



The Quad: One More ‘Minilateral’ Initiative, not an Embryonic Military Alliance in the Indo-Pacific Region

O Quad: Mais uma Iniciativa “Minilateral”, não uma Aliança Militar Embrionária na Região do Indo-Pacífico

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Abstract

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, abbreviated to Quad, comprises Australia, the United States, Japan, and India. Although many think tanks and media outlets have written about recommendations to further this initiative, this essay believes the Quad is only evidence of a rising patchwork of small strategical dialogues within the Indo-Pacific region. The aims here are twofold: (a) to demonstrate the definitions and relevance of the Quad amid the soaring rivalry in the Indo-Pacific; and (b) to grasp this initiative as a “minilateral” grouping, which is settled in a more informal structure than multilateral institutions. In assessing these hypotheses, this research employs a qualitative content analysis of official statements and documents about the Quad meeting and national policies toward the

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Indo-Pacific. A systematic bibliographical review was applied to refine theoretical frameworks and to triangulate sources. In conclusion, this paper infers the Quad is not as ambitious and strong as previous literature claimed. These four members developed divergent interests in the Indo-Pacific; thereby, an alliance against China seems unlikely.

Keywords: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; Minilateralism; Indo-Pacific.

Resumo

O Diálogo Quadrilateral de Segurança, abreviado para Quad, é composto pela Austrália, Estados Unidos, Japão e Índia. Embora muitos *think tanks* e meios de comunicação tenham promovido recomendações para essa iniciativa, este artigo acredita que o Quad é apenas uma evidência de uma crescente rede de pequenos diálogos estratégicos na região Indo-Pacífico. Os objetivos aqui são duplos: (a) demonstrar as definições e a relevância do Quad em meio à crescente rivalidade no Indo-Pacífico; e (b) compreender essa iniciativa como um agrupamento “minilateral”, estabelecido em uma estrutura mais informal que propriamente instituições multilaterais. Ao avaliar essas hipóteses, esta pesquisa emprega uma análise qualitativa de conteúdo de declarações e documentos oficiais sobre a reunião da Quad e políticas nacionais para o Indo-Pacífico. Uma revisão bibliográfica sistemática foi aplicada para refinar referenciais teóricos e para triangular fontes. Em conclusão, este artigo infere que o Quad não é tão ambicioso e forte quanto a literatura anterior alegou. Esses quatro membros desenvolveram interesses divergentes no Indo-Pacífico; assim, uma aliança contra a China parece improvável.

Palavras-chave: Diálogo Quadrilateral de Segurança; Minilateralismo; Indo-Pacífico.

Introduction

This essay aims to understand the relevance of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, abbreviated to Quad, to the current power shifts in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad is an initiative comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. It was revived in November 2017 when officials of these four countries met on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Manila (Miller 2018). Its first configuration occurred in 2007 and lasted until 2008. Many pundits, think tanks, and journalists referred to this initiative as a historical movement towards an embryonic democratic alliance to challenge China’s growing regional influence.





Such a hypothesis for this scenario is based upon two explaining variables: (1) the soaring rivalry between China and the United States within the Indo-Pacific region, and (2) the improvement of diplomatic ties among these four democracies. The quad hence would be an initiative aimed at the coordination of policies in the Indo-Pacific region, which is becoming the world's economic and strategic center of gravity (Cha 2014; Jaishankar 2017).

This paper aims to demonstrate a different hypothesis to assess the relevance of the Quad within the Indo-Pacific region disputes. The main topics to be addressed during this essay are: (a) to show that Quad is not a 'military alliance' and its real configurations are less impressive than what some experts and media outlets propose; (b) to describe the convergences and divergences of the four members of Quad in their conceptions of Indo-Pacific region and in their policies to deal with Beijing; finally, (c) to analyze Quad as part of this 'minilateralist' network of groupings and initiatives that historically exists as a diplomatic interaction within this context; in other words, mechanisms established by small groups of countries which converge in certain issues and are usually settled in more informal structures than multilateral institutions (Jaishankar 2018; Wuthnow 2019).

In assessing these hypotheses, this research employs qualitative methods to collect evidence. Two instruments are applied: (a) a content analysis to find observable implication inside primary sources; and a (b) systematic literature review to refine our theoretical framework and hypotheses. Such descriptive inferences serve to demonstrate how this work fills a gap in the literature.

This action depicted the geopolitical context to be tackled throughout the paper. Inferences produced by content analysis were triangulated to secondary sources. The theoretical framework was developed during the systematic review of literature about the geopolitical disputes within the Indo-Pacific. On Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, secondary sources were used to complement the lack of a considerable amount of Chinese governmental sources translated to English. Research papers published in leading peer-reviewed journals were selected to enhance the confidence in our findings. Likewise, articles from Chinese official-leaning editorial newspapers were used as proxy evidence.

Documents analyzed referred to the national perspective on the Quad. Two sorts of documents were evaluated: official statements on Indo-Pacific national strategies and reports about Quad meetings. The former provides some observable implications to investigate the latter. How a country engages in the Quad is related to its national policy towards the Indo-Pacific.





