIGOs on the following lines:¹³

- (1) *An explicitly shared expectation – rather than a formalized agreement – about purpose*
- (2) *With explicitly associated state “members” who,*
- (3) *Participate in regular meetings but have no independent secretariat or other significant institutionalization such as a headquarters and/or permanent staff. Regular need not be on a fixed schedule; the timing of sessions might be driven by need or other considerations. The point is that the group expects to interact in the future, and it is not a one-off occurrence.*

And, the following table charts the informal-formal spectrum of intergovernmental agreements:¹⁴

Adding to this theory, the theory of minilateralism and Wooyeal Paik and Jae Joe Park’s paper on *The Quad’s search for Non-Military Roles* shed essential light on the institutional character of the Quad. As per the US Department of Defense, a minilateral, while studying international security, is defined as “meetings between small subsets of nations, typically three or four, designed to address common security interests in a more focused setting.”¹⁵ Traditionally, minilaterals were international structures that consisted of states with similar security ambitions and interests. Noting that since the start of the century, various minilaterals have emerged that affect matters related to international security, like the G8, it is understood that states have expanded their understanding of “security” to be widened beyond simple politico-military considerations but also consider contemporary issue domains such as regional economic integration, climate change, cybersecurity, domestic development, rule of law in global commons. Paik and Park, in their paper, dichotomize modern minilaterals security cooperation and motivations as per the following table:¹⁶

The different groups and types of minilaterals can highlight their existing formal or informal nature and chart their transformations depending on the evolution of their goals and motivations. It is important to note that minilaterals, when they are formed, can either be agenda-centric or state-centric. The former means the states constituting the minilateral are looking to address a particular domain or issue; therefore, they face less internal resistance while setting up the scope, role, and functions of the grouping. A state-centric grouping tends to be broader and dependent on the state’s constituting it rather than the agenda they are convening over. While this allows greater participation, it tends to make cooperation around a specific role or function more challenging.

This was seen in the case of the Korea-Indonesia-Australia cooperation in the Global Green Growth Institute. While these three constituted the minilateral, the focus was on Climate Change and sustainability in the Indo-Pacific region. But in the interest of pursuing middle-power diplomacy, this minilateral eventually included Turkey and Mexico, thus creating the MIKTA partnership in 2013.¹⁷ This inclusion widened the scope of participation but turned the minilateral into state-centric, and it is finding it difficult to narrow down a role or function for itself as Turkey and Mexico are extra-regional states and have different motivations while pursuing security cooperation under this minilateral. The conversation is no longer around Climate Change and sustainability in the Indo-Pacific but about understanding these issues between the original trilateral members, Mexico and Turkey. Group 2 style of minilateral partnerships that may have been established in mutual interest and are agenda-centric can turn sour due to fundamental bilateral disagreements between members. This can cause the grouping dissolution, stagnancy, inefficiency, or states not keeping their commitments. This is partially being witnessed in the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) pipeline project, which is oriented toward increasing the natural gas supply from Central Asia to South Asia and creating a sustainable economic chain of energy.¹⁸ The articulation of the four-way agreement and creation of the pipeline inevitably drew in the interest of all participating states regarding the issues of terrorism and non-state activity in the region. Thereby creating an ad hoc channel of dialogue between them on the lines of addressing energy security and physical infrastructure regarding the protection of the pipeline from non-traditional forces. The current stagnancy and inertia in setting up the internal sections of the pipeline in Pakistan and India¹⁹ and the overarching security realities between the two states have not overridden the partnership. Still, they have actively inhibited it from achieving its objective in a timely manner.

Noting these theories, I argue the Quad can be characterized based on the spectrum these papers collectively establish; the Quad as a minilateral could transform into an IIGO. The critical factor here is that is an evident expectation for continued participation through regular meetings. The possibility of an institutionalized Quad in the third decade of this century could be the litmus test for studying the future of Asian multilateralism. Similar to the US' Hubs and Spokes policy in Asia during the Cold War, the geopolitical realities of the region do not support a linear mirroring of security policies pursued in the Atlantic region and Europe. Furthermore, the involvement of countries like India, whose foreign policies are evolving in a manner where it wishes to retain its defensive realist philosophies but not be oblivious to overt dangers surfacing around its littorals, will be the defining feature of an institutionalized Quad.

