



Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Cooperation

The View from Southeast Asia

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with an introduction by the Hon. Marise Payne

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the minilateral in strategic affairs is not a recent one. The Quad, with members Japan, India, the United States, and Australia, is one such minilateral in the Indo-Pacific region, in a veritable alphabet soup of minilateral arrangements regionally and globally.

For smaller nations who would neither seek to be major powers nor choose between them, in a significantly complex strategic environment the actions and engagements of minilateral members can have consequential impacts on neighbors and partners. In this context, under the auspices of the Hoover Institution's Global Policy and Strategy Initiative, led by Annenberg Distinguished Visiting Fellow Admiral James O. Ellis Jr. (ret.), three scholars from the ASEAN nations of Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam have responded to a question set that seeks to explore potential Quad activities from the perspective of leadership of the activity, the nature of the activity itself, the location of the activity, and the likely reaction of Southeast Asian states to Quad activity broadly.¹

The scholars provide a fascinating comparison of national perceptions and attitudes, written from the reality of a highly disrupted world order and what that view looks like to ASEAN partners.

I have been closely observing and supporting the work of the Quad for many years. Having had a seat at the table as Australia's Foreign Minister at the first in-person meeting

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of Quad ministers held in September 2019, I have participated in multiple Quad ministerial engagements and continued to watch its development in recent years. In 2019, that first meeting of ministers strongly reiterated our shared commitment to ASEAN centrality in the region, our focus on complementing ASEAN's critical role, and our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As the Quad advances its regional maritime security framework, most recently by launching the Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration, there remains an established assumption that Quad members must be sensitive to the concerns of regional actors in Southeast Asia regarding maritime cooperation. Hoover Institution Visiting Fellow Arzan Tarapore noticed that these perceived concerns are usually assumed and should be interrogated. So, as a first step, Tarapore convened a small group of in-region experts to examine how the nations of Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia perceive, evaluate, and react to various configurations of maritime security cooperation driven by the Quad and its members.

In our scholars' valuable contributions, each country's national interests are effectively at the top of their lists in response to the question set, as would be expected. They do, however, vary in subtle ways, based on the contemporary political and strategic circumstances in which each of the three countries finds itself. Considered pragmatism is to the fore in all three, not surprising in countries that are endeavoring to maintain a fine balance amidst great power rivalry.

There are shared sensitivities in response to the question of who leads, on the nature of activities that might be welcomed and where such activities would preferably occur, with some differentiation articulated between each scholar's contribution. On the question of how each nation might respond to Quad activities, the three assessments are again rooted in national interests, however with variables within those.

There are common national interests evident across the writings of each scholar. Our writers suggest that activities that are seen as capacity building with practical benefits for our ASEAN partners, which contribute to the collective stability of the region, and which may include regional non-Quad partners, would likely be viewed through a broadly positive lens. Logically—and this is integral to the effectiveness of the Quad's approach in the region—proactively building the value to regional partners of an activity, for example in areas such as maritime domain awareness, cyber domain activity, and navy-to-navy maritime cooperation, and activities that build regional cooperation will be more welcome. In my experience, this has been important to the development of Quad activities and continues

to be so. External perceptions of Quad activities, including from other ASEAN members and from major powers, for example, are also cited as relevant to a country's process of considering the value of such activities.

There is also a focus across the papers on the question of strategic balance in relation to potential Quad activities. It is described in two of our papers as being calculated across substance versus signaling. Both of our scholars from Vietnam and Singapore place emphasis on this aspect of strategic balance. Essentially, activities that might be led by different Quad members across time, and events that add value (for example, build cooperation or capacity), are seen as giving substance to minilateral engagement and are less likely to send signals about alignment or strategic tensions and therefore more likely to be welcomed within the region.

It is also interesting to look at long-term existing activities in the region, from exercises held over many years under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (Singapore, Malaysia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia), such as Bersama Lima and Bersama Shield, to multiple bilateral and trilateral engagements between individual ASEAN partners and various Quad members, to field-based exercises held under Australia's leadership, often with the United States, such as the recent air combat-training exercise Pitch Black and Talisman Sabre. Talisman Sabre is a large-scale combat-focused field training exercise, involving nineteen nations and 35,000 military personnel in 2025. Indonesia and Singapore are among the participants, and Vietnam is an observer. It is a regular, valuable major exercise activity, building capability and awareness, and strengthening relationships across the Indo-Pacific. It meets many, if not all, of the criteria outlined in our three contributions for an activity that adds significant value regionally, adds to capability building, involves regional partners, and drives a focus on stability and cooperation.

