

Preparing for War: Assessing the US-Quad from Realist Institutionalism Perspective

Abdul Muein Abadi

Political Science Program, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The rise of China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region has indirectly compelled the US, Japan, Australia, and India to reactivate the long dormant Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) to coordinate their strategic approaches. This article analyses both form and function of the Quad from realist institutionalist perspective to assess the diplomatic and military arrangements between Quad members. Realist institutionalist assumes that the type of the multilateral institution, whether it is an alliance or a coalition, along with its size, will affect the decision-making structure, power distribution, and internal leverage, which in turn affect cohesion, war-fighting effectiveness, interoperability, and the organization's legitimacy. Alongside an evaluative empirical analysis of Quad, this paper addresses the question how Quad will thrive although previous attempts at NATO-like security institution failed. Realist Institutionalism theory will illuminate why and how such informal quasi-alliances vis-à-vis China are going to be the structural new normal for the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: The Quad; realist institutionalism; Indo-Pacific; military alliance

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Introduction

Despite periodic turbulence since 1971, US-China bilateral relations had always managed to re-stabilize. However, by the 2010s, the underpinnings of U.S.-China comity became increasingly confrontational and volatile (Scobell 2021). Friedberg (2011) contended that the US and China were 'locked in a quiet but increasingly intense struggle for power and influence not only in Asia but around the world' because 'each [country] has strategic objectives that threaten the fundamental interests of the other side'. The end of Cold War changed China's strategic priority from the promotion of Communist ideology to extending its territorial claims, especially in the South China Sea (Hayton, 2014; Raine & Le Miere, 2013).

The concurrent rise of China's economic power – particularly after joining WTO – has resulted in the expansion of its military might and influence, turning its status from a rising power into a serious competitor for global dominance against the US (Acharya, 2014; Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2014) while Beijing's assertion of claims over the majority of the South China Sea has hindered its bilateral defence relationships with the smaller powers in the Indo-Pacific region (Abdul Muein Abadi 2021; 2019).

From the US perspective, the Indo-Pacific spans two oceans and several continents, making it important to U.S. maritime interests. In 2019, \$1.9 trillion worth of U.S. trade passed through the region (Smith 2021). This reality prompts the US to activate a long-dormant Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) with Japan, Australia, and India to exchange views on current security challenges and coordinate their strategic approaches. The Quad is supposedly an Asian NATO that will act as a bulwark against a rising and assertive China. However, Quad is a loose grouping rather than a formal alliance (Chowdhury 2021). Japan initially emphasized the democratic identity of the four members, whereas India more comfortably emphasizes functional cooperation. Australian leaders, on the other hand, have been reluctant to create the impression that the group is a formal alliance. However, in 2021, all four countries have become more aligned in their shared concerns about China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region. All four navies participated in their first joint exercise in over a decade in November 2020, and in March 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden convened a virtual Quad meeting attended by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (Smith 2021).

Contemporary coalition warfare reveals that U.S. military remains unrivaled and will be difficult for China to match for some time to come. This has to do with its military alliance – not just with the technology, capability, and level of training and war experience of the U.S. military. Nevertheless, military alliances provide constraints and opportunities for states seeking to advance their interests around the globe. To date, this alliance system did augment U.S. fighting capacity and solidify the country's position as a global hegemon through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, military alliances are not always well designed, nor do they always augment fighting effectiveness as well as they could since they sometimes act as a drag on state capacity (Weitsman 2013). To that end, this article assesses how and to what degree the emerging US-led Quad platform serves as a vehicle for projecting U.S. power vis-à-vis China at the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region.

Literature Review

Since this research specifically aims to assess the qualitative strength of the military alliance of the US-led Quad vis-à-vis China, this article utilizes realist institutionalism as its

theoretical core. Patricia Weitsman (2013) develops the theory by first articulating the concept of realist institutions as ‘arenas through which states advance their goals and manifest their capabilities’. While realists argue that institutions have no independent effect on state behavior, liberal institutionalists argue that institutions alter state preferences, and thus state behavior. Yet the truth lies somewhere in between. International institutions—sets of interrelated regulative and procedural norms and rules that pertain to the activities of states and other actors in the system—serve as conduits for the actualization of capabilities. Institutions are binding mechanisms that alter the strategic opportunities for states, but not simply in the ways that liberal institutionalists would suggest. While liberal institutionalists demonstrate how institutions allow states to escape the prisoner’s dilemma, what they fail to recognize is that institutions may also provide a permissive environment for warfare. This is the unintended consequence of having institutions that span the globe at the ready to confront threats—interventions are possible; troops and assets stand at the ready. Realist Institutionalism recognizes that institutions can serve as conduits for state power in ways that are not recognized by realists or institutionalists.

