

The QUAD Diplomacy and the New Regional Order in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a part of the research on “Impacts of QUAD Diplomacy and Indo-Pacific Strategy on New Regional Order in Southeast Asia”. The study applied a documentary qualitative research. Documentary data concerned were collected from related academic books, papers, and research reports, as well as official documents of international organizations concerned that were studied by content analysis and logical analysis. The results of this study found that the QUAD diplomacy has played an important role in rebalancing the rivalry between the Chinese new silk road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the American Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the quest for building a new ruled-based regional order in Southeast Asia in four aspects: the rivalry between the Chinese new silk road initiatives and the American Indo-Pacific strategy; the role of QUAD diplomacy in rebalancing regional security order in South China Sea; the quest of QUAD diplomacy for building a new ruled-based regional order in Southeast Asia; ASEAN diplomacy can play its centrality roles in balancing the new silk

Keywords: QUAD Diplomacy, New Regional Order, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a part of research on the Impact of QUAD Diplomacy and Indo-Pacific strategy on the New Regional Order in Southeast Asia. This study aims to analyze what and why QUAD diplomacy plays an important role in counterbalancing the Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia, especially in ASEAN Community and South China Sea. How can it make a new balance of power in the rivalry between the Chinese New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the American Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS)? What and how the ASEAN Diplomacy can take advantages from the QUAD diplomacy to establish a new regional order for peace and security in Southeast Asia and preserve constructive roles of ASEAN centrality and connectivity with its major dialogue partners, especially the US and China. The rise of power and increasing expansion by China presents a significant effect on the structure of regional order in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. In an effort to retain the status quo, a number of states have signed-up to the ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) strategy in this region. In support of FOIP, operational mechanisms have emerged - most importantly the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The United States, India, Japan, and Australia have come together in this informal format to exchange views on current security challenges and coordinate their strategic cooperation. This study analyses both form and function of QUAD

diplomacy and argues that both the diplomatic and military arrangements between QUAD members are a direct response to ever-increasing Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia. The success of China's reform and opening up to the outside world from Deng Xhaoping to Xi Jiniing, has contributed to China's substantial economic growth and its overall national strength. Thus the rapid rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region has threatened the US that starts to feel insecure. In response to this change, the US government has proposed the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and "Pivot to Asia" (Wang and Wu, 2016) to India, Japan, Australia and ASEAN. Meanwhile, in order to avoid direct conflicts with the US, China continues its steps of expanding westwards by proposing the "Belt and Road Initiative" and the new model of major power relations, in the hope of coexisting and flourishing with the US through its "peaceful rise". However, how the US perceives and reacts is of great importance to the formation of the new model of major power relations and the smooth development of the Belt and Road Initiative. (Jung & Chen, 2019). In June 2019, the ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to present their collective voice on the emerging Indo-Pacific discourse that had been actively promoted by the US, India, Japan and Australia as four members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The Outlook articulates ASEAN's inclusive and cooperative "vista" on the Indo-Pacific with the hope to present "an inclusive meeting place for the competing visions of regional order offered by great and regional players" and to maintain ASEAN's relevance and Southeast Asia's strategic autonomy (Sukma, 2019) in this discourse.

The Indo-Pacific maritime domain has since become more contested and crowded with increased risks of conflicts over critical confrontation in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea. Geopolitical tensions as well as trade and territorial disputes between China and the QUAD members have increased sharply and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Driven by their growing strategic concerns over a powerful China, the QUAD partners have pushed forward their Indo-Pacific strategies and enhanced the QUAD diplomacy in both institutional and operational mechanism in the past two years. Despite recent leadership change in the US and Japan, both the Biden and Suga administrations have made it clear by policy announcements and actions that the Indo-Pacific is here to stay (Moriyasu, 2021). Whereas the QUAD countries remain steadfast and determined in their Indo-Pacific strategy, the continued ambivalence within ASEAN towards this strategy due to both internal incoherence and external sensitivities. Indonesia and Vietnam have expressed two different approaches within ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific strategy. What the future may hold for ASEAN member states (AMS) as the US, India, Japan and Australia continue to solidify their Indo-Pacific strategy through the QUAD diplomacy.

