
The Quad's Soft Development and Implications for ASEAN's Centrality

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Abstract

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a cooperation framework associated with the Indo-Pacific strategy, which has been strongly promoted by the US since 2017. In the tense space of US-China competition, the Quad is often thought of as a counterbalancing mechanism to contain China and its area of activity is mainly security issues. However, this article argues that the development of the quadrilateral dialogue mechanism is not one-sided on sensitive and rigid security issues, on the contrary, the four members – which include the US, India, Japan and Australia - have softened Quad's activities in a variety of fields. This trend of development stems mainly from the different views of the member countries in responding to China's unilateral actions, which are motivated by the intertwined economic interests of the great powers with China as well as their foreign tradition in the region. After clarifying the flexible activities of the Quad, this article proves that the existence and development of the Quad doesn't reduce centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, it even becomes an open space for ASEAN to play that role.

Keywords

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Quad, Institutionalization, Soft development, ASEA

Introduction

'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' or Quad is a cooperation mechanism between the US, Japan, India and Australia; formed from the idea of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2007 when he mentioned the concept of Indo-Pacific¹. In Abe's point of view, the Indo-Pacific confluence was associated with the indispensable role of the Quad. Under Japan's effort, the official meeting of the four countries took place on the sidelines of the ARF Summit in Manila, Philippines in May 2007 – which was followed by the exercise in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007, with the participation of the US, Japan, Australia, India and Singapore. Under pressure from China, however, India and Australia withdrew from the plan, the quadrilateral framework then seemed to decline, with no other joint activities between the four countries other than the maintenance of bilateral and trilateral cooperation activities. After a decade of hiatus, in 2017, being motivated by President Donald Trump's consecutive statements at APEC 2017 in Vietnam, the Democratic Security Diamond was resurrected, which was marked by a meeting of Foreign Ministry officials from the four member states, namely the US, India, Japan and Australia, on the sidelines of the 2017 ASEAN Summit. This cooperation mechanism has affirmed its re-connections are not only temporary, but likely to make it a permanent mechanism - a framework of the Indo-Pacific structure which is in the process of being shaped. In the context that the Covid-19 pandemic has strongly impacted the whole world, especially, the US and India - who are still the two biggest victims of the corona virus ("Countries where COVID-19 has spread," 2022), Quad's activities are defining it as a multi-faceted institution whose approach is also 'softer' than the purely security implications as the bloc was previously thought of. This mechanism was prompted by the US in the context of fierce US-China competition and the US attaching its criticisms to China in the process of promoting its Indo-Pacific strategy; the Quad was at the time suspected of becoming a security alliance or a mechanism focused solely on security issues (especially with implications for China).

On the basis of the connotation of the concept of 'hedging', this article assesses Quad's soft development through its flexibility and diversity in terms of how and where it

¹ In the summer of 2007, in India, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke about the 'Confluence of the Two Seas' and in his article for Project Syndicate in 2012, he further affirmed the importance of peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Prime Minister Abe emphasized: 'Japan, as one of the oldest coastal democracies in Asia, should play a bigger role - along with Australia, India and the US - in preserving common interests in both areas'. See Confluence of the Two Seas, Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India. (2007, August 22). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>; Shinzo Abe. (2012, December 27). Asia's Democratic Security Diamond. Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?language=english&barrier=accesspaylog>.

operates. Hedging normally refers to a national security strategy with a mix of cooperation and confrontation, implemented by one country toward another (John & Ju"rgen· 2019, p.367). Cooperative and confrontational elements are cleverly interwoven, even if there is struggle in cooperation and cooperation in struggle. The way the Quad works is also in the same flexible direction of cooperation and struggle, although the struggle here, sometimes by all four members against external challenges, but sometimes also among members to steer the Quad not in a direction that would harm each country's national security policy. The fact that there are hub and spokes-modeled-groups of Quad members (which will be discussed in this article) and diversity of issues to be solved by the bloc, including security, economy, politics, cybersecurity, environment, health, etc. will prove this argument. Besides, the term "soft" used in the article is also based on the concept of "soft power" - which is understood as the ability to achieve desired things by attraction rather than coercion or bribes (Joseph, 2004, p.10). The diversity and flexibility of the Quad makes this dialogue mechanism more acceptable, thereby attracting the coordination of countries in the region for the bloc's activities. This dynamic development, in many assessments, is likely to be a threat to ASEAN's centrality. However, this article points out that, in the environment of great power competition, the central role of ASEAN is irreplaceable.