The four members issue self-reported documents after the meetings, instead of doing it together. Therefore, official statements about Quad meetings were evaluated as primary sources. The idea was identifying how each country: (a) defines this mechanism; (b) ultimate aims; (c) perspectives about furthering the ongoing agenda; and (e) any mention about China to check whether Beijing is considered a rival that sparked the creation of Quad. The period analyzed starts from its revival in 2017.

The motivations that sparked this investigation of the Quad was the observation that this dialogue has a more vivid life inside the media or think tanks summits than the actual achievements of governments. Three groups are considered responsible for this scenario: (a) the alarmist Chinese media led by the *Global Times*, a newspaper with a pro-government editorial stance; (b) the ‘hawkish’ scholars and media outlets which depict the Quad as an embryonic ‘Asian NATO’ seeking to set a comprehensive agenda against growing leverage of Beijing in the Indo-Pacific under the rule of Xi Jinping; and (c) think tanks releasing reports or organizing summits envisaging possibilities to the Quad instead of describing its actual configurations.

Among these groups, the Chinese media outlets are the wariest. The idea of the rise of an alliance against Beijing gained momentum with the Quad; thereby, this initiative is overrated when embedded in a dispute between the United States and China. One can read in these newspapers the Quad described as: an initiative ‘doomed to fail’ or ‘aimed to target China,’ ‘a cornerstone of Washington’s Asia strategy to counterbalance China,’ ‘united front to contain China’ and ‘a threat to ASEAN unity because it could undermine the roles of this organization in regional cooperation’ (Godement 2018; Liu 2018; Long 2018; Zhao 2019). Likewise, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi demonstrated irritation with the Quad calling it “an idea that would dissipate like the seafoam” (Rai 2017).

There are also the ‘hawkish’ scholars, such as Chellaney (2017), who endorses the settlement of a strategic constellation of democracies to contain the challenges that threaten to disrupt stability and impede economic growth in the Indo-Pacific. Such analysts believe that the Quad is a relevant mechanism in a supposedly future dispute between the U.S.-led liberal international order against the authoritarian alternative delivered by China. Unjhwala (2018) wrote that the initiative could make great headway toward containing Beijing’s international projects. These interpretations conclude that geopolitical and security factors or even converging political regimes can lure these four countries into the idea





of grouping against China regardless of the explanatory variable of divergences among national interests and capabilities (Ayres 2019; Rai 2017). Furthermore, during both the 2018 Halifax International Security Forum and the 2019 Raisina Dialogue, panels gathered army officials due to think tanks invitations. Strategic pundits and media outlets reported them as governmental initiatives towards the formalization of a grouping to contain Beijing, although those events were not official initiatives.

These definitions of the Quad need to be confronted due to an ongoing overstretching of this concept. The Quad as a dialogue began to be grasped as the whole network of bilateral and trilateral initiatives involving India, Japan, the United States, and Australia (Jaishankar 2018). Without a clear agenda about its purposes, many aspects were entitled as part of the aims of the Quad. This essay advocates that journalists or pundits who endorsed this common perspective about this subject incur in the imprecision of their research design due to an omitted variable problem. The quad is only another part of the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, which historically comprises many “minilateral” initiatives and where multilateral institutions are deficient in solving regional problems (Green 2014; Wuthnow 2019). In other words, these interpretations are biased to overestimate the Quad and make invalid inferences because (a) this initiative would be considered a unique security-minded dialogue aimed to hedge against Chinese global activities; (b) likewise, the concept of Indo-Pacific would be based on a singular strategic meaning (Chacko and Panda 2019; Mishra 2019; Wroe and Needham 2018; Wuthnow 2019); and (c) this perception also sees this grouping strongly linked to United States’ ambitions and meaning of the Indo-Pacific region since Washington’s idea of a growing competition against China could be replicated in other members (Curran 2018).

The question hence is how much formalized a dialogue could be if it were assumed that each state holds its own national strategy on international engagement. This paper refers to “formalized” as the capacity of an organization to set an agenda, to craft an official charter and bureaucracy, and to be considered a relevant aspect to its members’ foreign policy. Domestic politics debates on foreign policy and divergent perspectives are explanatory variables that could not be dismissed in order to avoid measurement errors when attempting to understand the Quad, once this initiative has never gone further than an informal dialogue without an official agenda (Gyngell 2018; Madan 2017).





The paper is divided as follows: (1) this introduction; (2) analysis on the expansion of the Chinese sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific since the ascension of Xi Jinping to power; (3) description of the real configurations of the Quad to characterize this grouping as part of a tangle of strategies and initiatives proposed by these four countries in the Indo-Pacific region; (4) a study stretching the meaning of the term Indo-Pacific once this concept is crucial to observe convergences and divergences inside the Quad in order to analyze each state's ambitions and perceptions of the geopolitics of this region; and (5) a section with final considerations.

The Enlargement of the Chinese Sphere of Influence: An Assertive Beijing

The rise of China's material capability is impressive. Starting at the country's reform and opening policy, under Deng Xiaoping, between 1978 and 2010, the Chinese economy grew at an average rate of 10 percent per year, when it slipped to the current 6 to 7 percent annually (Naughton 2020). The country reached the position of the world's second-largest economy in 2010 when its gross domestic product (GDP/PPP) surpassed Japan's and today's figures at \$25.1 trillion (Allison 2017; International Monetary Fund 2018).

