JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 5 • September 2026

AUSTRALIA AS AN INSTITUTIONAL CONNECTOR: MIDDLE-POWER STRATEGY AND THE QUAD'S ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23035558

Keywords
Australia; Quad; middle power; Indo-Pacific; AUKUS; regional order

Article History
Received: 21 June 2026
Accepted: 12 September 2026
Published: 28 September 2026

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Abstract
How can Australia shape the Quad despite its limited ability to determine regional outcomes? This study examines Australian middle-power influence through a qualitative analysis of scholars' and policy analysts' views on the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN, India, and China. It argues that Australia exercises influence through four mechanisms: alliance anchoring, coalition brokerage, functional specialization, and legitimating diplomacy. India's strategic autonomy constrains its role, ASEAN concerns about institutional displacement, economic interdependence with China, and the risk of excessive securitization. Australia is therefore most effective when it promotes a layered regional architecture in which AUKUS supports deep defense and technology integration, the Quad coordinates flexible cooperation and regional public goods, and ASEAN-centered institutions maintain regional legitimacy. Among three possible trajectories, a resilient functional minilateral offers the most viable future for the Quad by combining practical capacity with political flexibility. The study extends middle-power theory by showing how institutional differentiation enables states with limited material power to influence regional order amid strategic rivalry.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become a central arena of military competition, economic interdependence, technological rivalry, and institutional change. China's growing power, renewed United States engagement, maritime disputes, and the expansion of mini-lateral arrangements have reshaped the regional security architecture. However, Washington and Beijing do not determine the regional order alone. Middle powers and regional institutions also influence how competition is managed and constrained (Liu, 2023; Dei, 2025; Chauhdry et al., 2025).

Australia is holding a unique position in this changing order. It is a treaty ally of the U.S., a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a member of the AUKUS partnership, a middle power with close economic ties to China, and a middle power that is dedicated to a rules-based region (De Silva, 2023; Bisley, 2025; Wei,

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
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2022). They are positions of influence, and they also have strategic conflicts. Canberra wants allies to strengthen deterrence and provide greater technological cooperation. Still, it also needs to have a trade relationship with China and support the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is facing its biggest challenge in pursuing a successful, legitimate, and economically viable regional order by building alliances and practicing middle-power diplomacy (Chan, 2019; Nathan, 2023; Blaxland, 2017).

The Quad is at the heart of this challenge. It comprises Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. It has evolved from a consultative process to a leaders-level forum on maritime security, critical technology/s, infrastructure, health, climate, supply chains, and regional capacity building (Madan, 2022). It has an informal arrangement in which members can work together without entering into a treaty, but it also makes it difficult to understand what it is for and how long it will last. China is suspicious of the Quad, India is wary of institutionalizing arrangements within the alliance, and Southeast Asian nations are worried that the minilists would undermine ASEAN's institutions (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022).

Past studies (Jiang, 2026; Hanada, 2019; Vijaya, 2021) show several explanations for the evolution of the Quad and for Australia's role in it. The Quad is viewed as a counter to China's rise in regional capabilities and influence from a balance-of-power perspective (Deb & Wilson, 2021). Therefore, a study shows that AUKUS is the depth of Australia's defence partnership as part of its efforts to maintain the regional balance of power (Kumar, 2024). A focus on middle powers highlights Australia's capacity to build coalitions, support the rules of the international system, and increase its influence within institutions (Abbondanza, 2022). Besides, the studies highlight significant constraints. India is opposed to the move to turn the Quad into a security community (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023), and studies on ASEAN indicate that the proliferation of minilateral institutions could increase institutional competition (Koga, 2023; Ha, 2022; Koga, 2023). The studies provide insights into key elements of Australia's regional strategy, but most focus on each of the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN, India, and the Australia–China relationship individually. It therefore does little to help them understand how these various overlapping relationships are linked together in a coherent Middle Power strategy in Australia. This study thus asks: What can Australia do in the Quad, and on what terms can its participation enhance, rather than complicate, the Indo-Pacific order?

