

## Quad in the Indo-Pacific: Rhetoric, Implementation and India's Strategic Dilemma

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### Abstract

This article examines what the gap between rhetorical ambition and operational follow-through in the Quad's maritime initiatives reveals about Indo-Pacific security architecture and India's strategic dilemma. It analyses Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), Quad at Sea and Ports of the Future using an implementation test with four indicators, namely interagency operational interfaces, operational uptake by partners, repeatable outputs and institutionalisation. Drawing on official documents, policy reports and scholarly studies, it finds a pattern of announcement-led architecture. Some activities generate clear and repeatable public goods, especially where data sharing and training are routinised. Others remain thinly specified, weakly monitored and difficult to verify beyond political messaging. For India, the Quad complements Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative by widening networks for maritime awareness and capacity building while preserving strategic autonomy. However, the same informality limits durability and cannot substitute for denser bilateral arrangements or ASEAN-centred institutions that provide sustained co-ordination over time.

**Keywords:** Minilateralism, Maritime domain awareness, Indo-Pacific security architecture, Strategic autonomy; Institutionalisation

### Introduction

Over the past decade, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central theatre of great-power competition and regional order-building. Cannon and Rossiter (2018) describe the "Indo-Pacific" as the new epicentre of world geopolitics, reflecting a shift in strategic attention from the Atlantic to the maritime space linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Cannon and Rossiter, 2018, pp. 7-17). Rory Medcalf similarly characterises the Indo-Pacific as a multipolar system in which the fate of regional order or disorder, will not be determined by one or even two powers. This emerging multipolarity has generated overlapping and sometimes competing visions of regional order and a proliferation of institutional experiments (Medcalf, 2019).

Alongside long-standing multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, a dense web of more informal and flexible minilateral groupings has appeared. The spread of such arrangements has important implications for Indo-Pacific institutional architecture.

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The rise of minilaterals has created an “in-between” layer at the interface between bilateral relationships and large-scale multilateral forums (Singh & Teo, 2020, pp. 4-6). In an era of strategic competition, small coalitions of like-minded states are often presented as a nimble alternative to cumbersome universal multilateralism and formal alliances (Mohan, 2023). Among these configurations, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, which brings together Australia, India, Japan and the United States has attracted particular attention as a potential building block of Indo Pacific security architecture. (Mohan & Govella, 2022, p. 4).

Since its revival in 2017, the Quad has gradually moved from a loose consultation mechanism to a forum that seeks to present itself as a provider of regional public goods and a key pillar of the emerging Indo-Pacific order (Wei, 2022, p. 291). Maritime initiatives have been placed at the centre of this shift. Joint statements by Quad leaders and foreign ministers repeatedly highlight cooperation on maritime domain awareness, capacity-building for regional navies and coastguards, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, infrastructure and connectivity, and the maintenance of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023). On paper, these initiatives appear to offer the foundations for a more coherent approach to maritime security in the wider region, and they now feature prominently in scholarly and policy discussions of the Quad as an emerging security actor (Madan, 2022).

There is still a big difference between what Quad says about maritime initiatives and how well they are actually being put into practice and institutionalised. For example, Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) is still “in its nascent stage” a year after it was launched, even though it has gotten a lot of media attention and official statements (Roy, 2023, p. 2). The Quad is described as weakly institutionalised, casting doubt on its ability to ‘deliver meaningful advantages to the Indo-Pacific’ without clearer priorities and credible mechanisms (Saran et al., 2022). More generally, a number of flagship proposals presented at ministerial and leaders’ meetings still rely on bilateral or trilateral agreements that already exist, lack clear deadlines and governance frameworks or have not yet yielded observable results (Roy, 2023; Saran et al., 2024). Wider concerns regarding the nature of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific and its potential to influence the security architecture of the region are raised by this persistent discrepancy between rhetoric and delivery.

