

The Quad-ASEAN Dynamic: Security Cooperation, Strategic Hedging, and the Future of ASEAN Centrality

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ABSTRACT

*In the evolving geopolitical landscape of Indo-Pacific, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and ASEAN are the two most important regional groupings. This paper analyzes the interactions between the two groups, focusing on their security objectives, the implications of strategic hedging by ASEAN member states, and the contentious future of ASEAN's relevance. ASEAN is committed to maintaining a regional framework characterized by inclusion, multilateralism, and non-alignment, despite the growing importance of the Quad as a platform for technical cooperation, democratic resilience, and maritime security.*

*This paper argues that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces two critical imperatives regarding the Quad: the first involves engaging with major powers to secure economic and strategic advantages, while the second highlights the importance of avoiding zero-sum rivalries, especially between China and the United States. This has prompted ASEAN members to adopt diverse strategies, reflecting their unique views on economic dependence, alliance structures, and the challenges they face. As the Quad formalizes and expands its operational agenda, concerns have arisen regarding its ability to supplant or augment ASEAN-led initiatives, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum.*

*Paper argues that ASEAN's future significance relies on its ability to sustain unity while adjusting to a multipolar framework. To sustain its significance in the contested Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN must focus on strengthening internal cohesion, augmenting strategic autonomy, and fostering constructive dialogue with external partners.*

**Keywords:** Quad, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Hedging, Geo-Political Competition

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific is a significant region that transcends mere geographical designation. Claim is based on the fact that the formerly vibrant trade routes are now congested with warships, the ambiance is rife with the tension of an emerging superpower contending with an established one, and the submerged pipelines and cables are appraised at trillions of dollars. The ten ASEAN states, the Quad (comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia), and the persistent danger of a Chinese assault, are all engaged in a complex interplay inside this sensitive arena. The interaction of these factors—via transient collaboration, many layers of risk management, and a contest for institutional significance—will dictate whether this century's pivotal region attains a precarious balance or descends into overt conflict.

ASEAN has successfully fulfilled its enduring assertion of being the "conductor of the regional orchestra," as articulated in treaties such as the ASEAN Charter<sup>1</sup> and valued by Southeast Asian nations, by establishing platforms including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ADMM-Plus. It was not merely for display; it was a method of survival. ASEAN, stemming from Cold War apprehensions and post-colonial vulnerabilities, identified its most potent strategies as neutrality ("non-alignment"), cohesion, and providing a neutral platform for negotiations among countries. They formulated the guiding principle, "ASEAN leads, others follow."<sup>2</sup>

The resurgence of Quad in 2017, emerging from a period of inactivity in the 2000s, has transformed its image from an ambiguous notion of a "Asian NATO" to a well-defined and substantial organization. Driven by shared democratic unease over China's island-building in the South China Sea (SCS), its Belt and Road Initiative's strategic strings, and brazen economic coercion, the Quad has matured. It now delivers concrete projects: maritime surveillance networks, disaster response coordination, and infrastructure alternatives. As Japanese PM Kishida framed it, the Quad seeks a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) – a vision implicitly challenging Beijing's preference for spheres of influence<sup>3</sup>. Crucially, all four Quad members ritually affirm their support for "ASEAN Centrality" in their statements<sup>4</sup>.

But here's the point: Can ASEAN truly remain "central" when security anxieties are increasingly addressed outside its consensus-bound halls? And how does ASEAN's inherent, rational strategy of strategic hedging – refusing to pick sides between the US/Quad and China – both enable and constrain cooperation with the Quad?

This article argues that the Quad-ASEAN security relationship is deepening, fueled by undeniable shared interests, particularly concerning maritime security and non-traditional threats. However, this cooperation hits an inherent ceiling imposed by ASEAN's imperative to hedge. This dynamic acts as a double-edged sword for ASEAN Centrality: it simultaneously reinforces ASEAN's position as the indispensable regional hub while straining its cohesion and capacity to the breaking point. The future of this centrality hinges not on nostalgia, but on ASEAN's ability to navigate great power rivalry, maintain internal unity, leverage the Quad without becoming dependent, and crucially, evolve its own institutional muscle.

Paper will examine this complex triangle with careful and thorough consideration. Our inquiry will begin with an exploration of the historical importance of ASEAN within the framework of the Quad's uncertain evolution. The pamphlet provides a comprehensive analysis of the merits and drawbacks associated with the Quad and the existing security partnership of ASEAN. This article will delve into the historical context of ASEAN hedging and explore the reasons it is regarded as a strategy for survival rather than simply a reflection of uncertainty. Main research question paper deliberates on include: does the engagement of the Quad serve to elevate or undermine ASEAN's standing? Before exploring strategies to bolster ASEAN Centrality, it is crucial to discern the challenges that could hinder cooperation. The forthcoming expedition is indeed attainable, notwithstanding its succinctness and challenges. The stakes have ascended to unparalleled heights. The equilibrium and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region rest on a delicate fulcrum.