This study suggests Australia can add most to the Quad as an institutional connector and a capacity multiplier. It can leverage its alliance with the United States, its maritime location, its diplomatic connections, and its technological partnerships to enhance the grouping's operational capabilities further. Australia's choices to prevent two negative scenarios are to either form a formal alliance that India would not join or to create a loose diplomatic forum that would be of limited use. This type of approach calls for a clear distinction of functions. AUKUS should continue to serve as a basis for enhanced defence integration and technology cooperation; the Quad should continue to focus on swift cooperation and regional public goods; and ASEAN-based institutions should build on their broader diplomatic and legitimating functions.

The study makes three contributions. First of all, it provides a theoretical understanding of how Australia transforms its limited material power into institutional power, rather than the traditional dichotomy of balancing and hedging. Secondly, it separates the Quad's effectiveness from the institutionalization of military forces. Third, it examines the Quad's future from the perspective of internal coherence, regional legitimacy and the economic price of strategic polarization.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. The Quad and Regional Balancing

Balance-of-power theory investigates the view that the restoration of the Quad is a regional strategy to counter China's military, economic, and political ascendancy. Deb and Wilson (2021) studied it in the broader context of the Asia-Pacific-to-Indo-Pacific transition. They labeled it a move to prevent the domination of any single power in the Indo-Pacific. Members of the Quad dialogue discussed the issues of maritime coercion, freedom of navigation, reliance on infrastructure, and the impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

This view underlies the Quad's stimulation since 2017 and perhaps exaggerates the level of consensus among the Quad members. Australia and Japan are allies of the United States, but India is not. India maintains strategic autonomy, while Australia and Japan are allies of the United States. The U.S. also has international obligations that U.S. political priorities could alter. As a result, threat perceptions, economic exposure to China, and willingness to stand up to Beijing vary among the Quad members. The Quad is an informal balancing mechanism that is not politically unified.

Its agenda reflects this character. The Quad's maritime exercises and strategic consultations signal resolve, and its cooperation on vaccines, infrastructure, technology, climate, and disaster response demonstrates that it is a supplier of regional public goods. This broadens the appeal of the grouping but also muddles its identity. The Quad remains a strategic partnership and a forum for action on behalf of the region (Ali, 2025).

2.2. Australia as a pragmatic Middle Power

The Theory of Middle Power offers an actor-centered explanation of Australia's role. Most middle powers are not strong enough to have a say in the outcome of international affairs (Peters, 2019). Instead, it is through coalition-building, institutional activities, specialized diplomacy, and backing international rules that they have some influence. Australia is a pragmatic middle power that relies on alignment with the United States and engagement in multilateral and minilateral institutions to exercise regional influence (Wilkins, 2023; Teo, 2022; Abundance, 2022).

Australia's middle-power role blocs status with diplomatic practice. Canberra is looking to grow its voice as a regional power and develop defence relationships, development aid, capacity building, and institutional cooperation. As such, its impact is relational: by linking key actors, Australia is more effective in connecting major powers, regional institutions, and coalitions around specific issues.

The Australia–India maritime partnership is an example of this phenomenon. Garge (2015) studied AUSINDEX as a sign of greater security cooperation and increased strategic convergence in the Indian Ocean. The geographical location and regional weight of India provide an advantage to Australia, and the operational experience it provides through cooperation with a capable maritime partner is an advantage for India. The association is helpful to the Quad but doesn't necessarily require a formal military alliance between Canberra and New Delhi.

However, Australia's middle power influence is constrained. It can neither force India to lose its strategic autonomy, nor influence the United States, nor address the concerns of Southeast Asian nations regarding 'minilateralism'. The term middle power can be used to describe the role these nations play as allies or as boundaries to great powers' strategies, but they cannot dictate them (Abbandanza, 2022). Australia's influence, then, will be determined by how its proposals are perceived by the other Quad countries and regional partners as being aligned with their interests.

2.3. Alliance Integration through AUKUS

AUKUS is the most recent pledge of Australia's alliance. Kumar (2024) examined the alliance as a means for Australia to boost its nuclear-powered

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submarine capabilities amid shifting regional geopolitics and enhance its defence technology prowess. Beyond the submarine acquisition, it is important. AUKUS places Australia firmly in a partnership to build capabilities in cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum, undersea systems, and military interoperability that are sustainable over the long term.