These concerns sit squarely within wider debates about the Quad as a form of what Kei Koga calls “strategic minilateralism”. This small group format has attained traction across the Indo-Pacific. The Quad has gained salience in the Indo Pacific debate since its revival, even as its institutional depth and long term durability remains open to question (Koga, 2022, pp. 27–29). For India, the implications are especially consequential. New Delhi has worked to project itself as a leading maritime power and a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean, while continuing to emphasise strategic autonomy and to steer clear of formal alliance commitments (Bhattacharya, 2022). In that sense, the Quad’s maritime agenda offers India a useful middle path. It can build capacity, coordinate with like-minded partners and place some constraints on Chinese behaviour without signing up to a

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treaty-based defence pact. At the same time, the Quad's limited institutionalisation and uneven follow through on key initiatives narrow what the grouping can deliver for India's broader vision of an open, inclusive and rules-based Indo Pacific order; as framed through the Indo Pacific Oceans' Initiative and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine (MEA, 2020; Chauhan, 2020). The result is a strategic dilemma for India. The Quad helps as an instrument of "zone balancing" against China, yet it remains too shallow and weakly institutionalised to fully translate New Delhi's order building ambitions into outcomes (Tarapore, 2023).

In light of this, the article evaluates the implications of the Quad's maritime initiatives regarding the boundaries of Indo-Pacific unilateralism (Satake, 2023). It enquires about the nature of the Indo Pacific security architecture and how India's strategic decisions are influenced by the discrepancy between rhetoric and implementation in these initiatives. The main argument is that Quad maritime initiatives are more of a signalling and narrative-building tool than solid pillars of the regional security order. So far, an expansive declaratory agenda has produced implementation that is modest and uneven. This outcome reflects both structural features of unilateralism, including informality, flexibility and dependence on consensus and the distinct strategic calculations of the four member states (Cannon and Rossiter, 2022). For India, engagement in this relatively shallow form of unilateralism helps manage the tension between balancing China and preserving strategic autonomy. At the same time, it limits the Quad's utility as a vehicle for advancing New Delhi's wider order building objectives in the region (Tarapore, 202; Madan, 2022).

### **Conceptual framework**

This article uses the Quad's maritime initiatives to examine what unilateralism can plausibly deliver in the Indo-Pacific and where its limits become visible once India's preference for strategic autonomy and its hedging logic are placed at the centre of the analysis. Instead of treating the Quad as either an alliance in waiting or a purely declaratory consultative forum. This article conceptualises it as a consciously informal institutional arrangement that is politically salient enough to generate signalling and selective coordination, yet structurally exposed to weak institutionalisation and uneven follow-through (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022; Heiduk & Wilkins, 2024).

The Indo Pacific security architecture is treated here as layered, contested and only partly integrated, rather than as a single coherent order. Security governance is generated through a mix of overlapping alliance networks, ASEAN led multilateral forums, functional defence arrangements and issue specific coalitions. Each of these settings advances its own sense of priorities, rules and what counts as legitimate practice. ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo Pacific is useful for illustrating this dynamic. By placing cooperation within ASEAN led mechanisms, particularly the East Asia Summit, it underlines that the term Indo Pacific is more than a geographic label. It is also a politically charged framing through which actors seek to shape the meaning and direction of regional order (ASEAN, 2019; Acharya, 2017). India's own formulations, including SAGAR and the Indo Pacific Oceans' Initiative, can be read in a similar way. They project an inclusive vocabulary, reiterate ASEAN centrality and emphasise practical cooperation, while also signalling India's preferred approach to

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regional governance (MEA, 2015; MEA, 2019). Existing scholarship helps clarify why these competing framings matter. The Indo Pacific gained wider traction partly because it recast previously separate theatres as interlinked and created conceptual space for new forms of strategic coordination and layered institution building (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020; Medcalf, 2020).

Minilateralism refers to small, issue-focused coalitions of like-minded states that prioritise flexible, selective coordination and faster problem solving over broad membership, legalisation, and heavy bureaucratic structures often associated with multilateral institutions (Thakur, 2024). Within this crowded landscape, the Quad is best understood as a form of minilateralism arrangement designed to reduce transaction costs and move faster than larger multilateral bodies that often struggle to sustain agreement under rivalry. The literature on strategic minilaterals emphasises precisely this logic, function over form, agility over legalisation, coordination over permanent bureaucracy (Satake, 2023). Yet informality is also the Quad's built-in vulnerability. Thin institutionalisation can blur accountability and make delivery heavily dependent on shifting political attention and divergent member priorities, widening the distance between aspirational communiqués and measurable outcomes (Abbott & Snidal, 2000). The Quad's own diplomatic texts illustrate this tension. Maritime domain awareness and capacity-building are framed as the provision of public goods but commitments are usually expressed through joint statements and fact sheets rather than embedded in binding instruments or treaty-based mechanisms (MEA, 2022; White House, 2022).