We thank our three scholars, Le Hong Hiep, Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma, and Sarah Teo, for their valuable contributions and look forward to continuing the conversation on Indo-Pacific maritime security cooperation through the Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) Initiative.

The Hon. Marise Payne
Distinguished Visiting Fellow,
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THE VIEW FROM VIETNAM

Le Hong Hiep

INTRODUCTION: THE BASIC VIETNAMESE LENS

Vietnam's approach to Quad-led maritime security cooperation defies a simple support-or-opposition binary. Hanoi does not judge initiatives by whether the Quad undertakes them, but by how each affects Vietnam's security, strategic autonomy, and relations with China. Its response is shaped by three interacting variables: who leads an initiative, what activities it involves, and where they take place. Together these determine both the practical benefits Vietnam can extract from cooperation and the political costs it may incur.

This reflects Hanoi's post-Cold War strategy of diversification and multilateralization, anchored in strategic autonomy. The goal is to balance all major powers while avoiding dependence on, or apparent alignment against, any one of them, a logic sharpened by intensifying US-China competition. Vietnam's "Four No's" defense policy—no alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign bases or use of Vietnamese territory against third countries, no use or threat of force—embodies this philosophy. Yet Hanoi insists these are not absolute constraints. The 2019 Vietnam Defence White Paper's "one depend" principle allows Vietnam to build "necessary and appropriate" defense relationships depending on circumstances, giving Hanoi considerable flexibility while preserving its independence.

Vietnam has, in fact, steadily deepened maritime and defense ties with all four Quad members. Japan is a leading provider of maritime capacity-building assistance; India is an increasingly significant defense partner through naval exchanges and submarine rescue cooperation; Australia has expanded cooperation in maritime security, peacekeeping, and defense education; and the United States has substantially boosted support for Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and coast guard capabilities.

The harder question is whether Hanoi is equally comfortable with cooperation explicitly branded as Quad activity. Here, Vietnam's concern is less about substance than signaling. It welcomes initiatives strengthening maritime governance, safety, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but grows cautious when activities appear designed to counter China, resemble alliance building, or risk drawing Vietnam into major power confrontation. General Secretary To Lam's 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue address captured this: Vietnam welcomes transparent contributions that respect international law and

ASEAN centrality but warns against initiatives that divide the region into competing blocs. In other words, Hanoi's core concern is the geopolitical meaning attached to cooperation, not the cooperation itself.

WHO SHOULD LEAD?

For Vietnam, the identity of the lead country matters almost as much as an initiative's substance. Hanoi differentiates among the four Quad members according to their political signaling, relationship with China, operational capabilities, and effect on Vietnam's own balancing act. It generally prefers cooperation that looks functional rather than geopolitical—activities led by a single member or a flexible “Quad-minus” grouping attract less scrutiny than those explicitly badged as Quad initiatives.

Among the four, India is arguably the most suitable lead. Vietnam-India ties have deepened considerably, and India occupies a distinctive strategic position: Despite unresolved border disputes, Beijing does not regard New Delhi as its principal maritime challenger in East Asia the way it views Washington, Tokyo, or Canberra. India-led initiatives would therefore likely generate fewer political repercussions for Hanoi. India's chief drawback is capability, given that its navy still lacks the forward presence and institutional reach in Southeast Asia that others enjoy, making it the most politically acceptable but not always the most operationally capable leader.

Australia is probably Vietnam's second preference. Canberra enjoys high strategic trust and offers pragmatic, ASEAN-friendly cooperation with real capabilities in surveillance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and multinational exercises. But its close US alliance means Beijing is likelier to read Australian-led activity, especially near the South China Sea, as an extension of US strategy, which may temper Hanoi's enthusiasm somewhat.

Japan has arguably contributed more consistently to Vietnam's maritime capacity than any other partner, financing coast guard vessels and law enforcement training. Yet Japanese leadership carries its own sensitivity: Beijing increasingly views Tokyo as integral to the US alliance system in the Western Pacific, so Japan-led South China Sea activities may attract more Chinese scrutiny than comparable Australian-led ones.

