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U.S. ALLIANCES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: QUAD AND AUKUS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role of the QUAD and AUKUS in shaping the security and political architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. It examines their strategic objectives, structural differences, and impact on regional stability in the context of growing U.S.–China rivalry. The paper highlights how these formats reflect new forms of international cooperation based on flexibility, technological integration, and security coordination. Special attention is given to their effectiveness, limitations, and influence on the emerging multipolar order.

Key Words. Indo-Pacific, QUAD, AUKUS, United States, China, regional security, strategic competition, alliances, international relations, multipolarity

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region, stretching from the Pacific coast of the United States to the Indian Ocean, is one of the most culturally, economically, and politically diverse regions in the world. It is home to more than half the world's population, two-thirds of the global economy, and seven of the largest militaries on the planet. The region includes major economies such as Japan and China, but is also home to numerous emerging economies and small island states. As a major global center of gravity, the Indo-Pacific will shape the trajectory of the world's development in the next century.

The United States is a Pacific power and has had significant security and economic interests in the region for over a century, which it has pursued through various regional organizations in the region like QUAD and AUKUS.

Literature Review

The literature on the Indo-Pacific focuses on growing strategic competition, especially between the United States and China. Official U.S. documents (White House 2022; U.S. Department of State 2020) highlight the importance of alliances like QUAD and AUKUS for maintaining regional stability.

Studies on the QUAD describe it as a flexible and informal partnership (Gómez 2024; Pereira n.d.; Wei 2022). Researchers note that its strength is adaptability, but its weakness is limited effectiveness in implementation (CSIS 2023). This can be explained through Keohane's (1984) theory of cooperation.

In contrast, AUKUS is seen as a more military-focused alliance. Sources such as The Economist (2021) and Arimoto et al. (2023) emphasize its role in strengthening deterrence and military capabilities in the region. Other authors (RBK 2024; Yorgancı and Mehdiyev 2025) highlight its political significance and controversial reactions, especially from China.

Overall, the literature shows that QUAD and AUKUS represent different but complementary approaches to security and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the role of QUAD and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific region.

The main method is comparison, showing the differences between QUAD as a flexible partnership and AUKUS as a military alliance. The study also uses case analysis to understand their goals and impact.

The research is based on academic sources, official documents, and analytical reports. It also considers the broader international context to explain current global changes.

The QUAD and Its Role in Indo-Pacific Cooperation

QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is an informal alliance between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan focused on security in the Indo-Pacific region and promoting its economic and technological prosperity. This structure is weakly institutionalized, a new phenomenon that confirms the theory of "neo-institutionalism." This format lacks a charter, headquarters, or secretary general. This allows it to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century without bureaucratic shackles1.

The origins of the organization date back to 2004, when a powerful tsunami devastated the shores of the Indian Ocean, affecting 14 countries and claiming the lives of 225,000 people. Four countries formed the Tsunami Core Group to coordinate humanitarian assistance. The success of this collaboration prompted leaders to consider a deeper partnership.

The main ideologist behind the Quad was then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In August 2007, addressing the Indian Parliament with a speech titled "The Confluence of Two Seas," he proposed the concept of an "arc of freedom and prosperity" linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Thus, a unique Quad 1.0 format was created2. However, each country's bilateral relations with the other regional leader, China, as well as Shinzo Abe's departure from office, led to the format being lost the following year. For ten years, the Quad remained in a "deep freeze." However, the countries continued to strengthen bilateral and trilateral ties through joint military exercises and economic integration.

With the rise of Donald Trump in 2017, China's increasing influence and assertion of sovereignty in the South and East China Seas, military clashes between Chinese and Indian forces in the Galwan Valley, and the desire to achieve a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), the Quad was revived in November 2017 on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Manila. Today, it is a format for annual meetings attended by the countries' leaders3.

For the United States, the Quad serves as a crucial tool in an era of renewed great power competition amid China's growing influence and assertiveness. As part of this strategy, Washington seeks to unite the region's leading democracies to contain Chinese expansion and defend democratic values, ensuring a stable and open Indo-Pacific. This macro-region is critical to the American economy: in 2019, $1.9 trillion worth of goods passed through it, underscoring the importance of ensuring the security of maritime trade routes4. Furthermore, the United States is actively using the Quad format to strengthen bilateral ties with Australia, India, and Japan, allowing it to harmoniously complement the decades-old system of alliances with new mechanisms of strategic partnership and direct this against China, whose influence and power is

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1 Gómez, Martina. 2024. "Examining the institutionalization of the Quad." Global Affairs, Universidad de Navarra.