As a result, the balance of power and geostrategic competition and cooperation played by the QUAD diplomacy in Indo-Pacific maritime region is currently a reflection for the rise of China's power as a new hegemonic actor in the broader regional order in Southeast Asia. The US, India, Japan, and Australia the resurgence of quadrilateral cooperation of Indo-Pacific strategy by forming steps together in coordinating the Indo-Pacific regional establishment goals as a free, transparent, and based on international law area. The momentum of QUAD diplomacy that ignores China's membership and implicitly framed in the axis of democracy is certainly lead to the conflict escalation, where China has gradually succeeded in using their growing economic power as well as the strategic conditions of its military forces to spread the great influence in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. This condition brings China is regarded as a major threat and indirectly creates problems that lead to an ideological strategic competition in this region. The geopolitical governance and QUAD cooperation in Indo-Pacific strategy

that should have a good impact precisely create for new conflicts within the region. ASEAN has to hold its centrality carefully for balancing power in playing with the QUAD diplomacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a group of four countries: the US, Australia, India, and Japan. Maritime cooperation among them began after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. But today the countries - all democracies and vibrant economies - work on a far broader agenda, which includes tackling security, economic, and health issues. Over the years, the QUAD's diplomacy has waxed and waned. It is a loose grouping rather than a formal alliance. Japan initially emphasized the democratic identity of the four nations, whereas India seemed more comfortable emphasizing functional cooperation. Australian leaders have been reluctant about creating the impression that the group is a formal alliance. The QUAD leaders became more aligned in their shared concerns about China's increasingly assertive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region and are more willing to define a constructive agenda of strategic cooperation. All four navies participated in their first joint exercise in over a decade in November 2020. In March 2021, US President Joe Biden convened a virtual QUAD Summit attended by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. They formed working groups on COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, and technological innovation and supply-chain resilience (Smith, 2021). The US working closely with these countries is thus natural because Australia and Japan are US treaty allies, and India is an important American strategic partner in the Indian Ocean.

As the Indo-Pacific region spans two oceans and several sub-regions, making it important to US maritime interests. In 2019, \$1.9 trillion worth of US trade passed through the region. According to a UN report 2019, 42 percent of the world's exports and 38 percent of global imports are expected to pass through this region (Smith, 2021). Japan was a strong support in the QUAD's power to ensure a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and depends heavily on open sea lanes for its trade with the world. The US and Japanese militaries work closely across the region. Japan's Self-Defense Forces have built relationships with their Australian and Indian counterparts. Japan has played an important role in supporting investment in manufacturing, trade, and infrastructure development across the region. Japan and its QUAD partners have had strategic consultations and shared concerns about China's assertion of its sovereignty in the South China Sea, as well as Chinese provocations toward Sino-Japanese claim islands in the East China Sea, where Japan was wary of China's military build-up. Furthermore, Japan is watching carefully as China imposes economic conditionality on countries in the Indo-Pacific, and it wants to offer Southeast Asian countries alternative sources of assistance and commerce to offset China's growing influence. Japan has joined with the US and Australia to deepen the funds available for quality infrastructure and logistic connectivity of ASEAN Community.

In diplomacy and international relations, the balance of threat theory was advanced by Stephen Walt, whereby states identify threats from other states by looking at their aggregate economic power, offensive military capabilities, perceived offensive intentions and geographic proximity (Walt, 1987). From this idea comes balancing responses of international cooperation between similarly concerned states. This strategic balancing process feeds into the theory of security dilemma dynamics, in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which in turn lead to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state's security (Jervis, 2011). The problem for China is that the military actions which it takes are (1) indeed explained by Chinese government as legitimate defensive security

measures, but (2) potentially can also be interpreted as offensive in character, and (3) attract widespread characterization as offensive in nature and intention based on regional perceptions reflecting a “trust deficit” in operation, which thereby triggers “balance of threat” response dynamics (Purba, 2019). In contrast, US military actions in the Indo-Pacific region are not generally seen as threatening to most other countries, because of the balance of threat grounds of geographic proximity and perceived offensive intentions, which apply in the case of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), do not apply in the case of the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.

The balance of threat theory and security dilemma theory considers the strategy of China’s presence in the South China Sea, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean that analyzes a maritime strategy section moves from China’s seapower drive into consideration of blue water navy, island chains, and two-ocean strategy (Scott, 2019). The Indo-Pacific region is the maritime area stretching from the Pacific and Indian Oceans, with the South China Sea as intervening waters, where is increasingly important in China’s “strategic calculus” (Junbo, (2013). Within these maritime zones, China is seeking to establish control of the South China Sea and of the East China Sea, and from there penetration into the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans - in effect a drive for a two-seas control followed by a strong two-oceans presence and consequent influence. In history, the theory of China threat (Yang, 2005; Sheng, 1999; Broomfield, 2003) attributes the zero-sum game between China and Japan to their historical conflicts. In response to the peaceful rise of China, the U.S. should strengthen its alliance with Japan to curb the rise of China and retain the ability of the U.S. to maintain the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. recently has proposed the concept of “Indo Pacific” that redefines the U.S. strategic outlook on Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. intends to collaborate with Japan, India and Australia to safeguard the open free trade model in the Indo-Pacific region. The continuation of the “Pivot to Asia” policy of President Obama, the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” emphasizes the commercial interests of fair trade under the “America First” policy of President Trump.