This article therefore treats the Quad's maritime agenda, especially maritime domain awareness and MAITRI as a useful empirical domain for assessing institutional depth. The IPMDA is particularly valuable because it is repeatedly presented as a flagship initiative and by design implies operational coordination. This includes information architectures, training, partner interfacing and iterative follow-up that should be visible beyond summit language (MEA, 2022). Tracking what happens after announcement makes it possible to judge whether the Quad is merely adding another discursive layer to the region's architecture or whether it is generating durable practices that partners can rely upon.

India's strategic autonomy and hedging are central to this framework because India is both essential to the Quad's political identity and a key constraint on how far the grouping can become more institutionalised. Strategic autonomy is treated here not as detachment but as a preference for retaining freedom of decision while drawing benefits from multiple relationships. Recent analyses emphasise that New Delhi has expanded cooperation with the United States and other partners without turning that cooperation into formal alliance commitments. This approach preserves room for manoeuvre within a more competitive regional environment (Muraviev et al., 2022). Work on hedging helps clarify this pattern by showing how states blend engagement with selective resistance in order to reduce exposure to risk under conditions of uncertainty. This captures India's readiness to participate in Quad initiatives while also stressing that the grouping should not be understood as an alliance (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019). Tarapore's discussion of zone balancing is particularly useful

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for interpreting India's adjustment after 2020. It connects India's strategic shift to efforts to strengthen the resilience of third states and to constrain coercion in contested maritime zones. These goals sit comfortably with Quad maritime cooperation, but they also point to likely limits when member priorities diverge or when the available institutional instruments remain thin (Tarapore, 2023).

This research article operationalises the rhetoric-implementation gap as the principal lens for identifying the limits of this minilateral experiment. Theoretically, such gaps are most likely where commitments resemble soft law, politically meaningful but weakly binding, so implementation depends on voluntary follow-through rather than enforceable rules or robust monitoring (Abbott & Snidal, 2000). Empirically, the analysis compares what Quad documents promise, joint statements, fact sheets and ministerial communiques, with what can be observed afterwards in terms of institutionalisation and execution, operational mechanisms, programme roll-outs, geographical scope, partner uptake and publicly documented outputs. If minilateralism in a contested Indo-Pacific architecture excels at signalling and selective coordination but struggles with sustained delivery then a persistent rhetoric-implementation gap in Quad maritime initiatives should be read not as an anomaly but as a patterned outcome. This, in turn, reveals both the limits of minilateral order-building and the constraints embedded in India's strategic dilemma.

### **Quad 2.0 and the rise of maritime initiatives**

The Quad's contemporary maritime agenda is best understood against the longer arc from its humanitarian coordination origins to its later strategic consolidation. Cooperative habits among the four partners were visible in the ad hoc "Tsunami Core Group" formed after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which is frequently treated in the literature as the functional precursor to later quadrilateral coordination (Grossman, 2005; Envall, 2019). The first explicit Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is generally dated to 2007, when senior officials met on the sidelines of ASEAN-related meetings but the arrangement soon lost momentum as Chinese criticism intensified and members' threat perceptions and political appetites diverged (MEA, 2025; Hosoya, 2020).

The 2017 revival, widely labelled "Quad 2.0", reflected a changed strategic environment shaped by sharper concerns about China's maritime behaviour and by the consolidation of "Indo-Pacific" as a strategic frame for linking the Indian and Pacific maritime theatres (Kaura, 2019). From 2017 onward, the Quad moved from irregular working-level consultations towards a routine diplomatic calendar, including regular foreign ministers' meetings and from 2021, leader-level summits accompanied by increasingly detailed joint statements and functional working groups (MEA, 2025; The Wilmington Declaration, 2024).

Within this post-2017 phase, the maritime domain emerged quickly as one of the most visible areas of cooperation. Quad texts repeatedly couple the "free and open Indo-Pacific" framing with explicit commitments regarding maritime order, including the resolve to uphold "peace and stability" in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and opposition of the efforts to change the status quo

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by force or coercion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). Maritime security and the protection of sea lines of communication are therefore not merely one policy line among many but a core arena through which the Quad seeks to demonstrate credibility as a regional security actor. That ambition is expressed through a set of branded initiatives, most notably the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness and more recently, the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific alongside newer proposals such as the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission and the Ports of the Future Partnership (MEA, 2024).

