

## India's Place in the Quad in Light of AUKUS

Amélie Chalivet

### Context

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is a cooperative group, comprised of India, Japan, Australia and the United States, that was first established in May 2007. This structure was inherited from the "Core Group," which was formed after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, as a means of coordinating humanitarian assistance. The member states subsequently wanted to expand the scope of their activities, in particular by organizing joint military exercises such as the Malabar Exercises. While the group has never shown a desire to counter China's growing power in the region, Beijing's reaction has been virulent, calling the Quad a "[little NATO](#)." Ultimately, Australia's rapid withdrawal officially ended this first test in 2008.

The Quad was reborn at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Manila in November 2017. Its [goal is now to](#) "promote a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region to serve the interests of all powers in the region and the world." The decision comes amid rising tensions between the United States and China under the Trump administration. For New Delhi, it also comes at a strategic moment, only months after its face-off with China's People's Liberation Army on the Doklam plateau and the official inauguration of China's permanent military base in Djibouti on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. The Quad countries explicitly refused to make it an anti-China military alliance. According to some analysts, it is notably India's reluctance that limits the scope of this [cooperation](#). However, the Quad, by allowing its members to assert their solidarity, sends [a clear strategic message](#) to China which is "sufficiently restrained to avoid significant blowback from Beijing."

With the convening of the first (virtual) summit of the Quad's heads of state in March 2021, the new U.S. president, Joe Biden, seemed to make this organization a central pillar of his strategy for a "[free and open Indo-Pacific](#)." Nevertheless, with the announcement in September 2021, a week before the first face-to-face summit of Quad leaders, of the formation of AUKUS -- a trilateral security alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, a new circle was drawn, one in which India was excluded. What are the effects of such an announcement on the Quad and, more specifically, on India's role in this organization?

The creation of AUKUS raises an issue as it casts doubts in India about the reliability of the United States. Yet, despite the concerns, the alliance does not appear to be causing a weakening of strategic cooperation within the Quad. On the contrary, it would clarify the position of this security dialogue. Finally, AUKUS and its effects could even allow India to maintain its strategic autonomy.

## The Question of U.S. Reliability

Good relations between India and the United States are recent – as India remains highly reluctant to form an alliance with the West. Indeed, the United States is perceived by many in India as a fallible partner. This image has deep roots dating back to the Cold War following American cooperation with Pakistan and India's ostracization in the international community after the 1974 nuclear tests. More recently, the Communist Party of India was vocal in its opposition to cooperation with the [Americans](#) in the 2005 nuclear deal. The birth of the Quad 1.0 has revived these criticisms. Thus, during a visit to Beijing in 2007, then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh was forced to reaffirm India's "[independent foreign policy](#)." In the summer of 2021, the departure of the United States from Afghanistan has revived this debate in the face of a possible return of Taliban-supported terrorist groups to the [India-Pakistan](#) border.

It is in this context of mistrust that the AUKUS announcement was made. This event had yet again underlined India's existing concerns towards the reliability of the U.S. as a partner. Indeed, the announcement is accompanied by a delivery of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, causing the termination of a contract with Naval Group, a French company, signed in 2016 and which provided for the sale of twelve conventionally powered submarines. This announcement provoked strong reactions in France, including the recall of the French ambassador to Australia and the United States. This event further damaged the reputation of the American ally. China has, moreover, taken advantage of this to develop the narrative that the United States is a fallible ally, as AUKUS would show that the "America First" mentality has outlived the [Trump](#) administration.

India has its own plan to develop a fleet of nuclear attack submarines to improve its deployment capabilities in the Indian Ocean as well as its second nuclear strike capability. However, the United States has emphasized the "[unique](#)" nature of this alliance and is not considering expanding the AUKUS to include [India](#), but is rather offering occasional collaborations. There is a two-tier policy of cooperation among the Quad members, as well as the limitations of the India-U.S. Defense Trade and Technology Initiative launched in 2012, that excludes Indo-U.S. cooperation in nuclear submarines.

However, the AUKUS announcement served to reinforce the dynamism of the pivot to Asia as well as the perception of the United States as a power committed to strengthening its alliances in the [Indo-Pacific](#). U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin, also assured Indian Defense Minister, Rajnath Singh, that the United States would continue to cooperate with India in the [Quad](#).