The United States is both Vietnam's most valuable maritime partner and its most politically sensitive one. No other Quad member matches American capabilities in surveillance, logistics, and power projection, and US assistance has substantially strengthened Vietnam's coast guard and maritime awareness. But precisely because Sino-American

rivalry defines the region's strategic environment, US-led initiatives carry the strongest signaling risk—raising the specter of Chinese diplomatic pressure or economic retaliation should Hanoi participate too visibly, especially in the South China Sea.

Overall, Vietnam's ranked preference runs India, Australia, Japan, and United States. However, this is not rigid. Different activities and locations call for different leaders. The most effective model would be flexible and rotating, with each Quad member leading initiatives suited to its comparative advantage, while partners like Vietnam opt in selectively. This would make better use of the members' diverse capabilities and reduce the impression that Quad maritime cooperation is a fixed anti-China coalition, significantly lowering Hanoi's political costs of participation.

WHICH ACTIVITIES ARE MOST AND LEAST PROVOCATIVE?

Vietnam distinguishes activities not by whether they have a security dimension but by whether they are perceived as capacity building or as collective deterrence. It welcomes assistance that improves its own ability to monitor and enforce maritime rights under international law, while remaining wary of anything resembling joint military preparation against China.

Least sensitive are activities centered on maritime governance and capacity building: maritime domain awareness; information sharing; coast guard cooperation; search and rescue; HADR; cooperation against illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; legal dialogue; logistics; and professional military education. These already anchor Vietnam's bilateral cooperation with each Quad member and align with its emphasis on UNCLOS and nontraditional security. The Quad's own evolving agenda—such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the new Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC), and information fusion—fits comfortably within these preferences, since it is framed around regional public goods rather than offensive capability.

Even so, acceptability still hinges on who leads and where activities occur; an identical MDA program might be welcomed under Indian leadership in the eastern Indian Ocean but viewed very differently under US leadership in the central South China Sea.

Exercises present a graduated picture. Tabletop exercises, staff talks, and technical interoperability drills are generally uncontroversial, framed as professional exchange. Field training exercises are more ambiguous, acceptable when focused on HADR, search and rescue, or logistics, but Vietnam grows markedly more cautious toward high-end combat exercises such as live-fire drills, antisubmarine warfare, amphibious assault

training, and carrier operations, which carry strong alliance-like implications. This is not opposition to deterrence per se: Hanoi actively builds its own deterrent capacity. The issue is whose deterrence Vietnam appears to serve. It prefers strengthening its own resilience to being seen as slotting into another country's regional military strategy, a distinction that also governs its approach to intelligence sharing, where MDA-focused exchanges are welcome but coalition-targeting architectures are not.

WHERE AND IN WHICH DOMAIN?

Geography determines strategic sensitivity. Activities outside the South China Sea—for example, in the eastern Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, or Malacca Strait approaches—are least sensitive, which is partly why the Quad's decision to give the IPMSC an initial Indian Ocean focus is politically astute. Activities in international waters are likewise easier to justify, as consistent with freedom of navigation and UNCLOS, than those in a state's territorial sea, where Vietnamese sovereign approval and control become paramount.

The South China Sea is the hardest case, though Hanoi's stance here is nuanced rather than blanket-restrictive: Carefully managed search and rescue, coast guard exchanges, and humanitarian cooperation may remain acceptable, while contested feature operations, freedom of navigation patrols tied to US-China rivalry, or high-profile multinational deployments generate much greater sensitivity. Leadership and geography also interact. For example, an Indian-led coast guard exercise in the southern South China Sea would likely be more manageable for Vietnam than a comparable US-led activity near the Paracels or Spratlys.

This logic extends across domains: Cyber, digital infrastructure, and legal cooperation are low sensitivity; air operations, closely linked to surveillance and escalation, are higher sensitivity; and naval activity sits in between, with patrols and search-and-rescue more acceptable than warfighting exercises.

CONCLUSION: VIETNAM'S LIKELY REACTION

Vietnam's response will remain selective, pragmatic, and case by case. Hanoi neither embraces the Quad as a bloc nor rejects its initiatives outright. Cooperation is most likely when framed as a regional public good rather than geopolitical competition, when it complements rather than replaces ASEAN-centered mechanisms, and when it builds Vietnam's own capabilities rather than folding it into another power's strategy. Under these conditions, Hanoi could become a considerably more active partner in MDA, coast guard modernization, information sharing, HADR, cyber resilience, and defense

education, while generally preferring bilateral or minilateral framing over explicit Quad branding.

