

# Asean should be open but wary about Quad

Region risks being entangled in great-power enmity as other parties expand Indo-Pacific ambitions

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*By Lucio Blanco Pitlo*



The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or simply Quad, is a grouping gaining traction as great-power competition and regional hot spots intensify.

It is one in a constellation of mini-laterals gaining currency amid shifting sands in the region's geopolitics. Quad can bring something to the table for Asean but it, too, could pose risks. Hype aside, Quad is still evolving and this is when interested parties have a greater chance of charting its trajectory. What role Asean can play in shaping its future remains to be seen.

There is merit in engaging Quad. It can support the capacity building of regional countries in the areas of maritime and cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and counter-terrorism.

Quad can encourage and nudge Asean to reflect hard on the region's evolving security dynamics. It is already raising serious conversations about the region's affairs and its progress may help shed some inhibitions about working with longstanding dialogue partners to address shared challenges.

Quad is raring to expand its roster and its less-institutionalised format works to its advantage. It exudes openness to countries of varying security configurations – those with formal treaty alliances, those without and those traditionally predisposed against alignment with great powers. From this vantage point, it could upgrade the region's security architecture.

### Keeping China in check

Some see the quartet as a counter to China's growing influence and wherewithal with the power disparity bearing on flashpoints like the South China Sea.

Beijing's burgeoning naval and coast guard muscle is sobering other littorals to welcome – openly or privately – the presence of the United States and other maritime powers to keep China in check.

Being the biggest disputant and one that does not shy away from enforcing its claims in contested waters, China's presence and activities in the hot spot naturally elicit great concern and suspicion on the part of other coastal states, including both claimants and those who rely on the semi-enclosed sea as a passageway for their energy and commerce.

Even granting that China's actions are more in line with broader blue-water ambitions that go beyond

its near seas and commensurate with its standing as a leading trading nation, unresolved territorial and maritime disputes and power asymmetry coupled with trust deficit make its neighbours edgy. Hence, some Asean member states, despite misgivings, find affinity with the foursome.

Quad also goes beyond security as it expands its portfolio to cover health, climate change, clean-energy transition, critical and emerging technologies, and infrastructure and connectivity. It thus opens new modes of engaging partners on a broad range of issues.

Asean member states need not subscribe to the full menu and can go the à la carte route – picking and choosing cooperation areas that suit their interests, priorities and comfort level. This flexibility and pooled resources from four dialogue partners can warm regional countries to the cluster.

At this juncture, some countries are already blazing the trail and are working with Quad in different capacities. But others remain tepid, probably looking for more tangible results beyond meetings and statements before signing up.

For pragmatic actors, if you cannot stop the wave, you might as well learn and find ways to harness it or channel it in ways that bring you more gains than losses. Those adopting this mindset may be more poised to benefit than latecomers.

### Asean centrality 'threat'

However, despite its promise, Quad also bred concerns about undermining Asean centrality. Some were anxious it might contribute to the fragmentation of Southeast Asia along competing great power factions.

Cleavages between insular and peninsular countries over the South China Sea, Mekong River, or dealing with China, among others, may be exposed further.



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Such disunity in Asean will make individual countries easy picking for rival powers.

Some also see engagement with Quad as a slippery slope. Instead of building consensus and institutionalised approaches to meet regional challenges, difficulties and all, member states may just adopt Asean-X (or -XYZ depending on the issue). Over time, swift resort to such an equation may hollow out the cohesion and integrity of one of the world's longest-running regional organisations.

Furthermore, while Quad can revitalise US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific, it also raises the spectre of being roped in and entangled in great-power enmity. While the arrangement is flexible, the degree of agency and autonomy one can exercise within this club of major and middle powers is also questionable.

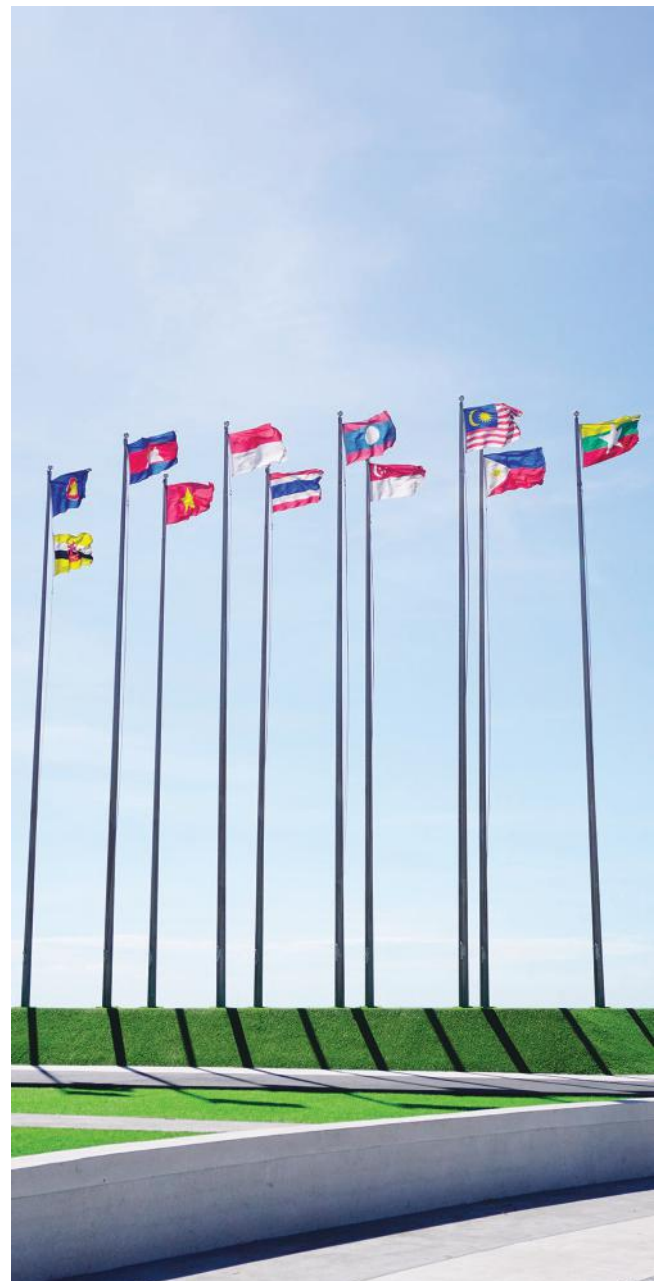
Fears, unfounded or otherwise, that Quad can be a building block or a nucleus for an Asian Nato also temper enthusiasm about engaging with the quartet. This is especially so for countries with cozy ties with Beijing or heavy trade and investment exposure with their big northern neighbour, the likely unspoken target of such potential collective security organisation.

Quad can have value updating rules of the road for security, technology, connectivity and beyond for regional countries. These are all crucial and worthwhile domains that will resonate in one of the world's fastest-growing regions.

Making one country the organising factor when forming a coalition is unnecessary and is, in fact, an injustice to the more pressing imperatives for the region. The disquiet with Quad comes from how it will form its relations with China, the elephant in the room. The answer to that may help determine not only buy-in to the mini-lateral but also regional order and stability.



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