

Role of QUAD Group in the Indian Ocean: Strategic Implications and Geopolitical Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The informal strategic partnership consisting of the United States, India, Japan and Australia, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as QUAD) has become a force in the Indian Ocean. In view of the Indian Ocean's importance as a global trade and energy security conduit, the QUAD's focus on maritime security and regional stability is highly relevant in the current geopolitics. In this paper, the role of the QUAD is assessed in relation to its potential to influence the regional balance of power against China's rising dominance both due to the BRI and military expansion. The key findings enable us to analyse the strategic initiatives of the QUAD which are joint naval exercises, intelligence sharing and humanitarian assistance and together aim at a regulation maritime order. In turn, India's leadership in the region and the contributions other QUAD partners make to the region reinforce the importance of collaboration to maintain freedom of navigation and economic security. Despite internal problems and external criticism, however, the QUAD is still a key means to dealing with security concerns and building regional partnerships. The paper argues that the QUAD's activities help stabilize, secure key sea lanes of communications (SLOCs), and balance power dynamics within the Indian Ocean and therefore constitute a crucial element of Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

KEYWORDS

QUAD, Indian Ocean, Maritime Security, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) was developed as a strategic pact involving India, the United States, Japan and Australia to counter the changing power balance in world dynamics, especially with the rise of China. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe initially conceived the QUAD in 2007 but the forum stalled with regional hesitations. Still, it was reactivated in 2017 as an informal group to foster an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, and rules-based; namely, in the Indian Ocean (Mishra & Kumar, 2023).

But the Indian Ocean is a huge strategic chessboard, a global trade and energy artery linking Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Nearly 80% of global oil shipments flow through it, and serve as an essential chokepoint for the Malacca Strait through which more than 80,000 ships pass each year (Permal & Moorthy, 2024). The key is the Indian Ocean's strategic location, featuring the Strait of Malacca, a crucial but narrow sea lane, and security challenges, including piracy, terrorism and environmental concerns further aggravating regional stability (Binh et al., 2022).

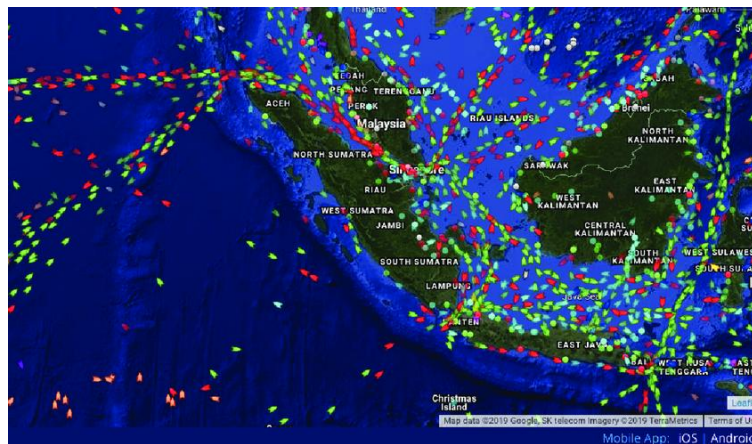


Figure 1: Shipping Traffic Density in Malacca Strait

Source: (Irewati, 2020)

This research explores the QUAD's evolving role in the Indian Ocean and addresses the following objectives:

1. What role does the QUAD play in the Indian Ocean's maritime security and geopolitical stability?
2. How does the QUAD's strategy influence regional power dynamics and counterbalance China's influence?

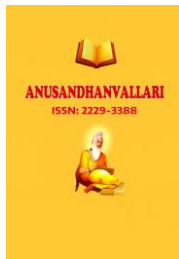
The scope here is limited to geopolitical, economic, and security elements of QUAD's activities in the Indian Ocean. Although it manifests due to strategic chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait, the analysis depends on primary data and secondary sources are used.

This paper analyses QUAD's collaborative initiatives to demonstrate the essential role QUAD plays in maintaining maritime security and the region's stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Review Of Literature

In the context of growing geopolitical competition, especially countering China's expanding influence, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has emerged as a strategic platform. According to Kaur et al. (2023), the QUAD emerged to ensure freedom of navigation and security of the critical maritime routes such as the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific, from military and political hegemony.