Other studies, such as AUKUS, present it as a new meeting of the minds between Australia and the United States as they compete with China (Cox et al., 2023; McDougall, 2023; Beeson, 2025). Iqbal (2024), for instance, suggests that Canberra has shifted from its initial ambiguity to the U.S. bloc. This interpretation is in line with Australian security policy but leaves the possibility of confusing military alignment with economic separation. Australia is economically tied to China and has worked to improve relations between the two countries (Laurenceson, 2025).

AUKUS' association with the Quad is thus significant. If these two scenarios are considered military alliances, then the Quad's appeal to India may wane, and its threat to other member countries in the region may increase. This risk could be reduced with a clearer division of functions. The Quad can be a flexible forum that includes India, and AUKUS can facilitate deep defence and technology integration among allies. Functional differentiation could enhance the Quad rather than diminish it.

2.4. Indian Strategic Autonomy and the Limits of Quad Institutionalization

India plays a crucial role in the Quad's geographical scope and political weight, but its strategic autonomy hinders the Quad's evolution into an alliance. However, Sullivan de Estrada (2023) contends that India is unwilling to characterize the Quad as a 'liberal security community '. The focus in New Delhi is on sovereignty, inclusion, pluralism and freedom of strategic choice. It embodies maritime and functional cooperation while rejecting the entanglements of permanent conflict and a hierarchy dominated by the United States.

India's posture is sometimes described as 'hedging,' but this does not really reflect its approach. India is under direct threat from China and has enhanced its security cooperation with Australia, Japan and the United States. It therefore does not lie in the middle of the competing powers. Meanwhile, it has been unable to embrace traditional alliance formation arrangements. The Quad policy is described by Sharma and Ganguly (2025) as pragmatic, owing to New Delhi's efforts to deepen maritime awareness, establish alternative infrastructure, foster technological cooperation, and build regional influence while maintaining its independence.

Australia's geographic location creates an obvious institutional disadvantage relative to India. Strengthening the Quad through collective defence pledges may not be enough to hold the grouping together, as it may push India beyond its comfort zone. Australia therefore needs to encourage strategic cooperation without issuing an ultimatum to establish formal arrangements that run counter to India's strategic autonomy.

2.5. ASEAN Centrality and Regional Legitimacy

The rise of the Quad and AUKUS has brought the issue of ASEAN centrality to the fore. Koga (2023) suggests that, as these minilateral organizations become more capable and more visible, they could begin to compete with the existing regional organizations. ASEAN members reiterate ASEAN centrality, but this does not negate concerns that decisions are increasingly being taken outside the framework of ASEAN institutions.

This is a competition managed by Koga's concept of 'tactical hedging '. Minilateral arrangements can emerge without directly replacing ASEAN due to strategic ambiguity and a flexible division of functions. But uncertainty can never resolve divergent conceptions of regional order. The

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validity of the Quad will depend on whether its activities align with shared regional priorities or ignore the interests and voices of Southeast Asian states.

Fortunately, Australia is well positioned to balance this tension, as it is a member of both minilateral and ASEAN-based institutions. It can provide Quad initiatives to support regional capacity rather than as an alternative to existing institutions. Maritime legal diplomacy is an example. Bautista (2024) believes that Australia should achieve this by building coalitions and engaging in diplomatic advocacy for international maritime law and its compliance. Such moves link Australia's strategic priorities with regional rules and the public good.

2.6. Economic Interdependence and Strategic Resilience

Security alignment does not meet economic interdependence, as evidenced by the Australia-China relationship. Dobell (2021) reports the deterioration of bilateral relations, China's export restrictions on Australia, and Canberra's concern about economic coercion. These developments highlighted the dangers of relying heavily on a single source. They led to the development of policies focused on diversification, supply chain resilience, and collaboration with trusted partners.

The following relationship-development improvement confirms Australia's intent not to separate its economy fully. The 2023 visit to China by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is seen as an attempt at "normalisation" based on Australia's national interest, according to Katkova, Liu, and Wu (2024). Meanwhile, Canberra reinforced AUKUS and resumed political communication and commercial access to the Quad. It was not strategic competition that ended economic interdependence, but rather a shift in how it was managed.