History of alliance networks in Asia from an American and Indian perspective

The implications of pursuing an informal intergovernmental organization in the Indo-Pacific are directly influenced by the Asian alliance structure the US pursued in the 20th century during the Cold War, as well as India's long-held position around nonalignment. Unlike Europe, the United States did not actively pursue integrating a formal multilateral organization to govern security matters. Noting that a politically, militarily, and economically weak Europe was vulnerable to the ambitious red tide from the East, it noted its transatlantic relationship as a fundamental foreign policy priority. In many ways, the idea of multilateral engagement in Asia was pushed to a tertiary level and only received symbolic gestures with no concrete commitments. There was a racial element as well to how the United States perceived South Asia and South East Asia. In 1949, Assistant Secretary of State, Will Clayton, in his testimony to the US Senate about Asian Membership in NATO, explicitly said, "*my idea would be that in the beginning the (postwar) union would be composed of all countries that have our ideas and ideals of freedom and that are composed of the white race.*"²⁰ The Indo-Pacific region was largely viewed through a racial lens, requiring Statist reconfiguration to be symbiotic with "white leadership" and structures.²¹ The empirical absence of similar religious values and lack of equally efficient (read as moldable) democratic structures premised the separation of the United States from any effective multilateralism in the region. Hemmer and Katzenstein note that the trust and affinity the US shared with its European counterparts in NATO was, in principle, absent in their relationship with various Asian States. This absence was "a powerful force separating the United States from Asia. The US preference for multilateral or bilateral security arrangements followed from these different constellations."²²

However, the United States did not simply ignore Asia altogether. The disparate identity issues, as well as the consequences of emerging decolonization within the region, gave impetus to the United States to invest in bilateral relationships with the Indo-Pacific States. The occidental Cold War manner of looking at international relations essentially had the United States looking at the Indo-Pacific through a linear, non-realist approach. In their visualization, these States were "buffer" or "domino" States that needed to fall on the blue side of the Cold War dichotomy.²³ The susceptibility of these States to align themselves with the Soviet bloc and then consequently influence other regional stakeholders was a prominent concern. The lessons learned during the Korean War crystallized these presumptions. In pursuit of setting up manageable security relationships, the American alliance system set up the "hub and spokes" policy, where America was the central node (Hub)

to a wheel-like architecture where bilateral networks from the Asian peripheral States were directed toward this node (Spokes).²⁴ On a policy level, the Americans aimed at being a major player in the region without letting regional players consolidate a security arrangement on a multilateral level. This afforded it tremendous control over domestic, regional, and international developments throughout the Cold War. However, the memory of this practice is deeply ingrained amongst the Indo-Pacific States and will influence the growth of the Quad amongst the four members and any other States that may join the Quad Plus structure.

India's security legacy within the same period informs us about the possible trajectory and fate the Quad may transition toward in the coming years. Accepting that during the Cold War, amongst the 4 Quad members, the United States was the major power, it is noted that Australia and Japan were closely aligned with the US position and were close, strategic allies within the Americans' global ambitions. India, however, was a leading force that chose not to conform to the Cold War dichotomy (explicitly, on a policy level) and was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. A position inspired by the philosophies of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, India balanced (and often hedged) between the Americans and Soviets all through the Cold War.²⁵ Since the start of the 21st century, India's global ambitions have grown due to widening economic capacities and capabilities, greater industrialization of the IT and military innovation sector, and international recognition of its geopolitical position in contemporary Asian politics. Despite these evolutions, India's nonalignment reigns supreme within its foreign policies. However, the nature of this nonalignment has been impacted by the wars and conflicts it has faced during and post-Cold War. The developments on both sides of its northern borders have incentivized India to softly *tilt* toward greater cooperation with the Americans in recent years. This has been substantiated by the recognition of India as a key strategic partner in Asia, moving forward, by American policymakers.²⁶

The premise of preventing being caught in someone else's wars bears a long colonial legacy given that massive numbers of Indian soldiers who fought Britain's European wars while their land, people, or economies gained nothing off it; instead faced grave circumstances of resource drainage, famines, and loss of livelihoods and agency despite their sacrifices. This memory fundamentally informs India's rhetoric of *strategic independence* whenever security or strategic arrangements (especially with major powers) are undertaken. This rhetoric will largely influence the way Quad will evolve, moving forward. The ability of the Quad to rise above "alliance pathologies";²⁷ entrapment, over-dependence, control, and exit will deeply be contingent on India's willingness to act in coordination with the interests of the Americans and their allies.