According to Jose & Nashir (2021), the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has quickly emerged as a strategically important area, as it acts as a key trading corridor connecting Asia, the Middle East and Africa. One of the most contested geopolitical chokepoints and security hotspots, the Malacca Strait, sees 80,000 or more



ships sailing through it every year.

Challenges in QUAD's activities and cohesion are highlighted in the literature. The QUAD hopes to achieve a rules-based maritime order but internal divergences of priorities among member states remains one of the most significant problems. By way of example, Mirwankar (2024) dissects the effects of China's expanding Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities on the Indian Ocean and how it presents strategic challenges to India and its QUAD allies.

There persists research gap concerning institutionalized tools of the QUAD to address regional security threats as a body. In the words of scholars like Chaturvedi (2021) enhanced multilateral maritime governance and collaboration are required to tackle the increasing challenges of the Indian Ocean.

Therefore, it is safe to say that QUAD's role in the Indian Ocean is very important and limited by internal and external factors. This must be supported by future studies that explore methods for institutionalizing its initiatives in countering increasingly strained regional relations.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach is used for the analysis of the role of QUAD in the Indian Ocean and its strategies to check China's increasing maritime influence.

The data sources are primarily academic articles and existing research on QUAD's collaborative initiatives. Drawing upon comparative data from studies on China's naval expansion and infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean, this article identifies how and why the country pursues a dual brand of regionalism. According to Mirwankar (2024), China's Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems with its Two Ocean Strategy, have helped Beijing gain even greater regional dominance to the extent that it is a concern for the QUAD nations.

The research framework compares QUAD strategies relative to China's maritime activity. However, according to Bhuyan (2023), the containment strategy of QUAD as described by India includes proactive policy steps such as the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine and participation in Malabar exercises.

The comparative framework examines:

- QUAD's naval cooperation, surveillance capabilities, and joint military exercises.
- China's activities, such as the String of Pearls strategy and its infrastructure investments like Gwadar and Djibouti ports.

Discussion And Analysis

Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is a key global trade and energy transport route providing important naval trade routes and acting as a major geo-political location of the world.

Economic Relevance

The Indian Ocean is a big trade hub in which about 80% of global oil shipments pass through. Its economic significance is further underscored by strategic chokepoints like the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Malacca. Some 80,000 ships pass through the Malacca Strait each year alone, which links the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is a shipping lifeline for global trade (Permal & Moorthy, 2024). Bab-el-Mandeb also functions as an important energy supply route between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to Asia (K P, 2024).

Security Concerns

Piracy, terrorism and illegal fishing are the maritime security challenges that India is facing in the Indian Ocean. Of particular interest for us is the Malacca Strait where piracy has been a hotspot interfering with trade and endangering global supply chains. Despite measures, such as joint patrols by littoral states and external assistance, security has improved (Pulungan, 2021). Moreover, to ensure their interests, regional and extra-regional powers are also militarizing the Indian Ocean with the resultant effect of adding to the intricacies of the security environment.

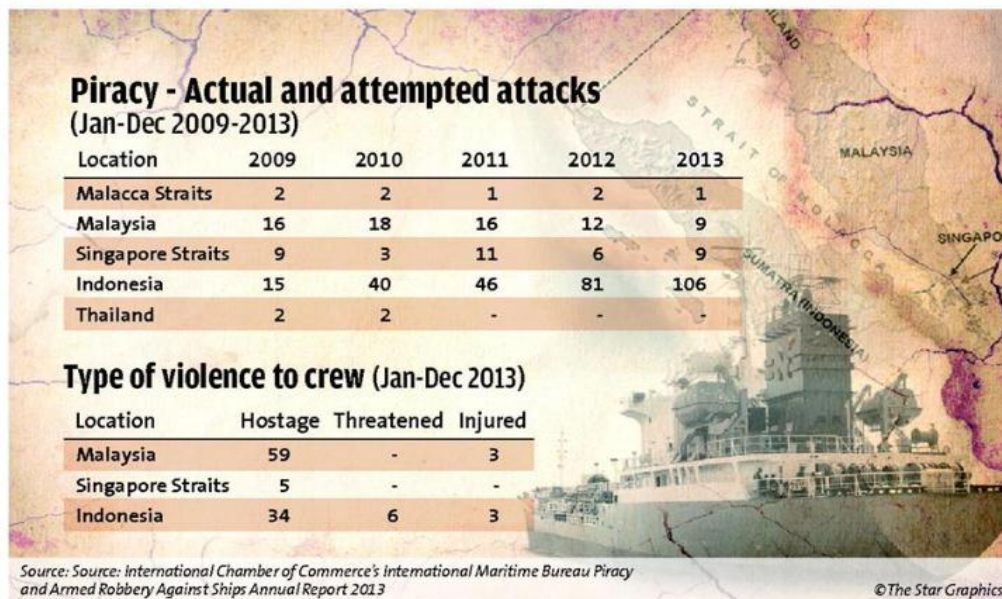


Figure 2: Piracy Stats in Malacca Strait

Source: (The Star Online, 2014)