In essence, realist institutionalism regards both military alliances and coalitions that are constructed to prosecute wars as institutions: ‘they are a general pattern of activity, a humanly constructed arrangement formally organized with identifiable norms and rules for achieving participating states’ objectives’ (Weitsman 2013). To that end, while both alliance and coalition serve as vehicles for states to promote their agendas, both institutions also augment power not by simply adding the power of others to their own, but rather through achieving ends that not only are rational but also enhance the power, soft or otherwise, of states. However, Weitsman cautioned that while some components of military alliance advance the strategic aims of partner states, other mechanisms inhibit such efficiency in important ways (p.4). There are several ways in which institutional structure impinges on war-fighting effectiveness and alliance or coalition cohesion depending on the following indicators constructed by Weitsman (2013):

- ‘Did the operation entail the use of an alliance or coalition?’
- What were the decision-making structures employed to manage the operation?
- To what extent did fighting multilaterally culminate in challenges in interoperability, burden sharing, and/or friendly fire?
- What was the power distribution within the coalition or alliance? Did it affect the cohesion, fighting effectiveness, and/or leverage of states within the coalition or alliance? In other words, did small states have disproportionate leverage over powerful states in negotiating participation and continued involvement in the operation? Did fears of abandonment mediate U.S. actions, and fears of entrapment dominate its partners’ actions?

- To what extent did the size of the alliance or coalition affect cohesion and costs associated with multilateral war fighting? Did interoperability challenges grow with coalition or alliance size?
- Finally, does legitimacy really inhere in the size of the coalition or alliance? Or does it inhere to the mission of the operation?'

The causal connections flow from whether the multilateral institution is an alliance or a coalition and its size, which affect the decision-making structure, power distribution, and internal leverage, which in turn affect cohesion, war-fighting effectiveness, interoperability, and legitimacy (Weitsman 2013, p.190). In coalition cases, significant interoperability challenges hampered the military operations, and the larger the coalition, the more challenges the states faced. Decision-making structure definitely mediated this effect; straightforward, hierarchical decision-making institutions fostered effectiveness. In the alliance cases, more effectiveness and fewer interoperability challenges are expected. However, the downside of multilateral war fighting is that even at the most integrated level, interoperability challenges will remain as long as the sovereign state system endures. Friendly fire may be more likely with more countries involved. Multilateral war fighting is not always more cost effective than unilateral approaches, nor does it necessarily augment legitimacy. To that end, this article applies a theoretical lenses to study a significant geopolitical event by assess the emerging US-led Quad in the Indo-Pacific region through the realist institutionalism perspective.

Method

For data collection, this study adopted a qualitative approach with two main procedures: primary document analysis as well as secondary data collection. This research also collected official documents of all relevant parties – Ministry of Defense, as well as leaders' statements. These data are in the form of annual reports, policy statements, ministry's official periodicals, etc. Data also collected through secondary reports and comments published in newspapers, portals, and magazines. These data collection strategy is known as 'media and secondary source collection' (Lamont 2015, p.81) and they can be in the form of local as well as international portals.

To analyze the data systematically, three procedures involved: firstly, an inquiry on the structural conditions (the rivalry between the US and China); secondly, inquiry on the intra-Quad relations; thirdly, inquiry on the Quad alliance war-fighting capability assessment. The procedures stem from this study's intention to capture parsimonious explanations of the Quad military alliance strength from the realist institutionalism perspective. This is in line with Bennet (2008) reasoning: "while researchers must guard against possible confirmation biases in deriving a theory from a case and then testing it in the same case, it is possible to derive an

explanation from a case and then test it against different and independent evidence from within that same case” (Bennet 2008, p.705).