As a result, ASEAN countries are required to reduce their trade surplus with the US and pile up their investment and procurement in the US. The Indo-Pacific Strategy is therefore deemed as a countermeasure to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since 2010, government officials of the US, Japan, India and Australia have repeatedly referred to the concept of “Indo-Pacific”, which is coined by Japan as the “integration of two oceans”. The concept of “Indo-Pacific” has gradually been closely combined with the word “strategy”, thereby resulting in the term of “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Chen and Wei, 2015; Wang and Wu, 2016). China’s policy towards the US has invariably been influenced by the US policy toward China. Considering the dual objectives of national development and security, China still has to coexist in peace with the US pragmatically (Ge, 2001). China’s current westward development is more feasible, especially given that Central Asia is such an important hinterland as to catalyst the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Most of the Central Asian countries are developing ones in desperate need of development where the US exerts weak influence. Given the abundance of resources and energy in this area, Central Asia is the best target for China to resort to diplomatic means for its rising influence in neighboring countries (Shao, 2007).

Furthermore, the Central Asian countries along the New Silk Road of the Belt and Road Initiative, especially those with abundant hydrocarbon reserves and mineral deposits, have already become major destinations of the Chinese investment. The geographical proximity of these countries to China and their reliable land energy supply contribute to easing China’s dependence on oil that is transported on maritime route. China also aims to stabilize Central Asia by promoting its economic development, including the stability of Xinjiang (China) that shares a long border with the Central Asian region that used to be reigned by the Soviet Union

(Bmariansi, 2013). Meanwhile, the “new model of major power relations” proposed for the first time by Xi Jinping in his visit to the US in 2012 clarified the direction of the sustainable development of Sino-US relations. Hu Jintao, ex Chinese President, formally proposed in 2012 the concept of a new model of major power relation between China and the US. In November 2012, the report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) clearly pointed out that China would improve and develop its diplomatic relations with other countries and broaden the fields of cooperation to address differences and promote a new model of major power relations featuring long stability and sound development. Since then the “new model of major power relations” has been important to China's diplomatic strategy (Wang, 2016).

Amitav Acharya in his remarkable article, “Power Shift or Paradigm Shift: China’s Rise and Asia’s Emerging Security Order” (Acharya, 2014) analyzed the idea of a consociational security order is offered whereby some sharing of responsibilities and leadership between a rising power in the form of China and other states in the region exists to help shape a regional order, based not so much on rules but more on common interests. Firstly, the “**order-centric approach**” that seeks to manage relations in the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian region primarily through rules-based frameworks and institutions may not work. The common perception of what laws and rules to use in governing inter-state relations has not reached a sufficient critical mass in the region to become the main driver of relations. At most, there is general acceptance on shared norms, principles and even some values, but no collective effort to enforce decisions based on shared legal principles.

Secondly, the “**threat-centric approach**” whereby the regional order mechanism will evolve based on shifting threat perceptions and changing balances of power may be inappropriate for analyzing the region. The threat-centric approach has countries managing their relations based primarily on changing threat perceptions and relying on bilateral and multilateral security arrangements to project deterrence and defense. It also involves countries shifting alignments in response to changing threat perceptions to maintain the best possible balance of power in the region. Such an approach was tried in Southeast Asia during the Cold War years and the so-called containment policy has been found wanting. At the end, the threat-centric approach to building regional architecture does not appear to be sustainable in the long-run, although it might have some value in the short-run, especially when distrust and lack of confidence amongst states run high (Tow, 2014). As a result, the threat-centric approach implies a fast-shifting realignment of major powers concerned to meet changing challenges, something difficult to replicate in the context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN centrality in Southeast Asia.

Lastly, in the “**shared interest-centric approach**”, the regional order mechanism built on the development of shared interests among states in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific region, and sustained through cooperative frameworks that seek win-win solutions, is likely to be more sustainable in the long-run. The viability of such an approach, however, depends on several factors. One is a high level or growing trend of interdependence and integration in the region. This is because such trends or conditions are more likely to result in the development of shared interests in a larger number of areas. Such conditions could be said to exist currently in the region because its healthy economic growth rates make it one of the key engines for global growth. Among three approaches, it seems the best approach in analyzing the regional order mechanism in Southeast Asia is the shared interests-centric approach. As stated above, the order-centric approach would seem to be an approach for the future rather than for the present, given the weakness of the rules-based system in the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN Community at the present time. The threat-centric approach appears to have credence during



times of high levels of mistrust and perceptions of great political instability in the region, but it is also premised on a high flexibility in shifting alignments quickly.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative research by using a documentary research method. All documentary data was collected from related research reports, academic books and papers, as well as official documents and information of the United Nations and other international organizations concerned. All collected documentary data were studied by content analysis, critical analysis and logical analysis throughout the data triangulation process in order to achieve comprehensive research results and discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that the QUAD Diplomacy has played an important role in rebalancing the rivalry between the Chinese new silk road initiatives and the American Indo-Pacific strategy and the quest for building a new ruled-based regional order in Southeast Asia in 4 aspects: (1) the rivalry between the China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS); (2) the role of the QUAD diplomacy in rebalancing regional security order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian region; (3) the quest of the QUAD diplomacy for building a ruled-based regional order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia; and (4) the ASEAN diplomacy can play its centrality roles in rebalancing the China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