Geopolitical Interests

India is reshaping Indian Ocean geopolitics because of China's strategic expansion through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The establishment of maritime bases, such as Djibouti, by China, shows it seeks safe passage of trade routes and can project naval power across the Indian Ocean, alarming regional powers (Aslam et al., 2023). As a result, India and other regional powers, the QUAD and other multilateral groups are stepping up naval cooperation to counter China's rise and to preserve a maritime order based on rules. India's policy of

SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and joint exercises like Malabar reflect an effort to project its future security as an important economic and maritime connectivity hub by securing the Indian Ocean region (Bhuyan, 2023).

The QUAD's Geopolitical Role in the Indian Ocean

In 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first introduced the idea, the acronym QUAD means United States, India, Japan and Australia working together to provide a strategic balance against rising concerns about China. The aim was to tackle regional challenges, in a rules-based Indo Pacific. It had taken a hiatus but was revived in 2017, with commentators growing concerned about China's growing influence and aggressive maritime activities (O'Brien et al., 2022). The revival is based on a concatenation of strategic interests of the member nations towards ensuring freedom of navigation of the Indo-Pacific.



Figure 3: QUAD Objectives

Source: (Moneycontrol , 2022)

The mainstay of the QUAD aims to promote a rules-based maritime order and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the greater Indo-Pacific region. These count as being proactively countermeasures to China being expansionist, such as the BRI and its naval buildup (Bhuyan, 2023).

Initiatives like the Malabar Naval Exercise of QUAD have strengthened maritime security by enhancing inter operational abilities of member nations with each other. The joint exercises mirror growing cooperation to deal with security challenges over sea lanes, such as the Malacca Strait. Furthermore, the QUAD highlights its agreements on maritime intelligence sharing that focuses on monitoring and counter-piracy, illegal fishing, and other non-traditional threats (Tahir & Amin, 2023). In addition to that, the QUAD is involved in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or HADR operations to promote goodwill among the region and show that the QUAD is a stabilizing force.

MALABAR: INDIA'S BIGGEST-EVER PRESENCE

Number of ships in Malabar Naval Exercise

Year	India	US	Japan	Others	Total	Aircraft carriers	Remarks
2005	4	4	-	-	8	-	
2006	5	5	-	1	11	2	One Canadian vessel
2007 - 1	5	7	4	-	16	-	
2007 - 2	8	13	2	3	26	3	Two Australian and one Singaporean vessel
2008	6	6	-	-	12	1	
2009	3	4	2	-	9	-	
2010	5	5	-	-	10	-	
2011	5	7	-	-	12	-	
2012	5	5	-	-	10	-	
2013	2	1	-	-	3	-	
2014	3	5	2	-	10	-	
2015	4	3	1	-	8	1	
2016	4	5	1	-	10	1*	Japan's JS Hyuga, a helicopter carrier, also participated
2017	9	6	2	-	17	2*	Japan's JS Izumo, a helicopter carrier, also participated

* Japan's helicopter carriers can embark vertical take off/landing fighter aircraft

Figure 4: Malabar Exercise Statistics

Source: (Shukla, 2017)

India's Leadership Role in the QUAD

India's position of leadership in the QUAD is based on its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine which focuses on maritime cooperation, regional security and development. As noted by Bhuyan (2023), India leverages SAGAR to consolidate its position as the "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean, countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expansion. India's involvement in the QUAD is an expression of a broader strategic goal to build a free and open Indo-Pacific according to the United States, Japan and Australia.