Result and Discussion

This section evaluate the Quad from realist institutionalism theory, comparing the platform’s current arrangement according to several causal indicators which in turn affect cohesion, war-fighting effectiveness, interoperability, and legitimacy: its pattern of multilateral institution (an alliance or a coalition), its size, the decision-making structure, and internal power distribution. From the first realist institutionalist perspective, it is clear that the Quad is gradually being transformed from an informal coalition into a more established military alliance. The increased pattern of naval exercises in the Indo-Pacific region signaling the political will from all four Quad members to address the possible future interoperability, and burden sharing issues – the way NATO did following the end of WWII. In combination, both push—the strategic challenge posed by China—and the pull factor—a renewed American commitment —gives rise to the momentum of the Quad to push for great military and strategic cooperation. India, for instance, substantially upgrading its strategic partnerships with the other Quad members: in August 2016, New Delhi signed the The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US to provide mutual military access to each other’s facilities; in December 2016, India became the US Major Defence Partner, on par with Washington’s closest allies (Saran & Verma, 2019); Japan and India upgraded their relationship to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership in September 2014, before further upgraded to Japan and India Vision 2025, Special Strategic and Global Partnership, Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Australia and India upgraded their relationship to the level of Strategic Partnership in 2009 while defence cooperation was expanded in November 2014 to include regular defence-ministerial meetings and maritime exercises (India Ministry of External Affairs, 2017).

It must be noted that previously, India and Australia had been hesitant and not only resisted calls to upgrade the Quad but also called it off to preserve their economic interest with China. The Quad previously was ended ultimately because of Australian and Indian concerns about China’s reaction. Such caution was reasonable at that time; that was the time when the former China President Hu Jintao’s promoting the narrative of China’s peaceful rise. However, the increased pattern of China’s assertive behavior – not only in the Indo-Pacific, but also across the globe under their Belt and Road Initiative scheme – compelled both New Delhi and Canberra to eventually participate in Quad ministerial level meeting; signaling the end of their accommodative stance towards China. The return of the Quad on the back of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) visions is evidence that this balance has shifted; both

Canberra and New Delhi now acknowledge that the cost of appeasing Beijing has now exceeded the cost of hedging against an increasingly great threat (Kliem 2020).

The sudden increase in Quad's diplomatic consolidation are concurrently accompanied by a great increase in their military cooperation. In November 2020, Exercise MALABAR 2020 has been conducted involving the Australian HMAS *Ballarat* together with Indian Navy Ships *Shakti*, *Ranvijay*, *Sukanya*, *Shivalik*; Indian submarine *Sindhuraj*; Indian Navy aircraft; United States Ship *John S. McCain* and Japanese Ship *Ōnami* (Borah 2020). Initially, Exercise Malabar began as bilateral exercises between India and the US back in 1992 and was expanded to include Japan only in 2015. Australia used to participate once in 2007, and it was finally invited back in 2020 (Borah 2020). Australian Minister for Defence, Senator Linda Reynolds said the imperative to cooperate closely with regional defence partners on 'shared challenges' – implicitly referring to China – was stronger than ever:

"Exercise MALABAR is an important opportunity to work in concert with like-minded nations to support a secure, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region...Participation in sophisticated exercises like MALABAR not only highlights the strategic trust between the members, but also strengthens our collective ability to contribute to regional security...India and Australia are natural partners in the Indo-Pacific, and Exercise MALABAR is a clear demonstration of the depth of trust and cooperation between our defence organisations."

During the exercise, the four participating navies conducted 'a range of high-end training, including air defence and anti-submarine exercises, aviation, communications and at-sea replenishment between ships' (Department of Defence Ministers Australia 2020).

From the realist institutionalism second indicator, the decision-making structure, while the Quad so-called chain of command are currently semi-decentralized in a consensus form, the US progressively increasing its golden share in this regard. Indeed, the United States remains the single most important driver of any meaningful Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy against China expansion, and such discourse only gained real traction once the US President Donald Trump embraced it at the 2017 APEC Summit and his administration released the National Security Strategy (NSS) as their first foreign policy strategy. From the US part, Washington's most significant change was the May 2018 rebranding of the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) to United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). Although USPACOM had been operating in the Indian Ocean even before the change took place, the original name was a strategic reflection towards the western Pacific in the post-WWII era. The renaming also reflects USINDOPACOM's theatre more inclusively since it includes 36 countries across all the sub-regions as well as both the Pacific and Indian Oceans between India to the West and the border of the US Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to the North and East (Kliem 2020). Ultimately, Washington's more robust push-back against Chinese expansion, both in terms of economic and security terms, was

consolidated during Trump administration (2016-2020). Washington clearly identifies China as the primary challenge and diagnoses a 'geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order' (The White House, 2017, p. 45). For the United States' vision to succeed, it must 'redouble [U.S.] commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners', in an effort to '[sustain] a favorable balance of power', which 'require[s] strong commitment and close cooperation with allies and partners because allies and partners magnify US power and extend US influence' (The White House, 2017, p. 46).