1. The Rivalry between the China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS)

Since the 21st century, the growing rise of China's power has enhanced the determination of the US to strengthen its influence on Asia through the Pivot to Asia by President Obama, which has been materialized by strengthening the political relations with its Asian allies to contain China and adopting the subsequent Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) by President Trump. In response to China's rapid rise of power and its claim of broadening its "core interests" in Southeast Asian region, the US has launched the Pivot to Asia and Indo-Pacific Strategy. Meanwhile, in order to avoid American containment policy and conflicts with the US caused by advancing eastwards, China continues its steps of expanding westwards by proposing the cross border and intercontinental Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or New Silk Road Strategy. In contrast, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by China, despite the existence of political intention, is a concept of international strategic cooperation mainly out of economic consideration. From the economic and geopolitical analysis, the western region of Asia is undoubtedly the end point of China's regional construction and development. However, from the strategy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the remote western region on the border of China is in the center of East, West, Central and South Asia in the ancient Silk Road. Therefore, the western region of China that used to be considered the end point of economic, investment and development as well as cultural interconnection will be the starting point of the Belt and Road Initiative connecting Asia and Europe (Jung & Chen, 2019). As a result, the confrontation between these two strategies has increased more tension and security issues in Southeast Asia, especially in South China Sea conflicts between US, China, Taiwan and the 4 ASEAN member states: Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei.

China intends to extend its political and economic expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) both overland and maritime Silk Road that goes across three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa. It can promote domestic and foreign trade and investment economically and strengthen its relations with the third world countries politically. Logistically it can make use of the Eurasian railways on land and maritime routes through Southeast Asia and India to Europe. However, the success of the China Railway Express has been confined to the space between Asia and Europe, the success of “point” and “line” that is far from the success of “area”. The five Central Asian countries can be regarded as the preliminary success of “area” on the belt and the ASEAN operation of RCEP as the success of free trade area on the Chinese New Silk Road. The belt extends westwards from the west inland of China and Central Asia is an important relay free trade station to Europe, while Southeast Asia is part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road on the Belt and Road Initiative heading to western Africa and Europe. With the Belt and Road Initiative, the five Central Asian countries on the “belt” can always exert a huge impact on China's economic development due to their energy endowment, and are expected to play their roles in the future market (Jung and Chen, 2019). The China’s overland and maritime Silk Road on the Belt and Road Initiative is therefore considered as Chinese “pearl bracelet” strategy to counter-balance the US’s containment policy of Indo-Pacific Strategy in Southeast Asia.

In counter-balancing and containing the rise of China’s influence in this region, the QUAD countries are, of course, launching an offensive Indo-Pacific strategy that jointly called for “a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values and unconstrained by coercion” with references to rules-based order of international law in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. As a new momentum in the QUAD diplomacy, the US has clearly seen the QUAD diplomacy as an important focus for US diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region. The QUAD grouping was President Biden’s first multilateral commitment and front-ended a neatly coordinated burst of regional diplomacy this month that includes visits to Japan and the Republic of Korea by Secretary of State Blinken and Defense Secretary Austin and culminates with a senior level meeting with China in Alaska. The QUAD meeting also came hot on the heels of the Biden Administration’s interim national security strategic guidance which reflects a strong determination to compete with China (Maude, 2021). The QUAD Summit reflects firstly the US foreign policy in working better with allies and partners and supporting universal values of democracy, climate change and the COVID-19 cooperation. Secondly, China’s aggressive foreign policy is encouraging the QUAD to push back against a China-centric regional order in this region. The clashes across the India-China border over recent months appeared in particular to have overcome India’s instinctive caution about pushing the QUAD too far too fast.

The ten ASEAN member countries on the Chinese New Silk Road can be expected to expand their existing RCEP free trade market big scale in Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides also strategic guidance for ASEAN and Chinese enterprises to develop the African and European free trade markets, although some economic risk, social risk, policy risk, and investment risk in Africa and Europe, there also is advantage of a national strategy to support the opportunities and resources endowment. In order to further response to the Belt and Road Initiative, based on the systematic assessment of the African and European market risk, enterprises in China and ASEAN actively implement the “going out” strategy of developing African and European market, from the perspectives of enhancement of risk prevention and control, promotion of cross cultural management ability, Joint foreign investment among enterprises looking for suitable partners, prudent exploration of risks and so on (Ha, 2021; Wang, 2018). China has advantages over the US in the

opportune timing, geopolitical convenience and good relations of both the “belt” and the “road”, but the attitude of countries involved towards the Belt and Road (BRI) and the US influence on these countries remain as a major obstacle to the smooth BRI’s implementation.