Since the rise of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, the country has exhibited increased confidence and proactiveness on the world stage. The president has abandoned Deng Xiaoping's prescription for passive diplomacy ("bide time, hide brightness do not take the lead") with his more activist dictum "striving for achievement". Xi has also emphasized "China Dream", China's "great rejuvenation", and a "community of a shared future for mankind" (Wang 2019; Shambaugh 2020).

Xi has also launched the concept of "major-country diplomacy", which means to transform the mission of China's diplomacy from seeking a peaceful environment conducive to domestic development to one that puts expanding China's global reach as a linchpin to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Hu 2019; Zhao 2020). In June 2018, Xi underscored these goals during the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, when he urged the foreign policy cadres to pursue "the efforts to firmly safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests, take an active part in leading the reform of the global





governance system, and build a more complete network of global partnerships” (Xinhua 2018).

To advance major-country diplomacy, Beijing has searched for a security strategy that aims to project influence over the Indo-Pacific region through the employment of its recently acquired economic, political, and military capabilities. In 2013, Beijing launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to link China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia; to the Middle East through Central Asia; and to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Whereas, the “road” aims to connect China with Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean; and with the South Pacific through the South China Sea. It is also a massive project involving the funding and construction of an infrastructure system of roads, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, fiber-optic and communication systems, ports, and airports. BRI encompasses 65 countries and reaches more than 60% of the global population. Estimations indicate that the project will cost more than \$1 trillion to China and, in the last five years, Beijing has already invested more than \$210 billion in it (Hendler 2019; Kuo and Kommenda 2018; Pautasso, Leite and Doria 2017; Zhang, Alon and Latteman 2018).

However, some analysts state that this initiative could trigger undesirable outcomes in vulnerable countries, fostering corruption, and autocratic behavior in these fragile democracies. The *debt trap*, occurs when the states are not able to pay the loans conceded by the Chinese government to arguably consolidate the ambitious infrastructural projects, would drive them to a dependence on China. Beijing already holds most of the debt of many nations along the BRI, such as Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kenya, and Djibouti (Berlie 2020; Fernholz 2018; Mayer 2018).

China has also been steadily increasing its annual defense spending since 2007, reaching \$170.4 billion in 2018, the equivalent of 1.3 percent of its GDP. The Chinese government has been focused on the modernization of the 2 million personnel-strong PLA as a warfighting instrument through the improvement of military professionalism. Furthermore, China has also been developing new capabilities that will enhance Beijing’s ability to project power and to deny foreign regional intervention, namely, unmanned aircraft vehicles, stealth fighter jets, aircraft carriers, and anti-ship ballistic missiles (Defense Intelligence Agency 2019; Economy 2018).

At the same time, China has sought to assert its presence more forcefully in its neighborhood, especially the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Beijing





claims sovereignty over most of the area of the South China Sea through its nine-dash line, which encompasses the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal. It is a major transport hub through which the goods to and from Northeast Asia are shipped, and the area contains reserves of crude oil and gas. The zone is disputed by Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Since 2014, Beijing has been engaged in massive reclamation projects and the construction of artificial islands in at least seven locations in the Spratly Islands and at least three locations in the Paracel Islands (Hendler 2019; Pautasso, Leite and Doria 2017; Turcsányi 2018).

In the document *China's National Defense in the New Era* (The State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China 2019), the Chinese government stresses that “the South China Sea islands (...) are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory” (p. 7). It also remembers that “China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea” (p. 7). The Chinese stance is due to the increasing pressure exerted by the foreign military presence in the region, such as the Quad members, the United Kingdom, and France. Zhang (2019) observes that when it comes to resolving territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Beijing has cautiously approached the use of coercion in the region. The author notes that China relies on military coercion less often the stronger it becomes, preferring to employ unconventional tools such as coercive threats and “gray-zone coercion”. Gray-zone coercion involves physical violence; however, it uses much smaller capabilities than the military coercion. A recent example happened in 2014 when Beijing used maritime law enforcement vessels to ram Vietnamese vessels in response to Vietnam's opposition to Chinese oil rigs operating in the Paracel Islands. Both countries claim sovereignty over the Paracels. Nevertheless, China has occupied the islands since 1974, where it has built military garrisons (housing 1,400 PLA officials), an airfield, and an artificial harbor (Lendon 2019; Zhang 2019).

At the same time, the expansion of the Chinese economic and military clout in the Indo-Pacific creates a deep connection in the security arena between East and South Asia. It also has the goal to secure Chinese sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and displace the US Navy as the predominant navy in the Indian Ocean (Brewster 2019).

The United States is seeking a way to counteract the Chinese assertiveness since the Barack Obama administration (2009-2017). In November 2011, Obama promised to increase U.S. American diplomatic, economic and military presence





in the Asia-Pacific and signaled the U.S. determination to counter the impact of China's rise in the region (Allison 2017). The United States declared that it was not directed to any one country ("China") and identified the five broad and interrelated components of the rebalance: 1) Strengthening and modernizing security alliances; 2) Forging deeper relationships with emerging powers; 3) Engaging more deeply in regional and global institutions to advance regional cooperation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and adherence to human rights and international law; 4) Pursuing a stable and constructive relationship with China; and 5) Advancing the region's economic architecture, such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (McCormick 2016).

