

# Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and South China Sea Issue: Impacts and China's Strategic Response

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## Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue on China's concerns related to the South China Sea issue. The study first reviews the origin and development of the quadrilateral security dialogue mechanism, pointing out that its geopolitical color is obvious, especially in China as the core factor of strategic interaction. Subsequently, the article discusses the specific impact of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue on the South China Sea issue, including heating the issue, encouraging countries outside the region to intervene, aggravating tensions, and undermining stability in the South China Sea. Following that, the article puts forward China's countermeasures and suggestions, emphasizing that China should analyze the interests of various countries, divide and disintegrate the United States alliance system, strengthen economic ties with ASEAN countries, consolidate friendly relations, maintain strategic focus, and strengthen national defense and military construction. Finally, the study concludes that to preserve regional peace and stability, China should fully utilize the advantageous aspects of the Asia-Pacific pattern and neutralize the dangerous components.

**Keywords:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; The South China Sea issue; geopolitics; China's response strategy

## 1. Introduction

As a key shipping lane for international trade and energy transportation, the geopolitical value of the South China Sea region is increasingly significant. With the intensification of strategic competition between major countries, the South China Sea issue has become an international focus, with increasing complexity and sensitivity. In this context, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, as an important cooperation platform under the Indo-Pacific Strategy, has had a profound impact on the situation in the South China Sea.

Ever since its establishment in 2004, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has emerged as a crucial instrument for the US to broaden its strategic reach throughout the Indo-Pacific area. Although the mechanism claims to be aimed at "maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific", its underlying geopolitical considerations and strategic intentions toward China cannot be ignored [1]. This study will examine China's approach to resolving this issue and assess how the quadrilateral system impacts South China Sea stability through military actions, multilateral coalitions, and geopolitical games.

Through the in-depth analysis of the Quartet dialogue mechanism and its impact on the South China Sea issue, this paper aims to provide a strategic reference for China

in safeguarding national interests and regional peace and stability.

## 2. The Relationship Between the South China Sea Issue and the QUAD

### 2.1 The South China Sea Issue

With rival territory claims between China and Southeast Asian claimants, the South China Sea dispute is a complicated and multidimensional geopolitical issue. As an important sea lane connecting the East and the West, the area occupies an extremely prominent strategic position. Important maritime routes, productive fishing grounds, and perhaps enormous undiscovered oil and natural gas reserves are all included in the contested territory. Therefore, some nations have competing claims over the islands, reefs, and waters within the region, making this a highly contested issue.

### 2.2 Formation and Restart of the QUAD

The quadrilateral mechanism originated from the core group of the four countries responsible for relief and reconstruction after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. Although the group was subsequently dissolved after the completion of the corresponding work, the form of co-

operation among the four countries laid the foundation for the subsequent “quadrilateral dialogue (QUAD)”. In 2007, the “four-way dialogue” was officially launched with the start of the meeting of senior officials of the four countries. Australia’s withdrawal the following year led to the suspension of the mechanism. In recent years, to expand its strategic scope in the “Indo-Pacific” region, the United States has constantly drawn Japan, India, and Australia into security dialogue, and the four countries have accelerated the construction of dialogue mechanisms in the security field. On November 12, 2017, senior officials of the four countries held consultations on issues of common concern in the Indo-Pacific region at the ASEAN Summit held in Manila, Philippines, and decided to restart the trilateral security cooperation dialogue that had been suspended for a decade based on shared vision and values. A free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific is in the long-term interests of all countries in the region and the world [2]. The reinstatement of the trilateral security dialogue signifies that the collaboration among the four nations within the Indo-Pacific region will persist in intensifying. After Biden took office, the United States further promoted the quadrilateral security dialogue, the four countries held the first “summit”, once again upgraded the level of the “quadrilateral dialogue”, expanded the security cooperation agenda, and established a network of Allies and partnerships.

The QUAD carries a clear geopolitical tint, with the “China element” serving as a pivotal catalyst for the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to enhance their strategic engagements and revive the tripartite framework. Consequently, the South China Sea is the initial area to experience the impact. In 2018, senior military representatives of the four countries held the Risina Dialogue in New Delhi, India, to discuss the maintenance of order in the Indo-Pacific waters. From the 2021 summit to the 2023 summit, repeated references to opposing “unilateral changes to the status quo and tensions” and safeguarding “freedom of navigation” were intended to accuse China of posing a threat to maritime security. In the declarations released by the United States, Japan, and Australia, the focus on principles such as the rule-based order, the security of maritime routes, the liberty of navigation, and the respect for international law, along with the endorsement of the findings from the so-called South China Sea Arbitration in July 2016, unmistakably target the policies that China has adopted in the South China Sea.