The Softening Process of the Quad

Quad Members' Initial Caution

The revival of the Quad has always been associated with the Indo-Pacific strategy, which has been strongly promoted by the US since 2017. However, the common motivation for member countries to participate in the quadrilateral dialogue mechanism is to protect their security and strategic interests against China's rise, even though the ways this bloc develops in the perception of the Quad members are different. Depending on the specific situation for security and strategic risks, the Quad also makes corresponding adjustments. At the beginning, since the 'anti-China' message was always incorporated by US leaders in their statements about the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIPS), the Quad was viewed as a form of military alliance against China. This made the rest of the member countries (except the US) somewhat apprehensive. In fact, the United States did not hesitate to

express its intention to build the Quad into an Asian NATO ² to address regional security issues - which Washington said was lacking in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, the remaining members of the Quad perceived that such a form of coalition would increase the likelihood of turning their countries into 'proxy battlefields' of the US-China conflict, causing them to suffer from direct economic, military and political pressures from China.

Despite the common goal of limiting China's 'unpeaceful rise', the views of building an Indo-Pacific region in general and the Quad in particular of India, Japan, Australia are different and different from the US. Australia aims for an 'open, inclusive and prosperous' Indo-Pacific region (Australian Government, 2017, p.3) instead of a 'free and open' one as set out by the US and Japan. 'Openness' and 'inclusiveness' to ensure that the region is not a covered monopoly by Chinese domination, while also to ensure that China is an important factor to participate strongly in the Indo-Pacific (but not 'excluded' as in US expression). China's dominant position among Australia's top trading partners has made China one of two priority targets (along with the US) that successive Australian administrations need to uphold and promote (Phạm, 2020, p.51), forcing the country to carefully consider joining a formal military alliance to contain China. Since 2007, China has replaced Japan as Australia's largest trading partner and has been number one among Australia's export markets since 2009. In 2019, Australia-China bilateral trade reached AUD 234.9 billion, accounting for 26.4% of Australia's total trade, of which Australia exported to China AUD 153.2 billion and imported from China AUD 81.7 billion ("Australia's trade in goods and services 2019," 2019). This fact makes Australia, for decades, push for both paths - which are neither far from the US nor leaving China. The comprehensiveness of Australia's perception of the Indo-Pacific region also shows that Australia wants all key stakeholders of the 'Quad' to have a 'place' in the political chessboard of the region, not just India from the Indian Ocean or America from the other side of the Pacific. Japan shares the same view with the US on building a free and open Indo-Pacific region, however, Japan's vision for this area is also more inclusive and broader when emphasizing the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, between Asia and Africa ("Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," 2016) instead of just covering the space from the west coast of the United States to the west coast of India as seen from its ally (The White House, 2017, p.46). On that basis, Japan is quite cautious with the prospect of building the Quad into an alliance like the Asian NATO. In October 2020,

² US Deputy Secretary of State - Stephen Biegun, on August 31, 2020 publicly acknowledged for the first time the progress of building a version of a military alliance like NATO in the Indo-Pacific based on the original Quad framework with small-scale and neutral foundational cooperation. See Deputy Secretary Biegun Remarks at the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership Forum. (2020, August 31). US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-biegun-remarks-at-the-u-s-india-strategic-partnership-forum/>.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga expressed that the US and its allies, including Japan, had no intention of forming a bloc similar to NATO (Kiyoshi, 2020).

Meanwhile, the remaining member of the Quad – which is also the most distinct member when it is not an ally of the US - India, is even more cautious with the orientation of turning the Quad into an Asian NATO. Despite the territorial conflict with China, India-China economic relations have developed rapidly. In 2009, India - China trade turnover surpassed that of the India – US³, turning China into India's top trading partner. By 2017, the total two-way trade turnover between India and China reached USD 83.6 billion and it was USD 92.89 billion in 2019 (“India-China Trade And Economic Relations,” n.d). This makes India hesitant to promote a mechanism that could potentially affect its relationship with China. More importantly, as a traditionally non-aligned country, India is more concerned with issues of common interest such as maritime security, counterterrorism cooperation, supply chain, and humanitarian assistance rather than forming a military alliance like that of the Cold War era (“India building,” 2020). Even at the time after the revival of the Quad, India was careful and avoided attaching itself to the Quad. Prime Minister Modi, in his speech at the Shangrila Dialogue (June 2018) emphasized that ‘this concept [Indo-Pacific] is not intended to be against any country’ [referring to China] or ‘forming an alliance to dominate’ [referring to the Quad]. With such an approach, Modi seemed to like to send a message that ‘India will not be in the alliance of one side [US] against one side [China]’. India remains committed to the Indo-Pacific strategy on the basis of promoting bilateral relations with the US, with Japan and with Australia. As for the US, India would still advocate to develop a strategic partnership and consider this a basis for the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. However, this promotion of cooperation was only intended to maintain relations with the US at the ‘partner’ level, not an ‘ally’ in the way that the United States expected (Alyssa, 2015, p.2). On this background, India had certain restraints when it came to the Indo-Pacific - which might help avoid China understanding that India joined a US-led alliance against China. Therefore, India was cautious, until early 2020, India had always denied Australia to become an official member of the multinational exercise - Malabar⁴, although it was still held annually,