After his inauguration in 2017, President Donald Trump officially terminated the engagement policy toward China and opted for competitive policies. The 2018 National Defense Strategy indicated that China would "continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near term and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence in the future" (Department Of Defense 2018, 2). Therefore, the United States has sought to increase its military presence in Asia. Between 2017 and 2019, Washington carried out "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPS) 15 times in the South China Sea (Wu 2019).

On its turn, India fears encroachment on its zone of strategic interest as well as encirclement from Chinese projects in Pakistan. Japan is wary of China's ability to influence the energy supply chains on which East Asia depends and the possibility of the country to use BRI to further push its People's Liberation Army into the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, a move that could destabilize regional security. Australia is concerned that China's project aid could render fragile states more vulnerable to coercion. These shared concerns on the expansion of the Chinese political and military clout were fundamental to the revival of the Quad by the four countries (Gale and Shearer 2018; Herskovitz 2019; Medcalf 2018; Pautasso, Leite and Doria 2017).

Since the rise of Xi Jinping to power, the authorities have systematically silenced human rights lawyers and all manner of peaceful criticism of the government. Many have been forcibly disappeared or arbitrarily detained. Beyond that, the state-controlled media have steadily discredited their work, trying to deter future generations of whistle-blowers and others who seek to challenge state authorities (Roth 2020).





There is a growing concern about what China's domestic crackdown means for international security and the U.S.-led liberal international order. One of the main analysts of China's rise, Yan Xuetong (2019), says that the Chinese leadership should recover the thought of philosophers from China's pre-Qin era (prior to 221 B.C.) who argued that a country should be loved rather than to be feared by other states. The author advocates that China should seek respect from its international counterparts through "humane authority", a crucial component of global power, along with economic and military strength. For Yan (2019), "humane authority requires consistency between a leading state's domestic ideology and the political values it pursues abroad" (p. 53). Thus, the author contends that the international community is put off by China's domestic rule and its assertive foreign policy, which significantly damages its legitimacy abroad and capacity to lead. Yan warns that Chinese officials should abandon their repressive practices at home if they want to "lead by example" in the international arena (Nyrén 2019; Yan 2019).

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Indo-Pacific regional architecture of security dialogues

First and foremost, it is essential to usher to what this initiative is not. In 2017, the Quad returned as a topic inside official circles. At the same time, 'Indo-Pacific' also became a recurring strategic terminology amid the soaring geopolitical tensions and concerns about China's actions along the Indo-Pacific (Choong 2019; Madan 2017). This scenario reinvigorated the argument that Quad is an initiative with an offensive agenda towards Beijing, and its activities would be related to the military potential of these four states to demonstrate interests in regional maritime security issues (Ayres 2019; Grossman 2018). However, the Quad is still not a formal military alliance or even an emulation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) due to the five following aspects:

(a) It is a group without a legally binding treaty; therefore, members are not officially committed to the principle of mutual defense (Kuo 2018). (b) The Quad does not have an official schedule or a formal agenda (Madan 2017). (c) The meetings are not even formalized at a ministerial level (Tweed, Koutsoukis and Scott 2018). (d) The name Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is not institutionalized. Leaders and bureaucracies from the four countries do not refer to this initiative in a singular fashion. For example, the last National Security Strategy of the United





States of America demonstrates the existence of a ‘quadrilateral cooperation’ (White House 2017). Furthermore, Australian and Indian governmental authorities refused to use ‘quadrilateral security dialogue’ to officially name this diplomatic mechanism (Ministry of External Affairs 2019b; Parliament of Australia 2007). Actually, the name Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was coined and widespread by scholars and journalists who envisaged the allocation of India to the already existing Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) between Australia, Japan, and the United States (Lu 2018; Sharma 2010). (e) Likewise, references to this grouping are more often found in academic journals and newspapers rather than in official documents (Curran 2018).

In reference to the last topic, comparing the four statements about those diplomatic meetings is an excellent exercise to notice divergences among these countries (Panda 2018). India, which some scholars and media outlets consider the weakest link of the Quad, prefers a milder reference to the need to ensure respect towards international law than its partners. In the last three statements, New Delhi advocated for an inclusive Indo-Pacific (Panda 2018; Ministry of External Affairs 2018a; 2018b; 2019a). On the other hand, Indian statements have similarities with other countries in terms of concerns with terrorism and the necessity to increase regional connectivity based on transparency and territorial integrity (Ministry Of External Affairs 2018b). The United States, Australia, and Japan have already emphasized democratic values as a pillar of this initiative (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018b; Department of State 2017a; 2018b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017a; 2018b).