It has significant implications for the Quad. A containment policy focused exclusively on China would impose high economic and diplomatic costs on the Quad countries and their partners in the region. A resilience-based approach is more sustainable as it helps move away from dependency in critical sectors without sacrificing mutually beneficial trade.

2.7. Research Gap and Contribution

Three gaps emerge from the literature. First, studies typically focus on the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN, Indian strategic autonomy, and Australia–China relations as distinct areas of study. This does not adequately describe how Australia deals with these overlapping institutional and strategic relationships. Second, Australia is consistently presented as a middle power whose role is either to be dependent on the United States or to pursue independent middle-power diplomacy. This perspective downplays Canberra's ability to leverage its alliance ties to increase its influence without sacrificing its diplomatic versatility. Third, past research typically links a more formalized Quad to greater military cooperation, which could negatively affect India's role or the Quad's legitimacy in the region.

This study aims to overcome these shortcomings by first understanding Australia as an institutional connector and as a capability multiplier. It clarifies Canberra's linkage of its alliance resources, Quad support, India and ASEAN-focused diplomacy, and its economic interdependence with China. It also sets aside the distinction between practical effectiveness and institutionalization, contending that the Quad's effectiveness rests on functional cooperation, internal unity, and regional acceptance, rather than on a treaty.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study attempts to explain how Australia can influence the Quad despite its limited material power by applying middle power theory and the concept of institutional layering. The influence of middle powers takes the form of coalition-building, institutional engagement, specialized

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capabilities, and support for international rules, rather than unilateral coercion (Abbondanza, 2022). Australia also serves as an institutional broker and multiplier between the United States alliance network and AUKUS, and between AUKUS and the Quad and ASEAN-led institutions, as well as a difference-maker through its maritime geography, defence capabilities, diplomatic connections, and technological know-how in the region (Garge, 2015; Kumar, 2024). This role is complemented by institutional layering, as some institutions in the Indo-Pacific overlap in their membership, functions, and commitments (Heiduk, 2022). This enables a configuration that enables AUKUS to deliver deep defence and technology integration, Quad to facilitate ad hoc security cooperation and regional public goods, and ASEAN-centered institutions to enable inclusive diplomacy and regional legitimacy. These are the mechanisms that Australia uses in its operations: alliance anchoring, coalition brokerage, functional specialization, and legitimating diplomacy (Bautista, 2024). The framework emphasizes that increased benefits for the other Quad members provided by the Australian use of alliance resources and specialised capabilities increase the scope of Australian influence, that the AUKUS framework should broaden the scope of AUKUS while narrowing the scope of the Quad, and that the breadth of economic decoupling or the displacement of institutions by the Quad and AUKUS should reduce the level of Australian influence. Increased benefits to other Quad members provided by the Australian use of alliance resources and specialised capabilities increase the scope of Australian influence; AUKUS should widen the scope of the AUKUS while narrowing the scope of the Quad, and broad economic decoupling or the displacement of institutions by the Quad and AUKUS reduce the level of Australian influence. Australia's capacity to influence the Quad, in turn, relies on the coherence and interaction of these institutions, whilst maintaining their separate functions, as well as on the economic burden of strategic competition (Dobell, 2021).