2 Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. 2023. "Elements of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy." *Harvard Kennedy School*.

3 White House. 2022. *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.*

4 U.S. Department of State. 2020. *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision.*

growing year after year. Trump has publicly acknowledged that the Quad is a mechanism to counter Beijing5.

Different strategic priorities among the member states pose a challenge to its functioning. For the United States, Australia, and Japan, a potential escalation around Taiwan remains a key regional security issue. Meanwhile, India is paying significantly more attention to its own border issues with China, particularly in the regions of Ladakh and Tibet. Such differences in threat perceptions often complicate the development of a unified strategy within the group.

Some researchers also note India's unique position within the format. Another problem is so-called "mission expansion." In recent years, QUAD's agenda has expanded significantly to include climate change, space cooperation, critical technologies, and healthcare. While this demonstrates the member countries' desire to develop multilateral cooperation, it also poses the risk of dissipating efforts and losing a clear strategic focus6.

The practical implementation of some initiatives is also facing challenges. For example, the vaccine partnership program, which envisioned the production and distribution of one billion vaccine doses by the end of 2022, was only partially implemented, sparking debate about the mechanism's ability to effectively implement large-scale projects7.

At the same time, the QUAD has demonstrated significant value as a platform for coordination rather than a formal alliance. It enables rapid policy alignment among member states, facilitates flexible coalition-building on specific issues, and serves as a signaling mechanism of shared strategic intent, particularly in the context of balancing China’s growing influence.

From a theoretical perspective, the QUAD can be understood as a hybrid form of institutional cooperation, situated between traditional alliance systems and informal multilateral arrangements. It reflects broader transformations in the international system, where states increasingly rely on flexible, issue-based coalitions rather than rigid institutional frameworks, consistent with neo-institutionalist interpretations of global governance8.

In the context of the evolving Indo-Pacific order, the QUAD contributes to balancing China’s regional influence, reinforcing a rules-based maritime order, and promoting economic and technological standards among like-minded states. However, its long-term effectiveness will depend on its ability to reconcile internal divergences, maintain strategic coherence, and translate political commitments into practical and measurable outcomes.

AUKUS and Its Strategic Significance

Another organization that exerts a unique leverage over the Indo-Pacific region is AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States). It is a trilateral defense alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The partnership was announced on September 15, 2021, during a joint press conference by the leaders of the three countries: Scott Morrison (Australia), Boris Johnson (United Kingdom), and Joe Biden (United States). This was prompted by Australia's rejection of a $66 billion

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5 Pereira, Andrew. n.d. “The Quad.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed March 23, 2026. https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Quad

6 Wei, Zongyou. 2022. "The evolution of the ‘QUAD’: driving forces, impacts, and prospects." Center for American Studies, Fudan University

7 CSIS. 2023. *Assessing the QUAD Vaccine Partnership.*

8 Keohane, Robert O. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy.*

contract with a French company, once dubbed the "contract of the century," for the construction of 12 Barracuda-class diesel-electric submarines9. Citing delays and rising costs, this triggered a major diplomatic crisis with Paris. France demanded compensation, and the dispute was settled with compensation of AUD835 million (€555 million, or $584 million)10. Following 18 months of preliminary negotiations, the alliance's goals were first detailed in March 2023 in the first joint statement by the heads of government following the San Diego Summit (USA).

Diesel submarines are ideal for coastal defense, but are virtually useless for offensive operations on the high seas against enemy submarines or surface combatants. Australia's decision to abandon the French deal and pursue nuclear submarines in cooperation with the UK and the US is a tacit admission that diesel submarines are not a sufficient naval deterrent to the threat it considers most immediate. Moreover, at the tactical and operational levels of warfare, nuclear submarines provide a far more potent platform for power projection. As The Economist magazine wrote: "The transition from a diesel-electric fleet to a nuclear fleet is thus a change in strategy, not just in propulsion." This allows for the projection of power from the shipping lanes leading to the crucial Strait of Malacca to the waters off Taiwan. Add to this the ability to launch missiles with much greater range - a submarine can deliver missiles to the Chinese mainland from east of the Philippines the country gains a significantly expanded offensive potential."11

The second pillar of US cooperation involved the involvement of key allies in the region, primarily Japan. Further discussions were held to expand this partnership, including New Zealand, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Canada, and other Asia-Pacific countries with which the US already cooperates in the QUAD and FPDA formats. Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines expressed their support for the treaty.