The IPMDA announced at the Tokyo leaders' summit in May 2022, represents the Quad's first major attempt to organise maritime cooperation around a standing, partner-facing framework rather than relying primarily on exercises and episodic coordination. Official statements present IPMDA as a mechanism for building a faster and broader near real-time maritime picture across three subregions, with a stated focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster response and countering illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (White House, 2022). Subsequent Quad materials specify that the initiative is built around commercially sourced data and analytics, including radio frequency data and planned additions such as electro-optical data and advanced analytic software (MEA, 2024). In this sense, IPMDA is framed simultaneously as a practical public good and as a politically careful instrument, because it allows the Quad to present its maritime cooperation as capacity-building and law enforcement support rather than as explicit military balancing.

Crucially, the later statements also provide observable markers of implementation that can be traced empirically. The Quad foreign ministers' statement of July 2024 links IPMDA's Indian Ocean expansion to operationalisation "through the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram" and notes continued work with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency to strengthen maritime domain awareness in the Pacific (MEA, 2024). The 2024 leaders' proclamation further by claiming that, in consultation with partners, IPMDA has been scaled across subregions "through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency" and "to the Information Fusion Center-Indian Ocean Region" and that more than two dozen countries have gained access to "dark vessel" maritime domain awareness data (The Wilmington Declaration, 2024; Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2024). These official claims matter for your argument because they move the initiative beyond aspiration and supply concrete benchmarks against which delivery can be assessed.

The second flagship initiative, the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), was announced at the Quad leaders' summit in Wilmington in September 2024. The official fact sheets describe MAITRI as a partner-oriented training programme intended to enable regional agencies to maximise tools provided through IPMDA and related Quad initiatives, with India scheduled to host the inaugural MAITRI workshop in 2025 (PIB, 2024). In analytical terms, MAITRI complements IPMDA's emphasis on information provision by targeting the human and institutional capacities required to absorb data, translate it into enforcement and sustain routines of maritime governance.

Alongside IPMDA and MAITRI, the 2024 summit materials announce additional maritime

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initiatives that expand the Quad's declaratory agenda into interoperability and infrastructure. These include a first-ever Quad at Sea Ship Observer Mission planned for 2025 and a Ports of the Future Partnership framed around sustainable and resilient port infrastructure development across the Indo-Pacific (MEA, 2024). Taken together, the post-2017 documents construct a narrative of the Quad as an increasingly maritime-centred minilateral, with initiatives spanning maritime domain awareness, training, interoperability and port infrastructure. On paper, this package appears to move the Quad closer to the kind of functional "pillars" associated with regional security architecture. However, as the next section argues, the extent of implementation and institutionalisation remains contested and the gap between ambitious framing and observable footprint is central to evaluating both the limits of minilateralism and the constraints shaping India's room for manoeuvre within the Quad.

### **Rhetoric versus Implementation**

Quad summit communiqués and accompanying fact sheets present the grouping's maritime agenda as evidence that minilateral cooperation can generate practical public goods across the Indo-Pacific. Initiatives such as the IPMDA and MAITRI, alongside proposals for ship-observer missions and port partnerships are framed as concrete "deliverables" that translate strategic alignment into operational capability and regional capacity-building (PIB, 2024). Yet when these claims are assessed against observable markers of follow-through, the picture appears more restrained. This section therefore separates declaratory ambition from implementation by applying a clear test of delivery: the presence of operational interfaces (standing data links, fusion-centre integration, agreed procedures), partner uptake (use by recipient agencies beyond the Quad), repeatable outputs (regular products, training cycles, missions) and institutionalisation (stable resourcing, governance routines and sustained administrative ownership). Where these indicators remain partial or opaque in open sources, the most defensible conclusion is not that an initiative has failed, but that its practical effects are difficult to verify. That limitation matters in its own right for a minilateral whose credibility increasingly rests on demonstrable delivery rather than declaratory alignment (Heiduk & Wilkins, 2024).