The character of the Quad

Quad 2 serves as an interesting case study to understand the evolving multi-lateral dimensions of Asian geopolitics. As of April 2023, the Quad has no clear constitution; there isn't a charter, treaty, agreement, or secretariat. Clearly, the Quad is far from being a FIGO, and considering there is no overarching institution over the meetings and collective operations of the 4 States, it is also not an IIGO under a FIGO. For this paper, the "founding" members are the US, Japan, Australia, and India, and there is the possibility of other States, like Canada,²⁸ joining this group over time (the grouping has been titled *Quad Plus*), showing institutionally it is open to including future members in its exercises and operations. This approach can be traced back to the 2006 Princeton Project's proposal to recreate Woodrow Wilson's first proposal of a league of democratic States, which essentially restricted membership to "like-minded" States. However, Biden's "Summit for Democracy" expresses the separation from the emerging Quad-plus structure.²⁹ I put forward an argument that the Quad is simply not the collective participation of all four members together but also the different permutations and combinations of trilateral and bilateral networks amongst the members that 1) facilitate the objective of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and 2) influence the region to respect established norms and rules through including but also beyond politico-military posturing.

As mentioned earlier, the four members have agreed to host regular senior-level meetings and have met on various occasions, including their recent meeting in Tokyo in May 2022. But apart from a few quadrilateral maritime exercises, the States have not entered into any formal or structured commitment as a quadrilateral group. While this fluidity allows all States to adapt to the geopolitical scenarios as they develop, it also doesn't substantiate their collective commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific in a structured and traceable manner. I believe the Quad is currently a 'Group 3' minilateral. The arrangement as of now is simply an "Explicit Agreement Consultation," indicating that the currently agreed regularity of meetings is not the inception of this grouping as an IIGO but a critical juncture in the process that has been ongoing since Quad 1. The confidence between the four countries has ebbed and flowed, as is the nature of multilateral structures. Still, the foundational base of the Quad as an IIGO will be the trilateral and bilateral relations all of these countries share. Taking the example of the Malabar exercise, the naval exercise that in 2020 became the media highlight of the Quad began as a bilateral exercise between the US and India shortly after the end of the Cold War. In 2015, in the backdrop of increasing geopolitical tension in Sino-Japanese relations and the South China Sea issue, Japan formally joined the exercise as the third participant, and in 2020 the exercise included Australia (with no guarantees about its continued participation).³⁰ The bilateral

exercises of the two members were expanded to include the other members to fortify their collective posturing. This would not have been possible if the fundamental network didn't exist and confidence between the States had not been built over time.

Similarly, in the economic and development domain, the United States, Japan, and Australia are making efforts to provide alternatives to Chinese investments in the Indo-Pacific³¹ and actively seeking India's participation in the same system. Similarly, the trilateral security dialogue amongst Japan-Australia-US is arguably the principal security grouping in the Indo-Pacific. The evolution of this security dialogue is similar to what can be observed around the Quad. Before becoming a formal institution, the trilateral dialogue held regular ministerial-level meetings, followed by leader-level meetings. It was finally augmented and formalized by a "Security and Defense Cooperation Forum."³² The instruments, agreements, and code of conduct for different military wings and political institutions within this grouping will serve as the blueprint and bedrock as these three States and India move toward structuring the Quad.

To understand the character of the Quad, understanding the motives and ambitions behind a "free and open Indo-Pacific" is needed. The premise of promoting and securing this philosophy and vision shows that some traditional and/or non-traditional threats exist against it. Addressing the latter, the proposal of Quad 1 was against the backdrop of a successful operation between the four countries while addressing the non-traditional issue of the 2004 tsunami and providing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) support to the affected region. On the other hand, piracy and sea-based terrorism are direct threats to freedom of navigation and sea lanes of communication. Over time, States have taken adequate measures unilaterally and in cooperation to stifle the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and around the Malacca Strait. Operation Ocean Shield, which was NATO's contribution to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, was coupled with operations of the Indian and Japanese Navies proving multilateral efforts to tackle non-traditional issues can be effective over an extended period of time. While India was not part of the US' Combined Task Force 151, the two countries' navies effectively coordinated their operations in the region.³³

Similarly, the coordinated exercises being conducted on a regular basis amongst the Quad countries feature anti-piracy and HADR operations. It can be concluded that the non-traditional threats to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific are principally agreed upon, and there is space for increasing cooperation under an institutionalized Quad 2. But the pursuit of greater collaboration to tackle piracy and sea-based terrorism will raise further questions about the inclusiveness of other stakeholders, which will be addressed later in the paper.