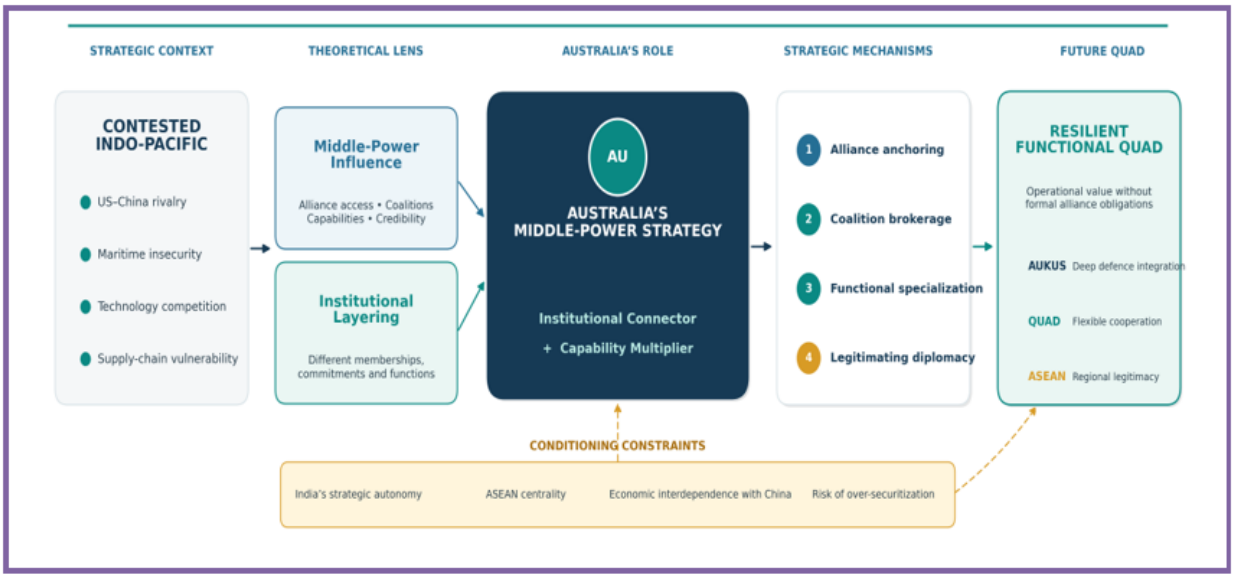


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Australia's middle-power strategy and the future development of the Quad

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4. Research Design and Analytical Strategy

4.1. Research Design

This study examines how Australia shapes the Quad, even as it operates amid unequal power, interests, and institutional commitments among its members, using a concept-driven qualitative design. It does not test causal relationships or review the entire Indo-Pacific literature. The analysis addresses three related contexts: the United States alliance and AUKUS, the Quad, and ASEAN institutions.