From the third indicator, namely from the perspective of power distribution within the Quad, the US under Trump administration did demand its partner to contribute meaningfully. In addition to the Chinese push-factor, the elevated threat level since the beginning of the Xi Jinping administration, the Quad revival followed a more robust US commitment to the region post-Obama. The heightened uncertainty regarding the future of America's commitment in the Asia Pacific region after Trump had abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and rebuffed Obama's pivot to Asia was to some extent alleviated by Washington's more robust Indo-Pacific position and Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Huxley & Schreer, 2017). The most critical signal was the State Secretary Mike Pompeo's comments following the outcome of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal that delivers victory to the Philippines against the Chinese illegal Nine dash line claim at the South China Sea: 'We have reconvened the Quad [...] that had been dormant for nine years [...]. This will prove very important in the efforts ahead, ensuring that China retains only its proper place in the world' (Marlow, 2019). In addition, the US promised to redouble its commitment to established partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners that share their concerns through the National Security Strategy (NSS) (The White House, 2017, p. 46). Indeed, the emergence of Quad into the contemporary Indo-Pacific stage is characterised by this mutually reinforcing dynamic of able and willing middle powers on the one hand, and a reliable, yet demanding American partner on the other (Kliem 2020).

However, the consensus and decentralized decision-making structure of the Quad also take a toll on its complete transformation into a full-fledge military alliance that makes the Quad is not going to play a major military role any time soon. In October 2020, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga kicked off his trip to Vietnam and Indonesia where he repeatedly reassured his partners that Japan does not intend to create an "Asian NATO," implicitly referring to the Quad. Similarly, on the eve of the 2021 March Quad Summit, the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that the Quad will remain informal. India's diplomatic protests against U.S. Navy operations within India's exclusive economic zone in the same year reveal another strategic gap in the Quad's current decision-making structure.

In terms of size, the Quad alliance of four countries greatly affected its cohesion and streamline the costs associated with possible multilateral war fighting in the future. The

Quad's current small members also promising in terms of easy access to each other's ports and airfields. The signing of Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) mean that all the partnerships within the Australia-Japan-U.S. trilateral relationship have an RAA or Status of Forces Agreement. A more critical progress from the perspective of realist institutionalism is this: bilateral military ties among all four Quad members is strengthened. India's defense ties with the US are growing quickly, purchasing a huge array of U.S.-made military hardware, with U.S. defense sales to India increased to more than \$20 billion. Australia and Japan are also expanding their defense ties with India. And all three are heartened that India has set up a tri-services command in the strategically important Andaman and Nicobar islands just north of the Malacca Strait. The recent landing of a U.S. P-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft in the Andamans for the first time suggests that this has opened new avenues for maritime security cooperation (Borah 2020).

However, Quad in reality still need to do more to be an Asian NATO. The first issue is the fact that NATO represented a grand strategy of culturally similar Western nations with a mutual history of trust and cooperation forged through post-WWII and Cold War conflicts and crises. NATO members not only equally shared a perception of Moscow as a threat, but their zero economic, trade, investment, or any commercial entanglement with the insular Soviet bloc made it uncomplicated for them to work strongly towards the goal of strategic containment (Chowdhury 2021). Contrast that with Quad, where almost all countries share critical economic interdependence with China. Beijing is Tokyo's largest export market and trading partner, representing more than 20 percent of Japan's total trade. China is also the largest trading partner of Australia, accounting for about 30 percent of Australia's trade with the world. Close to 40 percent of Australian goods exports go to China, which in turn supplies 27 percent of all goods imported into Australia. Even for India, which has a live boundary dispute with China that flared up in a bloody conflict in the Himalayas last year, China is the largest trading partner. Total imports from China are more than India's purchases from the US, its second largest trade partner.

Nevertheless, if one considering the possible conflict against China, the interoperability challenges might grow but not in an overtly negative way. This is following the US concurrent strategic partnership building in the region; not only Washington has consolidated its strategic cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India, but also with other key ASEAN states like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines as well as with South Korea and Taiwan. While improved naval interoperability and expanded information sharing will be valuable to the members, the speed of advance will be restrained by geopolitical considerations. There are other areas where the Quad can act to deliver immediate impact to regional maritime security. With the signing of the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) between India and Australia in June 2020, all of the bilateral partnerships within the Quad now include an MLSA or Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). These arrangements is an imperative step toward the interoperability of cooperative logistics, but

to endure any real conflict, they are not only need to be developed, but also tested and practiced through regular use. Such cooperation creates efficiencies and by leaning on each other's logistics networks, partners gain expanded operational flexibility while at the same time streamlining lowers transaction costs. This is precisely how the Quad cooperation can inspire and empower similar efficiencies among other like-minded regional states.