### **IPMDA Between Ambitious Design and Calibrated Implementation**

IPMDA is best understood not as a wholly new maritime security architecture but as an effort to make existing maritime information ecosystems more usable for partner states by adding commercial data streams and analytical capacity under a Quad label. Official descriptions emphasise near real-time maritime domain awareness for partners, particularly for identifying illicit activity such as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and "dark shipping", while operating through established regional hubs and information centres rather than building a centralised institution from the ground up (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023). This design choice is politically coherent for a minilateral arrangement. It offers speed and flexibility and it sustains a public-good narrative while keeping institutional density low. At the same time, it sets a clear standard for evaluation. Implementation is not demonstrated by announcement. It is

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demonstrated when IPMDA produces operational interfaces, partner uptake, repeatable outputs and some degree of institutionalisation (Cheng, 2019).

On operational interfaces, IPMDA seems to be moving in a sensible direction. By routing linkages through established fusion centres it avoids some of the friction that comes with building entirely new pipelines and it draws on regional arrangements that already carry legitimacy. At least in design terms and in the operational pathways described publicly, IPMDA is meant to work through existing mechanisms across the Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (Kapur, 2022). The more demanding indicators, however, are also the hardest to see in the public record. Partner uptake is often described in broad language but independent evidence that recipient agencies have integrated IPMDA into routine practice remains limited. From open sources alone, it is difficult to know whether IPMDA feeds have changed day to day maritime monitoring, enforcement practice or inter agency coordination in recipient states. Repeatable outputs are equally hard to judge. The question is not only whether data can be delivered but whether it is turned into regular, actionable products and feedback loops that partner agencies actually use in their daily routines. In practice, the bottleneck lies in the data to action chain. Detection has to connect to lawful attribution, interdiction or enforcement and then to administrative routines that can be sustained (Bueger, 2015; Chawla, 2023).

This is where the gap between rhetoric and implementation becomes analytically useful. The constraints facing IPMDA are not primarily technological. They have more to do with governance and with the like-minded partners' will to place in one another. A networked design may connect systems, but it does not settle core questions about who controls access, how end use is regulated, how costs are shared over time and how sensitive information is protected across different jurisdictions and levels of capacity. For that reason, early assessments treat IPMDA as a work in progress. They suggest that what ultimately delivers will hinge on coordination arrangements, sustained resourcing and protocol setting, rather than on sensing and analytics alone (Park, 2024). Alsaied in 2022 reaches a similar conclusion in more practical terms. He argues that IPMDA will matter only if it is embedded in existing mechanisms and if persistent problems in data management and information sharing are addressed (Alsaied, 2022). This logic also echoes a wider point made in debates on maritime surveillance. Technology can widen what partners are able to detect but it cannot replace trust, agreed procedures and the capacity of partners to act on the information they receive (Basu, 2025).

For India, this pattern amounts to a strategic dilemma rather than a simple implementation deficit. IPMDA can strengthen India's position as a regional hub and enhance maritime awareness in the Indian Ocean by reinforcing India's role in regional information-sharing and maritime governance which aligns with its aspiration to be seen as a net security provider (Kapur, 2022). At the same time, deeper institutionalisation would raise costs that India typically seeks to manage, including stronger expectations of alignment, sharper China signalling and greater sensitivity around data governance and operational integration (Park, 2024). The most likely outcome is therefore calibrated implementation. Delivery is sufficient to generate practical gains and reputational returns but it remains limited in formalisation and transparency when judged against what would be required to

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make these “deliverables” fully legible as durable, routinised public goods (Banerji, 2025).

### **MAITRI and the new wave of maritime initiatives**

The Quad’s 2024 summit materials positioned a “new wave” of maritime initiatives as evidence that minilateral cooperation can move beyond signalling and generate practical regional capability, particularly through training, operational exposure and infrastructure partnerships (PIB, 2024). However, these initiatives still look less like a consolidated programme and more like a portfolio of experiments whose operational maturity varies and whose effects are unevenly verifiable in publicly available documents. That distinction matters because informality can speed up announcements while leaving delivery dispersed across national agencies, which in turn makes monitoring, standard-setting and performance reporting harder to institutionalise (Cooper & Cannon, 2024).