India's naval infrastructure investment has greatly increased its strategic posture in the Indian Ocean. A tri-service command, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) are strategically expanded to keep a vigil on Chinese movement through Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest trade routes. According to Hashim et al. (2023), the efforts made by India to turn ANI into a strategic defence and economic hub for India further enhance its maritime primacy. India's naval interoperability and readiness are increased with bilateral agreements and joint naval exercises such as Malabar with QUAD partners.

India has a multi-aligned strategy, balancing QUAD commitments while staying with ASEAN and Russia. India's interactions with Southeast Asian states fulfil two purposes, that is countering China's influence and establishing regional groups (Phillips, 2022). India needs to remain outside overt alignment with anti-China coalitions, protecting its strategic autonomy as well as addressing its security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges Facing the QUAD

Diverging priorities of the QUAD member states poses internal challenges for the QUAD. India's voice for non-alignment and strategic autonomy frequently opposes the United States aims of 'being large globally,' being the centrepiece of broader Indo-Pacific security frameworks (Bhuyan, 2023). Moreover, the absence of institutionalized platforms for decision and enforcement has prevented the QUAD from acting in a cohesive manner in important security situations (Mohan & Abraham, 2020).

The development of strategic ports by China according to their 'String of Pearls' Strategy on the Indian Ocean becomes a challenge for QUAD's objectives. China surrounds India by setting up naval bases in Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and extending its maritime reign (Pautasso et al., 2020). On top of this, littoral states, especially the smaller ones, usually convey the distrust they have with the QUAD, whereby they see the QUAD as an exclusive grouping giving primacy to strategic competition over regional development.



Figure 5: China's String of Pearls Strategy

Source: (Ghosh, 2017)

The problem with QUAD is its much-trumpeted militarization of the Indo-Pacific. Such perception provokes regional worry that the QUAD would not lead to stability but instead will fuel tensions (Megal & Mirza, 2022). This grouping is also exclusive and this exclusivity makes it difficult to engage constructively with non-member states, especially in Southeast Asia.

Implications for Regional and Global Geopolitics

The QUAD plays an immensely important role in enhancing the regional stability of the Indian Ocean by providing security to smaller littoral states. Opportunities for regional engagement and coordinated maritime governance exist in frameworks such as ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Jose and Nashir (2021) observe that ASEAN acts as a mediator, which balances China and QUAD's competing interests in order to encourage cooperation and stability.

The QUAD has proven to be a formidable force in countering China's maritime expansionism and developing a multi-polar maritime order. The QUAD increases maritime security and freedom of navigation, countering initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that have forced Beijing's presence in the Indian Ocean region. According to Tahir and Amin (2023), QUAD's naval exercises and coordinated policies have the capacity to testify to QUAD's ability to ensure an Indo-Pacific order that is based on rules.

In addition, the QUAD is developing the Indo-Pacific as a forum for future global governance. This



shows its intent to be a resilient Indo-Pacific through evolving cooperation across security, infrastructure and disaster relief operations. Nevertheless, India's hesitance toward a full alignment mobilizes Estrada's (2023) observation that complete cohesion is difficult.

Conclusion

As a regional security and stability force in the Indo-Pacific especially in the Indian Ocean, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has proved to become a critical element. Maritime security, freedom of navigation and infrastructure development counter China's strategic ambitions like its Belt and Road Initiative (or BRI) and increasing naval influence in the region. Yet, challenges still grow such as internal differences between member states and external pressures like China's harsh countermeasures, as well as regional distrust.

Institutionalization is necessary for the QUAD to be most effective. Finally, a formal mechanism to handle decision-making, enforcement and collaborative measures will enhance coordination and would react to geopolitics tensions more efficiently. In addition, expanding partnerships with regional actors, including ASEAN and IORA, can cement QUAD's credibility and contribute to the growth of all in the Indo-Pacific.

Adoption of non-military roles like disaster relief, infrastructure investment and climate cooperation will also assist in overcoming criticism of the QUAD for perceived militarization. The QUAD can reinforce the global norms of governance and underpin regional security and prosperity by pushing towards a multipolar maritime order and a nailed-down Indo-Pacific framework.

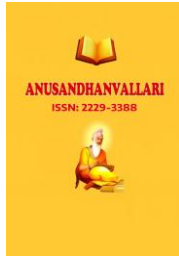
Overall, the QUAD's shifting role demonstrates its promise as a stabilising influence in a competitive geopolitical world. Its long-term success will depend on addressing internal challenges, institutionalizing mechanisms, and broadening cooperation.

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