The word ‘quadrilateral’ appeared only in Canberra’s and Washington’s statements — an aspect that demonstrates a sort of blockage to classify this dialogue, such as a group initiative (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017; Department of State 2017a; Panda 2018). The initial ‘Quad’ was only used in a document from Washington (Department of State 2019). The United States and Australia were also the only countries to recognize the discussion of political issues involving the Maldives and Sri Lanka — India, notoriously considered as the highest interesting part, averted mentioning it to avoid challenging Beijing (De Silva 2019; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018b; Department of State 2018e; Malik 2018; Ministry of External Affairs 2018b). Furthermore, in 2019, all the statements depicted the ASEAN-led mechanisms as initiatives to be supported to reaffirm the intention to preserve the peace and freedom within the Indo-Pacific region (Department of State 2019; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2019;





Ministry of External Affairs 2019a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018a). Canberra and Washington also reported their support to The Pacific Islands Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association in a moment that Beijing attempts to increase its influence through the Pacific — a region with many states that still recognize Taiwan diplomatically.

Likewise, it is worth mentioning that the Quad is a grouping comprising: a superpower (the United States), a rising power (India), a traditional middle-power (Australia), and a military-constrained economic leading-power (Japan). Therefore, regarding the Quad, an instrument to Washington is an equivocated perspective because, despite being the most powerful country in the group, it is not possible to affirm that they agree on controversial topics such as dealing with Chinese growing regional leverage or regional interests (Ayres 2019; Rai 2017). Inserting Quad into disputes between Washington and Beijing is not only a misinterpretation of Indian, Japanese and Australian perspectives over the issues, but it also overestimates the current capabilities of this initiative by setting an agenda that the officials have not done yet (Curran 2018; Madan 2017; Mishra 2019).

Those misconceptions about the Quad buried the first attempts to formalize this grouping from 2007 to 2008 (Madan 2017). Beginning as an initiative called Tsunami Core Group, it aimed temporarily to coordinate operations of humanitarian relief for vulnerable people and villages affected by the tsunami that occurred in 2004. Many observers believed the maintenance of this arrangement would mean a concert of democracies to balance against China (Jaishankar 2018; Madan 2017; Medcalf 2008; Rai 2017). This vision was considered too provocative by leaders and diplomats, mainly from Australia and India. Beijing was promptly assured that they were not establishing a security alliance after Chinese officials demonstrated concerns over the endorsement by the Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and the then-U.S. vice president Richard B. Cheney to the solidification of this dialogue and on the fact that, in 2007, these four countries joined the naval drills called Malabar exercises that Washington and New Delhi organize annually (Madan 2017; Medcalf 2008; Pattanaik 2016; Rudd 2019). Likewise, this situation hampered the formation of domestic political consensus about the Quad so that Yasuo Fukuda, Shinzo Abe's successor after his resignation in 2007, and Kevin Rudd, who assumed in 2007 the role of the prime minister of Australia, did not show the same enthusiasm for this mechanism (Rai 2017; Rudd 2019; Wuthnow 2019).

Once overlapped those issues, it is important to demonstrate what Quad really is. The best description of the Quad is an association of Australia, India,





Japan, and the United States aimed to facilitate their conversation and diplomatic cooperation. (Ayres 2019; Madan 2017). According to the United States Department of the State (Department of State, 2017a), these four partners gather together because they are “committed to deepen cooperation, which rests on a foundation of shared democratic values and principles, and to continue discussions to further strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region”. However, countries develop different interests and approaches to the Quad once this initiative does not define clear guidelines; hence these four partners only underscore, in each statement, aspects of their interests following foreign policy strategies (Hardy 2019; Panda 2018).

As a matter of fact, this diplomatic arrangement has never gone further than a “less-than-alliance formation” in which these four countries cautiously watch the rise of China’s international political and economic clout and to the consequent redefinition in the global balance of power. However, they were not able to set a unique and sophisticated agenda towards the Indo-Pacific region in this initiative due to constraints imposed by domestic politics issues (Ayres 2019; Jaishankar 2017; O’Neil and West 2019). Furthermore, military meetings among members of the Quad happened only within think tanks summits — official quadrilateral dialogues related to diplomatic instances. Therefore, “suggest that the Quad is an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, or a mechanism aimed at containing China, or to conflate it with understandings of the Indo-Pacific construct assigns far too much strategic gravitas to the grouping at this stage” (Byrne 2019, 18).

A goal achieved by this initiative is demonstrating to Beijing that these four states are able to group up in small forums to discuss geopolitical issues (Curran 2018). The Quad is not as relevant as some media outlets proposed as an institution. Still, it is a good example to observe the maintenance of “minilateralism” as a way of strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, the best way to grasp its real significance is to examine the Quad as part of a matrix of initiatives comprising these four countries (Jaishankar 2018). Although this mechanism does not have an official agenda, its members have developed trilateral and bilateral strategic dialogues aimed to improve their ties in many instances, such as military cooperation, infrastructure projects, and intelligence-sharing (Wuthnow 2019).

Descriptive analyses confirm the historical existence of “minilateralism” in Asia and Oceania once Washington has preferred to engage with its regional partners through a “hub-and-spoke” system since the Cold War (Cha 2014; Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Wuthnow 2019). It is not the case here to explore the reasons





for this evidence. Still, it is an important implication to view the Quad as part of this framework of small initiatives serving strategic ends usually do not move forward in terms of formalization (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002).