³ However, since 2018, the US has surpassed China to become India's top partner. See U.S. remains India's top trading partner in 2019-20. (2020, Jul 12). *The Economics Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/u-s-remains-indias-top-trading-partner-in-2019-20/articleshow/76924711.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴ Malabar is a tripartite naval exercise involving the United States, Japan and India as permanent partners. Beginning in 1992 with joint Indo-US naval exercises, Malabar had a pause between 1998 and 2002 due to India's nuclear weapons tests. Since 2002, the exercise has been resumed every year and Japan became a permanent participant in 2015. See Franz-Stefan Gady. (2018, June 5). India, US, and Japan to Hold ‘Malabar’ Naval War Games This Week. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/india-us-and-japan-to-hold-malabar-naval-war-games-this-week/>.

with participation of the US and Japan. Obviously, in the first two years after the Quad's revival, the members of the quadrilateral dialogue framework (except the US) were still hesitant to promote joint activities.

China, Covid-19 Pandemic and the Soft Movement of the Quad

China's escalation of tensions with India, Australia and Japan in the complicated context of the Covid 19 pandemic has led the Quad countries to have stronger coordination, both at the bilateral and block-wide levels. In June 2020, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a clash in the Galwan valley, located in the eastern region of Ladakh. Traditionally, India has continued to conduct defense diplomacy with China and come to an agreement to withdraw troops together. However, despite many rounds of negotiations⁵, both the Indian and Chinese militaries have been unable to resolve disagreements. In the context that India was still struggling with the Covid 19 pandemic and China had temporarily successfully brought it under control, China's assertiveness at the border indicated they were willing to take every opportunity to realize their ambitions in the disputed territory. This situation has led India to publicly admit that China is its biggest security threat and that India has prepared to deal with 'any misadventure' from the aggressive neighbor ("China biggest security threat," 2021).

Meanwhile, after Australia called for an international investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic (starting from the Chinese city of Wuhan) in 2020, China has continuously put pressure on Australia through economic and political 'retaliatory' actions. The situation has shaken Canberra's traditional balance of forging trade ties with China and tightening its defense alliance with the US in favor of Washington. The current position of the Scott Morrison administration shows that Beijing posed a threat to Australia's democracy and national sovereignty (Kirsty, 2020). As for Japan, within the first 90 days of 2020, Tokyo recorded 177 incidents of infringing Japanese airspace by Chinese jets. China's escalation has prompted Japan's defense minister, Taro Kono, to admit that 'China has become Japan's security threat' – which he used to be very careful not to say when he was Foreign Minister (Francesca, 2020). Serious events in Sino-Indian, Sino-Japanese and Sino-Australian relations have led the Quad member states to have a series of more assertive

⁵ As of October 2021, the conflict has lasted 17 months and gone through 13 rounds of negotiations, but all have failed. In the last negotiation (the 13th time) taking place on October 10, 2021, the two sides continued to criticize each other. The Chinese military said that 'the Indian side always makes unreasonable and unrealistic demands, creating more difficulties for negotiations'. Meanwhile, the Indian defense ministry said it had made 'constructive proposals, but the Chinese side did not agree and did not make any proposals for the future'. See AniNews. (2021, October 11). China not agreeable to resolve remaining areas along LAC, no results in 13th round talks: Indian Army. AniNews. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/china-not-agreeable-to-resolve-remaining-areas-along-lac-no-results-in-13th-round-talks-indian-army20211011091651/>.

responses to China, through which the operation of the Quad has also been developed in a stronger and more flexible direction.

Accordingly, since the beginning of 2020 - when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Wuhan, China, the Quad has acted in a more open direction, paying attention to many areas of the region and the world, not only focusing on defense security. The four-party cooperation framework has made great efforts to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic, with many global immunization meetings, in particular, a meeting in February 2020 which focused on ways to 'encourage alternative health supply chains, thereby reducing dependence on China' (Rupam, 2021). India even did not hesitate to 'annoy' China when urging the US, Japan and Australia to invest in the COVID-19 vaccine production capacity of India to oppose the Chinese strategy of vaccine diplomacy (Rupam, 2021).