At the same time, AUKUS faces several internal challenges and political risks. One of the primary concerns relates to industrial capacity. U.S. naval experts and members of Congress have raised doubts about whether American shipyards can meet the increased production demands without compromising domestic naval readiness. It is estimated that submarine production would need to increase from approximately 1.3 to 2.3 units per year12. In the United Kingdom, the main contractor, BAE Systems, has also faced criticism over delays in submarine construction. Additionally, the alliance has had to navigate political uncertainty in the United States. Following the return of Donald Trump to the presidency, the administration initiated a

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9 Arimoto, Mayu, Gabrielle Armstrong-Scott, Sophie Faaborg-Andersen, Nicholas Hanson, and Chris Li. 2023. "Elements of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Qualitative Primer on the Quad, AUKUS, and Partners in the Blue Pacific." Asia-Pacific Initiative, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/230526_API_IndoPacificStrategy_FINAL.pdf.

10 РБК. 2024. "Что такое AUKUS: для чего был создан военный союз и против кого воюет." РБК

11 "Aukus Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific." The Economist, 25 Sept. 2021, www.economist.com/briefing/2021/09/25/aukus-reshapes-the-strategic-landscape-of-the-indo-pacific.

12 РБК. 2024. "Что такое AUKUS: для чего был создан военный союз и против кого воюет." *РБК*.

review of AUKUS under the "America First" policy framework. Nevertheless, in December 2025, the Pentagon concluded a five-month audit confirming that the project remains beneficial and will proceed at full pace13.

International reactions to AUKUS have been sharply divided. China has strongly opposed the alliance, characterizing it as a "dangerous" precedent that could trigger a regional arms race reminiscent of the Cold War. Beijing raised concerns with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), arguing that the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology could violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Although no violations were identified, China accused the agency of bias and continues to call for further review. Chinese officials have also argued that AUKUS could undermine the Rarotonga Treaty, which establishes a nuclear-free zone in the South Pacific. State-controlled media in China have gone as far as to warn that the deployment of nuclear-powered submarines could make Australia a potential target in the event of conflict. North Korea has taken an even more critical stance, framing AUKUS as the beginning of a nuclear arms race in the region.

In sum, AUKUS represents a significant evolution in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. It combines traditional military capabilities with advanced technological cooperation, reinforcing long-term strategic deterrence-particularly with China-while also highlighting the growing militarization and polarization of the regional order.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central arena of global politics, where economic dynamism, strategic competition, and evolving security architectures intersect. As demonstrated, both the QUAD and AUKUS represent key instruments through which the United States and its partners seek to shape the regional order in response to the growing influence of China .

The QUAD reflects a flexible, non-institutionalized model of cooperation that emphasizes coordination, shared values, and issue-based collaboration. Its strength lies in adaptability and its ability to bring together major regional democracies without the constraints of formal alliance structures. However, internal divergences and the risk of agenda overexpansion continue to limit its effectiveness and coherence.

In contrast, AUKUS represents a more traditional and security-oriented framework, centered on hard power capabilities and deep technological integration. Through its focus on nuclear-powered submarines and advanced defense technologies, AUKUS signals a long-term strategic commitment to military deterrence and power projection in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, it raises significant concerns regarding regional stability, arms competition, and non-proliferation norms.

Together, these two frameworks illustrate the transformation of international cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than relying solely on rigid alliances or universal institutions, states increasingly employ hybrid and overlapping formats tailored to specific strategic needs. This reflects broader shifts in the international system toward competitive multipolarity and flexible coalition-building.

Ultimately, the future of the Indo-Pacific order will depend on the ability of such mechanisms to balance deterrence with stability, cooperation with competition, and national interests with regional security. While QUAD and AUKUS contribute to maintaining a balance of power, they also underscore the intensifying geopolitical rivalry that will likely define the trajectory of the region in the decades to come.

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13 Yorgancı, Yasin, and Nariman Mehdiyev. 2025. "США поддержали проект AUKUS, известный как «ядерный подводный альянс»." Anadolu Ajansı.

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