### **3. QUAD Involvement in the South China Sea Issue and its Consequences**

Since the U.S. re-engaged with the Asia-Pacific, transi-

tioning from the Obama administration’s “Asia-Pacific rebalancing” strategy to the “Indo-Pacific strategy” under both the Trump and Biden administrations, the South China Sea has seen a progressive escalation in tensions. The interplay between the major power rivalry and the disputes has become the defining trait of the current situation in the region. Although the issue itself is a regional territorial sovereignty dispute, due to its important role in international navigation and energy development, it has led to the strong intervention of powers outside the region, resulting in increasing internationalization. On the one hand, the United States has drawn Japan, India, and Australia into a strategic combination, and on the other hand, it has promoted the formation of a trilateral security cooperation mechanism through trilateral security dialogue, to achieve the purpose of deep involvement in the area. The Trilateral Security dialogue mechanism has attempted to use the issue as an important bargaining chip in the game with China, which has brought huge risks and challenges to the geo-security environment in the South China Sea.

#### **3.1 Inciting Geopolitical Games**

The United States, Japan, India, and Australia have bolstered certain ASEAN nations’ initiatives in the South China Sea through the conduct of security conferences, the transfer and sale of military hardware, and the forging of alliances. Notably, the United States has distinctly sided with Vietnam on the issue, endorsing its territorial assertions within the region, and has ramped up its engagement in and around the South China Sea with ASEAN members like Indonesia and the Philippines. Japan has supported the Philippines’ actions militarily, transferring defense and technical equipment to the Philippines that can help it strengthen patrols. India has taken sides with Vietnam and the Philippines on the issue, supporting their interests in the South China Sea. Not only do India and Vietnam share the same support for “unrestricted freedom of navigation”, but the two countries also issued a joint statement that the outcome of the so-called “South China Sea Arbitration case” initiated by the Philippines should be respected. Australia is strengthening ties with ASEAN countries and supporting the demands of countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam. In its Foreign Policy White Paper, Australia pledged to further strengthen its cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and promote its strategic partnership with ASEAN. Australia’s support for stability, maritime security, and counter-terrorism helps the Philippine government address security challenges and supports the Philippines in resolving territorial issues in the South China Sea by international law [3]. Undoubtedly, this has fueled the escalation of tensions and hastened the rivalry among geopolitical powers in the area, which undermines

the peace and stability of the region.

### **3.2 Instigating External Nations to Intervene**

To amplify their impact within the South China Sea and attain additional strategic objectives, the QUAD has convened security dialogues and instituted a consistent framework for periodic meetings, to collaboratively engage in the regional maritime affairs of the South China Sea. Its actions will undoubtedly stimulate more countries outside the region to continuously intervene in the area to gain economic interests, strategic interests, and geopolitical space. In recent years, many Western maritime powers, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy, have conducted exercises, inspections, and military exchanges in the South China Sea and its surrounding areas with the United States, Japan, India, Australia and some ASEAN countries, which will seriously affect the security atmosphere and lead to a more complicated security situation [4].

### **3.3 Eroding Stability within the Region**

On the one hand, the quadrilateral mechanism may trigger an arms race in the Indo-Pacific region and worsen the military security dilemma. The QUAD focuses on military and security cooperation, which will stimulate the arms buildup in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea, and escalate the military and security crisis. On the other hand, the military offensive posture of the QUAD increases the risk of military conflict. In recent years, the United States has conducted increasingly frequent military activities in the sea, with its warplanes and warships repeatedly trespassing illegally into the airspace and territorial waters for reconnaissance and patrol [5]. In addition, the United States has also jointly conducted military training and exercises in the region and its surrounding areas with Japan, India, Australia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and other ASEAN countries, which has undoubtedly increased tensions and seriously undermined the current relatively stable security environment.

## **4. China's Response Strategy**

### **4.1 China's Proposition on the South China Sea Issue**

The Chinese authorities underscore that China's claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime rights within the South China Sea are by international legal norms and customary practices. China is steadfast in its opposition to unlawful occupations and violations and is open to resolving disputes amicably through dialogue and peaceful negotiation. Concurrently, China upholds the principle of freedom of navigation and overflight for all nations within the region.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman pointed out that the quadrilateral security dialogue between the four countries is regarded as an exclusive "small circle", its intention is obviously aimed at China, and this kind of closed and exclusive behavior against other countries runs counter to the historical trend. Confronted with the constraints imposed by the security dialogue framework, China ought to capitalize on the favorable elements within the current Asia-Pacific landscape and diligently work towards mitigating the potential risks.

### **4.2 China's Strategic Response to the QUAD's Involvement**

#### **4.2.1 Dividing America's alliance**

The QUAD takes the South China Sea issue as its core issue, which is based on the interests of each country. The United States and its Allies build and lead such multilateral security mechanisms to counter China's growing power and influence in the sea, ensure freedom of navigation, and safeguard national interests in the region. At the same time, the mechanism also provides a platform for Japan, Australia, India, and other countries to increase their voice and influence on the issue with the help of the leadership of the United States based on protecting their existing interests, to achieve their own strategic goals and gradually improve national strength.