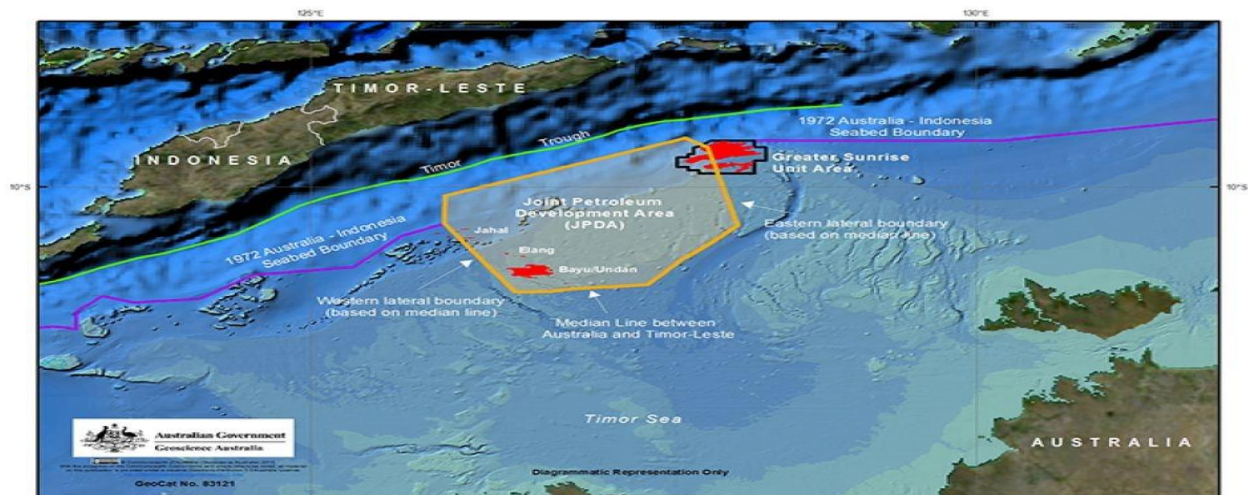
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<sup>1</sup> Secretariat, A. S. E. A. N. *The ASEAN charter*, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, Indonesia. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Caballero-Anthony, Mely, ed. *Regional security in Southeast Asia: Beyond the ASEAN way*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Tatsumi, Yuki. "Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy." *Korea Policy* 1, no. 2 (2023): 22-37.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. QUAD Leaders Joint Statement, Hirishima, Japan. May 20,2023. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100506959.pdf>



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To grasp the delicate Quad-ASEAN dynamic, we need to rewind and picture Southeast Asia in 1967: fresh from colonialism, scarred by conflict, and desperate to avoid becoming a Cold War battlefield. The Bangkok Declaration wasn't just a founding document; it was a survival pact. ASEAN emerged not as a military bloc, but as a "security community" built on dialogue, non-interference, and absolute rejection of great power domination. As scholar Amitav Acharya noted, ASEAN's genius was transforming "weakness into leverage" by making itself the indispensable platform for regional talk.<sup>5</sup> The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1976 cemented this – enshrining principles like peaceful dispute settlement that became the bedrock of ASEAN Centrality<sup>6</sup>.

Fast forward to the 1990s. With the Cold War over, ASEAN seized its moment. It birthed the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, inviting giants like the US, China, and Russia to discuss security on ASEAN's terms. The East Asia Summit (EAS) followed in 2005. The message was clear: "If you want a seat at Asia's table, you sit through ASEAN." This wasn't arrogance; it was institutional entrepreneurship born of necessity. "Centrality," as former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan bluntly put it, "isn't a gift. It's something ASEAN seized because the great powers couldn't talk to each other directly"<sup>7</sup>.

Meanwhile, across the ocean, a different experiment flickered. The Quad's first incarnation (2007-2008) was a hesitant response to China's growing naval assertiveness and the devastating 2004 tsunami, which exposed gaps in regional disaster coordination. But it lacked substance and spooked ASEAN. Memories of Cold War alliances were fresh. When Australia's PM Kevin Rudd proposed an "Asia-Pacific Community" in 2008, ASEAN reacted coolly, seeing it as potential dilution of its hard-won centrality<sup>8</sup>. The Quad's quiet demise felt almost inevitable – crushed by Chinese diplomatic pressure ("containment plot!") and ASEAN's visible unease about "minilateralism" outside its frameworks.

<sup>5</sup> Acharya, Amitav. *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*. Routledge, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> William J.Jhones. *ASEAN'S treaty on Amity and Cooperation*. *East Asia Forum*. November 28, 2024. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/11/28/aseans-treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation/>

<sup>7</sup> Koga, Kei. "ASEAN's evolving institutional strategy: Managing great power politics in South China Sea disputes." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018): 49-80.

<sup>8</sup> Emmers, Ralf, and Sarah Teo. "Regional security strategies of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (2015): 185-216.

The years between 2008 and 2017 were a study in contrasts. ASEAN deepened economic integration, formally adopted the ASEAN Charter (2008) declaring centrality sacrosanct, and expanded the ADMM-Plus (2010) defense ministers' forum. Yet, beneath the surface, anxiety grew. China reclaimed reefs in the Spratlys, deployed coast guard armadas, and wielded economic power like a cudgel (e.g., the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippines). ASEAN's response? More dialogue, more consensus-seeking – a strategy looking increasingly inadequate against raw power plays. As a Philippine diplomat confided anonymously in 2016, "We kept inviting the elephant into the room hoping it would behave. Sometimes it just trampled the furniture."<sup>9</sup>

2017 was the most important turning point with China's island-militarization peaked, the US pivoted hard under Trump with the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, and Shinzo Abe's relentless diplomacy revived the Quad. This wasn't the ghost of 2007. The new Quad focused on practical deliverables: maritime security, infrastructure, vaccines. Crucially, it learned to genuflect to ASEAN. Every summit statement now ritually affirmed "support for ASEAN Centrality and the AOI"<sup>10</sup>

ASEAN's reaction was complex. Relief mixed with deep suspicion. On one hand, China's actions demanded counterweight. On the other, the Quad's rebirth screamed "Cold War 2.0" to some members. The compromise? The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP, 2019). It wasn't a rejection of FOIP, but a recalibration. AOIP embraced the geographic term "Indo-Pacific" (a Quad keyword) but insisted on "ASEAN-led mechanisms" and "inclusivity" – diplomatic code for "Don't force us to choose, and don't exclude China"<sup>11</sup>.