But pursuing security against traditional threats is where the asymmetry between the Quad members emerges. Tracing the origins of the Quad, it can

be argued that the alliance was initially proposed on politico-military lines due to no other dimensions of the dialogue existing. But this cannot be understood as a *fait accompli* as Quad 1 fizzled out after one meeting and a single naval exercise in 2007. The emerging Quad 2 in its current configuration is wider than a simple politico-military peacetime alliance. Along with the network of various peacetime maritime exercises, there is a substantial economic dimension to it. The Belt and Road initiative, which will be discussed later in this paper, is a prominent point of consideration in the Indo-Pacific policies of all four member states. The response to China's economic foothold in maritime Asia may well lie within the emerging architecture of Quad 2. The form and nature of this response and its compatibility with the other prong of maritime security deepen this asymmetry. While having a larger Indo-Pacific maritime security policy that looks to protect the integrity of the High Seas as a global common or the purpose of maintaining SLOCs is noted, the application of other dimensions of the Quad, such as infrastructure investments, territorial and maritime sovereignty and integrity, developmental aid, sea-based patrolling, cannot be as universal and macro, it will need to be given specific regional and country-based consideration. For example, India's primary area of interest and influence will remain in the Indian Ocean Region and mainly focus on its littorals. The South Asian state will fundamentally look to curtail further Chinese incursion into its principal sphere of influence and also create restraints to increasing Chinese investments amongst specific regional players. It can channel these objectives through the emerging architecture and re-buff its efforts in the region with the support of the other members through the various networks that are existing between the four currently. But the current character of the Quad has minimal bureaucracy. As its objectives crystalize over time,³⁴ it will need to centralize its bureaucratic capacity to a certain extent to create a chain of communication and coordination across various issue domains and regions of operations within the Indo-Pacific. Creating a dedicated Indo-Pacific division within the governmental apparatus in India is a positive sign for this endeavor.

Furthermore, these operations are fundamentally in place to support deterrence strategies and peacetime operations. But what about in times of military crises? There is no evidence or guarantees whatsoever that the Quad would operate as a cohesive multilateral structure in response to direct hostilities in the Indo-Pacific.

While multilateral military and political posturing have implications, they are still peacetime operations. Nonetheless, suppose the Quad does encompass security guarantees in the future. In that case, a structured military chain of command is essential in this regard, and the lack of hierarchy could prove to be anathematic to the IIGO's larger objective. But to address the possibility of a conflict, a critical change must now materialize in India's foreign policy. India's hesitancy with such multilateral groupings has always stemmed from

these hampering its strategic independence. Observing the other participants being more committed to the Quad than ever is a sign of confidence, but it may also be a product of today's geopolitics in Asia and China, which of course, is not set in stone and neither is opposed to other changes in the global sphere. In light of these changes, New Delhi needs to factor in where it places the Quad moving forward in its foreign policy objectives and how much of a concession it is willing to make to inculcate an informal security organization/grouping into its political and strategic arsenal. This applies to the other members as well. Strategic clarity is immovably critical.

With the aim of diversifying its mandate (and arguably shedding its anti-China image), the Quad has often been touted as a funnel for larger Indo-Pacific strategies that do not impact sea lanes of communication. Instead, they focus on humanitarian assistance, development and human security, economic aid and relief, public health, and even space cooperation. For example, in the US' 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy, while elaborating on the Quad, it aims for satellite information sharing regarding climate and maritime domain awareness (which has its military implications). Additionally, it also sets up a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fellowship program amongst the four members that focus on scientific education and graduate degree opportunities for their citizens in US institutions.³⁵ Even the 2022 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Recovery was framed as a post-COVID19 multilateral economic undertaking that targeted multi-sectoral recovery through regional engagements. However, it is essential to note that the framework is not a *constitutionalized framework* and is a signal of intention to "negotiate" on its four pillars; Trade, Supply Chains, Clean Energy, and Tax and Anti-Corruption. All of these are further aspects adding to the ever-expanding (ambiguous) "possibilities" of the Quad. Although, within a network visualization, this further substantiates the bilateral and trilateral networks that contribute to the Quad's character and the Quad-plus potential.

