



## India's QUAD participation and strategic Autonomy: A critical assessment of Minilateral Security Frameworks in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

Mukesh Kumar Yadav

Assistant Professor, Aatmaram College, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

### Abstract

India's involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue represents a significant yet contested development in Indo-Pacific geopolitical arrangements. While Western analyses frequently characterize QUAD as a mechanism for constraining Chinese regional dominance, Indian strategic conceptualizations emphasize autonomy maintenance and strategic flexibility. This evidence synthesis examines 74 peer-reviewed publications (2007-2025) to assess how scholarly literature characterizes India's QUAD engagement, constraints limiting India's exclusive participation, and institutional factors affecting minilateral framework sustainability. The synthesis reveals substantial divergence between Western alliance-centered interpretations and Indian hedging-focused approaches. Analysis of strategic documents and policy publications identifies India as conceptualizing QUAD participation through four distinct strategic objectives: maritime security advancement, technological sovereignty protection, capacity enhancement, and multipolarity maintenance. Qualitative thematic analysis across included publications consistently identifies five constraints limiting India's exclusive QUAD alignment: economic interdependence with China, regional preferences for great-power neutrality in Southeast Asia, Pakistan-focused security priorities, strategic relationships with Russia, and philosophical commitment to multipolarity. Comparative institutional analysis of minilateral frameworks reveals that successful arrangements (Five Power Defense Arrangements) maintain operational focus and respect member autonomy, while failed arrangements (SEATO) imposed ideological commitments exceeding member interests. The synthesis demonstrates that QUAD sustainability depends on institutional evolution accommodating India's autonomy requirements rather than demanding subordination to alliance coherence. Policy recommendations emerging from reviewed literature suggest that reframing QUAD as rules-based governance forum rather than explicit containment alliance would strengthen India's participation while addressing Southeast Asian concerns regarding great-power exclusivity. Findings establish that understanding India's strategic perspective represents a prerequisite for realistic assessment of QUAD's trajectory and Indo-Pacific institutional development.

**Keywords:** QUAD, strategic autonomy, minilateral frameworks, India-China relations, geopolitical positioning

### Introduction

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue emerged initially as an ad-hoc coordination mechanism following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The framework remained dormant for approximately a decade before resurfacing in 2017 as geopolitical circumstances shifted. Contemporary QUAD encompasses India, Japan, Australia, and the United States, with explicit emphasis on Indo-Pacific security, rules-based order, and maritime governance.

Published scholarship examining QUAD reveals divergent interpretations of its strategic purpose. Western strategic analyses frequently present QUAD as a critical alliance mechanism for maintaining American primacy and constraining Chinese regional expansion. Indian strategic publications, conversely, emphasize QUAD's utility for specific security cooperation while maintaining broader strategic flexibility. These divergent interpretations reflect fundamentally different assumptions about QUAD's intended role, constraints limiting participation, and appropriate institutional arrangements.

Understanding QUAD's sustainability requires engaging seriously with India's strategic perspective rather than assuming convergence between Indian and Western strategic objectives. This evidence synthesis examines published literature characterizing India's QUAD engagement, documenting scholarly consensus regarding

constraints on India's participation, and identifying institutional factors affecting minilateral framework effectiveness.

Core research questions shaping this synthesis: First, how do publications examining India's foreign policy conceptualize India's strategic autonomy and its implications for QUAD? Second, what constraints does literature consistently identify as limiting India's exclusive QUAD commitment? Third, what institutional models demonstrate success in maintaining minilateral cooperation while accommodating member autonomy? Fourth, what institutional evolution would strengthen QUAD while accommodating India's strategic requirements?

### Methodology

Systematic review methodology provides the organizational framework. Literature identification employed Web of Science, Scopus, and region-specific academic databases. Search strategies addressed three dimensions: QUAD institutional development and evolution; India's strategic autonomy conceptualization; and minilateral security frameworks including QUAD, Five Power Defense Arrangements, and historical comparison cases.

Inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed publications from 2007-2025 engaging explicitly with QUAD, India's strategic positioning, or minilateral security frameworks. Geographic

and thematic variation in publication venue was preserved: Indian scholarly sources, Western strategic analyses, Japanese and Australian perspectives, and international relations theory publications were all represented in included studies.

Two independent reviewers applied selection criteria at title/abstract and full-text stages. Disagreements resolved through consensus discussion. Seventy-four publications met final inclusion criteria.

Quality assessment employed AACODS (Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Density, Structure) checklist for policy analyses and think-tank publications; CASP Qualitative Checklist for qualitative research; domain-specific assessment tools for theoretical frameworks. Studies classified as low, moderate, or high quality. Sensitivity analyses examined whether excluding lower-quality publications altered conclusions.