In relation to the fight against the pandemic, Quad's openness was continuously reflected in a channel of partnerships that the member states coordinated. In March 2020, the Quad had unofficial phone calls with representatives from Vietnam, New Zealand, and South Korea - who had a good anti-pandemic record at that time (on March 20, 2020⁶ and March 28, 2020⁷), to discuss prevention of Covid-19. In May 2020, the Quad held an official meeting between foreign ministers to discuss post-Covid-19 activities of economic recovery with the participation of Korea, Brazil and Israel ("Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus," 2020). The activities that the Quad conducts with outside countries are often referred to as Quad Plus (Quad +).

Immediately after the Galwan incident, India began coordinated actions with the US navy in the South China Sea, and held the first trilateral dialogue on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with France and Australia, on September 9, 2020 (Indrani, 2020). Moreover, India invited Australia to participate in the Malabar 2020 as an official member, along with the US and Japan (Grant, 2020). And, in November 2020, for the first time in Malabar history, Australia officially attended the exercise with other members of the Quad - an event that demonstrated the strategic trust among like-minded members of the Quad.

In addition, member states themselves began to build annual activities. In October 2020, the 2nd Foreign Ministers Meeting of the Quad was held in Japan⁸. Here, the Foreign

⁶ See Foreign Secretary's Conference Call with counterparts from Indo-Pacific Countries. (2020, March 20). Ministry of External Affairs. <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32592/Foreign+Secretarys+Conference+Call+with+counterparts+from+IndoPacific+Countries>.

⁷ See Indrani Bagchi. (2020, March 28). India, Quad-Plus countries discuss Covid-19 battle, economic resurgence. *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-quad-plus-countries-discuss-covid-19-battle-economic-resurgence/articleshow/74861792.cms>.

⁸ The first Foreign Ministers Meeting of the Quad was held in September, 2019. See Quad ministers agree to meet once a year. (2020, October 6). *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Quad-ministers-agree-to-meet-once-a-year>

Ministers of the four countries agreed to meet regularly on a once-a-year basis. Although no joint statement was issued, the countries all shared the same perception of security threats in the region, in which the biggest 'common denominator' was still China's hegemonic behavior when it was simultaneously escalating conflicts with Australia, Japan and India.

The Quad then continued to demonstrate the momentum of increased cooperation with meetings at the highest levels, the first of which was the 1st four-party Summit, held virtually on March 12, 2021 (Geeta, 2021). In the context that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected many international connections, the Summit demonstrated the determination of the four member countries of the Quad, and was also an opportunity for the leaders of these countries to exchange views about current challenges such as flexible supply chains, emerging technologies, maritime security and climate change. In addition, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide also discussed on continuous efforts in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and sought opportunities to cooperate in ensuring the safe, fair and affordable distribution of vaccines in the Indo-Pacific region. In a joint statement entitled 'Spirit of the Quad', the four member countries emphasized that they would strive for a free, open, inclusive, healthy Indo-Pacific region – one which would be upheld by democratic values and not constrained by coercion. The Quad is committed to working for a liberal, open, rules-based order to promote security, prosperity and counter threats in the Indo-Pacific and other regions; support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, and the peaceful settlement of disputes; and committed to working together with many partners (Khổng Hà, 2021).

Six months later, in September 2021, the first in-person summit of the 'Diamond Quadrangle' took place in the US. In the Joint Statement, the four countries reaffirmed the commitments which were mentioned in the online summit (March 2021), but in a practical and comprehensive way. Specifically, for the Covid-19 pandemic, the Quad announced the establishment of the Quad Vaccine Expert Group, pledged to donate more than 1.2 billion doses of Covid-19 vaccine to the world (in addition to the doses sponsored through the COVAX) and accelerate cooperation with Biological E. Limited of India to produce at least 1 billion doses by the end of 2022. In addition, the member nations made their own commitments to this common goal. India announced to resume exports of COVID-19 vaccines, including to COVAX, beginning in October 2021 and Japan stated that they would continue to support regional countries to buy vaccines through a loan program of \$3.3 billion. Australia announced that they would provide \$212 million in aid for Southeast Asia and the Pacific to purchase vaccines, and another package of \$219 million to support the Quad's vaccine delivery to those regions ("Joint Statement from Quad Leaders," 2021).