Beyond politico-military posturing and a (lack of) unified strategic ambitions, the Quad also lacks a clear sense of actionable principles (either in international law in general or within a structured constitution). This is a fundamental difference between what NATO, as a Neo-European security alliance, promises to its members and orbital states and what the Quad, in its current configuration, fails to demarcate. The premise of security amongst the Member states and those within its security umbrella highlights the underlying set of principles of what constitutes "peace;" it could be an intersection of human rights, non-belligerence, exchange of military assets and intelligence, humanitarian response, and unified understanding of the desirable 'status quo. Within NATO's constitution, Article 5 epitomizes this, which demarcates the apparent willingness of all Member states to ensure European peace and security is sustained, and any threat to it is met with a clear and coordinated response. Unlike NATO, the lack of a clear constitution further contributes to

the ambiguity about where the Quad has a definitive role to play. The current set of agreements and increased regularity to collectively meet as well undertake military exercises have confirmed its status of being an explicit agreement consultation. However, in geopolitical cases where the Quad, in its inter-ministerial meetings, have covered them as agendas or failed to, it is visible that national interests amongst states continue to blind any efforts to set up a guiding north star that can define its principal purpose. Academics and pundits have repeatedly touted FOIP as the fundamental principle of the Quad. I argue that FOIP is a critical national interest of all Quad-members individually, and promotion of this principle, as noted in the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is in the collective interest of the same. However, the interpretation of what FOIP means is nationally determined, and India's behavior within the boiling US-China competition highlights the asymmetry within interpretations. India's concerns about entrapment or control within an explicit multilateral agreement with the US outweigh its potential benefits. China, a neighboring state that has repeatedly undertaken limited belligerence upon Indian border territories in the North-West, informs its concerns of a Chinese overreaction or miscalculation to an explicit grouping that collectively projects politico-military positioning.

Furthermore, India's position on foreign policy not being directed by other states is best visible in recent geopolitical events in Ukraine and Taiwan. While the United States does not mimic its aversion to security arrangements in Asia as it did in the mid-twentieth century, it stays reminded that a mimicking of European structures and behaviors remains cardinally implausible given India's strategic autonomy, as well as varying degrees of interests of the Member states in the multitude of domains it *could* possibly engage on. A cardinal question that substantiates the inquiry pursued by this paper is "under what circumstances do all four member states envision codifying a unified response under the Quad umbrella?" Additionally, "what would this response look like?" and "what would trigger the principled institutionalization of this driver and response?" This is why the Quad's evolution as an organization in Asia will be a significant variable in China's geopolitical behavior.

The China-factor

The ambiguity and asymmetry evident with the Quad also inform Chinese behavior. While it has noted the fracturing of national interests amongst the Member states, it remains concerned regarding the resistance of the Quad members to the spread of Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi had equated the Quad to being like "sea foam" and remained skeptical about the Quad's purpose being greater than an anti-China coalition, as stated by its members.³⁶ China sees this ambiguity among the

Member states as an outcome of hesitance to call it the principal antagonist that would justify the reasoning of any further institutionalization. Chinese scholars and pundits have also acknowledged the asymmetry amongst the members as an evident nascency of the organization,³⁷ which I have classified as an explicit agreement consultation. However, Chinese policy literature has highlighted that it does consider the future trajectory of the Quad could be reactive to its national ambitions.³⁸ This *de facto* alludes to it certainly holding the potential to further crystalize certain principal concepts in the future.

Clarity around the basic concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” does not have to be traditionally oriented against one state under the Quad. As per the Japanese Government, the concept is centered around developing a free and open Indo-Pacific region as an “international public good” by ensuring a rule-based international order which is inclusive and transparent.³⁹ Furthermore, they have pursued ASEAN’s centrality to the Indo-Pacific construct, as have the United States,⁴⁰ and India.⁴¹ This position around the Indo-Pacific is, in principle, synonymous among all the 4-member states. The ASEAN+ institutional model, which developed in the same period, is highly compatible with the workings of the Quad as all the Quad members are part of this model and can effectively serve as a lobbying group within it. Two questions can be derived from this position: 1) Is the Quad adopting the mandating of enforcing rules within the Indo-Pacific regional construct? and 2) how inclusive will the Quad be in terms of strategic participation across all the domains considering China’s growing BRI foothold in Southeast Asia?