Data extraction employed standardized forms capturing: author and year; geographic/institutional focus; QUAD dimensions examined; India's strategic positioning; benefits and constraints identified; institutional recommendations; theoretical frameworks employed.

Synthesis employed thematic analysis for qualitative synthesis. Publications coded for recurring themes regarding India's strategic autonomy, QUAD benefits, QUAD constraints, institutional recommendations, and divergences between Western and Indian interpretations. Patterns identified across multiple publications organized into overarching findings.

### Study Characteristics and Publication Patterns

Initial searches identified 1,924 potentially relevant publications. Title and abstract screening eliminated 1,603 publications lacking relevance. Full-text assessment of 321 publications yielded 74 meeting inclusion criteria.

Geographic authorship distribution indicated substantial representation of Indian scholarship (38%), U.S.-based strategic analysis (24%), Australian policy analysis (16%), Japanese regional studies (11%), and other sources (11%). This distribution reflects QUAD membership while preserving diverse perspectives on QUAD's strategic implications.

Study design variation included strategic policy analyses (43%), theoretical frameworks and conceptual discussions (24%), empirical case studies (19%), and comparative institutional analyses (14%). This heterogeneity reflects QUAD's positioning at the intersection of strategic analysis, institutional design, and geopolitical interpretation.

Temporal distribution revealed increasing publication intensity post-2017. Publications during 2007-2010 (QUAD origins) and 2011-2016 (dormancy period) comprised only 19% of included studies; post-2017 revival generated 81% of publications, with 43% appearing during 2022-2025. This pattern reflects QUAD's limited scholarly attention during dormancy and accelerating attention following revival and operationalization.

### Key Findings from Literature Synthesis

#### 1. India's Strategic Autonomy: Conceptual Framework and Contemporary Relevance

Thirty-eight publications explicitly examining India's strategic autonomy concept identified consistent definitional elements. Strategic autonomy denotes capacity to pursue independent strategic objectives without subordination to

external great-power preferences or requirements for exclusive alignment. This concept derives historical legitimacy from India's Non-Aligned Movement positioning during the Cold War, when India maintained cooperative relationships with both Soviet Union and Western powers while declining formal alliance commitments to either bloc.

Contemporary Indian strategic thinking maintains autonomy emphasis while differing from Cold War non-alignment. Rather than seeking to avoid great-power involvement, contemporary Indian strategy pursues active engagement with multiple powers while preserving capacity for independent decisionmaking. Twenty-eight publications analyzing current Indian strategic documents emphasized that India simultaneously cooperates with the United States, maintains defense relationships with Russia, engages pragmatically with China, and participates in regional forums such as ASEAN and BRICS. This pattern represents sophisticated hedging rather than inconsistency.

Indian strategic elite consistently distinguish between two positions: alignment (exclusive commitment to one power's objectives, viewed as constraining autonomy) versus hedging (maintaining multiple partnerships while preserving autonomy). Publications examining Indian policy statements identified repeated emphasis that India pursues hedging strategy compatible with autonomy, rejecting alignment incompatible with independent strategic agency.

#### 2. QUAD Evolution: From Ad-Hoc Forum to Formalized Partnership

Publications examining QUAD's developmental trajectory identified three distinct phases. The 2007 origins represented ad-hoc coordination without strategic intent—a pragmatic tsunami relief coordination mechanism lacking deeper geopolitical ambitions. Eight publications addressing this period emphasized the framework's limited institutional formality and absence of explicit strategic purpose.

The 2008-2016 dormancy period, examined in eight publications, reflected absence of shared threat perception, economic interdependencies reducing appetite for confrontational positioning, and ASEAN preference for great-power equidistance. During this decade, QUAD lacked institutional infrastructure, member-state commitment, or strategic *raison d'être*.

Post-2017 revival, extensively examined across 48 publications, reflected changed geopolitical circumstances: renewed U.S. focus on great-power competition, Trump administration Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasis, intensified U.S.-China tensions, and member-state recognition of shared interests in rules-based regional order. The 2021 QUAD summit elevated the framework from dialogue to substantive partnership, establishing working groups addressing maritime security, supply chain resilience, infrastructure development, emerging technologies, space, and climate change.

#### 3. QUAD Institutional Characteristics and Deliberate Weakness

Twenty-four publications analyzing QUAD's institutional structure identified that the framework's relative weakness—absence of formal treaty basis, permanent secretariat, binding commitments, automatic mutual defense—represents deliberate design choice rather than institutional deficiency. This institutional weakness serves multiple strategic functions for member states.

First, institutional weakness enables participation without subordinating autonomy. Members can participate in specific cooperative initiatives without accepting alliance-level commitments constraining broader strategic flexibility. India's participation in QUAD working groups on maritime security or technology governance does not require acceptance of alliance-level obligations regarding China policy, Russia relationships, or other strategic domains.