Leadership and geography will continue to shape participation: India-led initiatives carry the lowest signaling cost; Australia and Japan remain strong options in their areas of comparative advantage; and US-led activity, while operationally the most valuable, will require greater caution, especially near the South China Sea. Vietnam is highly unlikely to accept anything resembling foreign bases, rotational force prepositioning, or coalition warfighting, all of which would contradict the “Four No’s.”

For the Quad, the lesson is to minimize unnecessary geopolitical signaling: Build a flexible, rotating leadership menu of functional, transparent initiatives grounded in international law and ASEAN centrality, from which Vietnam and other partners can opt in selectively. The objective should not be to enlist Vietnam into the Quad as a bloc, but to expand practical cooperation in ways that respect the strategic autonomy that remains the cornerstone of Hanoi’s foreign and defense policy.

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THE VIEW FROM INDONESIA

Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma

NONALIGNMENT AS A SAFEGUARD

When international experts ask whether Indonesia has more incentive than ever to pursue closer maritime cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, abbreviated as the Quad—the informal strategic partnership among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—they may be asking the wrong set of initial questions. Their analysis often begins by identifying the benefits Indonesia could gain from engagement with the grouping.² In Jakarta, however, policymakers tend to start elsewhere, with the risks and costs such cooperation might entail.

In Indonesia’s usual mode of practice, risk perception is the first door through which security cooperation initiatives are assessed, especially those with geopolitical implications.³ Only after the risks are deemed manageable do policymakers seriously consider the potential benefits of engagement. For the large part of the past two decades, the gatekeepers of this practice have been the custodians of Indonesia’s free and active

principle residing in the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, schooled in a deep-seated wariness of alignment shaped by Indonesia's experience as a strategically located postcolonial archipelagic state.⁴ Any attempt to explain Indonesia's long-term response to strategic unilateralism in the context of great-power rivalry must begin with these enduring diplomatic traditions. The *bebas aktif* (independent and active) doctrine has historically acted as a risk filter, shaping how Jakarta evaluates external security initiatives.

Here is a caveat, though. Under President Prabowo Subianto, who was elected in 2024, that "gatekeeping" function has basically changed hands.⁵ While Indonesia's increasingly pragmatic and deal-oriented approach had already become evident under President Joko Widodo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained an important institutional filter through which security proposals were evaluated. Under Prabowo, decision-making has become more centralized around the presidency, with foreign and defense policy increasingly managed in tandem.⁶ Consequently, the screening of external proposals is conducted less through the traditional diplomatic gatekeepers and more through a presidential calculus that places greater emphasis on immediate material returns than normative wins. What ultimately shapes this presidential calculus remains an open debate. Early indications suggest an outlook that is strongly oriented toward great-power politics, informed by pragmatic thinking—though the intellectual influences behind President Prabowo's worldview remain difficult to establish—and attentive to the imperative of regime stability. Regardless, the result of the shift is a Jakarta that is hard to predict yet, to an extent, "more open" to considering unconventional proposals than in the old days when policymakers were more tightly constrained by familiar scripts such as ASEAN centrality.

THE OLD GATEKEEPERS

The instinct to place risk and cost assessment at the forefront of strategic decision-making did not emerge out of nowhere. It was shaped by Indonesia's experience as a country situated between two oceans and, throughout much of its modern history, between competing spheres of influence.⁷ From the early postindependence period through the Cold War and into the contemporary era, Indonesian policymakers have drawn a consistent lesson: A close alignment with one superpower can invite punishment from the other, while dependence on any single patron creates vulnerabilities of its own. The arms embargo placed by the United States following the East Timor crisis remains widely cited in Jakarta as a reminder that even close security partnerships are ultimately subject to political decisions beyond Indonesia's control.⁸

It is from such experiences that Indonesia's enduring caution toward alliances emerged. Nonalignment emerged not merely as an ideological preference but as a safeguard for

sovereignty. It enabled Indonesia to avoid being drawn into the rivalries of the Cold War, preserve autonomy in pursuing its own security and economic policies, and manage competing political currents at home without allowing external relationships to evolve into asymmetrical dependencies. These objectives came to define the practical expression of Indonesia's *bebas aktif* (independent and active) doctrine, which has long sought to reconcile strategic autonomy with active international engagement.