The rhetoric around the Quad has ubiquitously been associated with a “rules-based” approach to governing the Indo-Pacific. The context around this approach is the flagrant violation by China of existing international law, UNCLOS, and international maritime law. The current Chinese operations in the South China Sea that violate the maritime sovereignty and Exclusive Economic Zone of various ASEAN countries,⁴² along with its outstanding maritime border disputes with Japan, have repeatedly seen an international call for the ceasing of the transgressive activities by the East Asian giant. Considering there had been some headway in bridging the gap between China and ASEAN by setting up the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, there still exists no effective mechanism to ensure Chinese adherence. Noting the Chinese softening stance in the region should not be considered a benevolent turn toward accepting the current international regime as it still continues to boast one of the region’s most potent and aggressive military presences. In 2019, China still held its claim on the South China Sea Islands, and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory.⁴³ They were pushing to build defense infrastructures in these disputed sub-regions to protect their “sovereignty.”⁴⁴ Within this reality, the Quad has space to garner legitimacy from the other regional stakeholders as turning into an informal mechanism that uses soft power tactics, military posturing, economic outreach, and speech acts to pursue

adherence to existing rules. Although, the recent controversial docking of the Chinese military survey ship,⁴⁵ Yuan Wang 5, in Sri Lanka's Hambantota port captures the Quad members' ineffectiveness in collectively influencing Indo-Pacific players to actively support its position in the region against China in all cases. It is to be noted that, despite the substantial economic aid India had provided to crisis-stricken Sri Lanka, it could not substantiate its concerns to the island state to convince it to act in its favor.

Furthermore, suppose the Quad was to turn into a more inclusive grouping like the hypothesized Quad-plus. In that case, it could turn into a Group 2 kind of minilateral and turn into a functional coalition of the willing with IIGO traits. This would allow the streamlining of the dialogue, the establishment of the rules, and enforcement mechanisms amongst like-minded states. While enforcing the rules amongst these like-minded states will become more accessible, there will still be an enforcement deficit vis-à-vis nonmembers who would realistically have no political or moral obligations to the IIGO. This is the center of the competition between China and the hypothesized Quad.

It is noted that humanitarian relief and aid is a geopolitical tool that is often operationalized to meet political ends. Within this reality, the Quad faces competition vis-à-vis China as well. Given the circumstances observable due to the effects of climate change, mitigation, adaptation, and resilience efforts of Indo-Pacific states, particularly those of low-lying coastal and island states, have become a competition point between China and the Quad-member states. As seen most recently in the Solomon Islands, the Pacific Small Island state's agreement with Beijing includes non-traditional security elements pertaining to humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and domestic policing.⁴⁶ Within this framing, the agreement also included the provision for Chinese vessels and forces to visit and protect Chinese personnel and projects (given the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in the state) and China's long-standing history of losses incurred in foreign investments due to civil unrest.) The blurring of this non-traditional security variables having implications on strategic projection in the Indo-Pacific region paradoxically confirms the Quads' current implicit organizational premise but fractures any semblance of structured purpose, scope, or mandate. China's projection into the Pacific also has a facet of seeking national territorial legitimacy. It is evident that it is further seeking nonrecognition of Taiwan's statehood by other Pacific states (the Solomon Islands and Kiribati have already switched allegiances).⁴⁷ This shift away from bilateral relations with Taipei has often been induced through financial aid by Beijing.

As stated earlier, the networks between the members on which the Quad is being set up have various economic dimensions. Many of these are oriented toward opposing China's BRI investments in strategically critical states in the Indo-Pacific. The declassified US Indo-Pacific strategic document calls for reducing the variables that facilitate Chinese coercion in the region, which

then further refers to a still-classified document titled “US Strategic Framework for Countering China’s Economic Aggression.”⁴⁸ The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific is an example of this. A \$2 billion investment aims to develop critical infrastructure in the Pacific Island Countries. Under this investment, the United States has collaborated with Australia in critical strategic investments. The Manus Island Base deal, which was principally between Australia and Papua New Guinea, was also co-opted by the United States, allowing the increased naval presence of both these countries in the Oceanic region.⁴⁹ Papua New Guinea has also seen combined investment from Australia and the US in the energy and electricity sector that aims to counter China’s infrastructure investments in the Indo-Pacific Island country. The investment seeks to facilitate 70% of the country’s electricity output by 2030.⁵⁰ Both these countries have pursued further cooperation in these projects with New Delhi, who thus far has been hesitant in engaging on these lines.