Regarding maritime security, the leaders emphasized that they would redouble efforts to ensure maintaining the Quad as a force for peace, stability, security and prosperity in the region. In order to gain that end, the Quad would continue to advocate for compliance with international law, particularly as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in response to challenges to the rules-based maritime order, including in the East and South China Seas. On climate, QUAD would establish a Green Maritime Network, which includes the establishment of a network of green and zero-carbon seaports, and aims to establish two or three zero- or low-emissions maritime corridors by 2030. In the field of education, QUAD set up a scholarship fund to sponsor 100 students (25 students from each country) to study masters and doctorates in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) at American universities every year.

In addition, the discussion agenda of this Summit also included a series of issues on infrastructure, cyberspace, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Myanmar - which has demonstrated the bloc's inclusivity in solving international problems. The members at the same time affirmed that they would continue to build the habit of cooperation, in which leaders and foreign ministers would meet annually and senior officials would meet regularly. Furthermore, the Quad working groups would continue at a steady pace to create the cooperation needed to build a stronger region.

At the 2nd in-person summit on May 24, 2022 in Japan, in addition to reaffirming previous commitments, Quad members also discussed realizing the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, security and regional issues, conflict in Ukraine, post-covid 19 economy, climate change and nuclear weapon disarmament. There are two special points related to this Quad summit, firstly, the US announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) on the occasion of President Joe Biden's Asia visit and his attendance at the conference and second, the Russia-Ukraine war became one of the prominent issues on the agenda of this summit. While the first one once again demonstrates the Quad's attachment to the Indo-Pacific strategy and the willingness of Quad countries to accelerate the implementation of the strategy, the second shows the Quad's leading role in solving international problems as well as the inclusiveness that this group aims for.

The Covid-19 pandemic and China's simultaneous escalation of tensions with Japan, India and Australia have pushed Quad to develop and it has been developed in a 'softer' and more diverse direction. In fact, the way the Quad works is incredibly flexible. The Quad is not merely a quadrilateral mechanism centered on the US, but is also one which is built on a system of overlapping bilateral and trilateral connections. The 'hub and spokes' of US - Japan, India - Japan, India - Australia and Japan - Australia help the Quad both have flexibility to respond to common security challenges in a manner tailored to each member's national interests, and at the same time avoid the group being dominated by a single country

[America], ensuring the position of all 4 parties in the bloc. Among these hubs, the Indo-Japan link plays the leading role in terms of the number of cooperation pillars as it has established a common vision of the Indo-Pacific Initiative (IPOI) and cooperation pillars on high-quality infrastructure, finance, healthcare, maritime security, and cooperation in digital and cyber systems such as 5G technology, artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) (Priyanka, 2020) and most recently, clean energy (“India-Japan Clean Energy Partnership,” 2022). The US-Japan hub has only 3 pillars of energy, digital economy, and cooperation between the US - Japan - Mekong sub-region⁹, while the India – Australia¹⁰ and Japan – Australia¹¹ hubs continue to be improved.

On a bilateral basis, the Quad members have built groups of ‘strategic triangles’, creating diversity for the Quad’s cooperation framework. Indo - Australia / Indo - Japan hub currently has triangles of Indo - Australia - Japan, Indo - Australia - France, Indo - Australia - Indonesia and in the near future there may be one more triangle of Indo - Japan – Russia (Sachin, 2020). In addition to expanding the cooperation frameworks of the Quad, the US-Japan hub has built a series of triangles such as the US - Japan - India, the US - Japan - Australia, the US - Japan - Korea, and the US - Japan – Mongolia. With the desire to develop the Quad in the non-military direction, the Japan - India - Australia triangle on the supply chain will be the basis for India, Japan and Australia to promote the ‘softening’ of the Quad. However, the fact that the US - Australia - UK trilateral alliance (AUKUS) was formed in September 2021 showed that Australia has become more assertive and it is likely to be a ‘flexible’ member to participate in various spokes of the Quad. In the external ‘triangular’

⁹ According to US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, on January 6, 2022, the US and Japan will soon sign an agreement to increase collaboration on advanced space systems and countering hypersonic missiles. See In new agreement US, Japan team up on counter-hypersonic research. (2022, January 7). *Breaking Defense*. <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/01/in-new-agreement-us-japan-team-up-on-counter-hypersonic-research/>; <https://www.vietnamplus.vn/mynhat-ban-hop-tac-phat-trien-he-thong-phong-thu-ten-lua-sieu-vuot-am/767064.vnp>.

¹⁰ Recently, India and Australia signed a Defense Agreement to upgrade their bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), a defense science and technology arrangement agreement, etc. See: Bộ Tư - Từ yên ắng đến hồi sinh (kỳ 1) [Quad - From silence to revival (part 1)]. (2020, October 9). Baoquocte. <https://baoquocte.vn/bo-tu-tu-yen-ang-den-hoi-sinh-ky-1-125752.html>.