The same instinct was evident in my engagement with Indonesian officials regarding proposals for minilateral cooperation in the late 2010s and early 2020s, including the Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral, which was then widely regarded as part of the broader wave of middle-power minilateral initiatives gaining traction at the time.⁹ The prevailing preference was for issue-based cooperation rather than bloc-based arrangements, and for flexible partnerships that avoided entangling Indonesia in great-power competition. At its core was a desire to preserve Indonesia's position as an inclusive and independent broker rather than a participant in rival strategic camps. Although operational agencies such as the Indonesian navy and coast guard were generally more willing to engage in discussions on practical cooperation and specific functional tasks, foreign policy decision-makers, particularly within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tended to evaluate proposals through the lens of their broader geopolitical implications and second-order effects.

THE PRABOWO SHIFT

What has changed now is who sits atop this structure. The Prabowo administration has deliberately moved away from institutional orthodoxy toward a leader-driven and transactional approach to foreign policy. In less than two years, Indonesia has joined BRICS, signed on to Washington's Board of Peace, concluded a trade agreement with the United States that exchanged limited tariff gains for deeper commercial and strategic commitments, renewed a security pact with Australia, deepened dialogue mechanisms with Beijing,¹⁰ and courted Moscow. While each of these decisions carries its own logic, the common thread is better understood less as a coherent doctrine than a pragmatic instinct to keep all major powers within reach. President Prabowo has demonstrated a willingness to engage, accommodate, and make selective concessions where he perceives tangible benefits or where doing so helps avoid unnecessary tensions with key partners.¹¹ For the screening of minilateral initiatives, this matters. The question is no longer primarily whether a proposal compromises Indonesia's commitment to nonalignment, but what concrete returns it delivers, what opportunities might be lost by rejecting it, and which superpower Prabowo perceives he might antagonize if Indonesia says no to making peace and concessions. Values, democracy, and rules-based-order language, which once lent such initiatives their legitimacy, appear to carry far less weight than deliverables.

READING THE QUAD

If the Quad seeks to drive greater maritime security cooperation with Indonesia as a mini-lateral grouping, the most provocative arrangement, at least under Indonesia's traditional mode of strategic practice, would be one in which the Quad explicitly brands itself as a counterbalance to China. For Indonesia, associating with such a label means accepting its geopolitical association, precisely the type of risk that the first filter is designed to screen out. Traditionally, this concern has often been expressed through demands that any new arrangement pass the "ASEAN centrality test" and demonstrate compatibility with existing regional architectures.¹² Under President Prabowo, however, such objections may prove less decisive if engagement is pursued through personal channels and accompanied by sufficiently attractive material incentives.

The least provocative arrangements are those that do not visibly bear the imprint of great-power rivalry. Indonesia has generally been more comfortable with the gradual accumulation of bilateral partnerships than with overt strategic groupings. In the near term, the most politically viable pathway remains the stacking of bilateral building blocks. Over the longer term, formats that visibly involve fellow regional and middle powers, particularly those not perceived as directly adopting an anti-China posture, are likely to travel much further. Most importantly, a Quad-sponsored initiative repackaged under a neutral, functional banner may be acceptable in circumstances where formal association with the Quad itself would not be.

Indonesia's past record reflects many of these instincts. Jakarta rejected the US 2004 Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), arguing that responsibility for securing the Malacca Strait rests primarily with the littoral states.¹³ It also declined to join the Singapore-based Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), preferring to retain greater control over maritime information sharing and security governance as Southeast Asia's largest archipelagic state.¹⁴ But it sustains the littoral-led Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) and, since 2014, has hosted the inclusive and noncombatant Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK), bringing together naval vessels from the United States, China, Russia, India, and other countries in the same forum.¹⁵ Initiatives perceived as diminishing the authority of littoral states or privileging external powers tend to encounter resistance, whereas regional and genuinely inclusive arrangements are far more likely to gain Indonesia's support.

If the question is narrowed to which of the four is best placed to sell such cooperation to Jakarta today, the answer is somewhat counterintuitive. The United States comes first. Because the administration appears to treat superpower proximity as insurance and Washington as the larger and most consequential near-term variable,¹⁶ a concrete

American offer now may gain a hearing it would not have had a decade ago, though the catch is that a US-pitched entry risks arriving bundled with Trump-era demands on spending and alignment that Jakarta might not be ready for.¹⁷ Australia and Japan come next. As the natural near neighbor, a Canberra that speaks the region's language, under the current government, is among Indonesia's more comfortable partners.¹⁸ Tokyo sits comfortably as a trusted development partner more than a security patron, though recent efforts and nascent ambitions for a more active regional security role under the current Japanese government could provide momentum in defense ties and dialogues.¹⁹ India occupies a more complicated position; it is values-aligned and a fellow Global South voice but can also pose as a competitor, with overlapping needs and requests and not yet positioned to deliver what Indonesia wants. It is welcomed bilaterally more as a vendor for its platforms than a provider of public goods.