For example, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), established in 1954 and formally disbanded in 1977, was the eastern initiative endorsed by the United States that advanced the most in terms of formalization since it was headquartered in Bangkok and hosted military exercises. However, it had very few formal functions, and the official charter did not prescribe sophisticated mechanisms of mutual protection or the constitution of a common military force (Department of State 2017b). This aspect provides a relevant systematic feature of historical Washington's preference to coordinate its policy towards the Indo-Pacific through a bilateral or trilateral mechanism, rather than a multilateral institution, and the continuous idea about establishing a NATO-style organization in Asia and Oceania (Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002; Cha 2014). It is important to underscore that among the reasons that dismantled those organizations was the fact that some states disagreed with the United States' actions in Vietnam and Cambodia. Domestic politics strategies and perceptions played a crucial role in the development of the SEATO (Department of State, 2017b).

The consolidation of this entangled framework of small-scale activities within the Indo-Pacific region is not only sparked by the United States' efforts, but also China and other countries have developed instruments according to their individual need to carve out new diplomatic and security ties without spending excessive capital and time to structure a multilateral organization (Medcalf 2015; Wuthnow 2019). Thus, over the past 20 years, it is possible to infer that "minilateralism" was consolidated as a diplomatic trend within this context once it facilitates dialogues among selected partners. Even so, this aspect does not necessarily incentive the institutionalization of these small forums, preventing countries from setting legally binding activities upon all partners, an instance that could constrain their own strategies (Wuthnow 2019).

Australia, India, Japan, and the United States join different "minilateral" forums that can compete against Beijing in specific issues. This paper underscores a bunch of initiatives into this context. However, bearing in mind that national programs are working concomitantly in the same areas such as the South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity initiative (SARIC) in Australia, the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in Japan or the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in the United States (Choong 2019). The aim here is to prioritize instruments





comprising more than one member of the Quad and only these four states, although they also group with other regional countries such as the United States-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Ministerial Meeting or the Indonesia-Australia-India Senior Officials' Strategic Dialogue (Wuthnow 2019). Moreover, these mechanisms present different degrees of consolidation and ambitions.

Here is a list showing how many initiatives are in vogue amid the Indo-Pacific region geopolitical dynamics:

1. Connectivity and infrastructure: Trilateral Partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific (Australia, Japan, and the United States), Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (India and Japan), and Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group (India, Japan, and the United States) (Department of State 2018c; Ministry of External Affairs 2018e; White House 2018a).
2. Multiple issues: India-Australia-Japan Trilateral Dialogue, the United States-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, and United States-Japan-India Trilateral Meeting (Department of State 2018a; Ministry of External Affairs 2017a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018c).
3. Intelligence-sharing: Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (Australia-Japan-United States) (Wuthnow 2019).

Defining Indo-Pacific region: one question, many answers

The Quad is strongly linked to the concept of Indo-Pacific once all the four members defined that this grouping aims to act in this region. Indeed, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States used the last four meetings to assure their commitment to the preservation of regional freedom and the enhancement of regional security. Likewise, the four countries mean to assure the maintenance of a rule-based Indo-Pacific to focus on mechanisms to develop regional connectivity and economy and to combat the terrorism, cyber-crimes and piracy (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018a; 2019; Department of State 2018d; 2019; Ministry of External Affairs 2018a; 2019a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017b; 2017c).

Each of these four members emphasized the importance of deepening diplomatic dialogues and strategies in order to preserve mutual interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Abe, 2012; Australian Government, 2017, P. 40; Ministry of External Affairs, 2018d; White House, 2017). However, as Bisley (2018), Jaishankar (2018), and Mishra (2019) noticed, a common analytic mistake happens when observers





assume the Quad as a formal initiative setting an agenda related to security issues involving the Indo-Pacific and aggregating shared interests by four supposedly like-minded democracies. In other words, due to geopolitics, the Quad emerges as an important diplomatic initiative seeking to compete with Beijing in many aspects: from investments in infrastructure and the construction of facilities along the Indo-Pacific region to military issues (Huang 2018; Madan 2017; Pant 2017).

In the geopolitical realm, the earliest academic statement on the Indo-Pacific dates back to the work of Karl Haushofer in 1920 (*Indopazifischer Raum*). Since then, “Indo-Pacific” was often used in oral discourse, especially in Australia, which was premised mainly on Canberra’s two-ocean geostrategic imperatives. Nevertheless, until the beginning of the XXI century, the usage of the term was mainly confined to Biology essays. Only recently, the term Indo-Pacific was embraced by international politics studies because this macro-region, in geographical terms, comprehends an area that covers from eastern Africa to western shores of America (Khurana 2019; Pan 2014).

Indo-Pacific has emerged as a strategic terminology in a moment when countries are rearranging their policies and agendas to promptly react to possible consequences sparked by the ongoing increase of security, economic, and diplomatic connections throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans (Medcalf 2018; Phillips 2016).

Its relevance to the global order is manifold. In economic terms: (a) Indian Ocean carries two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo (Medcalf 2018); (b) 50% of the world’s commercial influx goes through the Indo-Pacific along the sea routes (Department of State, 2018b); (c) the three world’s largest gross domestic product are: the United States, China and Japan (World Bank 2019). In demographic terms: (d) the five world’s most populous countries (China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Pakistan) are located there (United States Census Bureau 2019); (e) by 2030, more than 60% of the world’s middle class will reside throughout the Indo-Pacific (Davidson 2018). In military terms: (f) among the biggest fifteen military spenders, in 2017, nine are part of the Indo-Pacific region (the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Canada) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2018). In other words, regional dynamics and rivalries in the Indo-Pacific can potentially trigger consequences worldwide because it “represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world” (White House 2017, 46).