Based on history one can say that the developments in 2017 indicates various complexities in ASEAN-QUAD relations. Basic paradoxes are highlighted below:

- ASEAN's DNA is non-alignment. Its institutions were built to dilute great power rivalry, not fuel it.
- The Quad is inherently reactionary. Born of shared threat perceptions, its existence challenges ASEAN's preference for ambiguity.
- 2017 changed everything. China's assertiveness made ASEAN's hedging more urgent and more fraught, while forcing the Quad to publicly embrace centrality even as it built power outside ASEAN structures.

Thus, the stage was set not for a merger, but an intricate, often awkward, tango where both partners need each other yet fear stepping on the other's toes.

### **DEEPENING SECURITY COOPERATION: NECESSITY DRIVES PRAGMATISM**

Forget grand alliances or formal treaties. The glue binding the Quad and ASEAN today is something far more visceral: shared vulnerability. Picture a Vietnamese coast guard cutter shadowing Chinese survey ships near its oil blocks, an Indonesian fisheries patrol chasing illegal trawlers stripping its seas bare, or a Philippine town flattened by a super typhoon. These aren't abstract geopolitical chess moves; they're daily realities forcing ASEAN states to seek capable partners. The Quad, with its combined

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<sup>9</sup> Laksmana, Evan A. "Whose centrality? ASEAN and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific." *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 5 (2020): 106-117.

<sup>10</sup> QUAD Leaders' Joint Statement: The Spirit of the QUAD. The White House. March 12, 2021. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>

<sup>11</sup> 2019 ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Adopted in Bangkok, Thailand. June 23, 2019. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-ASEANs-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>

maritime reach, technological edge, and resources, is increasingly that partner – not out of ideological alignment, but cold, pragmatic necessity<sup>12</sup>.

### **What's Driving This Cooperation? The Threat Matrix:**

**The Elephant in the Sea:** China's relentless grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea (SCS) – coast guard swarms, militia vessels, reclamation, and subtle coercion – are the primary catalyst. As the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) meticulously documents, Beijing's actions directly threaten the sovereignty and resources of multiple ASEAN claimants. "There's only so much a single frigate can do against dozens of 'fishing boats' armed with water cannons," remarked a retired Philippine Navy officer. "We need eyes, we need data, we need friends who can see what we can't."<sup>13</sup>

**Beyond Bullets:** Non-traditional security threats bind them tighter. The Indo-Pacific is the world's most disaster-prone region. HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) isn't charity; it's stability. Piracy lingers in critical chokepoints like the Malacca Strait. Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing devastates coastal livelihoods and food security. Climate change intensifies storms and threatens low-lying capitals. As ASEAN's 2023 Regional Outlook starkly noted, these are "existential challenges demanding collective action"<sup>14</sup>.

**The Unseen Battlefields:** Security now extends below the waves (subsea cables) and into the ether (cyberspace). Protecting critical infrastructure and countering disruptive cyberattacks requires sophisticated capabilities few ASEAN states possess alone. Supply chain shocks, like those during the pandemic, exposed dangerous dependencies.

### **Possibilities of Cooperation Between QUAD and ASEAN**

The magic word to explain QUAD-ASEAN ties is "complementarity". The Quad isn't trying to replace ASEAN; it's trying to plug critical gaps, often working through or alongside ASEAN structures. Following section will deliberate on different QUAD and ASEAN projects that can enhance cooperation between two groups.

#### **The Quad's Toolkit**

Following are critical QUAD initiatives that can address the strategic needs of ASEAN states.

- **IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness):** This isn't just a buzzword. It's about fusing commercial satellite data, RFID tagging for fishing vessels, and existing coastal radar networks into a usable picture. Think Vietnamese analysts accessing near-real-time ship tracking via a Quad-funded fusion center in Singapore, identifying suspicious activity faster (CSIS, Understanding IPMDA, 2023).
- When Cyclone Mocha devastated Myanmar and Bangladesh in 2023, Quad members rapidly coordinated airlift and naval support, complementing ASEAN's AHA Centre. "Speed saves lives. Having pre-coordinated channels with partners who have heavy lift capacity is crucial," explained an AHA Centre coordinator.

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<sup>12</sup> Kulsoom, Saliha, Ibrar Hussain, and Muhammad Naveed Ul Hasan Shah. "THE QUAD AND EAST ASIAN SECURITY: EVALUATING ITS ROLE IN COUNTERING CHINA'S INFLUENCE." *Journal of Religion and Society* 3, no. 01 (2025): 37-51.

<sup>13</sup> Ha, Thang Nam. "Neither Peace Nor War: China's Grey Zone Coercion in the South China Sea." (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Zimmerman, Erin. "Security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: non-traditional security as a catalyst." In *Geoeconomics and Geo-securities in the Indian Ocean Region*, pp. 32-47. Routledge, 2018.

- **Capacity Building:** Tailored workshops – Japanese Coast Guard training on law enforcement at sea for the Philippines and Vietnam; Australian-funded cyber hygiene programs for ASEAN civil services; US-supported critical infrastructure protection seminars. These build skills and trust.
- **Infrastructure Lite:** Focusing on transparent, sustainable "soft infrastructure" – port security upgrades, digital connectivity grants – contrasting sharply with BRI's debt-heavy model.<sup>15</sup>

### **ASEAN's Platforms**

Following ASEAN initiatives can help legitimize QUAD's position in the Indo-Pacific region.

- **ADMM-Plus:** This defense ministers' forum is the golden ticket. Quad members actively participate in its Experts' Working Groups (EWGs) – Maritime Security, HADR, Counter-Terrorism, Cyber Security. Here, cooperation gets formalized and blessed by ASEAN consensus. Joint exercises like the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security field training are key confidence-builders.
- **EAS & ARF:** While often criticized as "talk shops," these remain vital for signaling. Quad leaders use the EAS podium to publicly announce initiatives or funding, embedding them within the ASEAN-centric architecture. ARF dialogues provide lower-level channels for crisis communication.
- **The Bilateral Backbone:** Often overlooked, but crucial. Singapore's deep naval logistics pact with the US; Vietnam's burgeoning coast guard cooperation with Japan (including patrol vessel transfers); Australia's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN itself – these bilateral ties are the nuts and bolts holding the broader cooperative structure together. They provide flexibility ASEAN's consensus model often lacks.