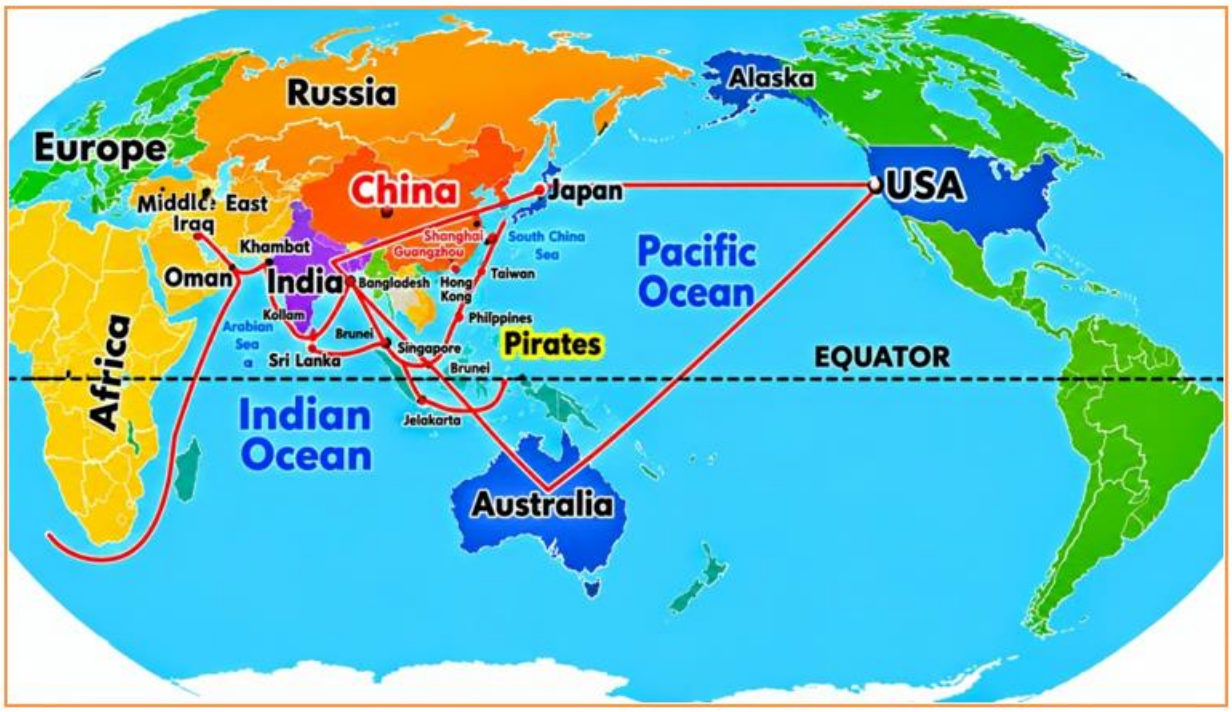


Figure 2: strategic location and Global Importance

4.2. Source Selection and Thematic Analysis

The academic literature, book chapters, research reports and policy analyses cited in the reference list and Appendix A were chosen because they focused on the development of Australia's middle-power strategy, the Quad, and its links with AUKUS or ASEAN, or limitations imposed by India and China. These sources were sorted into six themes: Alliance dependence, Coalition building, Specialized capabilities, Institutional legitimacy, Strategic autonomy, and Economic interdependence. These themes were compared across institutions and four mechanisms of Australian influence were identified: alliance anchoring, coalition brokerage, functional specialization, and legitimating diplomacy. The contributions and limitations for each source are summarized in Appendix A.

4.3. Scenario Construction and Evaluation

It examines three potential futures for the Quad: a 'quad alliance,' a 'quad diplomacy,' and a 'resilient quad functional minilateral. These scenarios are not predictions, but rather the directions that the institutions can take. They are assessed based on member cohesion, operational capacity, regional legitimacy, and economic sustainability. A scenario is more viable if it allows for practical cooperation without commitments that key members/regional partners will not make.

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4.4. Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to an English-language source base. It does not feature interviews with elites, classified documents, or original data on defence cooperation or trade, or defence project implementation. The evidence available is also country- and institution-specific. So the findings should be regarded as a theoretically informed interpretation, not as a definitive causal explanation. The proposed mechanisms can be tested in the future using interviews, process tracing, and project evaluations.

5. Australia's Evolving Role in the Quad

5.1. From Cautious Participation to Strategic Commitment

The Australia-Quad relationship has moved from "cautious" to increased strategic engagement. The initial hesitation stemmed from reservations about the rationale for the grouping and fears that it could strain ties with China. When the Quad came back into the fore in 2017, China had risen to become a stronger player in the region, tensions with the maritime nations had escalated, and trust in the status quo was waning. Diplomatic tensions with China and trade barriers also helped Canberra to diversify its relationships. While Iqbal (2024) reads this pivot as a clear step toward the United States, Australia has deepened security ties with Washington while maintaining economic ties with Beijing. Its approach is thus deterrent, diversifying and selective in dialogue.



Figure 3: Role of Australia in Quad

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5.2. Anchoring United States Engagement

Australia will continue to support U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific through the ANZUS alliance, intelligence sharing, military interoperability, access arrangements, joint exercises and defense investments over the long term (Dobell, 2021). The commitments bolster the alliance's credibility and demonstrate Australia's willingness to shoulder the burden of regional security. The Quad can provide the flexibility for Canberra to support its allies in coordinating actions and adjusting United States interests to those India can accept. However, being seen simply as Washington's extension will make a greater difference to Australia's capacity to foster cooperation and engage with Southeast Asian states. Its alliance role has to be backed by its own initiatives to address regional priorities.

5.3. Building Maritime Capacity

Maritime security is the single most important area of common interest for Quad members. Australia is situated in a strategic position linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and AUSINDEX facilitates naval cooperation with India (Garge, 2015). Australia can help in the areas of maritime domain awareness, logistics, surveillance, joint exercises, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and training for smaller states. The activities increase deterrence and offer real regional benefits. Through legal and diplomatic advocacy, Australia can further support the South China Sea arbitral ruling and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which means not only a military alignment but also a commitment to regional rules (Bautista, 2024).