All members of the Quad officially adopted the term Indo-Pacific envisaging to address properly the challenges sparked by changes in this region in which





adequate military strategies and economic and commercial policies are required to protect national interests (Brewster 2018). For Canberra, this macro-region is of primary importance because it encompasses their leading economic partners and the soaring competition among states could hinder Australian international engagement since these disputes between great powers in the region will determine the future of the global order (Australian Government 2017; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018c). New Delhi claims “the destiny of the world will be deeply influenced by the course of developments in the Indo-Pacific region” (Ministry of External Affairs 2018d). Japanese diplomacy believes world peace relies on an Indo-Pacific that values freedom, the rule of law, and free from coercion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017b). Likewise, Washington’s foreign policy has officially considered Beijing as a “revisionist power” which supposedly attempts to coerce neighboring countries and reorder this region to their advantage, besides displacing the United States (Department of Defense 2018; White House 2017).

Nevertheless, do the Quad members understand the boundaries of Indo-Pacific similarly to the geographic definition? Not exactly. A region is a volatile idea based more specifically on political interests rather than in geographical definitions (Hemmer Katzenstein 2002; Pan 2014; Pekkanen, Ravenhill and Foot 2014). Indeed, it is a strategic construction based on the interpretation of policymakers following objectives and their ideas over national capabilities in terms of pursuing a political project or a security agenda in the international arena (Bergin 2018; Le Thu 2018; Phillips 2016). There are systematic patterns historically observed corroborating this assumption, such as the idea of a macro-region called North Atlantic once the United States intended to assure its influence over Western Europe (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific is an imaginary terminology that varies according to one country’s foreign policy; that means there is no such a thing as a universal definition for this region because the meanings and borders are interpreted to fit into a national strategy (Bergin 2018; Gyngell 2018; Hardy 2019; Varghese 2018).

For India, the Indo-Pacific is a region stretching from the African shores to America (Ministry of External Affairs 2018d). Australia defines it as an area “ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia, and the United States” (Australian Government 2017, 1). Japan presents an interesting perspective because it urges the United States to remain involved in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it officially emphasizes the idea of an area connecting Asia to Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017c).





Finally, for the United States, the Indo-Pacific region “stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States” (White House 2017, 45-46).

India and Japan have developed commercial and strategic relations with African countries, and their definitions of Indo-Pacific include Africa (Brewster 2018; Gabriel and Carvalho 2018). Furthermore, New Delhi considers its “Act East Policy” crucial to Indian engagement to the Indo-Pacific (Hardy 2019; Ministry of External Affairs 2017c). Canberra adopted a more restrictive terminology to emphasize a region cored in Australia, demonstrating the primary interest of defending regional influence and seizing new commercial opportunities due to the consolidation of Western Australia as an economic center and diplomatic possibilities with countries such as India (Australian Government 2017; Tyler and Bhutoria 2015; Varghese 2018). For Washington, this concept reveals a strategy to manage China’s growing influence through the establishment of regional partnership and encouraging India, Japan, and Australia to take on a proactive diplomatic role alongside the United States (Bisley and Phillips 2013; Department Of State 2018b; Scott 2018; U.S. Congress 2018).

Managing issues sparked by the rise of China is considered critical for Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region once this country has become an important player in terms of international politics and economy (De Silva 2019; Medcalf 2018; Pattanaik 2016; White 2013). In this respect, many scholars and officials observe such issues as an aspect able to alter the post-Cold War liberal order maintained by Washington and organizations such as the United Nations (Pant and Joshi 2016). Chinese presence and influence in global affairs are not unusually portrayed as a hindrance to the maintenance of international laws and organizations. For some scholars and leaders, Beijing has attempted to carve out a better position in certain instances through the creation or endorsement of commercial, financial or political institutions and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, the BRICS, the New Development Bank, China Union Pay, and the Universal Credit Rating Group (Stuenkel 2016; Wuthnow 2019).

Each of these four countries has its reasons to be apprehensive about this context: (a) India and Japan maintain historical quarrels, such as disputes for territories, with Beijing (Gabriel and Carvalho 2018; Pant and Joshi 2016). (b) All the members of the Quad are somehow wary about the establishment of the BRI because it could strengthen China’s position not only as a leading regional power





but also by expanding its influence throughout the world. In this aspect, New Delhi also complains against the fact that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor would cross the disputed territories of Kashmir (Gabriel and Carvalho 2018; Ministry of External Affairs 2018c). (c) Likewise, these democracies worry that China's diplomatic and economic initiatives could render fragile countries more prone to coercive measures (Gale and Shearer 2018; White House 2017). (d) All of these countries wish to preserve their own interests on the seas. However, Japan and Australia, due to their geographical configuration, rely exclusively on sea lines of communications to trade with other nations making them warier of the expansion of the Chinese navy and the development of military facilities in the East China Sea and the South Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018d). (e) Washington understands that Beijing has pursued economic and military strategies aimed at the consolidation of its influence and the regional displacement of the United States (Department of Defense 2018). Finally, (f) Australia and the United States accuse Chinese organizations of interfering in their domestic affairs (Turnbull 2017; White House 2018b).