The capacity-building equivalent of IPMDA is MAITRI. It is presented as a training program designed to assist Indo Pacific partners in making better use of the resources and data associated with IPMDA and other Quad initiatives. India has been chosen to host the first MAITRI workshop which aims to improve partners’ capacity to monitor and secure their waters, enforce domestic laws and discourage illegal activity (PIB, 2024). There is a significant promise in that framing. The Quad does more than supply information. Despite the very uneven distribution of governance capacity across the Indo Pacific, it is also signalling that it can help partners turn maritime awareness into routine enforcement practice (Alsaied, 2022). MAITRI becomes easier to evaluate once it develops clear and durable markers. These would include a standardised curriculum, transparent criteria for partner nominations, an institutional home with assigned personnel, a predictable training calendar and an assessment process that checks whether partner agencies actually adopt new procedures after training. Without such markers, the training may sound credible in principle, but it remains difficult to judge as an operational capability in practice. MAITRI also fits closely with India’s broader maritime narratives. It offers a way to connect Quad capacity building with India’s regional framing while reinforcing India’s claim to a hub role in maritime training and operational learning (Borah, 2025). The decisive question is whether MAITRI becomes a sustained pipeline rather than a one off event. A single workshop can demonstrate intent but long term credibility depends on repetition, partner uptake and evidence that training translates into lasting changes in operational procedures. (Bradford and Bradford, 2025).

Consider a smaller Indo-Pacific coastal or island state that receives improved maritime cues through IPMDA type feeds but lacks reliable boarding procedures, evidence-handling protocols and inter-agency coordination between fisheries, customs and police. In such a setting, MAITRI would be meaningful if it produces practical outputs that can be embedded at home such as a standard boarding checklist, a basic chain-of-custody template for prosecutions, a communications SOP for joint operations and a six-month follow-up mentoring cycle that checks whether procedures are being used. This is the kind of training-to-practice bridge that turns “capacity-building” from rhetoric into institutional change. It is also the kind of outcome that requires programme design, continuity

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and measurement not only an inaugural event (Alsaied, 2022; Kumar & Khan, 2024).

On the evidence visible by late 2025, MAITRI still sits closer to intent than to demonstrable programme depth. The public record confirms purpose and planned timing, but it provides limited detail on curriculum, participant selection, institutional ownership, and monitoring and evaluation standards that would allow outside observers to judge partner uptake and repeatable outputs (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This does not imply non-delivery. It implies that delivery remains difficult to verify at the level that would support strong claims of implementation. Other initiatives announced alongside MAITRI reveal a slightly different pattern. The Quad-at-Sea ship observer mission moved from proposal to practice in 2025 through cross-embarkation on a US Coast Guard patrol ship, framed as a mechanism for improving interoperability and operational learning among maritime enforcement agencies (PIB, 2025). It further indicates that observers participated in on-board tasks and training which strengthens the claim that at least one Quad maritime initiative has already produced an observable operational output (U.S. Embassy in Malaysia, 2025). Under the implementation test, Quad-at-Sea is relatively legible because it has a clear interface and a concrete activity. The remaining question is repetition and scaling whether such missions become regular, rotate across theatres and generate routinised lessons-learned processes that shape future cooperation rather than remaining a symbolic first.

The Quad Ports of the Future Partnership has also advanced beyond announcement, but in ways that highlight the limits of unilateral legibility. The partnership has generated visible convening outputs, including the Ports of the Future conference in Mumbai in late October 2025 (Ananta Centre, 2025). That is not trivial, since convening can set agendas and connect public and private actors. Yet ports and logistics are also the domain where a baseline comparison matters. Unlike development banks and large bilateral infrastructure lenders, a unilateral partnership without an obvious financing arm must rely heavily on coordination, standard-setting and project facilitation to produce on-the-ground change (Sinha, 2025). Under the implementation test, the partnership becomes substantively credible when it identifies pilot sites, produces feasibility or resilience assessments, mobilises financing pathways and establishes a mechanism that tracks progress across projects and years not only across conferences.

Partner preferences further shape what becomes visible and what remains deliberately low-profile. In subregions such as the Pacific, partners tend to welcome additional resources for maritime surveillance and enforcement but many prefer delivery that is routed through familiar regional mechanisms and framed in terms of practical need rather than great-power rivalry (Novak & Imai, 2024). This creates an incentive for the Quad to soften branding and operate through existing organisations. That choice can reduce political risk and widen acceptance, but it can also dilute ownership and make “Quad delivery” harder to verify as distinct from national or regional programmes.

