



# China and the Indo-Pacific: Are We Moving towards the Bipolar World?

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With the first in-person QUAD summit in Washington DC with the member countries (India, US, Japan and Australia) and signing of the AUKUS security alliance (among Australia, UK and US in September 2021), the Indo-Pacific Strategy has once again become a hot topic.

## Evolution of Indo-Pacific Strategy

The idea of Indo-Pacific is not new, nor is it originally an American one. Its origins can be traced to a speech delivered in August 2007 by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Indian Parliament (Paskal, 2021). However, one of the first indications of a shift of focus from the terminology “Asia Pacific” to the “Indo Pacific” was Trump’s 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) speech in Vietnam in which he talked about a vision for a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP). This was built on Shinzo Abe’s identical FOIP formulation, with the

‘free and open’ being a reference to the need to counter China’s attempts to gain strategic control over areas such as the South China Sea.

Since the beginning of the current decade, the US administration realized the inadequacy of the “Asia-Pacific” [term] to meet its geopolitical and attendant foreign policy objectives in Asia, for two key reasons. The first was China’s expanding politico-military activities from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The second was the imperative to incorporate New Delhi into the region-wide security architecture, as evidenced by the US desire for India to be a regional “net security provider”. However, the term Indo-Pacific is embedded in US policy circles as the US government published a series of foundational documents setting out its Indo-Pacific policies. The US Pacific Command (PACOM) changed its name to the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) on 30 May 2018. Consequently, in June 2019, the Department of Defense published the second key document *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* (Kuo, 2018).

The changes in the geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific region are the fundamental causes motivating the creation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The United States was the first to put forward the “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, an expansion version of its “Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy”, which reflects the attention of the United States to the Indian Ocean region. Through the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US aims to maintain its strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new spheres of influence. The purpose of IPS is to reshape alliances and partnerships to respond to China’s rise, hence, containing China’s rise and safeguarding U.S. leadership in the region. The strategy is also believed to be driven by the collective anxieties of four major Quad countries. However, the concept and motivators for their advocacy of the Indo-Pacific strategy are not exactly the same and cannot be equated (ibid.).

As one of the initiators of the modern Indo-Pacific strategic construct, Japan in the region, is actively trying to embed new approaches, including economic levers, to foster regional partnerships that are less dependent on China. India, likewise, has always been one of the most important advocates of the concept of “Indo-Pacific Strategy”.

Through IPS, India strives to promote the justification and rationalization of its interests in Southeast Asia; expand its presence in East Asia, strengthen its political, economic and military cooperation with the United States and its allies, and comprehensively increase India's influence in international affairs (Chen, 2018). Unlike the US and Japan, countries like Australia and India have been cautious to join a group with an obvious anti-China intention.

New countries are drawing into the Indo-Pacific strategy, with South Korea, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Vietnam and other ASEAN countries as the main objects. Europe is also formulating and implementing its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is an additional stimulus for the development of the Indo-Pacific. The European Union has also launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy that recommit the EU politically to the region with the aim of “contributing to its stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law” (Saha, 2021). The French Ministry of Defense published the French Indo-Pacific Defense Strategy in May 2019. The German government issued policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region in September 2020, entitled “Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together.” At the same time, the UK has also decided to make the Indo-Pacific the focus of its future diplomacy and security, making a strategic shift to the Indo-Pacific (Huasheng, 2021).

## Development in QUAD and Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS)

Looking back since 2004, the QUAD's diplomacy witnessed several ups and downs, which can be viewed more as a loose grouping rather than a formal alliance. The motivation for this comes after the Tsunami Core Group in 2004-05 and other important meetings that preceded the 2007 Quadrilateral meeting which paved the way for the first QUAD. Japan initially emphasized the democratic identity of the four nations, whereas India seemed more comfortable emphasizing functional cooperation. Australian leaders have been reluctant about creating the impression that the group is a formal alliance. The four democracies claim that the aim of QUAD is to enable a regional security architecture for the maintenance of a rules-based order. Currently, the four countries

have been careful to deepen their cooperation without formalizing a multilateral arrangement however with Japan, the United States and Australia having maintained trilateral security relations.