On the operational side, the least controversial forms of cooperation remain noncombat and nontraditional activities. Based on my interactions with officials, these include maritime domain awareness and information sharing, particularly to support efforts against illegal fishing, smuggling, and trafficking, as well as disaster relief, capacity building, and support to improve fishery and marine resource governance and infrastructure. Data and surveillance coordination initiatives in the Quad could fit with what Indonesian officials have long said they can support. Navy officials that I have engaged with tend to want precisely this kind of information-sharing mechanism against smuggling and undersea threats. The complication is that Indonesia, as a large maritime nation, is also mindful of its status and strategic self-image. Officials will want any fusion cell based in-country and any information-sharing network to run on Jakarta's schedule, sharing what Indonesia decides to share, when it decides to share it. The framing and packaging of any of such arrangement matters, because the perception of handing over Indonesian maritime data to major powers, or even appearing to do so, touches on something deeper than bureaucratic caution. That perception, fairly or not, evokes a sentiment that Indonesia is surrendering important national data to foreign hands.

To build familiarity without implying alignment, low-profile expert exchanges and observer schemes offer a useful starting point. A tabletop exercise, with the right combination of countries and as inclusive as needed, can be entertained so long as the specific nontraditional issue of common concern is identified and agreed upon. On the far side is anything that reads like warfighting bloc integration, such as large field exercises and logistics networks that create the perception of staging and sustaining arrangements for a future contingency.²⁰ My sources were near-unanimous that combat-related activity in an exclusive bloc setting is implausible, and several warned that interoperability itself, by binding Indonesian forces to a single order of battle, is a barrier rather than

a benefit. President Prabowo's deal-oriented approach may nevertheless make him more receptive to politically sensitive forms of cooperation, including hosting arrangements, maintenance facilities, and logistics access, that previous foreign-policy gatekeepers would have approached with considerably greater caution.²¹ The key condition is that such cooperation delivers tangible returns aligned with the administration's priorities, particularly technology transfer, local manufacturing, and industrial development.

Geography matters too. Anything pointing toward the contested waters of the South China Sea invites China's scrutiny and protest, something the regime would rather avoid unless there is a visible and urgent threat that triggers a strong reaction at home.²² That caution extends to commercial arteries like the Strait of Malacca, where a visible external military presence would still touch a nerve, given how critical the route is as a lifeline for East and Southeast Asian economies. The Indian Ocean is easier to accept, though it is hardly an urgent Indonesian interest, and certainly not one Jakarta would spend to cover on its own. By invitation, at Indonesia's own pace and on its own terms, activity within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) may be feasible. The hardest line is any initiative requiring long-term concession of access to its territorial waters.

The underwater domain is where need and wariness collide. Out-of-battery Chinese survey gliders keep surfacing in Indonesian waters, most recently near the Lombok Strait in 2026, gathering data as useful for submarine warfare as for research, which is exactly why sharper awareness appeals to Jakarta.²³ Security issues regarding undersea cables raise the same anxiety over a real capacity gap, though they are not the most imminent of concerns.

CONCLUSION

So how will Indonesia respond? For now, quiet nonobjection is the most the grouping can expect. Jakarta is unlikely to endorse the Quad or accept any publicized, sensitive commitment that marks it as bound to the bloc, including becoming part of coordinated logistics and resource mobilization or an intelligence-sharing network. A concrete but sensitive offer would realistically meet a divided response. At Prabowo's level, it might be waved through and followed up, while at the bureaucratic level, the *bebas aktif* custodians process it cautiously, steering the proposal toward an outcome that neither kills nor embraces it (e.g., sending junior officials to talks), letting the cadence lapse.

Beneath that surface, more is available than the public posture implies. Selective bilateral deepening will continue. Participation in functionally named, de-risked products on maritime domain awareness, disaster response, and countering illegal fishing are plausible. Even sensitive forms of concessions (e.g., access) cannot be ruled out

if the incentives are sufficiently attractive and the packaging is discreet. But because screening now runs through a personalized, deal-driven center rather than institutional consensus, Indonesia's cooperation can be both more reachable and more reversible at the same time. For the Quad's planners, the lesson is not that the door is open, but that it now swings on a different hinge.

