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The Quad as an Instrument of Collective Security: India-US Perspectives

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Abstract

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has emerged as a central element in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic architecture. While originally conceived in 2004 as a response to humanitarian disaster relief needs, the Quad has since evolved into an important strategic grouping countering the regional assertiveness of China. This paper analyses the extent to which the Quad functions as an instrument of collective security, focusing on India and US perspectives. The United States views the Quad as a mechanism to uphold its regional primacy and strengthen alliance-based deterrence against China, whereas India adopts a cautious approach, emphasising strategic autonomy and multi-alignment while cooperating on maritime security, critical technologies, and infrastructure development. The conceptual distinction between collective security and security cooperation remains central to this analysis, as the Quad currently lacks formal mutual defence obligations, functioning more as a platform for strategic signalling, capacity building, and promoting a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific order. Challenges such as diverging threat perceptions, India's reluctance for formal alliances, ASEAN sensitivities, and the risk of Chinese countermeasures limit its evolution into a formal security alliance. However, operational convergence through naval exercises, critical technology cooperation under iCET, and institutionalisation of the Quad Leaders' Summits reflect its growing strategic utility. This paper concludes that while the Quad is unlikely to become a formal collective security alliance in the near future, it remains a significant strategic partnership shaping regional order amidst rising power contestations.

Keywords: Quad, collective security, India-US relations, Indo-Pacific, strategic autonomy, alliance politics

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the primary theatre of 21st-century geopolitical contestation, with China's rise reshaping regional power dynamics. Against this backdrop, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has gained prominence as a strategic framework aimed at promoting a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order. Comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, the Quad has evolved from its initial conception as a humanitarian disaster response mechanism in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to an institutionalised strategic grouping with broad geopolitical objectives (Smith, 2020).

The Quad's revival in 2017, after nearly a decade of dormancy, reflected the converging interests of the four democracies in countering China's growing maritime assertiveness, coercive diplomacy, and expansionist behaviour across the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Indian Ocean Region. For the United States, the Quad forms a vital pillar of its Indo-Pacific Strategy to maintain

regional primacy, strengthen alliance networks, and contain China's revisionist ambitions (Campbell & Ratner, 2018). India, on the other hand, perceives the Quad as a diplomatic and strategic force multiplier but remains cautious of any formal military entanglements that may compromise its principle of strategic autonomy and non-alignment (Rajagopalan, 2021). This divergence in perspectives raises critical questions about the Quad's utility as an instrument of collective security. While collective security entails a formal commitment whereby an attack on one is considered an attack on all (Kupchan & Kupchan, 1995), the Quad currently lacks any mutual defence treaty or institutionalised security guarantees. Instead, it functions as a flexible security partnership focused on capacity building, infrastructure development, critical technologies, maritime security, and counterbalancing China through diplomatic signalling and operational synergy. This paper seeks to analyse the Quad's evolution, objectives, and operational mechanisms, focusing on India and the US perspectives on its role as a potential

collective security arrangement. It explores the conceptual frameworks of collective security versus security cooperation, examines strategic convergences and divergences between India and the US, assesses the Quad's challenges and limitations, and evaluates its future prospects in shaping regional security architecture. The central argument posits that while the Quad falls short of a formal collective security alliance, it functions as a pragmatic, issue-based security partnership that enhances regional deterrence and strategic resilience without imposing binding military commitments, thus aligning with India's strategic autonomy and the US's alliance-based approach to Indo-Pacific security.

Evolution of the Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) originated from the ad hoc Tsunami Core Group formed in December 2004 to coordinate humanitarian relief after the Indian Ocean tsunami. The US, Japan, India, and Australia collaborated effectively, highlighting their capacity for rapid multilateral coordination (Smith, 2020). Building on this, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed institutionalising the group into a strategic dialogue in 2007 to promote regional cooperation and balance China's growing assertiveness. The first formal Quad meeting occurred in May 2007 on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum. However, China's strong diplomatic protests against the grouping, viewing it as an attempt to encircle it strategically, led Australia to withdraw under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008, resulting in its dormancy. During this period, India maintained a cautious approach, wary of provoking China while developing its own regional partnerships. The Quad was revived in November 2017 against the backdrop of rising concerns about China's maritime assertiveness, militarisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and the Belt and Road Initiative's strategic implications (Rehman, 2021). The four countries held official-level consultations and gradually elevated it to foreign ministerial and leaders' summits. The 2021 Quad Leaders' Summit marked a milestone in institutionalisation, outlining cooperation in vaccine production, critical technologies, climate change, and infrastructure development. The Quad's agenda has since expanded to include maritime security, supply chain resilience, cyber security, infrastructure financing alternatives to China's BRI, and emerging technologies like AI and 5G. Naval exercises, especially India's invitation to Australia for Exercise Malabar in 2020, reflect growing operational synergy. However, despite its institutional strengthening, the Quad remains an informal strategic grouping without a formal charter or mutual defence obligations. Its evolution demonstrates the flexible and issue-based cooperation model adopted by its members to advance shared strategic objectives without provoking direct alliance-based confrontation with China.