## A Weakening of Strategic Cooperation Within the Quad?

According to Admiral Arun Prakash, who played an important role in bringing the Indian and U.S. navies together, AUKUS presents itself as an exclusive club that leaves India and Japan out in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad was capable of posing an alternative to China and AUKUS would have somehow diminished that [capability](#). One [concern](#) is that the Quad would be reduced to dealing with issues such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby removing its strategic interest in the region.

Beyond the criticism of an indirect weakening of the Quad, AUKUS also has direct strategic consequences for India. The Indian Ocean, which stretches from the east coast of Africa to Australia, is perceived by India as an integral part of its sphere of influence. This Indian "[Monroe Doctrine](#)" causes India to be sensitive to a possible "[over-crowding of Indian Ocean strategic space](#)." The United States has already been criticized when, in April 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted a "Freedom of Navigation" operation in the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone without [New Delhi](#)'s consent. Thus, even though Australia is a partner of India in the Quad, the prospect of deploying new nuclear-powered submarines in the region is not necessarily [welcome](#). In this perspective, AUKUS effectively adds an actor capable of deploying in the eastern Indian Ocean and mathematically diminishes [Indian](#) primacy.

Moreover, India is concerned about a Chinese reaction that would take the form of an expansion of its military activity beyond the South China Sea, and thus, into the eastern [Indian](#) Ocean. Indeed, in the framework of the "[Two Ocean Strategy](#)," incursions of nuclear attack submarines by the People's Liberation Army Navy in the Indian Ocean are already [recurrent](#) and could intensify.

However, other voices mitigate these concerns by arguing that AUKUS and the Quad are not to be pitted against each other in a zero-sum game, but would rather be [complementary](#). Indeed, their creation was motivated by a similar reason: to counter the rise of China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The same values are put forward in the joint statements of the two groups, i.e. freedom of navigation and respect for international law. The Quad, which is a strategic partnership, focuses more on unconventional [security](#) issues such as emerging technologies, vaccination or counter-terrorism. Conversely, AUKUS, which is a true alliance, is more concerned with defence issues. The distinction between security and defence is essential here: the Quad does not lose its strategic interest, but its prerogatives are now clearer. The September 2021 summit held in Washington was intended precisely to show that the Quad would not disappear, contrary to what China might have [hoped](#).

One of the reasons India was concerned about the resurrection of the Quad in 2017 was Australia's lack of "strategic clarity" vis-à-vis [China](#). AUKUS had the merit of sweeping away those doubts. In reference to the delivery of submarines, Philippines Foreign Secretary, Teodoro L. Locsin Jr., [argues](#) that the "enhancement of a near abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it." Thus, India, rather than worrying about the presence of Australian submarines in the region, should instead recognize that this development is in its [interest](#) and that of the region.

More broadly, the formation of AUKUS, rather than weakening Japan and India, diversifies and strengthens the strategic architecture for partnerships in the Indo-Pacific beyond the Quad. Indeed, India is part of several other more or less active cooperations, such as the India-Japan-United States trilateral dialogues since 2011 or Australia-India-Japan since 2015. In addition, AUKUS is attracting a new player in the region, the United Kingdom, which could also work with the [Quad](#). This multiplication of partnerships is aimed at strengthening the balance of power.

The creation of AUKUS as a security alliance in the region also allows the Quad to prioritize other issues besides the military and this is in line with India's plans. The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) introduced by Prime Minister N. Modi in 2015, followed by the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative in 2019, outlines India's strategy in the region – one that is increasingly defined, albeit still lacking coherence. ASEAN was highlighted as the [central](#) organization for India's Act-East policy in the Indo-Pacific in order to emphasize the importance of cooperation and inclusiveness. The September Heads of State Summit addressed criticism from ASEAN countries that the Quad was not helping them address [infrastructure](#) needs. The implicit objective of the Quad is to offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative by emphasizing the "[high standards](#)" of their financing programs.