When considered as a whole, these trends suggest a structural explanation for the disparity between rhetoric and execution. Because they don't have to construct complex institutional

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apparatus before taking action, minilaterals can act fast. However, whether results rely on shared resources, standardised reporting or long-term program management that endures leadership cycles, the same informality may result in uneven delivery. These are the exact places where informality has the most obvious negative effects (Kumar & Khan, 2024). In this way, the Quad's maritime portfolio includes the benefits and constraints of minilateralism. When sustainable delivery depends on bureaucratic depth, it gives weaker institutional consolidation and thinner visibility but it facilitates agenda-setting agility and selective operational outcomes.

This is still a mixed picture for India and rather than solving the strategic conundrum, it makes it more acute. India's intended image as a practical security supplier and capacity builder is supported by initiatives like MAITRI, operational exposure through ship observation missions and port-focused convening. Additionally, they increase India's ability to convene without pressuring New Delhi to adopt a treaty-style alliance stance (Borah, 2025). Once these activities need to be carried out, sponsored and repeated, the trade-off becomes apparent. Partners may begin to anticipate continuity, consistent resourcing and prompt responsiveness as India anchors programs through hosting, training and regular operational procedures. At the same time, it gets more difficult to maintain distance from China-related connections. Instead, it would be more challenging to demonstrate sustainable delivery in ways that can be monitored and compared over time if India maintains these efforts informal and hardly branded. (Koga, 2025; Novak and Imai, 2024). Calibrated implementation is one such path. In order to make Quad deliverables completely comprehensible as long-lasting and standardised public goods, it will be necessary to pursue visible and functional outputs that enhance India's hub role while exercising caution over the kind of bureaucratic consolidation and transparency (Bradford and Bradford, 2025).

#### **India's Strategic Dilemma and the Limits of Minilateral Order-Building**

Two concurrent pressures influence India's participation in the Quad's maritime initiatives. One is the necessity of maintaining strategic independence. The other is the aspiration to develop a more distinct Indo-Pacific vision that emphasises the provision of maritime public goods and inclusive order building. Instead of just outlining principles, order building in this section refers to the creation of routinised practices, shared expectations and enabling capacities that can sustain cooperation over time. The institutional design of the Quad is the source of the problem. Because it avoids alliance-like obligations, its informality facilitates India's political participation. However, delegation, monitoring and repeatable delivery are frequently hampered by the same informality. These are exactly the characteristics needed for initiatives to develop into long-lasting mechanisms. Yet the same informality often constrains delegation, monitoring and repeatable delivery. Those are precisely the features required if initiatives are to become durable mechanisms of order building rather than episodic commitments (Vabulas and Snidal, 2013; Cannon and Rossiter, 2022).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keynote at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue remains a key reference point for India's Indo Pacific framing. In that speech, Modi presented the Indo Pacific as a natural and inclusive geography. PM also warned against treating it either as a strategy or as a club

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with limited membership and he placed ASEAN centrality at the heart of regional architecture (MEA, 2018). The point of this framing is strategic. It lets India deepen practical cooperation with major partners while making clear that its Indo Pacific posture should not be read as bloc politics. It also provides a public yardstick through which India's participation in minilateral formats is interpreted in Southeast Asia and across the wider Indian Ocean. In these settings, concerns about great power rivalry remain politically sensitive and they often shape how India's intentions are assessed. (Rossow, 2018).

India has attempted to operationalise this vision through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), proposed in 2019 and later elaborated through official briefs that present IPOI as an open and issue-based framework organised across seven pillars (MEA, 2020; MEA, 2019). The intent is not to replace existing regional mechanisms, but to work through them by offering practical cooperation in areas such as maritime security, disaster risk reduction and capacity-building. SAGAR, articulated in 2015, plays a complementary role by positioning the Indian Ocean as a priority theatre for India and casting India's regional role in terms of security provision and shared prosperity (MEA, 2015). India's maritime leadership is ultimately evaluated less by declaratory vision than by the capacity to deliver sustained governance outcomes, whether through humanitarian response, information-sharing or support to littoral enforcement capabilities (Padmaja, 2018).

