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The Quad and the South China Sea: Making Waves Without Taking Action

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SYNOPSIS

*The Australia-India-Japan-United States partnership known as the Quad makes frequent statements regarding the East and South China Sea and the partners' shared commitment to bolstering the rules-based maritime order. However, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral grouping, AUKUS, has been much more active in the dynamics of the South China Sea dispute than the Quad. **JOHN BRADFORD** and **RALF EMMERS** discuss how the quiescence of the Quad reflects India's differing worldview regarding the optimum nature of a "rules-based maritime order" and its own emerging position as a global power.*

COMMENTARY

The maritime domain is increasingly defined by an era of competition among great powers. This is reflected in the Indo-Pacific by an emphasis on naval power and the establishment of exclusive arrangements – the so-called minilaterals.

The most prominent among them are the US-Australia-India-Japan arrangement known as "the Quad", and "AUKUS" that teams up Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Both are commonly viewed as maritime-centric arrangements to shore up cooperation against a rising China. This is obvious concerning AUKUS, the crown jewel of which is a commitment to base US and British submarines in Australia while transferring the technology necessary to build up a new Australian nuclear submarine force. Yet things are rather different with the Quad.

The Quad and the South China Sea: Talk Unbacked by Action

[Quad statements](#) are replete with references to maritime cooperation and focus on maritime flashpoints, but the actual substance of the Quad's action has remained thin, especially when it comes to South China Sea issues. This is because although all four Quad members are maritime powers, they do not share a common vision for the optimal future of the maritime domain.

Since the arrangement was upgraded to a heads-of-state meeting, the diplomatic language has become stronger, specifically naming the East and South China Seas as areas of collective concern. The grouping is now committed to defending the rules-based maritime order and opposing destabilising or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion.

Yet, despite the repeated statements, the Quad has accomplished very little in the maritime domain. In fact, there are only two examples of concrete Quad activities in the maritime domain: the Malabar naval exercise and the creation of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).



The 24th Malabar naval exercise, held in 2020, involved the four Quad countries' navies and was conducted in two phases: in the Bay of Bengal and in the Arabian Sea. Yet, despite the Quad's annual Malabar naval exercises and the creation of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the Quad has accomplished very little in the maritime domain, especially regarding the South China Sea disputes. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Since 2020, the annual [Malabar naval exercise](#) has been a training event exclusively for the four nations. Yet, India points out that the Malabar naval exercise is not sponsored by the Quad, and the event takes place either in the Indian Ocean, South Pacific, or Philippine Sea, all locations away from disputed waters. Surely, Malabar strengthens the navies' interoperability, but it is not directly oriented towards influencing the dispute dynamics. At its core, it remains an exercise of [naval diplomacy, more a signal](#) than an action.

As for [IPMDA, which the Quad created](#) in 2020, its only accomplishment till today has been to provide data regarding electronic emissions (such as radar, radio, and phone signals) from vessels collected by the commercial Hawkeye 360 satellite system to the SeaVision data management system that was already offered free to regional states by the US government.

The Failure of Interest and Capacity-based Explanations

When national leaders fail to take cooperative action that lives up to their rhetoric, the reasons can often be traced to differences in interests or capacity. In these areas, the Quad members have notable differences.

India and Japan are immediate neighbours of China and both have territorial disputes with the latter. Japan's dispute is maritime whereas India's is not. Australia and the United States are far from China, so their interests are not directly about territorial claims but about the principles involved in appropriate dispute resolution and about ensuring continued access to free and fair use of the seas.

All four Quad members have [economic stakes in the South China Sea](#), but Japan and India are more dependent on its sea lanes than the others. India has the highest international trade-to-GDP ratio among all the Quad members, and its international trade increasingly crosses the South China Sea to reach various East Asian and North American markets. Japan is the most dependent as it relies on South China Sea routes for 83% of its [total energy needs](#) and 20% of its total trade. In recent years, Australia has decreased its dependency on China through diversification and trade with other partners that can easily be routed away from disputed waters. Least dependent is the United States. The South China Sea carries only an estimated 6% of American trade in goods, most of that being with China.

Other differences relate to the members' ability to deploy combat forces into the disputed waters. In this area, the United States, Japan, and India can all project sizeable naval forces into the South China Sea. The Australian navy is much smaller and less powerful, but it maintains a regular presence around the South China Sea. This includes maritime patrol aircraft that are based out of Malaysia and high levels of interoperability with the United States.

Were one to look exclusively at those two factors – interests in the maritime disputes and capacity to influence the dynamics through force – the expectation would be that Japan and India would be the most keen to take hard action against what they see as Chinese unilateralism in the South China Sea. In contrast, Australia should be the most reserved. However, the record of action shows that, in this area, India has been the divergent partner among the four Quad members.

Australia, Japan, and the United States have conducted joint naval exercises in the South China Sea for more than a decade. As far back as June 2011, a trilateral exercise involving the navies of the three nations took place in the South China Sea, utilising ships that had conducted defence diplomacy operations by participating in a Brunei-hosted fleet review. Since then, these partners have established an increasing tempo of exercises in the South China Sea.

The trilateral cooperation has also expanded to activities involving the three nations' coast guards. In a separate development, in June 2023, the Philippine coast guard [hosted a trilateral maritime exercise](#) in the South China Sea with their counterparts from Japan and the United States, while Australia joined as an observer. The persistence of this relationship has even encouraged Philippine president Ferdinand

Marcos, Jr., to suggest the establishment of “[another Quad](#)”, with the Philippines being one of the four members in place of India.

Divergent Views on the Rules-based Order

This divergence among the Quad is not a matter of near-term interests or capabilities. Instead, it relates to assumptions about the long-term future and what “rules-based order” means in differing worldviews. Japan and Australia have made the strategic decision that their best interests lie with bolstering the rules-based order developed by the institutions built after the Second World War and fostered under American leadership. Therefore, their order hinges on a strong United States maintaining something akin to the status quo.

India agrees with the need for rules, but its view of “order” diverges from that of the others. While Japan and Australia rally behind US interpretations of the rules and American leadership, India seeks another path. Foreign minister S. Jaishankar’s [comments at the 2022 Raisina Dialogue](#) pointedly exemplified the difference: “When the rules-based order was under challenge in Asia, the advice we got from Europe is do more trade.... In terms of Afghanistan, please show me which part of the rules-based order justified what the world did there.”

India sees a future where it steps into great power status and assumes a larger role as a leading representative of the Global South. It seeks to balance China by increasing defence ties with the United States without becoming an ally or accepting US leadership. Therefore, India’s refusal to participate in activities that could meaningfully influence the dynamics of the South China Sea disputes is reflective of its intent to manage its relations with China without relying on the United States and to create its own path for its rise.

Conclusion

The Quad is likely to remain a secondary player in the South China Sea. Australia, Japan, and the United States want to engage India and are ready to limit the Quad’s involvement to rhetorical statements while coordinating their actions trilaterally on the South China Sea. This leaves the Quad with few policy options to directly influence the dynamic of regional maritime disputes.

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