Finally, in terms of the Quad's legitimacy, it is obviously inhere to the shared Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, rather than inhere in the size of the coalition or alliance. Bradford (2021), for instance, stated that despite lacking strategic alignment across the full spectrum of security issues, the strategic interest of Quad members mostly converged and compatible between one and another – especially regarding critical elements in the maritime domain. In their joint statement, the Quad leaders pledged to “facilitate collaboration, including in maritime security, to meet challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas.” The importance of freedom of navigation and the priority of international law in the maritime domain, particularly as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has been frequently highlighted and emphasized. In recent years, the Quad also has focused progress on enhancing naval interoperability while improving maritime intelligence and information cooperation. The 2020 return of the Royal Australian Navy to the Malabar exercise which since 2016 had been a trilateral India-Japan-U.S. event is a significant signs of increased naval interoperability. At one time, Malabar was more of a diplomatic symbol rather than a significant military alliance. But in recent years it has progressed to feature advanced tactics and serious training for potential cooperative warfighters as preconditioned by realist institutionalism.

Conclusion

In the light of tectonic geopolitical shifts in the Indo-Pacific region, the re-emergence of Quad provides the Washington's regional partners a multi-pronged strategy of internal and double external balancing as indicated by realist institutionalism. In addition to strengthening their own defence capability and continuing support, Japan, India, and Australia have simultaneously pursued efforts to develop stronger ties among themselves, as likeminded partners who share the strategic goal of wanting to push back against an increasingly powerful China. This article set out to achieve two things and answer one puzzle: it aimed to provide an analysis of Quad and connect it to realist institutionalism theoretical perspective of multilateral military institution; it subsequently attempted to locate Quad firmly in IR theory. By completing these tasks, this article's contribution is twofold: first, it has added a comprehensive account of the Quad to the existing literature and second, it has provided most up to date empirical evidence that amidst structural changes in the regional environment, it is the propositions of realist institutionalism that help to make sense of agents' immediate responses to structural change.

In a nutshell, the US is not in absolute decline. Indeed, under the Trump administration Washington has been stepping up its hard power in both oceans of Indo-Pacific: Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The current gap between China and the United States may diminish further as a result of continued Chinese economic growth. But Beijing will not be able to push the US out of the Indo-Pacific in the foreseeable future, which will give Washington more time and space to increase the Quad's internal and external defence capabilities and relationship. However, the undeniable relative decline of the US economic and military power requires joint solutions together with regional middle powers like Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Korea who do not wish to see China as a regional hegemon, and multilateral checking-institution like Quad will be indispensable. Indeed, the potential for future expansion of the Quad with other quasi-alliances of likeminded partners are the likely future of Indo-Pacific security.

In essence, there are a few key principles that are imperative to determine any further military institutional progress by the Quad: First, the United States, as the world's only superpower with less time to maintain that particular status, will have to continue to take the lead, while middle power countries like India and Japan will also have to shed their reticence vis-à-vis China. Finally, the Quad countries will need to coordinate to implement economic decoupling with China, as Beijing continues to take advantage of its imbalanced trade relationships upon countries like Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and other nations in the Indo-Pacific region (Abadi 2021). Nevertheless, shortfalls in strategic alignment and insufficient mutual trust constrain the Quad from evolving into a formal arrangement or a military alliance in the immediate future. Indeed, a contentious future where continued aggressive and illegal actions by Beijing drive all four Quad member states into closer strategic alignment is certainly possible, if not inevitable. While geopolitical forces control the pace of Quad efforts to build interoperability and enhance intelligence coordination, Bradford (2021) urged the members' maritime planners to steam forward at 'full speed' with initiatives focused on logistics cooperation, mutual access, and coordinated maritime capacity building which will provide the essential foundations for the type of military cooperation that will be desired when greater strategic alignment – and eventual threat – arrived.

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Author Biography

Abdul Muein Abadi is a Political Science lecturer at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and currently a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University. His research focusses on political-administrative relations in foreign policy-making process. He has published widely on geopolitics, Malaysian and Asian defence affairs, U.S. and China foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific, and foreign assistance including in *Contemporary Politics*, *The Pacific Review*, and *Asian Survey*.