5.4. Connecting the Quad and AUKUS

To sign up the AUKUS, Australia has reinforced its regional importance by introducing nuclear-powered submarines and deepening cooperation in cyber, AI, quantum, and undersea systems. However, the AUKUS transfer to the Quad is hampered by the exclusion of some sensitive technologies that could be shared, as AUKUS members and the Quad nations have different memberships, levels of trust, and export restrictions. India is not an ally of the countries involved. The advantages of such arrangements are available to Australia but not combined. AUKUS can facilitate deep defence and technology integration, whereas the Quad makes its own decisions and is based on flexibility, cooperation, capacity building, and regional public goods. This division helps to explain the different roles and minimises the danger of the Quad being seen as more militarised than AUKUS.

5.5. Cooperation Brokering with India.

India has the most unambiguous rejection of the formalisation of the Quad, as it is committed to strategic autonomy and a treaty-based alliance is unlikely (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). Australia can foster cohesion without requiring India to align with it or sign treaties by engaging India in military exercises, logistics arrangements, education, trade, and diplomatic consultations. Rather than Indian autonomy being a temporary measure, Canberra should try to bring those common interests in maritime awareness, supply chain resilience, critical technologies, infrastructure, disaster response, and regional capacity building to the Quad. This will allow for better coordination without compromising on India's freedom of military signals and relations with other states.

5.6. Preserving ASEAN Legitimacy

Australia's relations with Southeast Asia also contribute to its influence. While minilateral institutions may be more nimble, ASEAN-centered institutions remain significant sources of legitimacy across the region. Unless Greater Quad roles are carefully defined, they can become marginalised if institutionalised within ASEAN (Koga, 2023). By engaging with the region to take advice from Southeast Asian states, backing into ASEAN-led forums, and positioning Quad initiatives to complement the region's

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priorities, Australia can mitigate this risk. The assessments should be based on the use and value of regional partners for these initiatives in maritime training, climate adaptation, health security, infrastructure, and illegal fishing monitoring. Practical means of influencing priorities and accessing resources for ASEAN members to utilise, through Australia's role as a connector, are thus required.

6. Three Futures for the Quad

Table 1: Comparative Assessment of Three Quad Futures

Scenario	Member cohesion	Operational capacity	Regional legitimacy	Economic sustainability
Alliance-like Quad	Low	High among three members	Low	Low
Diffuse diplomatic forum	High	Low	Moderate to high	High
Resilient functional minilateral	High	Moderate to high	High if demand-led	Moderate to high

Note. Ratings are comparative judgments derived from the four evaluation criteria. They indicate relative institutional viability, not measured probabilities.

6.1. Scenario One: An Alliance-Like Quad

In this scenario, the growing rivalry between the United States and China further drives the Quad to become more explicitly military, with joint planning, intelligence sharing, military exercises, logistics, and coordinated deterrence. Australia is likely to back robust capability integration, and offer advanced assets through AUKUS. This model provides strategic clarity, but is not very politically feasible. Mutual-defence commitments and a specific containment policy are unlikely to be accepted by India, and concerns among Southeast Asian countries about bloc confrontation would grow in India. The Quad could result in higher military cooperation between Australia, Japan and the United States, but it would lack the flexibility and inclusiveness of the United States alliance network. Selected aspects of this approach could be acceptable to Australia, but any attempt to force commitments for formal alliances would compromise its brokerage position. Thus, an alliance-like Quad is neither the most likely nor the most desirable in the current scenario.

6.2. Scenario Three: A Resilient Functional Minilateral

In this case, the Quad is further developing its agenda without making any tough strategic decisions. It makes general statements and establishes working groups in numerous areas, but implementation is inconsistent. This helps minimize internal disagreement and regional insecurity, but it may also lead to institutional erosion. A cluster of activities that is likely to take place in too many places may struggle to make an impact and become susceptible to Leadership turnover, bureaucratic burnout, and a lack of perceived impact. Canberra has an interest in preventing the Quad from achieving this, as it is vital to enhancing Australia's regional capacity. It should therefore not be the subject of ongoing agenda-building, but rather of practical, measurable priorities limited in scope.