Though these initiatives are often being criticized as mere symbolic but actually these are providing base to many tangible shifts. Following sections highlights various joint initiatives that holds considerable strategic significance for both regional and global security frameworks.

- **Sharper Eyes:** Enhanced MDA via IPMDA inputs and bilateral sensor integration is slowly eroding China's "opacity advantage" in contested waters.
- **Faster Response:** Joint HADR protocols and prepositioned Quad assets have demonstrably cut disaster response times in the region.
- **Stronger Shields:** Increased cyber training and information sharing are bolstering defenses against state-sponsored and criminal cyber threats.
- **More Options:** Quad-supported infrastructure alternatives, while smaller in scale than BRI, offer ASEAN states crucial leverage in negotiations with Beijing.

The success of this partnership can be attributed to its rare deviation into an independent military coalition. It concentrates on areas where the characteristics of "public goods" are more pronounced, including disaster relief, economic resilience, and marine safety. Consequently, the ASEAN nations are able to participate while still maintaining their protective measures regarding China. Scholar Cheng-

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<sup>15</sup> Dung, Huynh Trung. "ASEAN and the 'Quad Plus': Opportunity in Turbulence? 1." In *India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity*, pp. 251-271. Routledge, 2022.

Chwee Kuik characterises ASEAN as exemplifying "functional cooperation without entrapment" (Kuik, *The Essence of Hedging*, 2016). In the wake of its shortcomings in 2008, the Quad has evolved by providing mechanisms rather than pursuing formal treaties. Nevertheless, the practical approach is founded on the delicate necessity of maintaining equilibrium among the member states of ASEAN. At that juncture, the narrative begins to resemble a more intricate network<sup>16</sup>.

#### **THE IMPERATIVE OF STRATEGIC HEDGING – ASEAN’S DELICATE BALANCING ACT**

To an external observer, the partnership between ASEAN and the Quad might seem paradoxical. Why not engage in a collaborative effort with Beijing to strengthen economic relations instead of pursuing an independent course of action? You foresee China entering into a security partnership with you. The approach is not based on a lack of determination, but instead on a nuanced form of strategic hedging, a sophisticated survival mechanism that has developed through years of engaging with substantial power dynamics. Irrespective of one's viewpoint on the issue, it is imperative for ASEAN to embrace a hedging strategy.

Institutionally, hedging means channeling Quad engagement primarily through ASEAN platforms like the ADMM-Plus or EAS. This allows collective engagement without endorsing the Quad as a bloc or granting it formal legitimacy outside the ASEAN-centric framework. It's ASEAN maintaining control of the guest list. Crucially, the intensity of hedging varies dramatically across the region.

China has a lot of power. It has been ASEAN's main commercial partner for almost 10 years, helping to build infrastructure and playing a key role in regional supply chains. China has a much bigger impact on ASEAN's trade than the other Quad countries, more than 20%. If the major ASEAN countries decide to cut these relations, it is likely that there will be a lot of trouble in both the political and economic spheres. After a lot of thought, Mari Pangestu, who used to be Indonesia's trade minister, said, "Our economies are connected." According to Pangestu of the *Straits Times* (2021), disentanglement is not a goal that people want to achieve or that is realistic. A nuanced sense of who you are goes beyond borders. China's aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy, together with its economic pressure on countries like Australia and Lithuania and its military actions at sea, have made tensions between the US and China higher than they have ever been. Because it is so close to the ASEAN region, Beijing's use of power has a big effect on it. This yields a framework that is simultaneously logical and complex. In the context of ASEAN, hedging denotes the intentional circumvention of singular alignment. Expanding networks, fostering independence, and maintaining a broad spectrum of options serve as commendable strategies for reducing risk. In other terms, it resembles the process of obtaining geopolitical insurance. The objectives of collaborating with the Quad on cybersecurity and maritime security are to establish counter-leverage and to illustrate to Beijing the consequences of its coercive strategies, rather than to align with an anti-China coalition. Simultaneously, we are reinforcing our long-standing economic dedication by pursuing additional BRI agreements and enhancing agricultural exports to China in order to appease our substantial neighbour. Discontinuing the practice of signalling is impractical.

This hedging can be identified through various methodologies. This suggests that, notwithstanding the training of Vietnamese personnel alongside the US Coast Guard, Hanoi will continue to procure military equipment from Russia and participate in collaborative naval exercises with China. Indonesia is engaging in discussions with China regarding investment opportunities within its nickel sector and has welcomed Japanese patrol vessels to bolster its naval presence in the Natuna Islands. ASEAN statements are meticulously crafted to prevent any language that might be interpreted as antagonistic by Beijing, while also commending the Quad's "constructive role" and emphasising principles such as "inclusivity," "dialogue," and the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP). The AOIP itself,

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<sup>16</sup> Ba, Alice D. "ASEAN and the changing regional order: the ARF, ADMM, and ADMM-Plus." *ASEAN 50* (2017): 146-157.

adopted in 2019, was a masterclass in hedging: embracing the Quad's preferred "Indo-Pacific" terminology while insisting ASEAN institutions remain paramount and all regional powers, especially China, must be included. As scholar Evelyn Goh notes, ASEAN seeks "omni-enmeshment" – binding all major powers into a web of interdependence moderated by ASEAN rules (Goh, *The Struggle for Order*, 2013).

