



THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE QUAD AND FOR ASEAN

BY AMANDA TREA PHUA
AND SARAH TEO

Amanda Trea Phua (isamandaphua@ntu.edu.sg) is a Senior Analyst with the United States Programme and Sarah Teo (islsteo@ntu.edu.sg) is an Associate Research Fellow with the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

The reunion of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) in 2017 sparked concerns on several grounds, including perceptions that it would be a [threat to multilateralism](#) centered on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as a means to [contain China](#). Originally banded together for [aid efforts](#) following the 2004 Indian Ocean disaster, the group – consisting of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia – initially appeared to reflect a renewed convergence of strategic interests between these four major democracies in the region. Over time, however, [questions](#) have been raised about the Quad’s viability.

Yet, the fact that the Quad continues to meet – mostly at the senior officials’ level, although its inaugural foreign ministerial meeting was held in September 2019 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York – suggests that despite challenges, the four-member arrangement is likely to become a salient aspect of the regional security architecture. It would thus be worthwhile to consider how it could interact with ASEAN going forward, given that the latter is generally considered the primary multilateral organization in the Indo-Pacific.

Here, we discuss three possible scenarios in which the Quad may evolve, and how ASEAN should respond.

Scenario One: Strengthened military cooperation

This scenario suggests the commencement of Quad meetings involving defense ministers or senior officials in the defense ministry, or even the inauguration of military exercises among the four countries. Annual Malabar joint naval exercises are already carried out between the United States, India, and Japan. Including Australia as a permanent participant would be a significant gesture pointing to a more coordinated quadrilateral security arrangement. To be fair, quadrilateral military exercises appear unlikely. For instance, India refused Australian participation to the [2017](#) and [2018](#) Malabar exercises despite Canberra’s bids to be part of the major multilateral naval drill. A meeting among defense senior officials, however, may be easier to achieve.

One way for ASEAN to respond to such a scenario would be to reinforce the idea of regional defense cooperation through the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), a platform that involves the 10 ASEAN member states and dialogue partners such as Australia, China, India, Japan, Russia, and the United States. While the ADMM-Plus is certainly not meant to compete with the Quad, its strength vis-à-vis the latter is its inclusivity. Promoting ADMM-Plus defense cooperation, be it through joint military exercises or other forms of interaction, would thus be useful in underlining the importance of an open and inclusive regional security architecture.

Scenario Two: The Quad Falls Apart

Quad 1.0 fell apart shortly after it was conceived when Australia [walked away](#) in consideration of Chinese sensibilities. While nuanced differences among the Quad countries have narrowed since, the viability of the grouping is uncertain insofar as it lacks a convincingly cohesive vision and an operational agenda. More significantly, the viability of the group remains largely susceptible to each country’s relations with China. In recent months, we have seen a significant warming of ties between Japan and China, with the two countries heralding a “[new era](#)” of bilateral relations. Following its non-aligned tradition,

India has a conventionally different approach in dealing with China compared to Japan and Australia, which are US allies. On the other hand, Washington has [dropped the niceties](#), suggesting that the Quad could be used to ensure that China “retains only its [proper place](#) in the world.” Given these differences, it is difficult to say that the Quad will not fall susceptible to the same reasons that led to its falling apart the first time, especially if the United States envisages the group as taking some sort of coordinated action against Beijing.

Despite debates about the Quad’s challenge to ASEAN centrality, the dissolution of the Quad may not necessarily be beneficial to ASEAN as a second suspension of the Quad could embolden revisionist powers to try to change the regional status quo. If the Quad falls apart again, the best option for ASEAN would be to seize the opportunity and reinforce its central place in the regional security architecture. This means strengthening ASEAN’s capacity as an independent actor and emphasizing the relevance of ASEAN-centric platforms to regional countries.

Scenario Three: The Status Quo

This is the most likely scenario for the Quad in the foreseeable future, as regular consultations among the four countries continue without significant stepping up of cooperation. For what it is worth, the revival of the Quad provides a useful dialogue mechanism for discussions to be had over shared values and interests in the region. At the same time, it is clear that the Quad countries have varying priorities and perceptions of the region. The fact that the Quad meetings so far have [failed to produce](#) a single joint statement signals the struggle within the grouping to reconcile views on critical issues. It is thus realistic to expect that the Quad maintains its status quo for the time being.

Here, ASEAN should work to ensure that even as the Quad continues its consultative dialogue, the “hub” of the broad multilateralism remains through ASEAN. This means, for example, providing a reason for all four Quad members to continue committing to ASEAN-centric platforms. In this sense, ASEAN should consider how it could continue to serve the interests of its dialogue partners. This could involve, as some have advocated, making the leaders-level

East Asia Summit the [premier regional](#) forum for exchanges and discussions on strategic issues. Ensuring that non-ASEAN countries have a reason to consistently engage with ASEAN would serve the latter’s objectives in the context of ASEAN centrality and relevance. Going forward, the Quad’s value is expected to remain in the potential that it holds more than that of which it demonstrates. It is important for ASEAN to adopt a commensurate approach in response.

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