Japan, Australia, and India are pursuing their interests in the South China Sea within the framework of the QUAD [6]. For Japan, the South China Sea is an important area of interest game, and it advocates the formation of a "diamond encirclement" with the United States, India, and Australia, which can not only enhance its military presence and influence in Southeast Asia and South Asia but also deter China's peripheral security. In this regard, China needs to maintain concentration. First, it is indispensable to stabilize Sino-US relations and use Sino-US relations to influence Sino-Japanese relations. It is necessary to manage Sino-US relations well, expand the common interests between China and the US, and regulate Sino-Japanese relations with stable Sino-US relations. Second, the Chinese government needs to maintain consultations and exchanges with Japan through coordination and cooperation, promote the relaxation of China-Japan relations through economic promotion and common economic interests, and create a good atmosphere for the opening of political dialogue between China and Japan.

For India, its participation is to promote the "eastward policy" and enhance its influence in Southeast Asia and East Asia. India has long played a leading role in the political economy of the region around the Indian Ocean. However, with the changes at home and abroad in recent

years, India has not been satisfied with the strategic space in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. To expand its strategic space and counter China's regional influence, India has actively participated in the resumption of the trilateral security dialogue mechanism, seeking to reflect its influence on the South China Sea. Therefore, China needs to strengthen high-level political meetings with India, enhance political mutual trust between the two countries, and improve the top-level design of China-India relations. China and India are working together to establish a security mechanism to strengthen political trust between the two countries to avoid being influenced by other powers and become the guardians of peace in the Indo-Pacific region. Geographically located at the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific Ocean, Australia can expand its navigation space in the Indian Ocean and strategic space in the South China Sea to gain more economic benefits through the quadrilateral security dialogue mechanism [7]. China should strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Australia and promote the in-depth development of bilateral relations. China can also start from the international community and multilateral cooperation platforms. For example, China and Australia are both members of the RCEP. China and Australia can use the RCEP mechanism as a breakthrough to promote economic and trade cooperation and strengthen political dialogue between China and Australia.

#### **4.2.2 Consolidating friendly relations with ASEAN nations**

China stands as the most significant trading partner for the nations within the ASEAN bloc. When developing economic relations with ASEAN countries, China should ensure the independence of ASEAN countries while continuing to increase the trade volume with them, refrain from interfering in their internal affairs and diplomacy, and reduce the potential possibility of ASEAN being used by non-regional powers to contain China. Leveraging the "Belt and Road" initiative, China aims to facilitate the modernization and enhancement of indigenous industrial technologies, thereby fostering the sustainable economic growth of the respective regions [8]. At the same time, China needs to establish a new Asia-Pacific security concept, take inclusiveness and cooperation as the basic direction, and safeguard the long-term interests of China and the Asia-Pacific region, that is, when developing diplomatic relations with ASEAN, create the interests and needs of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, to obtain the long-term support of these countries

#### **4.2.3 Strengthening national defense and military construction**

In the face of the security threat of the four-country mechanism to the country, China must adhere to strategic calm and determination, strengthen national defense construction, and break the security dilemma. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has put forward the national maritime strategy of building a "maritime power". Building an "ocean-going active defensive navy" is a solid foundation for safeguarding the interests of sea power. It is necessary to accelerate the pace of military modernization, enhance naval strength and ship protection capabilities, accelerate the improvement of maritime security offensive and defensive capabilities, and build ocean-going supply bases, to create security guarantees for China's development with strong military strength. At the same time, China should strengthen the research and development of new weapons, using artificial intelligence, quantum computing, remote sensing, big data analysis, etc., to develop more advanced weapon systems.

By employing these tactics and recommendations, China can more adeptly address the challenges posed by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and uphold the region's tranquility and stability.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through an in-depth analysis of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's involvement in the South China Sea issue, this study reveals its impact and challenge on regional stability and China's surrounding security environment. The QUAD is highly geopolitical, and its actions and statements have raised the temperature of the South China Sea issue, promoted its internationalization, and increased regional tensions. The United States and its Allies have strengthened their support to ASEAN countries through security dialogue, military equipment transfer, and partnership establishment, which has not only intensified the geopolitical game but also increased the risk of militarization in the region.

Faced with this situation, China should adopt a multidimensional strategy to deal with it. First, the Chinese government needs to thoroughly analyze the interests of the QUAD members and use diplomatic and economic means to break up the possible alliance system. Second, China should strengthen its economic ties with ASEAN countries, consolidate friendly relations, and at the same time ensure the independence of ASEAN countries and reduce the possibility of intervention by external forces. In addition, China needs to establish an Asia-Pacific security concept and promote cooperation and win-win results among countries in the region. On the military front, China needs to maintain strategic focus, strengthen national defense and military construction, upgrade the level of naval mod-

ernization, enhance ship protection capabilities, and develop advanced weapons systems to ensure national security and regional stability. Through these comprehensive measures, China can contribute to peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region while safeguarding its interests.

In conclusion, the development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the complexity of the South China Sea issue require China to adopt a flexible and firm approach, showing cooperation and openness on the international stage, while remaining vigilant and self-reliant in the field of defense and security. Through these efforts, China can actively respond to external challenges and promote regional peace and development.

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