Finally, that leaves the question of the Quad's own future. Will it remain a genuine US priority?²⁴ Will the grouping choose to stay exclusive, refocusing on strategic mobilization among the four and deprioritizing the public goods and capacity-building agenda that has, so far, done little to build operational deterrence against conduct in the Indo-Pacific that flouts international law?²⁵ If it moves that way, Indonesia will quietly appreciate the grouping while keeping its distance.

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THE VIEW FROM SINGAPORE

Sarah Teo

INTRODUCTION

Maritime security has become an increasingly prominent pillar of Quad cooperation.²⁶ Recent initiatives suggest that collaboration in this domain will continue to expand.²⁷ As the Quad's maritime agenda evolves, a salient question is how Southeast Asian states might respond, particularly as future initiatives may involve regional partners directly. This question is also relevant given lingering concerns that a more active Quad could have implications for ASEAN centrality, notwithstanding the reassurance provided by the "Joint Statement on Cooperation with ASEAN by the Quad Foreign Ministers" issued in July 2026.²⁸

Against this backdrop, understanding how Southeast Asian states might react to enhanced Quad maritime security cooperation is of considerable importance. Focusing on Singapore, this article assesses the country's potential responses to a more active Quad maritime security agenda. It begins by examining Singapore's perspectives on the evolving regional security architecture, as they are expected to inform its potential responses. These responses are likely to vary according to three factors—specifically, the actors involved, the nature of the activities undertaken, and the location in which they are conducted.

SINGAPORE'S VIEWS ON THE EVOLVING REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

For Singapore, the “real strategic question” facing the region is the state of China-US relations.²⁹ Singapore’s overriding objective is to preserve a stable regional order that prevents strategic rivalry from escalating into confrontation.³⁰ In this context, Singapore welcomes initiatives that promote inclusive dialogue, “nonconfrontational” activities, and a rules-based order underpinned by international law.³¹

Consequently, Singapore has adopted a pragmatic and open approach toward emerging security arrangements such as the Quad. While acknowledging that the Quad may be perceived as provocative by China, Singapore’s policymakers have maintained that new arrangements should be assessed based on whether they contribute constructively to regional peace and stability.³²

A persistent theme in Singapore’s position is the importance of ASEAN centrality and an inclusive regional architecture.³³ At the same time, Singapore recognizes that ASEAN alone cannot address every security challenge and has therefore supported a broader ecosystem of overlapping regional arrangements.³⁴ The emphasis, nevertheless, is that these initiatives should complement rather than undermine the ASEAN-centered architecture.³⁵

In October 2023, then-Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong observed that ASEAN “welcome[s] new configurations, be it the Quad, or AUKUS.”³⁶ Although this remark was made in the context of ASEAN, it is arguably reflective of Singapore’s own openness toward the newer security arrangements. That said, Singapore has indicated that it does not see a need to be part of a “Quad-Plus” arrangement, with Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan arguing that Singapore already enjoys “bespoke and great” relations with each Quad member and therefore has little reason to “package” those ties under a single framework.³⁷

The above suggests that Singapore adopts a relatively pragmatic approach toward the Quad. While acknowledging the political sensitivities surrounding the Quad, Singapore welcomes the grouping’s activities where they are consistent with its broader principles of supporting a rules-based order, promoting regional stability, and complementing the ASEAN-led regional architecture. In light of these considerations, this article now turns to assessing how Singapore might respond toward enhanced Quad maritime security cooperation.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Singapore would likely regard maritime security cooperation involving the Quad and one or more Southeast Asian states as having the potential to be the most politically contentious arrangement, as it extends the Quad's engagement into Southeast Asia and may therefore be interpreted as bringing ASEAN member states into closer strategic alignment with the Quad. However, the degree of that sensitivity would likely depend on three factors. The first is the type of activity, which is discussed in the following subsection.

The second factor is the extent of Quad participation. An arrangement involving all four Quad members would carry a stronger association with the Quad and therefore greater strategic signaling than one involving only bilateral or trilateral combinations among the Quad members.