Fundamentally, if the Quad wants to shed the image of an emerging traditional security alignment, it needs to delineate how it is not an anti-China grouping. While ministers and diplomats from the member states have repeatedly stated that their meetings thus far are not oriented toward antagonizing China, their maritime exercises and the trilateral and bilateral networks under the Quad structure have been oriented against Chinese expansionism in Asia. Suppose the Quad adopts an economic outreach and developmental role in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on strategically valuable points amongst Indo-Pacific Island countries and amongst ASEAN countries. In that case, it will need to be contextualized against the larger competition all 4 states have vis-à-vis the East Asian Giant. The example of Papua New Guinea as a strategic investment by Quad countries is to increase their regional presence while actively cutting Chinese influence. In terms of maintaining the rule of law and the integrity of UNCLOS, the Quad can orient itself as the informal enforcement mechanism against any transgressor. Still, it can only legitimize this claim if it were to act equally on non-Chinese transgressions within the construct. Here is where the questions of inclusiveness and the asymmetry within the domain are magnified.

Conclusion; the transformation trajectory of the Quad

The Quad clearly has two presupposed functions – traditional security and non-security oriented. While the security functions relate directly to the politico-military relations between the members and geopolitical dimensions of Asia. The non-security aspects can relate to economic outreach, development, human rights, and non-traditional issues such as natural disasters and calamities. Considering the members have repeatedly reiterated ASEAN’s centrality to their respective Indo-Pacific policies, the importance of SLOCs

in South East Asia, and the growing economic and military dominance of China within the region, the Quad's functions fundamentally and in practice will be focused around the waters and littorals of ASEAN states.

In peacetime, the traditional security functions can be streamlined over time and do not come at high transaction costs if the institution remains informal. Military posturing against a rising adversary lies in the interest of the members and other states that may be looking to collaborate under the Quad-plus structure and other regional stakeholders that are influenced by the great power games but do not unilaterally possess the capabilities to challenge the powerful adversarial player. Therefore, the numerous exercises amongst the members and in collaboration with South East Asian states and extra-regional players like Canada and the United Kingdom is a trend that will legitimize the Quad in the region as a minilateral arrangement that focuses on maritime security issues through deterrence against transgressors (which as of now is China), anti-piracy and HADR operations. The prerogative of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" can be satisfied if the finer nuances of maritime exercises and patrols in the Indo-Pacific region are addressed. To increase cooperation with and confidence in the Quad, the group's exercises must expand beyond the Malabar exercises undertaken around Indian Ocean littoral. Suppose the grouping aims to serve as an informal enforcing mechanism of international maritime law and the agreements of other relevant regional bodies such as ASEAN, it needs to increase its collective physical presence in South-East Asia. This factor, as of now, remains fractured on many levels.

Regarding the title of operations, there has been confusion in the past where an operation was titled as a "patrol" rather than an "exercise" which has profound implications for the foreign policies of various stakeholders. For example, Operation "Sagittarius", where Indian ships escorted American ships through the Malacca Strait, was earlier reported as "patrols" which was highly contentious, and Malaysia raised concerns. While this was corrected in the media, it is to be noted as an escort mission that abides by international law.⁵¹ On another occasion, the issue of command in joint operations emerged. In 2016, Admiral Harry Harris was misinterpreted as saying that India and the US should also conduct joint operations under the "US Flag." This was also later corrected by the Indians, and they indicated they were willing to undertake "coordinated patrols" with both countries retaining the autonomy of operations in their theater of operations.⁵² As the roll of operations, exercises, and patrols amongst the Member states and other regional players expand, this critical variable needs to be streamlined.

The non-security functions also have a diverse range of compatibility with the ASEAN states. Functions such as HADR operations and anti-piracy patrols and operations will witness a sustained effort and deliverables amongst the members and in coordination with the ASEAN states. There is even scope for including the Chinese within this set of functions as not only does it lie in

China's interest to prevent piracy on the high seas in South East Asia, but it also provides the Quad counter-balance to the perception of it being anti-China. The US, China, India, and Japan have previously cooperated and coordinated their anti-piracy operations since 2018 to tackle Somalian pirates.⁵³ On the other hand, the economic functions can be contentious due to China's strong presence in the region in various domains, including infrastructure, labor, investments, and loans.