The above analysis of major powers’ rivalry in Southeast Asia gears the ASEAN Community towards the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the China’s Belt and Road Initiative decisive for its smooth development. Although the US is on the other end of Pacific Ocean, its strategy exerts the hugest influence on China’s Belt and Road Initiative. After the setbacks of Chinese “Great Leap Forward” and “Three Line Construction” that were transformed into the success of “Reform and Opening up to the outside world” from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, China has come to be keenly aware of the key role played its soft power so by the good diplomacy in international relations, especially the Sino-US relations, in its economic stability and development. Therefore, even if the US persists in working with its Asian allies to curb the China’s Belt and Road Initiative strategy at the cost of repeating the Cold War period, China’s constant emphasis on peaceful rise and the new model of Sino-US major power relations demonstrates its effort to create the best diplomatic environment for dispelling the hostility between the two countries and maintaining the sustainable development of China’s economy (Jung and Chen, 2019). As a result, the ASEAN plays a decisive role in how to avoid negative impacts of US’s Pivot to Asia and Indo Pacific Strategy on the China’s Belt and Road Initiative. How can the ASEAN exercises its centrality to seek positive benefits from both of these global rivalry strategies between the US and China in Southeast Asia.

2. The Role of the QUAD diplomacy in Rebalancing a Regional Security Order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian Region

In an effort to retain a regional order, the leaders of four important democracies of the Indo - Pacific region - the United States, Japan, Australia and India - held their first virtual QUAD Summit on 19 March 2021. They have signed-up to the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) that is “free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion” (Kwek, 2021). In support of FOIP, the QUAD countries have come together in this informal format of QUAD diplomacy to exchange their views on current security challenges and coordinate their joint strategy in Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian region, especially in South China Sea. The strategic operational mechanisms of QUAD diplomacy have been emerged most importantly from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Both the diplomatic security and military arrangements between the QUAD members are normally a direct response to any ever-increasing Chinese expansion in South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region by the New Silk Road Strategy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ASEAN Centrality shall play very important role in rebalancing a regional security order in Southeast Asian region, especially in South China Sea.

Furthermore, the QUAD countries launched a vaccine partnership during the COVID-19 pandemic and promised to deliver 1 billion Covid-19 vaccines to countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Among other things, the summit also discussed climate change, critical technologies, cyber space, counter-terrorism, maritime security and humanitarian assistance (Kwek, 2021). The QUAD members were finally able to show the substantive utility of the Indo-Pacific strategic grouping in its collaborative effort to provide a most needed global public good: more vaccines for COVID-19 pandemic. Provided that the deal hatched for QUAD Summit is realized, the world will now be up another billion Covid-19 vaccines, based on Indian production and financial, technical and logistical assistance from the other three players (Thornton, 2021). However, the message that the QUAD Summit sent about the nature of the

grouping against the backdrop of worry about China, this summit clearly sought to address the biggest concerns from Southeast Asian countries about the QUAD strategy itself: that it focuses too much on political and security rather than economic and trade cooperation on more practical, immediate concerns. As the QUAD strategy's main concern revolves around China's rise of power, there were worries that the QUAD diplomacy would securitize the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asean region by becoming an “**Asian NATO**” military alliance.

However, the responses of Southeast Asia to the Indo-Pacific strategy of QUAD diplomacy have been very cautious. With China the largest trade partner of the ASEAN Community, the ASEAN member countries are cautious, for fear of pushback from China, which remains wary of the new strategic grouping in Indo-Pacific region. The QUAD's language about upholding the rule-based regional order and democratic values might also not sit well with some governments in the region, even if they pay lip service to it. By focusing on more practical cooperation, the QUAD countries have gone some way to allow ASEAN countries a good entry point for strategic and economic cooperation. Increasingly, a “twin chessboard scenario” is being formed in the region, where great powers are competing at two levels – the strategic and resources level. For the latter, we can see a race to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative, in the likes of Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, Australia's Partnership for Infrastructure (P4I) and the US-led Blue Dot Network (Kwek, 2021). Strategically, having more options is very helpful for ASEAN development. Cooperation on technology, climate change and vaccines is much needed by ASEAN countries, and working with more than one partner can reduce over-reliance and encourage better quality investment.