¹¹ On January 6, 2022, Japan and Australia signed a historic defense cooperation agreement. The agreement called ‘Reciprocal Access’, helps speed up the deployment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JFDS) and the Australian Defense Force (ADF), and eases restrictions on the transportation of weapons and supplies for joint training and disaster relief operations. Australia is the second country with which Japan has signed a defense cooperation agreement, after the US. See Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement. (2022, January 6). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/au/page4e_001195.html.

structures related to the Quad, the Indo - Australia - Indonesia and Indo - Australia - France partnership triangle seems to be the space for India to consolidate the Indo-Australian axis, counterbalancing (instead of tilting about) the US - Japan axis along with the two triangles of the US - Japan - Korea and the US - Japan - Mongolia ("Joint Statement: U.S.-Japan-Mongolia Trilateral Meeting," 2017). Japan is currently the only country participating in the three internal 'triangles' of the Quad, Japan - US - India in terms of connectivity infrastructure, Japan - US - Australia also in infrastructure (Peter, 2019) and Japan - India - Australia in a new supply chain initiative ("Australia-India-Japan Economic Ministers' Joint Statement," 2020). All of this creates diversity in the Quad's structure as well as shows the block's openness to regional issues.

Remarks on Quad's Soft Development and Its Ability to Threaten ASEAN's Centrality

With intricately intertwined hub-and-spokes and collaborative activities that have begun to be built on an annual basis, Quad is clearly in the process of institutionalization. The development since early 2020 of this bloc shows that the Quad has the ability to become a open, flexible, and multi-sector mechanism. The bloc's initial efforts to develop annual contact frameworks between the four member countries as well as between the Quad and external countries are clearly indicative of this trend. Interwoven bilateral and tripartite mechanisms between the Quad members also help the bloc interact more flexibly to properly deal with threats at each moment. At the same time, given the different perceptions of the threat posed by China, such a group could help the countries in the Quad to allocate more compatible resources and react more quickly than the group that needs the consensus of the whole bloc. Quad members are also not under pressure to act on American expectations, or to feel that they are being protected by the United States in terms of security.

Meanwhile, Quad's practical approach is shaping a multi-disciplinary cohesion institution rather than a NATO-modeled military alliance. Although the United States wants more than anyone else to turn the Quad into the Asian NATO, the interwoven connectivity of the remaining members to Asia in general and China in particular is the point that makes it difficult for the group of four nations, at least in the short term, to make a decision to form an formal military alliance against China. An Asian NATO would make ASEAN countries see the Quad as an institution that could increase tensions, even lead to conflict in the region and that could manipulates or pressures these countries to 'pick sides' between America and China. This reduces ASEAN's sympathy for the existence of the Quad. Meanwhile, Japan, India, and Australia all have close interactions with Southeast Asian countries and, their Indo-Pacific strategy also needs the cooperation of these nations, not just encapsulated in the four members of the Quad. As mentioned, the remaining members of the bloc have

important economic interests with China¹², dependence on the Chinese economy can cause these countries to suffer great losses when China engages in economic coercion.

Japan, India and Australia still avoid creating a unanimous voice to criticize China directly within the framework of cooperation with the Quad, despite of increasing pressure from China recently to all three countries. Japan, India, and Australia seem to avoid letting China understand that they are 'together' and with the US to fight against China. This is evidenced by the Quad foreign minister meeting in October 2020. In his speech before the conference, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo: (i) directly attacked China's ruling party; (ii) mentioned a series of specific areas where China was misbehaving including the South China Sea, East China Sea, Mekong River, Himalayas, and Taiwan Strait, and (iii) proposed 5G telecom infrastructure cooperation and global supply chains from China ("Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Opening Remarks," 2020).

However, in the closing statement of the meeting of the host country-Japan, there was no content attacking China or the Chinese ruling party. Instead, it just exchanged (didn't agree) security views on North Korea, East China Sea and South China Sea. The members only agreed to continue cooperation in the fields of health against COVID-19, the digital economy, the regional structure led by ASEAN, the participation of European countries into the 'free and open Indo-Pacific', quality infrastructure, maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber security, rescue and many other less sensitive areas ("The Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting," 2020). By not mentioning issues related to Xinjiang, Taiwan, the Mekong nor the Himalayas, the remaining parties in the Quad showed that they would like to minimize the discussion of highly sensitive issues with China.