Vietnam and the Philippines are becoming more and more aligned with Quad security cooperation, partly because China is making big demands in the South China Sea. The two countries prefer to side with Beijing since they rely heavily on Chinese investment and political support. Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand are the four founder countries of ASEAN. They are very good at establishing consensus, yet this achievement is always at risk. Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said, "We will not be a subordinate entity." At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2022, Balakrishnan said, "We will work with everyone, but we will not owe anyone anything." A price must be paid for this complicated balance. Talking about delicate issues like the South China Sea Code of Conduct often means going through a long and complicated process. This needs a lot of diplomatic work, and it causes problems between member states when their interests are different. In its drive for goals in certain ASEAN areas, Beijing takes advantage of these gaps by offering economic incentives or putting pressure on them. It's clear that Washington sees ASEAN's "ambiguity" as a major source of annoyance at certain times. On the other hand, ASEAN thinks that joining China or completely backing the Quad would be a lot more dangerous. In the face of an oncoming power conflict, a hedging plan must be put in place, but it is a fundamentally flawed way to protect one's life. ASEAN Centrality faces a lot of problems, but hedging tries to make them less of a problem. It is still the most important thing that keeps it strong. The Quad gives ASEAN important resources, but its principal goal is still the difficult and complicated one of keeping things in balance.

Vietnam and the Philippines joining Quad security cooperation recently seems to be because China has a lot of power in the South China Sea. Because both governments are near to Beijing, it shows how much they rely on China for political and economic help. The four main members of ASEAN—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand—are very good at building consensus. "We don't want to be a subordinate entity," said Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Balakrishnan said at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, "We will talk to everyone, but we won't owe anyone anything."

When member countries don't agree on things like the South China Sea Code of Conduct, talks may move slowly. This could lead to complicated internal relationships and need a lot of diplomatic work. Beijing skillfully fills in these gaps by using a mix of threats and financial incentives to get some ASEAN cities to go along with what it wants. At times, it's clear that Washington is having trouble with ASEAN's lack of clarity. ASEAN sees fully following the Quad or following China's orders as two much more dangerous options. Hedging is a practical but seemingly pointless way to stay alive in a world where everyone is fighting for power. The hedging technique is still an important way to keep ASEAN Centrality relevant, even if it faces a lot of problems. Because the Quad has so many resources, ASEAN's major goal is still to keep things balanced in a complicated and sophisticated way<sup>17</sup>.

### **THE CENTRALITY CONUNDRUM – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD**

ASEAN Centrality is more than just a diplomatic choice; it is the basis for carefully building the region's security architecture. The evolving partnership between the Quad and ASEAN introduces a notable conundrum: their engagements simultaneously reinforce and undermine the principles they profess to

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<sup>17</sup> Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. "Hedging via Institutions: ASEAN-led Multilateralism in the Age of the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022): 355-386.

champion. As a result, ASEAN finds itself in a precarious position, where any progress in tangible collaboration could threaten its fundamental objectives.

The Quad's embrace of the core appears genuine upon initial examination. Since its revival, all principal Quad leaders have consistently emphasised their strong endorsement of ASEAN Centrality and unity, as well as the ASEAN-led regional architecture, in their statements. (Quad Leaders' Joint Statement, May 2023). The declaration is expressed in a methodical and systematic fashion by diplomats representing various foreign nations. This goes beyond simple clichés. The Quad needs ASEAN. Engaging through ASEAN platforms like the East Asia Summit (EAS) or the ADMM-Plus lends the Quad's initiatives crucial regional legitimacy. Without ASEAN's implicit or explicit blessing, Quad actions risk being dismissed as external interference – a "containment strategy" in Chinese parlance. When Quad members announce maritime security initiatives during an EAS meeting, or fund capacity-building projects through ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups, they are actively reinforcing ASEAN's role as the indispensable regional convener. As Singaporean scholar Tan See Seng argues, this recognition, however strategic, provides ASEAN with tangible "brokerage power" it can leverage (Tan, *The Role of ASEAN*, 2022). Practical cooperation, like the Quad-funded IPMDA feeding data into ASEAN-linked fusion centres in Singapore or Indonesia, tangibly enhances ASEAN members' capabilities within an ASEAN-recognized framework. This functionally empowers ASEAN states, making centrality feel less like an abstract ideal and more like a practical asset<sup>18</sup>.

Beneath this reinforcing facade, however, runs a powerful current of strain. The Quad, by its very existence and accelerating operational tempo, creates a parallel structure of power and influence outside ASEAN's consensus-bound, inclusive model. While Quad activities often interface with ASEAN mechanisms, their strategic direction, funding, and core decision-making reside firmly within the Quad capitals. This raises an uncomfortable question: Is ASEAN truly leading, or is it increasingly becoming a convenient venue – a legitimizing stage for agendas set elsewhere? The risk of marginalization is real. When crisis erupts – a severe South China Sea clash, a disruptive cyberattack, or a major Taiwan contingency – will key decisions be made in the ADMM-Plus or in closed-door Quad meetings? The Quad's ability to act swiftly and decisively, unencumbered by ASEAN's requirement for unanimity among ten diverse members, inherently threatens ASEAN's claim to be the primary manager of regional security. As veteran Thai diplomat Kobsak Chutikul observed, "The Quad's efficiency highlights ASEAN's slowness. Speed matters in crises, and that's where centrality gets tested, not in summits"<sup>19</sup>.

This external pressure amplifies internal fissures. The Quad-China rivalry doesn't just play out around ASEAN; it plays out within it. Members have vastly different threat perceptions and economic dependencies vis-à-vis Beijing. Vietnam or the Philippines may privately welcome stronger Quad deterrence in the South China Sea, while Cambodia or Laos view such moves as destabilizing provocations against their key benefactor. Forging a unified ASEAN position on Quad engagement, beyond vague endorsements of "centrality," becomes increasingly difficult. China adeptly exploits these divisions, applying targeted pressure or offering inducements to sway individual members. In such scenarios, policies tend to stagnate, leading all parties to settle for the lowest common denominator, thereby undermining ASEAN's cohesive voice. The prolonged and fruitless endeavours to establish a substantial Code of Conduct in the South China Sea exemplify this shortcoming<sup>20</sup>. Does ASEAN's failure to tackle the region's most urgent challenges undermine its claim to being "central"?