Southeast Asia has been very careful in not choosing sides between the QUAD and China, insisting on ASEAN centrality in any regional cooperation with all its dialogue partners. However, ASEAN's refusal not to choose side might not be an option for long as great power competition intensifies, meaning that ASEAN's strategy must be adapted and accommodate to both sides. As it stands, ASEAN has published the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, giving the QUAD's favored lexicon an affirmative nod while offering its own iteration of the concept. All four QUAD countries are major ASEAN dialogue partners, who have had deep footprints in Southeast Asia and good ties with many ASEAN countries. Even if ASEAN countries are not ready to openly endorse the QUAD strategy as a whole, it should not hinder strengthening strategic cooperation with QUAD countries. ASEAN countries will need more assurance to assuage a deep-seated fear of upsetting China's treat, a country which by dint of geographical fact will forever be a big neighbor. How ASEAN member countries perceive the “China threat” will also be a key factor in driving them closer or further away from the QUAD partners. Southeast Asia will judge the QUAD strategy on its promise of more regular engagement and realization of the initial commitments. Therefore, the courting of so-called “QUAD-plus” countries has already begun, and ASEAN members will need smart diplomacy in response to navigate these new dynamics and emerge with a positive outcome for rebalancing regional security order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian region.

ASEAN is actually striking for a successful and effective diplomatic concert by an effort to manage the challenge of diverse perspectives of ASEAN diplomacy on common problems. ASEAN-centered dialogue partners processes have already sought to create “**a concert of Asia-Pacific**” through various associated mechanism of ASEAN dialogue partners, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN plus meetings, or the Asia-Europe Meeting. These existing frameworks, processes, institutions and forums are useful as a regional community that form strategic assets in governing the contest in what is now referred to as Indo-Pacific. The QUAD leaders may help make a broader “**concert of the Indo-Pacific**”

possible in the future (Zhongying, 2021). What and how shall Indo-Pacific countries such as Japan and Australia, together with China, organize the concert of Indo-Pacific security to manage a regional confrontation. Despite China as an APEC member was included and well-integrated into the Asia-Pacific concert, it has not yet accepted and engaged into a broader concert of Indo-Pacific. However, China has not neglected de facto strategy of Indo-Pacific engagement. China is nowadays a signatory to the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP free trade agreement, from which India unfortunately withdrew before the end of RCEP negotiations. At the APEC meeting 2020, China announced it would favorably reconsider joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership or CPTPP free trade agreement. Thus, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also crisscrosses the Southeast Asian region and beyond.

3. The Quest of the QUAD Diplomacy for Building a Ruled-Based Regional Order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia

The global security and geopolitical situation today are witnessing significant rivalry between the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road initiatives (BRI). After abortive start in 2007, the QUAD Summit meeting in March 12, 2021 has been resuscitated and driven by uneasiness about the rise of China's power and the security threat it poses to the regional order. Despite there is no direct reference to China, or even regional military security, in the QUAD's first-ever joint statement, the most significant summit outcomes are related to COVID-19 vaccine production, facilitating cooperation over emerging technologies, and mitigating climate change. Post-summit statements, which stressed the humanitarian origins of their collaboration in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, set out the group's uniting principles - democracy, a rules-based order, and a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific - and emphasized its role as a "force for global good". These provide the broad framework within which the QUAD will operate with the aim of shaping global order in an age of transition from the US "unipolar" world to one in which China is seeking a decisive role (Kutty and Basrur, 2021). Despite doubts about the possibility of deep and institutionalized collaborations among the QUAD countries, the meeting indicated that the four powers are willing to cooperate on pressing issues of common concern, such as the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and the global impact of climate change, in addition to traditional security challenges. According to the joint statement issued at the close of the meeting, the four nations pledged to "redouble our commitment to the QUAD engagement" (Dermawan, 2021). Rather it is not perhaps an "Asian NATO", the QUAD is designed as a loose-network of like-minded partners aiming at a broader purpose.

The threat posed by China in Southeast Asia is not only at political and military strategy but also economic and technology one. As evidenced by its proactive pursuit of territorial claims in South Asia, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea, it is also economic and technological expansion in Asia-Pacific region. China is a pivotal player in global supply chains, most visible today in its major active role as a vaccine supplier, a major investor of surplus capital globally through the Belt and Road Initiative, and a rapidly rising technological power. It is this broader aspect of global order that the QUAD diplomacy aims to address, as is clear from two of the joint statement's specifics, which focus on the establishment of working groups on vaccine development and critical technologies. Both these efforts seek to constrain China's central position in the global system, but also to develop a world order that is broad-based and inclusive. The third working group being set up is on climate change, an area in which China is a cooperative player and not a competitor, and thus downplays the notion that the QUAD is simply an instrument of containment (Kutty and Basrur, 2021). With this three initiatives are

designed to create an environment that encourages China to be a positive player and persuades other states to shed their hesitancy toward the QUAD diplomacy for building a ruled-based regional order in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian region.

