

China-India Brief

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force

Guest Column

The Quad, China, India and Southeast Asia

By Le Trung Kien

The evolution of the Quadilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, has been partly tied to the China-India relationship. To most observers, it would appear that as relations between China and India deteriorated, cooperation between India and its Quad partners strengthened. With the Quad being seen by Beijing as an 'anti-China' alliance, enhancing security cooperation within the Quad could possibly result in a vicious cycle that is detrimental not just to China-India bilateral ties, but also to overall regional stability. This creates challenges for Southeast Asian countries which have to carefully manage their approach towards the Quad, as well as their relations with China and India.

 Lee Kuan Yew
School of Public Policy

 CENTRE ON ASIA
AND GLOBALISATION

The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

Centre on Asia and Globalisation

sppcwb@nus.edu.sg

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

cont'd p2

Background on the Quad

The initial framework for the Quad emerged in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami as a means for the countries of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (US) to coordinate their relief efforts. It came into being as a formal arrangement in 2007, only to be swiftly abandoned in 2008 following Australia's exit from the group—a move that is widely interpreted as Canberra's attempt to placate Beijing. The Quad would remain in hibernation for nearly a decade. In mid 2017, a border standoff at Doklam raised tensions between India and China. Though the standoff was amicably resolved, the Quad was brought back onto the international stage by November 2017. With its return, security cooperation between the four core partners would pick up through a series of informal meetings, military drills and a measure of policy coordination. It was after 2020 however, that engagement within the grouping showed real momentum. In June that year, a violent clash between Chinese and India soldiers in the Galwan Valley led to fatalities along their disputed border—a first in decades. Following this incident, Quad cooperation accelerated, expanding into new areas like regional infrastructure development and joint COVID-19 responses. And in 2021, the Quad summit was elevated to the leadership level. These activities reflected the growing institutionalization of the Quad, and based on the recent Quad Joint Leaders' Statement in May 2022, is a trend

that is likely to continue.

China-India relationship in the context of the Quad

How the Quad will affect relations between China and India however, remains an open question. There is certainly concern that the Quad's activities would be a sore point in the China-India bilateral relationship. After all, the Chinese defense ministry has criticized the Quad as a mechanism that “advocates bloc confrontation” and for “blatantly stirring up troubles among regional countries”. Yet, some optimistic observers have pointed out that just a few days after the Quad Summit in May 2022, news broke that India had agreed to strengthen space cooperation with its BRICS partners, which includes Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa, to establish a “virtual constellation of remote sensing satellites” that will facilitate data-sharing within the group. Such instances of cooperation however, have failed to convince sceptics like Sushant Singh who argue that India “seeks to benefit from initiatives that contain China, but it is fearful of antagonizing the superpower and thus willing to work with it in certain areas”.

Indeed, India has been drawn towards engaging in Quad's efforts partly due to its own tumultuous relationship with China. The two nuclear-armed states have an unresolved territorial dispute which resulted in a full-scale war in 1962 and has led to periodical military standoffs along their

border, including one that is still ongoing following the most recent clash in June 2020. Yet, India's geography puts it in a unique position among the Quad members. As the only country that shares a contiguous 3,500 km land border with China, there is a risk that India may be in the frontline of a Quad-China conflict. Thus, even as India has sought to deepen strategic cooperation with the Quad to deter Chinese adventurism, it has concurrently sought to downplay the grouping's 'anti-China' image. For instance, India has maintained its stance that the Quad is not "against someone" (meaning China) but "for something". And security cooperation activities within in the Quad have been downplayed by India.

China and India's membership in various multilateral forums should also exert a stabilizing effect on their relationship. They are both part of groups like the Group of Twenty (G20), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and of course, BRICS. The most recent BRICS Summit reiterated the importance of solidarity and cooperation among members, including China and India.

The view from Southeast Asia

How the Quad evolves in the coming years will matter to Southeast Asia. It is critical to take ASEAN's interest as the baseline in analyzing what and how the region may expect from the China-India relationship.

Political Security

Maintaining a peaceful, secure, and stable environment in the region is the most critical interest of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Of the four Quad members, three are close geographical neighbours of ASEAN. Thus, the Quad's policies and objectives would have major implications for the region. ASEAN has always promoted dialogue and cooperation among members and its extra-regional partners, including China and India. ASEAN should work to avoid the scenario of a vicious cycle in which closer cooperation between Quad members leads to further worsening bilateral relations between China and India to the point of conflict.

Economic Development

ASEAN desires to increase regional connectivity, economic integration, trade, and investment with major economies in the world. As members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN and China have been constructive in keeping the possibility of India joining the agreement open. It is in the interest of ASEAN if the Quad's activities help create international public goods, diversifying economic and development choices for regional countries while avoiding escalating economic tensions among regional economies. In this context, the relationship among big regional economies such as China and India should

continue to become a factor conducive to regional integration rather than regional division.

ASEAN Centrality

Another issue of concern amidst the Quad's growing importance is the possibility that ASEAN would lose its **centrality** in the regional architecture. Although the Quad has emphasized its “unwavering support for ASEAN unity and centrality” in its **joint statements**, ASEAN must ensure that the Quad's actions are in line with its official commitments.

Against this backdrop, ASEAN could seek greater cooperation with the Quad. First, ASEAN has an advantage in trust-building as the convenor and agenda-setter in the region to create a constructive environment for solving differences among the Quad and regional countries, including China. Second, ASEAN and the Quad could partner to strengthen the regional architecture centered around ASEAN. There is an **argument** that there is still no better alternative to this regional architecture in preserving peace and stability in the region. Third, ASEAN and members of the Quad have to materialize the regional economic frameworks such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework into concrete development projects of mutual interest.

insights that enable participants to avoid unnecessarily risky policies, open channels for crisis communication, and eventually pave the way to more substantive risk reduction measures if the geopolitical winds blow in a more favorable direction. Yet the Biden administration is smart to count even these as important aims, and it would be wiser still to seek them not just with Beijing, but in the wider context of Southern Asia as a whole.

Le Trung Kien, Ph.D., is the Assistant Director-General, Director of Center for Development and Security Studies, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV). His research covers the Mekong subregion, water security, multilateralism and Viet Nam's foreign policy.