Second, flexibility permits accommodation of divergent national interests. The United States prioritizes great-power competition; Japan emphasizes regional stability; Australia balances security cooperation with China economic dependency; India maintains multipolarity commitment. Formal alliance structures would require harmonization of these divergent interests; institutional weakness permits each member to pursue distinct national objectives while cooperating on specific shared concerns.

Third, weak institutionalization permits recalibration or withdrawal without treaty violations. Members can adjust participation levels, shift priorities among QUAD initiatives, or modify strategic positioning without confronting formal alliance obligations. This flexibility proves particularly valuable for India and Australia, whose relationships with China encompass substantial economic interdependence alongside security competition.

#### **4. Benefits of QUAD Participation: India's Perspective**

Systematic examination of 35 publications analyzing India's perceived benefits from QUAD participation identified four distinct strategic advantages. First, maritime security and freedom of navigation: thirty-three publications identified Indian Ocean security protection as primary QUAD benefit. Maintenance of sea lanes critical for India's trade, prevention of hegemonic dominance, and rules-based order advancement represent direct Indian interests. QUAD cooperation on maritime security, naval exercises, and information-sharing regarding maritime developments advances these objectives without requiring exclusive China containment framing.

Second, technological sovereignty: twenty-one publications addressed India's technology vulnerabilities and QUAD's potential contribution to addressing them. India lacks domestic semiconductor manufacturing capacity, depends on Taiwan (via TSMC) and South Korea, and faces substantial Chinese technological advantages in sectors including artificial intelligence. QUAD-coordinated supply chain diversification, joint research initiatives, and standards-setting participation enable India to develop indigenous technology capacity and reduce dependency on Chinese or exclusive Western technological systems.

Third, capacity building and military modernization: eighteen publications examined India's military technology needs and QUAD's contribution. Access to advanced U.S. military technology, Japanese defense innovations, and Australian operational expertise accelerates India's military modernization. Joint exercises enhance operational capability; intelligence-sharing strengthens defense planning; technology transfer agreements accelerate development of indigenous capability.

Fourth, regional influence and major-power status: sixteen publications identified India's interest in enhanced regional voice regarding Indo-Pacific governance. QUAD membership signals major-power status, provides platform

for advancing India's strategic interests, and strengthens India's position in bilateral relationships with regional states. However, publications consistently noted that these benefits could potentially be achieved through bilateral relationships or alternative frameworks; QUAD's specific value lies in facilitating multilateral cooperation on these dimensions.

#### **5. Constraints on Exclusive QUAD Alignment**

Thematic analysis across publications identified five persistent constraints limiting India's capacity to subordinate broader strategic positioning to exclusive QUAD commitment. First, economic interdependence with China: twenty-one publications examined India-China trade relationships. India-China bilateral trade approximates \$136 billion annually (2024), with China supplying critical inputs in pharmaceuticals, electronics, minerals, and rare earth elements. Eighteen publications documented that exclusive QUAD commitment requiring economic decoupling from China would impose costs India cannot sustain without significant domestic economic disruption.

Second, Southeast Asian non-alignment preferences: seventeen publications examined ASEAN perspectives on QUAD. Southeast Asian states prefer great-power equidistance and resist pressure toward exclusive alignment. Thirteen publications documented ASEAN concern that QUAD framing as anti-China alliance risks drawing Southeast Asian states into great-power conflicts they wish to avoid. Eight publications noted tensions between exclusive QUAD alignment and India's "Act East" policy, which emphasizes regional engagement requiring Southeast Asian cooperation and trust.

Third, Pakistan security as primary strategic concern: fourteen publications addressed Pakistan-focused security priorities. Pakistan security challenges consume substantial defense resources and political attention. While QUAD partners support India's Pakistan concerns, QUAD framework primarily addresses India-China competition. Ten publications documented that India cannot fully redirect strategic focus to Indo-Pacific QUAD engagement without adequate Pakistan security resolution.

Fourth, Russia strategic relationship maintenance: nineteen publications examined India-Russia defense relationships. Russia supplies 45% of India's defense imports and remains trusted strategic partner with deep historical relationships. Seventeen publications documented that exclusive QUAD alignment requiring alignment with Western Russia opposition would force untenable strategic choices.

Fifth, multipolarity commitment: twelve publications examined India's preference for multipolarity in international order. Eleven publications documented that India conceptualizes exclusive QUAD alignment as risking new bipolarity (Western-led QUAD versus China-led alternatives), contrary to India's multipolarity preferences.

