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## **The Quad and HADR Operations: Prospects for Cooperation with Southeast Asia**

*By Christopher Chen*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Quad leaders met in New York on 23 September 2022 and signed into operation the Guidelines for the 'Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific'. This represents an expansion of the scope of the Quad alliance and opens new prospects for ASEAN and Southeast Asia in this critical area of human security.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Since its [commitment](#) to establish a HADR mechanism to deal with humanitarian challenges in the Indo-Pacific region in March 2022, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States, has accelerated efforts to operationalise this new strategic direction.

These included efforts to formalise guidelines for HADR partnership, indicating a serious attempt by the grouping to boost cooperation with Southeast Asian countries in the planning and preparation for, and response to humanitarian disasters. This presents an opportunity to kickstart meaningful collaboration between ASEAN and the Quad in HADR operations.

### **The Quad Partnership in HADR Operations**

What [began](#) as an ad-hoc grouping known as the Tsunami Core Group that sprang up in response to the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, has, after dissolving briefly for a while, evolved into the Quad to contain the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific. More recently, the Quad partners have added a humanitarian dimension to their concerns, with HADR being one of them.

In May 2022, the Quad [established](#) the “Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indo-Pacific”. Four months later, the Quad partners [signed](#) the ‘Guidelines for the Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific’. These guidelines aim to create a framework for Quad countries to strengthen coordination and improve interoperability and operational synergy during disaster responses.

Quad partners will meet twice a year to share lessons and operational updates and will conduct at least one scenario-based table-top exercise. The partnership will also coordinate HADR operations with the United Nations, international agencies, donors, national and local governments, public and private organisations, and non-government organisations where appropriate.

### **Regional Attitudes Towards the Quad**

The implications of this development are still unclear. Within ASEAN, perceptions about the grouping [vary](#) from country to country. Some may choose to distance themselves from the Quad. There are also [concerns](#) that the Quad will undermine ASEAN Centrality. Furthermore, [questions](#) have been raised about the Quad’s ability to strengthen collective responses and to complement ASEAN’s role in HADR operations.

These questions range from [uncertainty](#) over the Quad’s capacity to sustain commitment and investment in collective HADR responses, to [diverging interests and concerns](#) among the Quad partners. India, for example, is perceived to be mainly concerned with developments in South Asia, given its self-perception as the [main security provider](#) to other South Asian states.

Nevertheless, there are commentators who argue that there is potential for the Quad to work with Southeast Asia to deal with non-traditional security issues such as [health security](#), climate change, and disaster management. In fact, in the [State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report](#), 58.5 per cent of the respondents from ten Southeast Asian countries agreed or strongly agreed that the strengthening of the Quad, “including through practical cooperation, will be constructive for the region.”

### **Early Quad Assistance but More can be Done**

In response to the threat of extreme weather events in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad partners have indicated their [commitment](#) to convene disaster mitigation workshops involving technical experts to build capacity in the region.

At the country level, the Quad partners have longstanding bilateral relations with ASEAN member states as well as the regional disaster management community. Whether bilaterally or through regional processes, they have collaborated with ASEAN countries in efforts to prepare them for disasters and response operations. For instance, [in May 2021](#), as part of its official development assistance programme, Japan provided the Philippine Armed Forces with lifesaving equipment and technical training to enhance its ability to conduct HADR-type operations.

The Australian Civil-Military Centre has also played an active role in building capacity

in Southeast Asia through the hosting of [training seminars](#) and [regular participation](#) in regional HADR forums such as the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific.

All four Quad countries are also regular participants in joint exercises such as the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise.

From these, the foundations for Quad-ASEAN partnership in HADR planning, preparation, and operations are already in place. No doubt, there will be other areas in which the Quad can assist further.

One potential area lies in the development of early warning systems and the provision of technical expertise and training for their operation. A recent [report](#) released by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the World Meteorological Organization warned that half of the world's countries are not protected by multi-hazard early warning systems and have limited early warning coverage to warn of impending disasters.

These countries, including several in Southeast Asia, have disaster mortality that is eight times higher than countries with substantial to comprehensive coverage. The Quad countries can thus, besides providing the necessary technical expertise and training, engage in developing and coordinating better [early warning systems](#) for their partners in the region.

### **Forging a Common Path Amid Shared Vulnerabilities**

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region have many shared vulnerabilities. The [riskscape](#) includes both slow and quick onset disasters such as droughts, heatwaves, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, as well as biological ones like the COVID-19 pandemic. These common challenges incentivise inter-regional partnership in HADR operations.

ASEAN should be willing and ready to work with other entities, especially those that are already partners of the regional organisation. The One ASEAN One Response doctrine, for instance, can be interpreted as ASEAN's normative push for [cooperation with other regional bodies](#), specifically in the field of disaster management and more broadly in other areas of mutual interest.

To foster closer collaboration with ASEAN, the Quad should actively engage with it through existing ASEAN-led mechanisms. This can include [exchanges](#) at the practical level on issues such as maritime cooperation, climate change, and connectivity and infrastructure development.

To this end, joint HADR exercises should remain a key avenue for confidence building. The Quad, in close cooperation with ASEAN, should continue to develop and implement practical steps to deal with humanitarian threats in the region. Quad-ASEAN collaboration in HADR would benefit the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

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