Furthermore, India's hesitance to be involved in a multilateral, multi-pronged economic partnership with states in the region is well noted, including its recent nonparticipation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership,⁵⁴ which saw ASEAN countries collaborating with Japan, Australia, and China. The domestic environment of India and its politically charged agricultural sector do not indicate New Delhi's stance on such partnerships changing anytime in the foreseeable future.⁵⁵ Furthermore, considering the expansive approach China has undertaken under the BRI, and the modern silk road, a Morgan Stanley report states it is on track to be worth over \$1 trillion by 2030.⁵⁶ This poses a very difficult question for the emerging grouping as the members have no basic consensus over economic investments.

Within these two functions, there are vast spaces for asymmetry, meaning the Quad cannot be agenda-centric and will remain state-centric. And as it stays state-centric, the character of the Quad will resemble the members' common national characters. The principal character is their democratic nature. The informal nature of the organization will allow the states to tackle the issues without facing the bureaucratic and tedious processes associated with FIGOs. But without a constitution and the grouping's critical geopolitical position in Asian affairs, the will and commitment of each member state will be susceptible to democratic changes in government and democratic discourses. The role of liberal institutionalism, IIGOs, and democratic practices may prove to be a positive overture over time, as states are increasingly craving order within a region that is heating up with traditional competition. While this form of global governance is far from perfect, it comes with lived experiences. Also, it allows the Asian states that have previously been on the fringes of establishing the structures, norms, and rules of such governance to be at the center of it. The Quad and its role in the Indo-Pacific at large are India's opportunity to attempt to fulfill its prophesied role of a global leader (of consequence).

It is essential to look at the Quad in the context of other multilateral or trilateral agreements/groupings that are present in the region. The trilateral between Australia-Japan-USA, multilateral organizations like ASEAN (and ASEAN +), and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are some examples that play a substantial role in or influence the governance and international relations of the Indo-Pacific in various domains; economics and trade, exchange of human

resources, security and strategic posturing, non-traditional security, infrastructure, investment, Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and sea lanes of communication. The Quad, if it concretely materializes, will not overcome/replace any FIGO, but will it either work in collaboration with them or play an influential role in their operations? The question arises: What is the Quad's nexus with IIGOs that have mainly been centered around security and strategic posturing and agreements? The Quad, in terms of State participation, is not extraordinary considering the members constituting it; all four members are already present in various permutations and combinations of informal groupings along with some other regional state stakeholders. While it can be argued that each of these groupings is either agenda-centric or State centric, the rhetoric around the Quad is most definitely the latter. Taking the example of the trilateral between USA-Japan-Australia, if the Quad materializes into a security IIGO with a broad and unspecific agenda, would it replace the established operations of the trilateral? I believe the state-centric nature of the Quad will materialize in a manner that, as consensus is incrementally achieved, it will be seen as a blanket structure under which this trilateral and all other applicable permutations and combinations will continue to operate. The Malabar Exercise of 2020 is an example of this. The media rhetoric and academic understanding of the exercises alluded to the assumption that the Quad had materialized due to all four states participating in these exercises that year. But none of these states confirmed this. The term "Quad" was not associated with any of the official literature describing the exercises. This, of course, complements India's hedging behavior but also presents a future pathway for creating an IIGO.

The Quad should be aiming to be an amalgamation of Group 1 and Group 2 kind of Minilateral-where it plays a supplementing role to other institutions and groupings but also brings like-minded states together on an array of agendas to influence the regional order (Quad plus). Questions around its traditional security role persist, especially its war-time efficacy. While its peacetime role is to deter, does the minilateral grouping that has the potential of turning into an enforcing IIGO crumble in the face of actively and militarily fulfilling its promise of ensuring a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific?" The Quad is not an Asian NATO, far from it. There have been no security guarantees signed. Neither has there been a hint of an "Article 5" kind of arrangement amongst the members. The Quad is too fluid and will face waves of uncertainty before it matures into an IIGO (if the geopolitical conditions support this evolution). Even so, it will still be leagues behind the kind of organization NATO is to European security.

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