However, foreign policy is understood here as a translation of national possibilities, capabilities, and interests in the international arena to a strategy elaborated in accordance with domestic politics outlooks (Bergin 2018; Le Thu 2018; Phillips 2018). Ortega y Gasset once said that each perspective molds different ways of understanding reality (Puy 1983); therefore, visions over the Indo-Pacific region vary as well as ideas about dealing with China.

In this respect, some issues arise: Washington represents a conception of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, which for the United States means a region where four common principles underpinning the international order are safeguarded: 1) Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; 2) Peaceful resolution of disputes; 3) Free, fair and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and 4) Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight. However, this vision is intertwined with its disputes against Beijing. Washington considers that its military advantage vis-à-vis China is eroding and a negative shift in the regional balance of power may encourage competitors of the United States to challenge and subvert the free and open order that supports prosperity and security to its allies and partners (Defense Intelligence Agency 2019; Department of Defense 2018; 2019; Le Thu 2018). On the other hand, Australia, India, and Japan present different approaches to China, demonstrated by developing their own strategies





in order to avoid provoking unwanted responses from Beijing and to maintain solid security and diplomatic ties with Washington (Bisley 2018; Tyler and Bhutoria 2015).

New Delhi, Canberra, and Tokyo analyze this scenario according to their economic, military, and diplomatic resources amidst a soaring rivalry between two leading powers. India and Canberra have many complaints against China about political and security issues, but these countries prefer to emphasize the idea of an inclusive and pragmatic approach towards the Indo-Pacific (Australian Government 2017; Bisle, 2018; Ministry of External Affairs 2018d; White 2013). Likewise, the Indian diplomacy defends an Indo-Pacific based on a multipolar order so that this country could maintain its strategic autonomy in order to define positions and commitments in a context that is dominated neither by Washington nor by Beijing (Chacko and Panda 2019). Although Tokyo shows some interest in pursuing a more assertive position on China's regional influence and territorial claims, the Japanese government has also attempted to reduce tensions with Beijing (Gabriel and Carvalho 2018).

It is worth to remember that: China is the major trading partner of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia and, except for the US, Japan, India, and Australia lack the economic weight to endanger their trade relations with this Asian power (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018d; Simões, Landry and Hidalgo 2018; United States Trade Representative 2018; White 2013); (b) India presents some convergence with China in terms of reforming the instruments of global governance; therefore, it joins, alongside Beijing, initiatives such as the BRICS and the AIIB, in which New Delhi is the second-largest shareholder (Stuenkel 2016; Zhu 2018); and (c) Japan is moving closer to China in the trade as a way to counterbalance the steel and aluminum tariffs imposed by the United States (Lin 2019).

Thus, an important inference in this context is that the terminology Indo-Pacific could not be reduced to a shared vision endorsed by four democracies to refrain China's military, naval and economic influence throughout this macro-region (Gyngell 2018). The idea of the Quad is directly influenced by this context because each of these four countries develops different ways and goals to engage in the Indo-Pacific region, although they agree on certain topics. The question "what is the Quad?" has many interpretations as well as the definitions of the Indo-Pacific region. The following section seeks to analyze this initiative and its capacities among those divergences on how to act regionally and before China.





Conclusion

This paper concludes that: (1) the Quad holds only a symbolic significance among the existing entangled framework of “minilateral forums” in Asia and Oceania because it is the only one that comprises specifically Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; (2) studying the Quad as an institution capable of pursuing a similar status to NATO in the Indo-Pacific region implies in a high degree of uncertainty because systematic features demonstrate that minilateral forums are easily started, but the advancement towards their formalization is less frequent; (3) domestic politics aspects matter in this context not due to a state regime, but for national pragmatic understandings about the international relations and commercial, diplomatic and security issues; (4) the Indo-Pacific does not have a universal meaning based on Geography. Each state defines this region according to its interests and to its idea of where the Quad should act; (5) the Quad is not a United States-led coalition once the other members avoid undesirable consequences; (6) therefore, the attempt to define a joint strategy to act in the Indo-Pacific region is hampered by their different national interests; these four countries demonstrate different outlooks on China and on how to engage internationally, hence the idea of Quad as a military alliance stumbles in domestic political issues; (7) thus, this initiative has a more vivid life inside think tanks or newspapers than among officials and bureaucracies.

It is reasonable to assume that certain think tanks and media outlets envisage a mighty Quad and try to improve the linkages within this initiative. The role of such institutions in promoting new ideas and perspectives to different governmental sectors is well-documented and triggers a debate about the foreign policy decision-making process. However, these visions about the Quad could be described as ‘wishful thinking’ since China’s encirclement goes against pragmatic understandings of each member. Convergences on these states’ grievances against Beijing’s assertive international engagement are an element that should not be dismissed, but their divergences on the idea of Indo-Pacific and their ways to cope with China are also relevant to understand the real capacities of the Quad.





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