The virtual summit in March 2021 and the in-person summit in September 2021 continued to focus on the common concerns of all Quad members including the Covid 19 pandemic, maritime security, infrastructure, climate change, emerging technologies, space, cybersecurity and education. These are all general international issues, not China's internal security issues. Even so, it does not mean that the members of Japan, India, and Australia have opposite views from the US, which may lead to the breakdown of the Quad. In fact, these three countries only seem to avoid turning the Quad into a form of 'collective security' led by the US to fight China, through which could push them to 'stand at the front' for China's counterattacks. The benefits of committing to FOIPS as well as the Quad make Japan, India, and Australia share the US view of 'containing China', however, these nations prefer it to be in a manner consistent with their national strength. Therefore, despite not agreeing with the

¹² China is currently the largest and most important trading partner of Japan, Australia and India. See Debasish Roy Chowdhury. (2021, March 18). Quad is Key to Biden's Strategy in Asia, But the Four-Way Alliance Is Ambiguous and Contradictory. *TIME*. <https://time.com/5947674/quad-biden-china/>.

US to reach a four-party consensus at the Ministerial Meeting (October 2020), India, Japan and Australia, previously, seemed to take turns 'pleasing' the US from a bilateral perspective when: Japan agreed to the US's 'basic concept' of 5G Clean Path Initiative within the framework of communication between diplomatic missions ("Japan-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting," 2020); India left open the possibility of signing the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for geo-spatial cooperation at the US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue on October 26-27, 2020 (Shishir, 2020); while, Australia was the only country that allowed the US to mention China's 'malign acts' in bilateral discussions (Reuters, 2020). Thus, after the meeting, the US was still not 'disappointed' even though it did not achieve the 'whole package' of goals it ambitiously set out. The 'just enough' satisfaction of all members helps the Quad continue to be promoted and move in a multi-disciplinary direction.

With such diverse and flexible cooperation structures and activities, the cohesion of the Quad is still seen as an informal quasi-alliance to contain China's influence in the region. In the context that ASEAN remains divided on security issues related to China, the development of the Diamond Quadrangle raises many concerns that the Quad may reduce ASEAN centrality (Frederick, 2020, pp. 271-304; Mrittika, 2020, pp. 110-130). The concept 'central role' of ASEAN is essentially a coordinating role, which is achieved by the geographical location of the member states and mechanisms for coordination, conciliation and cooperation promotion this Association builds. On this basis, there are some indications that *the Quad is an 'addition' rather than an 'exclusion' of ASEAN*. This possibility is reflected in the perspective of the Quad countries, in the way ASEAN works as well as the international context that facilitates the indispensable central role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Firstly, Southeast Asia is geographically located in the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, the connection of the two oceans – Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean – in the Free and Open Indo - Pacific Strategy (FOIPS) therefore needs the coordination role of ASEAN. The existing ASEAN mechanisms - in which all Quad members participate, will be the foundation for effectively implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy. Because of this background, the major powers in the Quad bloc have repeatedly affirmed their strong support for ASEAN's centrality and ASEAN-led structure. As the closing statement of the Quad's Foreign Ministers Meeting, the member countries agreed to continue cooperation within a regional structure led by ASEAN ("The Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting," 2020).

ASEAN also has cooperation mechanisms with most of the world's major powers, including China, and all of these countries support ASEAN's centrality. The inclusive multilateral mechanisms initiated by ASEAN namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Open Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM+) play a clear and undeniable role in providing a multilateral venue for the participants to share knowledge

and coordinate actions to address transnational issues such as human trafficking, cyberspace, terrorism, infectious diseases and disaster management. In the economic field, ASEAN's central role is reflected in the fact that the Association has +1 free trade agreements (Plus One) with all major economies in the region. The FTAs that ASEAN has established with partners in the region are closely linked with security and political issues, through which, they are together to form a complex structure, reinforcing the central role of the Association.

The major powers themselves, through the institutions that ASEAN coordinates, have widely accepted ASEAN's central role in the region's political, security and economic issues and have considered ASEAN as an important partner to discuss and solve problems both inside and outside Southeast Asia (Simon, 2017). The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was officially signed online in mid-November 2020, with the participation of 10 ASEAN countries, South Korea, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. It continues to be seen as a success of ASEAN's foreign policy. The participation of two Quad members (Japan and Australia) and China in the RCEP has affirmed ASEAN's central role in regulating relations with major powers and enhancing tolerance for inter-regional connections. Obviously, given the diverse concerns and interests, the major powers of the Quad and China still view ASEAN as an important partner in their competition of influence in the region, and this helps to strengthen ASEAN's leverage role. From this perspective, competition between major countries in general and US - China competition in particular, along with the existence of the Quad are even more valuable to promote the position of ASEAN, it can even be said, *in the environment of great power competition, the central role of ASEAN is irreplaceable.*