#### **6. Divergent QUAD Conceptualizations: Western versus Indian Perspectives**

Systematic analysis of 28 strategic documents including national strategies, policy statements, and think-tank analyses revealed substantial divergence in QUAD conceptualization. American documents emphasize QUAD as mechanism for restoring U.S. primacy and constraining Chinese hegemonic aspirations. Japanese documents emphasize regional stability and alliance-strengthening. Australian documents balance security cooperation with

trade relationship management. Indian documents emphasize strategic autonomy, pragmatic cooperation, and multipolarity maintenance.

These divergences operate at multiple levels. Regarding QUAD's primary purpose, Western sources foreground China containment; Indian sources foreground rules-based order maintenance. Regarding member commitment expectations, Western sources emphasize alliance-like coherence; Indian sources maintain that pragmatic cooperation suffices without alliance-level commitment. Regarding China engagement, Western sources advocate confrontational positioning; Indian sources advocate competitive but pragmatic engagement.

These divergences matter significantly for QUAD sustainability. If Western members view QUAD as requiring exclusive commitment incompatible with India-China engagement or India-Russia relationships, India's long-term participation faces constraints. Alternatively, if QUAD evolves toward Indian-preferred framing emphasizing pragmatic cooperation and autonomy respect, India's participation deepens.

## 7. Comparative Institutional Analysis: Successful and Failed Minilateral Models

Comparative examination of minilateral security frameworks revealed instructive contrasts between successful (Five Power Defense Arrangements) and failed (SEATO) models. Eight publications analyzing FPDA—comprising Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom since 1971—identified success factors: consensus-based decision-making without requiring alliance coherence; pragmatic operational focus; explicit avoidance of targeting specific countries; respect for members' independent strategic positioning; minimal institutional overhead enabling flexibility.

FPDA demonstrates that minilateral frameworks can endure without ideological commitment or formal alliance structure. Joint exercises, military interoperability, and operational cooperation function effectively even as member states maintain independent relationships with external powers. Malaysia's multiple security partnerships, Singapore's pragmatic China engagement, and New Zealand's varied alignments coexist within FPDA framework.

Conversely, six publications examining SEATO's Cold War failure identified failure factors: explicit containment mission (against Communist expansion); formal alliance requirements exceeding members' interests; inability to accommodate regional priorities; excessive institutional formality reducing flexibility. SEATO's 1977 dissolution reflected that forcing Asian states into formal anti-Communist alliance proved unsustainable when states preferred regional autonomy and pragmatic great-power relationships.

Meta-synthesis of minilateral framework comparisons suggested that QUAD sustainability depends on evolving toward FPDA operational model rather than SEATO ideological alliance model. Success requires institutional design respecting member autonomy, pragmatic cooperation focus, and avoidance of explicit targeting of specific countries.

## Policy Implications and Institutional Recommendations

Synthesis of included publications identifying institutional recommendations suggests four evolution scenarios that

would strengthen QUAD while accommodating India's autonomy requirements. First, operational forum model (emphasized in thirteen publications): transform QUAD into pragmatic coordination forum emphasizing joint exercises, military interoperability, crisis management, and intelligence-sharing. This evolution maintains cooperation specificity while reducing ideological alliance requirements. Second, rules-based order governance framework (emphasized in fifteen publications): position QUAD as Indo-Pacific governance forum establishing norms for maritime security, technology standards, supply chain resilience, and environmental protection. This framing aligns India's interests in maintaining rules-based order while explicitly avoiding China-containment implications.

Third, inclusive regional framework (emphasized in twelve publications): expand QUAD mechanisms to include ASEAN participation or establish QUAD+ accommodating Southeast Asian preferences. This evolution addresses ASEAN non-alignment preferences and reduces perceptions of Western hegemonic imposition.

Fourth, explicit autonomy recognition (emphasized in nine publications): establish QUAD principle recognizing members' rights to maintain autonomous strategic positioning, including relationships with non-QUAD powers. Formal recognition that QUAD participation does not require exclusive alignment would reduce tensions between collective commitment and autonomy maintenance.

## Conclusions

Evidence synthesis of 74 peer-reviewed publications yields three core conclusions. First, India's strategic autonomy represents non-negotiable commitment deriving from historical experience, strategic geography, and contemporary security environment. India will not subordinate autonomy to Western alliance requirements regardless of pressure. Understanding this commitment represents a prerequisite for realistic assessment of QUAD's trajectory.

Second, QUAD serves India's interests through specific security cooperation rather than providing comprehensive alliance framework. Divergence between Western and Indian conceptualizations reflects fundamentally different assumptions about QUAD's role and appropriate member behavior.

Third, QUAD's sustainability depends on institutional evolution accommodating India's autonomy requirements. Successful minilateral frameworks maintain operational focus while respecting member autonomy; failed frameworks imposed ideological commitments exceeding member interests. QUAD's future trajectory depends on which institutional model member states adopt.

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