Conceptual Framework: Collective Security vs. Security Cooperation

Collective security is a principle of international relations where a group of states agree that security threats to any one member are threats to all, thus requiring a collective response (Kupchan & Kupchan, 1995). The most notable example is NATO under Article 5, where an armed attack against one member is considered an attack against all, invoking mutual defence obligations. The underlying assumption is that states, regardless of power differentials, commit to defending each other to maintain international peace and deter aggression. In contrast, security cooperation refers to flexible arrangements

where states coordinate policies, share intelligence, conduct joint exercises, and build capacities without binding themselves to formal mutual defence commitments. It is pragmatic, issue-based, and avoids the legal obligations and escalatory risks associated with collective security alliances. The Quad currently functions as a security cooperation mechanism rather than a collective security framework. While the US envisions it as an informal counterbalance to China, India remains reluctant to formalise it into an alliance structure. The Quad focuses on strategic signalling, capacity building, and upholding a rule-based order through coordinated diplomatic statements, naval exercises, and economic initiatives. Its agenda includes maritime domain awareness, infrastructure financing, vaccine diplomacy, supply chain resilience, and emerging technology cooperation. However, it lacks a treaty-based mutual defence clause or institutional enforcement mechanisms inherent in collective security frameworks. Thus, conceptually, the Quad represents an issue-based strategic partnership designed to deter unilateral aggression through enhanced coordination without becoming an alliance that could provoke an explicit security dilemma with China. Its evolution challenges traditional notions of alliances, reflecting the complex, multi-aligned security architectures characterising 21st-century international relations.

India's Perspective

India's perspective on the Quad is shaped by its historical adherence to strategic autonomy, aversion to formal alliances, and desire to balance relations with multiple major powers. For India, the Quad serves as a diplomatic and strategic force multiplier that enhances its leverage in dealing with China's assertiveness, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Rajagopalan, 2021). India views the Quad primarily as a platform to strengthen maritime security, enhance capacity building with like-minded democracies, and uphold a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific order. Its focus remains on practical cooperation such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), counterterrorism, cyber security, and supply chain diversification. For instance, India's Navy regularly participates in the Malabar exercises with the US, Japan, and Australia, enhancing operational interoperability without formalising military commitments. However, India remains wary of any formalisation of the Quad into a collective security alliance, fearing entanglement in potential US-China confrontations that do not directly serve its national interests. New Delhi's strategic culture emphasises non-alignment, despite its recent tilt towards the US in balancing China. India also prioritises ASEAN centrality, avoiding the perception that the Quad sidelines Southeast Asian multilateral institutions. Furthermore, India's domestic discourse positions the Quad as a strategic partnership rather than an alliance, enabling it to manage Chinese sensitivities while asserting its regional leadership ambitions. Overall, India perceives the Quad as an instrument for strategic balancing and regional stabilisation without compromising its core principle of strategic autonomy or provoking direct confrontation with Beijing.

US Perspective

The United States perceives the Quad as a critical pillar in its Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at maintaining regional primacy, strengthening alliance networks, and counterbalancing

China's growing influence (Campbell & Ratner, 2018). For Washington, the Quad complements its hub-and-spoke security architecture in Asia, reinforcing deterrence against Chinese coercion. From a strategic standpoint, the Quad offers the US an opportunity to integrate like-minded democracies into a flexible security partnership that addresses regional challenges ranging from freedom of navigation to emerging technologies. It seeks to expand its operational scope by encouraging greater defence interoperability, joint naval exercises, and intelligence sharing. The US also frames the Quad within its broader vision of great power competition, positioning it as a mechanism to uphold a rules-based international order against Chinese revisionism. This includes countering China's Belt and Road Initiative through alternative infrastructure financing and promoting standards-based supply chains in critical sectors such as semiconductors and pharmaceuticals. Moreover, recent US Indo-Pacific policy documents highlight the Quad's role in regional vaccine diplomacy, cyber security cooperation, and climate initiatives, reflecting a comprehensive security and developmental approach rather than solely military deterrence. However, the US recognises India's reluctance towards formal alliances, thus advocating a flexible, informal institutional structure to ensure India's continued participation. Overall, the US perceives the Quad as both a geopolitical counterweight to China and an instrument to consolidate its alliances and partnerships in Asia, maintaining its strategic primacy while avoiding the escalatory risks of a formal NATO-style alliance.

Challenges and Limitations

The Quad faces significant challenges that limit its evolution into a formal collective security framework. Firstly, the absence of a formal mutual defence treaty undermines its credibility as a collective security arrangement. Unlike NATO, the Quad's commitments remain political rather than legal, creating uncertainty regarding actual collective military responses in crisis situations.

Secondly, India's strategic autonomy constrains the scope of the Quad. India remains wary of entangling alliances, fearing constraints on its independent foreign policy and potential escalation with China, especially along the disputed LAC (Rajagopalan, 2021).