The way ASEAN works has made the parties, even if they confront each other, choose to support ASEAN's mediation role. Instead of leaning to one side (China or the US), ASEAN has opted for 'omni-enmeshment' with both China, the US and other great powers to form an intertwined balance-of-power structure (Evelyn, 2007, p.113). While continuing to cooperate with China at various levels to enhance economic resource attraction, ASEAN at the same time encourages the US to increase its presence in Southeast Asia and attract the involvement of moderate powers outside the region, such as Korea, Japan, Australia and India to maintain security as well as manage risks from China's rise. As for the Quad, so far, ASEAN has cleverly not given a common view on the Quad, which helps ASEAN not to get entangled in the controversy between China and the Quad. There is currently no formal mechanism or dialogue between ASEAN and the Quad (Evan, 2020, p.106). At the same time, ASEAN members are also cautious and avoid making a declaration to join the 'Quad

Plus' mechanism despite being suggested by the US and committed that this is not an alliance against any country¹³.

ASEAN has advantages both geographically and politically, and it knows how to take advantage of these advantages to encourage a better integrated Indo-Pacific region, in the spirit of peace and tolerance. Its hedging strategy helps ASEAN both retain its central role and create a soft balance in the region. In the tense space of US-China competition - which makes the Quad intolerant of China, ASEAN would be the domain of possible cooperation of the two adversaries. And, with a role accepted by both China and Quad members, the Quad's development is indeed a complement to ASEAN's standing.

Conclusion

Although there have not been binding principles, given the commitments of the member countries in the joint statements and the interlinkingly connected hub-and-spokes, it can be seen that Quad version 2.0 has had a basic framework for long-term development. The Quad's resurgence in the context of the tense US-China strategic competition makes this quadrilateral cooperation framework sensitive in terms of security and politics, and at first it was seen as a purely political - security mechanism against China. However, the intertwined interests of the member nations - India, Japan, Australia with China, ASEAN and these countries' different traditions of foreign relations from the US, has led to the Quad gradually being pushed in a softer direction, covering many international issues in all fields.

In that spirit, Quad is playing an important role in solving a wide range of regional and global issues, ranging from global issues such as pandemic, cybersecurity, climate change, to important maritime security issues in the region such as disputes in the South and East China Sea. With the focal point in the Indo-Pacific region and the capabilities of the world's leading major countries, Quad's diversification raises questions about future ASEAN centrality. However, given its neutral way of working and mechanisms, which cover a wide range of fields and partners (includes those that Quad members consider as rivals such as China and Russia), would help the Association of Southeast Asian Nations retain its irreplaceable role. The support of all parties for ASEAN, along with its existing connections with all Quad members, Russia and China would help this regional organization maintain its

¹³ US Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Biegun, during an informal meeting with members of the Quad in New Delhi (India) on October 12, 2020 stated: 'The Quad is a partnership driven by mutual benefit, with no obligations, and is not intended to be an exclusive group', and 'Any country seeking a free and open Indo-Pacific and willing to take steps to ensure it, should be welcome to work with us'. See Sanjeev Miglani. (2020, October 13). U.S. says 'Quad' nations ready to work with others for free, open Indo-Pacific. *Reuters*. <https://de.reuters.com/article/india-usa/u-s-says-quad-nations-ready-to-work-with-others-for-free-open-indo-pacific-idUSKBN26X2AT>.

role as a 'anchor' to solve the problems of the region. On that basis, the Quad could become an expanding space of ASEAN rather than a mechanism that hinders its development.

However, ASEAN still needs to show a stronger voice, especially in matters related to maritime security in the South China Sea. In the context of China's ever more assertive actions in strategic waters, this Asian major power's simultaneous escalation of tensions with all four Quad members - the United States, Japan, India and Australia, in bilateral relations will prompt the Quad to take stronger actions. ASEAN's avoidance of discussion on the South China Sea would make the Quad play a role in this issue. Therefore, ASEAN needs to promote more strongly the settlement of disputes in the South China Sea, on the basis of compliance with international law, at the same time actively cooperate with the Quad, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Working on a multilateral basis, for peace and prosperity in the region; resolving issues of territorial disputes and international conflicts on the basis of the rule of law would help ASEAN have the legitimacy of an international organization, thereby affirming its central role, regardless of whether the Quad is institutionalized.

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