Today, the leaders of the four-member countries have become more aligned in their shared concerns about China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region and are more willing to define a constructive agenda of cooperation. The naval forces of all four countries have together participated in the joint exercises. At the first in-person QUAD summit, following the virtual QUAD meeting, formed working groups on COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, and technological innovation and supply-chain resilience (Smith, 2021).

Similarly, the first QUAD also had a maritime element, whereby the four countries along with Singapore conducted Malabar exercise- a naval exercise. In August 2007, in a speech before the Indian Parliament, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried to draw a strategic link between the Indian and the Pacific oceans and spoke of the "confluence of the two seas". This sparked the ideological foundations for the QUAD. However, after the first QUAD meeting the same year in Manila things started spiraling downwards for QUAD as Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, a most vocal champion of QUAD resigned and Australia pulled out of the grouping (Natarajan, 2021). Things started appearing hopeful in 2012 as Japanese PM Shinzo Abe returned to the Prime Ministerial position. Since then many initiatives and meetups have taken place either formally or informally.

The ever growing economic, security and military competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean region and US response to China's anti-access and area denial strategies in the region and its push to make India a regional naval power in the region, has added a new dimension to geopolitical significance of the region. Although the QUAD members deny it to be a security alliance, they have created the base for regular defense cooperation through naval exercises, and the sharing of intelligence and military logistics. The trilateral India-US-Japan Malabar naval exercises expanded to include Australia recently (Kutty and Basrur, 2021). The member states have unified their military responses by building a set of nested strategic partnerships by linking their bilateral relationships with the India-Japan-US, India-Australia-Japan, and US-Japan-Australia trilaterals. Therefore,

new debates and deliberations are also emerging relating to probable QUAD Plus arrangements involving Canada, France, and perhaps New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Boruah, 2021).

## AUKUS and reaction from QUAD

The recent new minilateral security alliance of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to strengthen the military dimension of QUAD has come as a surprise to many, including some QUAD members. Similar to QUAD that carries a shared vision of ensuring a region that respects freedom and the rule of law, AUKUS is also founded on a similar vision. The three leaders of AUKUS, while announcing the trilateral security partnership, emphasized the importance of ongoing partnerships such as with ASEAN, the QUAD, and other Indo-Pacific partners including France from Europe, which has a direct material stake in the Indo-Pacific (Thakur, 2021).

The decision to abruptly call off the 90.7 billion Australian dollar deal to buy a dozen French diesel submarines was met with a mixed reaction from countries all over the world. The alliance has marred the relations with France and introduced fresh tensions into relations with China. While the member countries of QUAD have reacted in their own way. India, on the other hand, provided its formal response to the new grouping through a special media briefing by Foreign Secretary Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla (Rajagopalan, 2021). During the briefing he mentioned that AUKUS “is neither relevant to the QUAD, nor will it have any impact on its functioning.” Likewise, Japan has felt left out with the emergence of this security alliance, while the EU leaders have expressed their disappointment with the AUKUS deal asking for clarification from the US President Joe Biden (Mariyajohnson, 2021).

## Conclusion

Though the QUAD members have been reiterating time and again that QUAD and Indo-Pacific Strategy is not aimed at any countries, including China, China has clarified several times that it is a grouping aimed at them. China has been, time and again, raising voices against it. The evolution of QUAD and Indo-Pacific Strategy has generated a new form of great power rivalry, which is quite visible in Asia. The small powers of Asia are asked to choose their sides, exerting intense pressure on them. All these developments are clear indicators of intense competition and rivalry between the two factions. While some predict the emergence of the 'New Cold War', it is evident that we are moving towards a bipolar world.

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