6.3. Scenario Three: A Resilient Functional Minilateral

The third is a combination of strategic and institutional flexibility. The Quad is not a treaty alliance but is building enduring cooperation in

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key fields such as maritime domain awareness, critical technologies, supply chain resiliency, infrastructure standards, humanitarian assistance, health security, and capacity building in the region. This model is useful without requiring the same stance on each regional crisis. It provides for India's strategic independence, enables the continuation of commitments by the United States, Australia and Japan, and permits resources to be brought to the table. It can also be used in conjunction with ASEAN when initiatives are based on regional priorities. This is the most likely future for the Quad, as it will need to be executed, ensure institutional continuity, and achieve a better delineation of functions with AUKUS- and ASEAN-centred institutions. This model is well suited to Australia as a link between these different layers of institutions.

7. Discussions

The analysis corroborates the three propositions that were derived from the theoretical framework. Australia's influence is enhanced when it translates alliance access and unique capabilities into cooperation that other Quad countries and regional partners appreciate. This role can be achieved through institutional layering, which means Canberra can function in alliance, minilateral, and multilateral contexts without any common membership, commitments, or purposes among the institutions. This discovery adds a new factor of influence to Middle-power theory – functional differentiation. It also offers a rub-out of the idea that Australia has 'opted out' of China. Despite Canberra's recent consolidation of security realignment under AUKUS, the normalization of political and economic ties with China indicates that Canberra still pursues selective engagement (Katkova et al., 2024). Australia's approach is about deterrence, economic resilience, and dialogue – it's not about neutrality or 'full alignment' across all policy areas. The analysis also reveals that the Quad cannot be judged solely by the alliance's official nature. It has the biggest benefit of bringing together four states with different strategic interests and commitments—the formalisation beyond Indian tolerance would undermine cohesion. A more feasible way forward is to have a clearer division of functions, where AUKUS can build advanced defence capabilities, the Quad can coordinate flexible cooperation and provide regionally available public goods, and ASEAN-based institutions can offer inclusive dialogue and regionally available legitimacy. The implementation of this arrangement, credible Australian defence investment, regional buy-in, and political stability among Quad members will be crucial to Australia's success in supporting this plan. These could be tested in future research by conducting interviews, conducting process tracing, and analysing defence cooperation statistics and specific Quad initiatives.

8. Policy Implications

Australia should priorities the Quad's activities to a narrow range of strategic public goods, such as maritime domain awareness, critical technologies, resilient supply chains, quality infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance. A more focused agenda would facilitate implementation and make the grouping's impact more visible. Canberra also needs to make it clear that it is not trying to promote the Quad as AUKUS. AUKUS should continue to be responsible for sensitive defence technologies and the deep integration of alliances, while the Quad should leverage Australian capabilities without being an alliance. India's strategic autonomy must form an integral part of the grouping, rather than pressure to formal alignment, and bilateral trust, flexibility and cooperation are more effective strategies. Coordinated by ASEAN members and Pacific Island countries, the design of Quad initiatives should also incorporate regional needs and build the legitimacy of capacity building. The goal of economic resilience is not to move toward decoupling from China; it's to reduce

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
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dependency in key industries. The Quad would be more welcome among regional countries that are reluctant to pick sides between Beijing and Washington if they could diversify their strategic supply chains and continue trading with both countries simultaneously. Australia should also have diplomatic contact with China to minimise misunderstandings, understand competition and maintain cooperation as appropriate.

9. Conclusions

In this study, it examines how Australia can contribute to the Quad in this contested Indo-Pacific, and why it should be at the forefront as an institutional connector and capacity multiplier, rather than a leader. Australia utilises alliance anchoring, coalition brokerage, functional specialization, and legitimating diplomacy to connect the resources of the U.S., capabilities of AUKUS, Quad cooperation, India's strategic weight, and ASEAN-based diplomacy. An Allied-like Quad is unlikely, as India's strategic independence constrains it, ASEAN's concerns about institutional displacement, economic dependence on China, and the potential for over-securitisation. The most probable future is a resilient, functional, multi-faceted minilateral that is strategic, yet politically agile - AUKUS offers depth in defence and technology, Quad offers hands-on cooperation and regional public goods, and ASEAN-centred institutions provide regional legitimacy. It will be important for Australia to maintain this separation of functions and to make the institutional responsibilities evident in terms of tangible benefits for the region. The results of this study are based on a limited literature-based analysis; therefore, future research should examine specific Quad programs, engage with regional policymakers, and assess the effectiveness of institutional differentiation in the event of a Leadership change or regional crisis.

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