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<sup>18</sup> Koga, Kei. "Institutional dilemma: quad and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (2023): 27-48.

<sup>19</sup> Dalpino, Catharin. "ASEAN Centrality under Siege." *Comparative Connections* 21, no. 2 (2019): 47.

<sup>20</sup> Sulaeman, Fadhil Haedar. "ASEAN, the Quad, and China: a security contestation for the Indo-Pacific region." *ASEAN Studies Center UGM* (2020).

The system is destined to encounter a shortfall in capacity. The central role of ASEAN facilitates its capacity to set agendas, mediate conflicts, and provide regional public advantages. Despite this, the ASEAN Secretariat continues to face significant funding challenges. The bureaucratic capabilities of the Quad States are significantly less developed compared to the effectiveness of their diplomatic and defence ministries. Will it prove to be a formidable task to understand, oversee, and navigate the complex landscape of Quad initiatives, bilateral security partnerships, and the internal agendas of ASEAN? Nevertheless, could the significant surge of foreign involvement—irrespective of its benevolence—overwhelm ASEAN's institutional structure, thereby converting "centrality" into an encumbering bureaucracy rather than a means of empowerment? The relationship between the Quad and ASEAN presents a duality of benefits and drawbacks for the concept of ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN stands as a significant entity, endowed with ample financial resources, considerable influence, and a distinguished platform to present its initiatives. Nevertheless, the rival faction is continuously assessing its effectiveness, unity, and proficiency, which negatively impacts its standing. It is recognized in theory yet overlooked at the moments of greatest significance. The achievement of this important concept will depend less on following established methods and more on ASEAN's capacity to address this intricate issue.

#### **FRICION POINTS – WHERE COOPERATION GRINDS AGAINST REALITY**

The Quad and ASEAN have worked together to improve their security connections in response to real dangers and common goals. This partnership has grown up in a weak structure. Capacity-building seminars and group projects deal with short-term problems that could slow down progress, show that the partners have different goals, and check how strong the partnership is. These problems go beyond just technical problems; they show deep flaws in their past, present, and future<sup>21</sup>.

The main difference is how people see risk. The Quad views China's assertive actions as the foremost and potentially disastrous strategic challenge, taking into account its rapid military enhancements, broad maritime claims, and willingness to utilise economic pressure. They endeavour to limit Beijing's capacity to independently modify the regional order through cooperative efforts. For many ASEAN states, however, the threat landscape is broader and more nuanced. While deeply concerned about Chinese actions in the South China Sea, they also prioritize internal stability, transnational crime, economic resilience, and climate impacts. Crucially, China is seen simultaneously as the primary threat and the indispensable economic partner. This creates a cognitive dissonance largely absent in Quad capitals. As Malaysian scholar Kuik Cheng-Chwee notes, ASEAN views China through a lens of "complex interdependence," where confrontation is a last resort<sup>22</sup>. This divergence manifests practically: ASEAN often advocates for dialogue and confidence-building measures within forums like the ARF, while Quad members push for more robust operational deterrence and faster implementation of initiatives like IPMDA.

This leads directly to a clash of pace and process. The Quad, driven by democratic political cycles and a sense of urgency, often operates with a "deliverables-first" mentality. It seeks rapid project rollouts and visible results to demonstrate value to domestic audiences and allies. ASEAN, however, is structurally bound to the "ASEAN Way" – decision-making by consensus among ten sovereign states with vastly different interests. This method is inherently demanding and precise. Reaching a unified agreement among the Quad members regarding the degree, magnitude, or public recognition of a particular collaboration could present significant difficulties. A senior ASEAN official remarked, "Frequently, by the time we achieve consensus on a project framework, the Quad's funding cycle or

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<sup>21</sup> Koga, Kei. "Institutional dilemma: quad and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (2023): 27-48.

<sup>22</sup> Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. "How do weaker states hedge? Unpacking ASEAN states' alignment behavior towards China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500-514.

political priorities have already shifted." This divergence has fostered dissatisfaction: while ASEAN officials interpret the Quad's urgency as a disregard for their core principles, Quad officials view ASEAN's bureaucratic processes as a hindrance.

The considerable deficiency in the institutions' capacity amplifies these challenges. The ASEAN Secretariat facilitates regional responses and engages with international partners, albeit within the limitations of financial resources and technical expertise. The administration, oversight, and synchronization of internal priorities with the complex framework of Quad initiatives, bilateral security partnerships, and various agreements are presently operating at maximum capacity. Ponder the situation where a small town's planning office is unexpectedly tasked with overseeing numerous extensive global infrastructure initiatives. Well-intentioned Quad initiatives may become inundated by an overabundance of activity due to a lack of adequate coordination, manpower, or absorptive capacity within ASEAN. A former coordinator of the AHA Centre has articulated, "Goodwill and innovative ideas alone are inadequate." "The effective utilisation of external partnerships necessitates dedicated personnel, ongoing financial support, and specialised technical knowledge."<sup>23</sup>

China continues to adopt a proactive stance, persistently amplifying its endeavours through the implementation of counterpressure. China employs a variety of strategies, such as crafting diplomatic narratives that characterise the Quad as a "Cold War relic" intended to "divide Asia," implementing targeted economic sanctions or travel restrictions on nations viewed as aligning with the Quad (notably the Philippines in relation to South China Sea disputes), and encouraging ASEAN member states to engage in collaboration through infrastructure financing and favourable trade agreements. Notably, China promotes the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which are positioned as "inclusive" alternatives to the "exclusive cliques" of the Quad. The resilience of the Quad alliance is under scrutiny, while ASEAN's inclination to hedge is exacerbated by this ongoing pressure.