To this end, the QUAD diplomacy has promoted Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure and introduced the multi-stakeholder Blue Dot Network process, both intended to create a globally recognized evaluation and certification system for investments in infrastructure sustainable developmental projects in the Indo-Pacific region. With China leveraging vaccine diplomacy to a large number of recipient states, the four QUAD countries have decided to test the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (conceived by the India-Australia-Japan trilateral) through vaccine production with India as their production hub. If the vaccine initiative is to counter the influence of China's vaccine diplomacy, their cooperation over critical technologies is a second non-military action aimed to undercut the potential of China to achieve a dominant role in telecom and biotech areas. Attention to climate change as a third area of mobilization underlines the interdependence and "global common interest" aspect of our world (Kutty and Basrur, 2021). The QUAD diplomacy demonstrates an ultimate open-ended effort to alleviate a serious universal problem during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis by offering value to all states and banking on the strategic network effect that underpins an emerging new world order and ruled-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian region.

Despite focused on non-military initiatives, the QUAD strategy by no means downplays the military cooperation. Its members have established the basis for regular defense cooperation through naval exercises, and the sharing of intelligence and military logistics. Adding further heft to previous bilateral efforts, the trilateral India-US-Japan Malabar naval exercises expanded to include Australia last year. The four states have consolidated their military responses by building a set of nested strategic partnerships: linking their bilateral relationships with the India-Japan-US, India-Australia-Japan, and US-Japan-Australia trilaterals. The QUAD is a logical extension of this network and has the potential to build a "QUAD Plus" arrangement involving Canada, France (scheduled to join in a five-nation military exercise), and perhaps New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Kutty and Basrur, 2021). The QUAD is only a strategic grouping that seeks to enlist the support and cooperation of ASEAN and others countries in both military and non-military actions. The "QUAD Plus" idea bases on the framework of elasticity for other states who may want to link to and unlink themselves from specific QUAD initiatives as deemed useful. But China has long viewed the QUAD grouping as an American-led attempt to contain and counter its global rise of power, and the grouping's consolidation could well heighten further the tensions between the two superpowers.

Southeast Asia is one of regions in which Sino-American rivalry is most critical for ASEAN. The South China Sea remains an ongoing crucial hot sport, in which the US Navy is frequently challenging China's expansive "nine-dash line" claim over the vital waterway with frequent Freedom of Navigation Operations. The US has become actively involved in these territorial disputes by directly challenging the legality of China's claims (Dermawan, 2021). The four QUAD powers have taken their interests in the South China Sea disputes to promote a free and open rules-based regional order to advance security and counter China's threats in Southeast Asian Region. In brief, ASEAN and the four Indo-Pacific powers: US, Japan, India and Australia are yet to form a unified stand on Indo-Pacific Strategy of regional security order mechanism while keeping the connectivity of ASEAN centrality mechanism intact. The QUAD strategic diplomacy seeks to create a platform for mutual development in the Indo-Pacific region and engage with like-minded nations in the quest for a rules-based regional order that promotes respect for sovereignty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law,

free and fair trade system. ASEAN and QUAD countries can be an Indo-Pacific partnership to play a constructive role in building a ruled-based regional order in Southeast Asia region.

4. The ASEAN Diplomacy Can Play Its Centrality Roles in Rebalancing the China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Historically, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis have begun fleshing out a new vision for Indo-Pacific region, which US President Donald Trump first publicly unveiled in a speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Vietnam back in December 2017. As they have done so, they have rightly recognized that Southeast Asia will be a central part of this emerging Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy - broadly conceived as an effort to defend freedom and openness in the rules-based order in concert with willing and able partners (Wong, 2018). As a regional organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN is geographically situated right at the center of the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east, which are the two ends of the Indo-Pacific vision which seeks to emphasize its significance as a single strategic environment. To this extent, FOIP places an emphasis on the maritime domain, Southeast Asia's importance is critical since it is home to the vital sea lanes of communication that link both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, including not only the South China Sea, where one third of global shipping passes, but other strategic waterways as well, such as the Malacca Straits, which is one of the world's busiest waterways, and the Sulu Sea, which is both a place of rampant transnational crimes and emerging intraregional cooperation, as evidenced by trilateral patrols between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Parameswaran, 2014). However, ASEAN countries are not immune to the pulls of strategic forces from outside the region, not least with the tempting offers from mouth-watering of ASEAN centrality and Southeast Asian connectivity.

Geopolitically, Southeast Asia is arguably a key battleground in the Indo-Pacific where the "freeness" and "openness" of the FOIP strategy will be tested. Southeast Asia is a collection of relatively newer, very diverse states, several of which are rather underdeveloped economically and politically and maintain fluid and diverse alignments. This accounts for the spectrum of views on issues critical to the advancement of a FOIP strategy, be it China's role in the region or the advancement of democracy and human rights (Parameswaran, 2016). Southeast Asia is also home to the ASEAN Community, a regional grouping which, for all its flaws, is a fulcrum of the Asia's multilateral architecture, with its stream of annual meetings representing a critical front in the battle for ideas. Indeed, ASEAN itself has arguably been experiencing growing "Indo-Pacificization" over the past few years, with member countries expediting the integration of major powers such as the United States, India, and Australia into some key regional meetings over time including ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit.