## India's Position in the Quad

India has a particular [strategic culture](#) that values [strategic autonomy](#). New Delhi is therefore reluctant to enter into military alliances. There are several explanatory factors: the significance of the colonial past, mistrust of the West and the strategy of non-alignment inherited from the position of Prime Minister J. Nehru during the Cold War. Furthermore, as L. Lee [explains in a report](#) by the Lowy Institute, "India shares some common interests with the other three Quad countries but is less able to withstand the costs that could be directed its way if it became a more active partner." Indeed, despite the rapid modernization of its military, India has limited military capabilities and its geographic proximity to China puts it in a special position. New Delhi does not want to provoke Chinese hostility while border problems remain unresolved, as demonstrated by the clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020 that left 20 people dead on the Indian side. At the Raisina Dialogue in April 2021, Indian Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, insisted that the Quad is not an "[Asian NATO](#)." Moreover, a transformation of the Quad into a military alliance would also have strategic implications for its partnership with Russia. Traditionally, therefore, India has been perceived as the "[weakest link](#)" in the Quad and as an impediment to the evolution of the dialogue into a more military organization.

The AUKUS announcement could remove pressure on India in the Quad "[by attracting Chinese ire](#)." This would reduce the pressure on India to make defence [commitments](#) and allow it to maintain its strategic autonomy by not openly pursuing a policy of "[balancing](#)" against China. Similarly, the Quad has not made any joint statement on the Ukrainian crisis, thereby not compromising India in relation to its [Russian](#) partner. However, India's reluctance to take a stand on this issue could hurt it in the long run.

Finally, the creation of AUKUS could represent a strategic opportunity for India if it allows it to develop cooperation with other countries. The discussions between Prime Minister N. Modi and French President E. Macron in the hours following the AUKUS announcement show that it is with [France](#) in particular that cooperation could deepen. The two heads of state [stressed](#) "the important role that the India-France partnership plays in promoting stability and security in the region." The two countries have held bilateral Varuna naval exercises since 1998 and India ordered 36 Rafales from France in 2016. As French Defense Minister, F. Parly, [had mentioned](#) in 2020, this agreement could lead to other cooperations. For example, India is in a favourable position to negotiate a possible sale of [Barracuda](#) submarines with France.

## Considerations and Recommendations for Canada

The creation of AUKUS has raised a couple of issues for India as it questioned the reliability of the U.S. as a partner and it also seemed to weaken the Quad. However, these concerns are actually mitigated by the fact that AUKUS reinforces the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific and, to a certain extent, allows India to focus on other issues than the military within the Quad and maintain its strategic autonomy. India is a central player for the American strategy in the Indo-Pacific and its geographical position "[brings a particular political legitimacy to the United States' plans for a new Indo-Pacific balance of power](#)," which avoids presenting the stakes in the region as a confrontation between Asia and the [West](#).

In this context, Canada is "[missing in action](#)." When AUKUS was announced, Prime Minister Trudeau recalled that Canada was not interested in [American](#) nuclear submarines. Beyond this material aspect, Canada is, unlike Australia, hardly involved in the Indo-Pacific, or only in an ad hoc manner. The evolution of the Quad does not directly involve Canadian interests either, but as a member of the Five Eyes with a maritime border on the Pacific, Canada must keep an eye on this region. While a working

group within Global Affairs is currently looking at the issue, Canada does not currently have a formal strategy for the Indo-Pacific. It has more of a [spectator's](#) role in the region, and this wait-and-see position could be problematic in the future. Indeed, Canada has an interest in defending a rule-based international order and freedom of navigation in the region. As Tsuyoshi Kawasaki [stated](#), “far from being immune from this trans-Pacific power struggle, Canada is in the midst of it.” He believes that Canada’s strategy in the region should be an “active pro-U.S. diplomatic policy.” This would allow Ottawa to participate in “legal warfare” against China, especially in the South China Sea, without bearing the high costs of military action.

Could this strategy be implemented through the Quad? The new Quad summit in Japan in 2022 opens the possibility of expanding the dialogue with a Quad Plus. In 2020, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam had already participated in a Quad meeting to discuss pandemic management and may cooperate on other issues. Canada's possible membership in the Quad is also on the table, although it could further damage its relationship with China. Canada's Department of Global Affairs has [stated](#) that as a Pacific nation, "Canada works with all four Quad members to address shared challenges in the Indo-Pacific region." While the United States appears to be in favour of expanding the Quad, India and Australia are more cautious. In any case, a Quad Plus is a course of action to be seriously considered.