The notion of "inclusivity" is fundamental to the matter at hand. People who take part in Quad debates typically talk about how important "shared democratic values" and a "rules-based order" are. This conversation is important for a number of ASEAN cities, such as Delhi, Canberra, Washington, and Tokyo, but it also presents certain problems. The ASEAN nations that are not democratic might show their displeasure, which could put the group's goal of building good relations with China and its basic principle of not interfering at risk. Can the Quad really support "ASEAN Centrality" and "inclusivity" while still giving a smart critique of an authoritarian China? People often feel uneasy when they think of what the Quad might do when tensions rise.

People are still quite worried about how committed America is. People's opinions of the United States as uninterested have affected the conversation around ASEAN, notably during the Vietnam War and during times when the U.S. was politically isolated. A considerable number of individuals express apprehension regarding the swift withdrawal from Afghanistan and the strategic approach of the Trump administration that emphasizes American interests. A multitude of individuals express apprehension regarding Washington's potential inability to uphold its strategic pivot, influenced by domestic political challenges and international crises such as those in Gaza and Ukraine, notwithstanding the Biden administration's declared dedication to prioritizing the Indo-Pacific region. Is it possible for the upcoming administration to enact reforms? In light of the prevailing uncertainty, the ASEAN nations are engaging in a calculated risk by agreeing to forge a strong and lasting partnership with the Quad. Joko Widodo, the President of Indonesia, has reportedly cautioned his ministers, "Do not take for granted that any partner will maintain unwavering loyalty." Formulating a contingency plan and establishing a backup is of paramount importance. The translation is attributed to Lowy (2023). The complex issue of tackling concerns encompasses emerging threats, inaction, resource scarcity, Chinese

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<sup>23</sup> LIN, JOANNE. "ASEAN and the United States in the Indo-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence?." (2023).

strategies, ambiguous ideologies, and the dependability of American commitments. The grandiose declarations made at the summit tend to obscure fundamental truths and act as a mere representation of those truths. To adeptly navigate the forthcoming uncertainties, the Quad and ASEAN should focus on managing these challenges rather than striving for their complete eradication<sup>24</sup>.

### **FUTURE TRAJECTORIES – THE PRECARIOUS PATH OF ASEAN CENTRALITY**

The rivalry between the US and China exhibits a degree of unpredictability, with crises emerging without warning. Additionally, the combined resilience or vulnerability of the ten ASEAN nations contributes to the ambiguity surrounding future developments in the Indo-Pacific region. Through a thorough analysis of the present circumstances and prospective advancements, it becomes possible to conceptualize the future of ASEAN Centrality within the Quad-ASEAN interplay. All issues persist in a state of ambiguity. The forthcoming years will witness the most pivotal decisions being made in Beijing, Washington, Jakarta, and Naypyidaw. In following section, we will discuss different scenarios regarding the centrality of ASEAN.

#### **Scenario 1: Resilient but Strained Centrality (Pictures Next Five Years)**

ASEAN Centrality endures, but as a concept visibly fraying at the edges. Quad-ASEAN security cooperation deepens incrementally, focused heavily on non-traditional threats like HADR, maritime pollution response, and fisheries management—areas where China’s resistance is lower and ASEAN consensus easier. Initiatives like IPMDA expand functionally but avoid overt military integration. The Quad continues its ritualistic genuflection to ASEAN-led forums, using the EAS and ADMM-Plus as primary announcement platforms. ASEAN, in turn, maintains its hedging dance: accepting Quad capacity-building while boosting trade with China, and carefully avoiding any formal endorsement of the Quad as a strategic counterweight.

Why this persists: It’s the path of least resistance. It requires no radical ASEAN reform, no fundamental Quad policy shift, and allows China to avoid triggering a full regional realignment. ASEAN Centrality remains the "nominal norm," providing diplomatic cover for all sides. As Thitinan Pongsudhirak notes, "ASEAN’s genius is in managing decline gracefully—keeping relevance alive even as power shifts"<sup>25</sup>.

The Strain: Cracks widen. ASEAN struggles visibly to mediate crises (e.g., a major SCS standoff). Internal divisions paralyze responses to Chinese coercion against individual members. Quad frustration grows as ASEAN consensus blocks faster action on critical security tech-sharing. Centrality feels increasingly performative—a stage for great powers rather than the director of the play.

#### **Scenario 2: Erosion – Centrality Undermined**

Imagine a major crisis: a clash near Taiwan involving US and Chinese forces, or China seizing a disputed reef after "provocation." Suddenly, speed and decisive action trump process. The Quad consults rapidly among itself, coordinating naval deployments and sanctions, largely bypassing ASEAN’s consensus machinery. ASEAN, fractured between claimants fearful of abandonment and mainland states fearing escalation, fails to issue a unified statement for days. Beijing exploits the rift, offering security guarantees to Cambodia and Laos while punishing the Philippines.

The Downward Spiral: Trust erodes. Quad nations increasingly prioritize bilateral/minilateral arrangements with trusted ASEAN partners (e.g., US-Philippines-Japan trilateral patrols). Frustrated by

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<sup>24</sup> Duggal, Mahima. "Quad as Asian NATO: A Practical Proposition?." In *Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, pp. 103-123. Routledge, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Pongsudhirak, Thitinan. "Locating ASEAN in East Asia's regional order." *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (2018): 52-56.

ASEAN paralysis, they funnel resources away from ASEAN platforms towards standalone initiatives. China doubles down on its alternative institutions (GSI, GDI), drawing in ASEAN states dependent on its largesse. ASEAN meetings become diplomatic theaters where positions are aired, not solutions forged. Centrality, as a guiding principle of regional security, fades into irrelevance. "ASEAN becomes a spectator in its own region," warns Malaysian analyst Elina Noor <sup>26</sup>.