Recognizing ASEAN centrality to this evolving US strategic conception in Asia is a good starting point, particularly since the sub-region has often been marginalized in US Asia policy relative to its geopolitical importance. Successfully integrating Southeast Asia into such a strategy in the coming years will require US policymakers to recognize both the opportunities and challenges that come with such a vision in the region, as well as being cognizant of how to navigate this mix of considerations that play into US engagement in Southeast Asia as well as regional perceptions therein (Parameswaran, 2018). ASEAN centrality to US Asia policy has often not been matched by the level of attention given to it, particularly during the first few decades that followed the end of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, US policymakers displayed a growing recognition

of importance of the region on its own merits as well as to the wider region, be it in terms of its brisk economic growth rates or its role in addressing challenges ranging from terrorism to climate change to China's rise. (Campbell, 2016; Kurlantzick, 2015). With the rise of competing China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and US's Indo-Pacific Strategy advocated by major powers, Southeast Asia faces the challenge of maintaining ASEAN centrality amidst this balance of powers between the two superpowers.

ASEAN centrality suggests that the ASEAN Community might usurp the central diplomatic role in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, is one of ASEAN's initiatives to emphasize its centrality in the security field by providing a forum of dialogue on political-security issues for 26 participants, including both the US and China (Ba, 2020). Another security dialogue constructed by the QUAD and limited to its four members could displace the ARF from its position of centrality in the region's security order. ASEAN's attempt to get ARF participants sitting at the same table and discussing regional security concerns will not be easy when Indo-Pacific security architecture is dominated by the QUAD, the members of which are powerful countries outside Southeast Asia. This has the potential to deemphasize the platform that has been maintained for 27 years by ASEAN Community on the basis of dialogue and cooperation, featuring decision-making by consensus, non-interference, incremental progress and moving at a pace comfortable to all (Dermawan, 2021). As the Asia-Pacific strategy was reconceptualized as the Indo-Pacific strategy by United States, in recognition of China's strategic reach into the Indian Ocean and East Africa by Chinese New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the demographic, political and economic significance of Indian Ocean countries, demands new visions and modalities of strategic cooperation to sustain regional stability and prosperity. As ASEAN located at the crossroads of this two ocean strategic region, the QUAD has reassured ASEAN that they will respect the latter's unity and centrality, on the basis of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific issued by the ASEAN Summit in 2019. This ASEAN Outlook statement should be evaluated on regular basis because increasing Sino-American rivalry and tensions could change the QUAD's initial strategic plans and transform Southeast Asia into a dangerous region of great power rivalry and confrontation. The QUAD is fast emerging as an important part of a novel global security mechanism, raising pressing questions about the future role of ASEAN Diplomacy in Southeast Asian centrality.

Southeast Asian countries have been particularly reluctant to join in the US's QUAD strategy. If the United States, Japan, India, and Australia collectively work under the QUAD diplomacy to confront China, Southeast Asia's biggest and most difficult strategic challenge, should not the region embrace and support the QUAD strategy. As Southeast Asian countries still have different views on the QUAD strategy. How could the QUAD leaders gradually develop a mechanism of a ruled-based regional order to induce a strategic buy-in from Southeast Asia? The QUAD should not reinvent the building of new regional mechanism and instead seek to become a strategic amplifier to existing ASEAN-led centrality mechanisms and institutions. As far as Southeast Asian region are concerned, the QUAD strategy boosting the role of ASEAN centrality is perhaps more appealing than expanding the QUAD into a "QUAD Plus" by inviting, for example, South Korea, New Zealand, Brazil, and Israel, etc. By this way, the ASEAN diplomacy can play its centrality roles in the QUAD strategy in rebalancing the China's Belt and Road Initiative and US's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The key to a future QUAD-ASEAN relationship therefore lies in finding a calibrated partnership based on shared principles and common interests as well as practical cooperative engagements.

CONCLUSION

In brief, it remains to be seen whether ASEAN can reconcile the variety of sentiments and policy preferences at the national levels and synergize between these values-based, sustainability-based, military-based, or economic-based approaches to connectivity. ASEAN principles, mechanisms, outlooks, and visions will need to be effectively put into practice to filter out the negative excesses of competition between China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and US's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPA). For now on, the increasing number of initiatives being made by the major powers and offered to the region is seen as both risks and opportunities to continue the growth momentum of the ASEAN centrality in rebalancing a ruled-based regional security order in Southeast Asia.

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