The third is the identity of the participating Southeast Asian state(s). Participation by the Philippines, for example, would be less likely to be perceived as representing a significant shift in regional alignments given its long-standing alliance with the United States and established security cooperation with several Quad members.³⁸ In contrast, participation by Southeast Asian states that have traditionally emphasized nonalignment may carry greater political significance and could create the impression that some ASEAN members are moving closer to the Quad. Such developments may run counter to Singapore's preference for a regional order in which states avoid being drawn into competing blocs.³⁹

Among arrangements involving only the Quad members, the differences in political sensitivity are likely to be marginal. A formal maritime security initiative under the Quad framework would nevertheless be expected to be viewed as slightly more contentious because as a recognized minilateral grouping, the Quad carries the strongest signal of strategic and political intent.⁴⁰

Cooperation among the Quad members through an informal consortium would probably be viewed as less provocative because it avoids the political symbolism associated with the Quad label. Bilateral and trilateral arrangements would likely be considered less provocative still, as they represent more routine or flexible forms of defense and security cooperation that are arguably perceived less as constituting an exclusive strategic bloc.

WHAT TYPE OF ACTIVITIES ARE CONDUCTED?

Singapore's assessment of different maritime security activities would likely depend primarily on the signal being conveyed. In particular, the more an activity is perceived as

enhancing collective military capability against a third party or signaling strategic alignment, the more politically sensitive it is anticipated to be. Conversely, activities that are functional, inclusive, and directed toward the provision of regional public goods would generally be viewed as less provocative.

Activities that explicitly demonstrate combat capability could reasonably be regarded as the most provocative. These may include field training exercises (FTXs), which involve the deployment of troops and assets to simulate military operations. By visibly demonstrating the ability of participating forces to operate together in potential combat scenarios, such activities are more likely to be interpreted as preparations for potential security contingencies or conflict.⁴¹

Activities that primarily improve coordination among a select group of countries, without overtly demonstrating combat capability, would likely be viewed as moderately provocative. These may include tabletop exercises (TTXs) that focus on noncontentious scenarios, as well as ship-rider and air-rider programs that allow personnel from different countries to work alongside one another during maritime operations. While these activities strengthen cooperation and build familiarity between participating forces, they are arguably less visible and less likely than FTXs to be perceived as preparations for conflict.

Activities that mainly facilitate cooperation would probably be regarded as the least provocative. These may include communications networks, logistics arrangements, and other mechanisms that support information sharing and confidence building. Such activities provide practical support for cooperation and can be framed as measures to improve maritime governance and the provision of regional public goods.⁴² As a result, they are less likely to be interpreted as signaling alignment or preparations for conflict.

WHERE ARE THE ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED?

From Singapore's perspective, the same maritime security activity would be anticipated to carry different implications depending on where it is conducted. Activities in or near contested or politically sensitive areas are more likely to be viewed through the lens of China-US rivalry or as being directed against a third party, whereas those undertaken in less contentious waters can be more easily presented as practical cooperation addressing shared maritime challenges.

Maritime security cooperation conducted near either the Malacca Strait or in the South China Sea would likely be regarded as politically sensitive, albeit for different reasons. The Malacca Strait is one of the world's most strategically important maritime chokepoints,

and some of the littoral states have traditionally been cautious about external involvement in the area.⁴³ It is also of considerable importance to China given its dependence on the Strait as a key sea line of communication.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, activities conducted in the South China Sea would attract heightened political sensitivity because of the area's status as one of the region's principal geopolitical flashpoints.⁴⁵ In both cases, Singapore would likely be attentive to the potential for such activities to be interpreted as contributing to strategic competition or raising regional tensions.

The legal and political context in which activities are conducted is also important. Cooperation undertaken in international waters could be better regarded as supporting freedom of navigation and other shared maritime interests, while activities conducted within a state's territorial waters may carry greater political significance because they involve questions of sovereignty and require the host state's consent.

CONCLUSION

There is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all response from Singapore toward enhanced maritime security cooperation involving the Quad. Rather, its response would likely depend on whether the specific initiative is assessed to contribute constructively to regional stability and whether it remains consistent with Singapore's broader preferences for an inclusive regional architecture, a rules-based order, and ASEAN centrality. Key considerations would include the participating states and the type of activity, as well as its geographical location.

Any requests made to Singapore for access or support would likewise be expected to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the country's interests vis-à-vis regional stability and international law. Singapore already maintains close relations with all four Quad members and has demonstrated its willingness to facilitate practical cooperation where these serve mutual interests.⁴⁶ This suggests that Singapore would remain open to practical or functional cooperation, where it judges such initiatives to be constructive and stabilizing.

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