### **Scenario 3: Adaptation – Centrality Reinvented**

This path demands the most from ASEAN—and offers the highest reward. Facing existential pressure, key members (Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam) spearhead internal reform: relaxing the absolute consensus rule for operational security coordination (e.g., HADR, counter-piracy), significantly strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat's mandate and resources, and crafting a proactive, unified strategy for engaging external powers. The AOIP evolves from a vague vision into a concrete filter: Quad initiatives gain faster traction if demonstrably aligned with AOIP pillars and delivered through enhanced ASEAN mechanisms.

The Shift: ASEAN leverages Quad resources not just for capacity, but to build its own integrated maritime surveillance network or cyber coordination hub, reducing dependency. It brokers structured dialogues between Quad and Chinese officials within ASEAN frameworks during crises. The Quad, recognizing a more capable partner, invests in ASEAN's institutional capacity and defers to its crisis management role. Centrality transforms—it no longer means ASEAN is the sole actor, but the indispensable orchestrator of a networked security architecture. "It's not about ASEAN sitting alone at the head table," argues a senior Singaporean diplomat, "but about ASEAN ensuring the table is set fairly, and everyone knows the rules of the dinner."<sup>27</sup>

The trajectory of ASEAN Centrality remains fluid and subject to change. Disputes often emerge concerning the financial support for a coastal radar station by the Quad, the criticisms from ASEAN regarding China's maneuvers, and the varied viewpoints articulated during discussions. ASEAN has often demonstrated a deficiency in the determination required for revitalization, which is essential for adaptation. In a system where power is always changing, the ideas of erosion and resilience give us different points of view, but in the end, only one will be important.

### **CONCLUSION**

The complicated diplomatic ties between the Quad and ASEAN are going to have a big effect on how things work in the disputed Indo-Pacific area in the future. This complicated interaction shows that working together on security is becoming increasingly common because of clear shared hazards and urgent global problems that need to be solved quickly. Still, ASEAN's goal of not relying too much on one country will always limit what it can do. This dynamic makes ASEAN Centrality a contradictory force field that makes the region's diplomatic relevance grow while also pushing its operational coherence and capabilities to their limits.

There is a clear understanding of the issue. The Quad gives ASEAN important tools, such as sea surveillance and disaster management. It's not just possible for people to work together to make public goods; it's more prevalent, as shown by projects like coordinated HADR and IPMDA. Evelyn Goh said that the ASEAN approach is based on the idea of "omni-enmeshment" instead of just alignment. Because of the current volatility within the country, its strong trading ties with China, and its clear

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<sup>26</sup> Srivithaya, Suraphol. "The QUAD Diplomacy and the New Regional Order in Southeast Asia." *Business and Interdisciplinary Studies ICEBIS2020* (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Koga, Kei. "Institutional dilemma: quad and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (2023): 27-48.

reluctance to get involved in bloc politics, a careful and nuanced strategy is necessary. Japan has dispatched more ships to Vietnam to help the coast guard and has sent more wheat to China. Indonesia is working hard to join the AOIP and is talking to China on nickel. When governments have a lot of power, they typically use this complicated hedging strategy to keep things stable instead of showing any signals of doubt.

So, ASEAN Centrality has a complicated duality. The way ASEAN is set up makes it important at every summit, which builds trust among Quad members. The work that members of the EAS or ADMM-Plus do together greatly improves ASEAN's capacities and shows how the EAS framework can bring people together. The Quad's existence provides a rival power structure: a prominent minilateral organization that operates independently of ASEAN's methods, which are based on consensus and inclusion. Because the ASEAN group isn't very adaptable and doesn't work well together, it might just sit back and watch during crises. The talks over a code of conduct in the South China Sea that are still going on show how dangerous it is to put things off and break things up. Before moving forward, everyone involved needs to have a full discussion.

Instead of putting pressure on the Quad, it might be better to remain patient and stress making decisions on your own. In the area of non-traditional security, which includes things like managing fisheries, keeping computers clean, and making sure the climate is strong, Quad actions must put ASEAN's interests first. Instead than wasting money on bilateral efforts, resources can be used to improve ASEAN's institutions. This means giving more money to ASEAN's crisis response systems to assist them work together better and give the Secretariat technical help. It is very important to follow the rules and schedule that ASEAN has set. The Quad's declared goal of promoting unity is at risk when people promote ideas that go against the majority opinion. It is very important that what you say and do be always in line with each other.

A sense of complacency is the biggest problem for ASEAN right now. To keep something important, you need more than just remembering it. To speed up internal change, we need to take quick and firm action. This means giving the Secretariat a lot more power and money, as well as looking for flexible ways to reach an agreement on how to deal with operational security problems. ASEAN needs to take a clear and consistent stand against outside influences, using the AOIP as a guide to judge the actions of both the Quad and China. To avoid being kicked out, you need to show that you are a good mediator and can handle problems well. Hedging doesn't take away freedom; it gives it more.

Think about the prospective benefits of each option. Working together on well-known public goods like disaster relief, maritime safety, anti-piracy measures, and pandemic preparedness can build trust and show how everyone can benefit, while also making it easier for people to make tough choices. It's important to talk about Track 1.5 and Track 2 in order to deal with complicated problems that most people don't know about. Keeping this delicate balance is important for the stability and growth of the Indo-Pacific region. To achieve the often challenging goal of ASEAN Centrality, everyone must work together, be flexible, and show that they are effective. The Quad should understand that the best way to promote stability in the area is to strengthen ASEAN institutions. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is about to break up even more because of rising tensions between China and the US. In the long run, this setup probably won't help anyone. Southeast Asia is strong because it can keep the peace and stability even when the political situation changes. People who know how to handle the dynamics of group strength, participation, independence, and direction are more likely to be successful.