Thirdly, ASEAN's scepticism towards the Quad as a potential bloc that undermines ASEAN centrality poses a diplomatic challenge. Southeast Asian countries fear being forced to choose sides in US-China competition, preferring inclusive regional architectures such as the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit.

Fourth, the Quad's operational and capability asymmetries limit its effectiveness. Differences in naval capacities, defence budgets, and strategic priorities create coordination challenges. Additionally, domestic political transitions in member countries could alter their commitment levels, as seen in Australia's withdrawal from the Quad in 2008 under Kevin Rudd. Finally, Chinese diplomatic and military countermeasures pose strategic risks. Beijing perceives the Quad as an anti-China coalition, prompting coercive diplomacy against its members and accelerating its military modernisation to counterbalance Quad naval capabilities.

Overall, while the Quad has institutionalised strategic dialogue and cooperation, these challenges constrain its transformation into a formal collective security alliance, making it more effective as a flexible, issue-based security partnership.

Future Prospects

The Quad's future trajectory indicates continued institutionalisation as an informal strategic grouping with expanded areas of cooperation. Regular Leaders' Summits and ministerial dialogues have strengthened its diplomatic visibility, while joint naval exercises such as Malabar enhance operational interoperability. Future prospects include deeper cooperation in critical and emerging technologies under the India-US iCET framework, particularly in semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, and resilient supply chains. Vaccine diplomacy, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, will remain a key pillar, showcasing the Quad's ability to provide global public goods beyond military objectives. Maritime security is likely to remain central, with expanded Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) initiatives and capacity building for smaller Indo-Pacific states to counterbalance China's coercive maritime activities. Infrastructure development through Quad-supported initiatives offers alternatives to China's BRI, enhancing regional economic security.

However, the Quad is unlikely to evolve into a formal collective security alliance in the near future. India's strategic autonomy concerns, ASEAN's sensitivities, and the risks of direct confrontation with China constrain such transformation. Instead, the Quad will function as a flexible, adaptive strategic partnership enhancing deterrence, resilience, and regional order without binding mutual defence obligations.

Conclusion

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has emerged as a significant strategic partnership in the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture. While initially conceived as an ad hoc grouping for humanitarian relief, it has evolved into a flexible security mechanism addressing the converging concerns of India, the United States, Japan, and Australia regarding China's assertive rise. However, the analysis of its operational dynamics and member states' perspectives highlights that the Quad, despite its increasing institutionalisation and strategic depth, remains far from functioning as a formal collective security alliance.

For the United States, the Quad is an essential component of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at maintaining regional primacy and ensuring a favourable balance of power against China's revisionist behaviour. Washington perceives the Quad as an informal collective security mechanism that complements its hub-and-spoke alliance system in Asia, enhances deterrence through operational synergy, and signals its resolve to uphold a rules-based order. Its strategic objectives extend beyond traditional defence cooperation to include critical and emerging technologies, resilient supply chains, maritime domain awareness, and infrastructure development as tools of comprehensive security competition with China. Conversely, India's perspective is shaped by its long-standing strategic autonomy and reluctance towards formal alliances. While New Delhi recognises the Quad's utility in enhancing its maritime security capabilities, diversifying its strategic partnerships, and counterbalancing China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region and along the Himalayan borders, it remains cautious of entangling itself in an overtly anti-China military alliance. India prefers positioning the Quad as a diplomatic and security partnership that enhances its strategic options without undermining its independent foreign policy or provoking direct confrontation with Beijing. This divergence in approach constrains the Quad from transforming into a NATO-style

collective security framework. The conceptual distinction between collective security and security cooperation is thus central to understanding the Quad's current and future trajectory. While collective security entails binding mutual defence obligations, the Quad functions as a flexible, issue-based security partnership focused on enhancing regional resilience, capacity building, and strategic signalling rather than institutionalising military commitments. Its agenda encompasses a broad spectrum, including vaccine diplomacy, climate change, cyber security, critical technologies, and maritime security cooperation, reflecting a holistic approach to regional stability beyond hard power deterrence. Challenges such as diverging strategic priorities, ASEAN's scepticism towards bloc politics, operational asymmetries, and the risk of Chinese countermeasures continue to constrain its evolution into a formalised alliance. However, the Quad's adaptability remains its core strength. Its institutionalisation through Leaders' Summits, Ministerial dialogues, and working groups on diverse areas reflects an incremental approach towards greater strategic coherence. In the near future, the Quad is likely to deepen its cooperation in critical sectors such as semiconductors, AI, quantum technologies, and resilient infrastructure, enhancing its relevance in the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical and economic competition. It will continue to function as a strategic force multiplier for its members, especially India, providing diplomatic leverage and operational capacity to shape regional order. In conclusion, while the Quad does not fulfil the criteria of a traditional collective security alliance, it has emerged as an effective security cooperation framework that advances its members' strategic interests, counters China's unilateral assertiveness, and promotes a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific order. Its future success will depend on maintaining this pragmatic flexibility while incrementally building operational convergence and strategic trust among its diverse members.

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