India's foreign policy tradition still treats strategic autonomy as a guiding constraint and much of the recent literature reads its Indo Pacific posture through the language of hedging or multi alignment. That is not neutrality, it entails collaborating with several partners in particular fields while avoiding treaty-like obligations that can reduce diplomatic leeway or increase the possibility of entrapment (Vinodan and Kurian, 2024). This strategy is compatible with minilateralism since it does not impose a rigid set of duties on participation. For this reason, scholars frequently refer to India's involvement as "a la carte." When functional benefits are apparent India will join selective groups. Nevertheless, when cooperation starts to resemble alignment or when there is a risk to its reputation, especially in the Global South, it hesitates (Tzinieris et al., 2023). A related point is made by examining the presumptions that legitimise the Quad. It contends that in order to keep its Indo Pacific discourse inclusive, New Delhi has resisted being drawn into a "security community" framing and has instead attempted to mould the meanings associated with Quad cooperation (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023).

India can clearly benefit from the Quad's maritime initiatives but it is also difficult to overlook the format's limitations. India's preference for establishing order through useful public goods is catered to by IPMDA and MAITRI. By expanding information sharing and establishing more infrastructure for capacity building, they also provide India with a means of enhancing its key hub roles in the Indian Ocean. In theory, this could improve India's standing in the region by enhancing its reputation as a provider and convenor rather than as a supporting player in security plans created elsewhere. (Schottli, 2019). Limitations arise from the Quad's institutional nature. Informality keeps cooperation politically manageable for India, but it also makes implementation uneven and leaves

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basic administrative questions unclear. Who is in the position to follow-up who owns delivery and what constitutes success? This trade-off is evident in comparative studies of informal institutions. Although informal designs might circumvent the political costs associated with binding agreements and delegation, they often obscure expectations regarding performance, ownership and permanence. When initiatives grow more quickly than the systems required to monitor, manage and maintain them over time, these frictions typically increase (Cooper & Cannon, 2024; Mitra, 2023).

This is where the implementation test used earlier in the article becomes analytically decisive. India's dilemma is not whether Quad maritime cooperation has value. It is whether the Quad's style of cooperation can reliably produce repeatable, partner embedded outputs that support India's long term order building ambitions. Where initiatives remain lightly anchored institutionally, depend heavily on external providers or lack stable routines for reporting and evaluation, they can still serve signalling purposes and deliver selective operational gains. Yet they do less to thicken regional order in ways that can be credibly attributed to India's leadership (Cannon & Rossiter, 2022).

The strategic ambiguity is therefore functional not accidental. India has incentives to support visible outputs that reinforce its hub narrative but it also has reasons to avoid the degree of bureaucratic consolidation that would make Quad cooperation appear more alliance-like. Recent scholarship conceptualises this as a form of tactical hedging in which states send ambiguous coalition signals that preserve flexibility while eliciting cooperation and reassurance from partners (Koga, 2025). Applied to India, this logic clarifies why New Delhi can deepen operational cooperation, including maritime capacity-building and interoperability while continuing to emphasise that the Indo-Pacific is inclusive and not directed against any one state (MEA, 2018). The advantage of this posture is risk management. The cost is that informality and calibrated signalling tend to produce thinner institutionalisation, which can weaken the durability and verifiability of "deliverables" that are meant to demonstrate order-building in practice (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013).

From this perspective, India's behaviour is best read as selective thickening. New Delhi uses the Quad to supplement, rather than supplant, its SAGAR and IPOI agendas and keeps parallel tracks open through other regional and extra-regional formats so that its Indo-Pacific engagement cannot be reduced to a single unilateral frame (Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). At the same time, if Quad maritime initiatives remain unevenly implemented or weakly institutionalised, they risk becoming primarily symbolic. They remain useful for hedging and signalling, but less consequential for consolidating the kind of durable, routinised order that India's own maritime narratives claim to seek (Schottli, 2019). In that sense, India's strategic dilemma is no longer whether to engage the Quad. It is how far to invest political capital and resources in a unilateral framework whose design privileges flexibility over firmness, even as India's order-building ambitions increasingly require repeatability, institutional depth and visible partner uptake.

### **Conclusion**

Across IPMDA, MAITRI, and the newer maritime proposals, the Quad's agenda is normatively

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ambitious but institutionally light. Delivery has occurred in selective forms but much of the maritime programme remains embedded in nationally driven projects and existing platforms rather than consolidated within a distinct, rule-based framework. The Quad's maritime record therefore illustrates a recurring pattern in contemporary Indo-Pacific order-making where architecture can be announced, branded and politically performed without being fully consolidated as routine practice.

The study highlights a fundamental trade-off inherent in the Quad. The arrangement does a good job of producing activity that appears purposeful and cohesive. Members can demonstrate progress without embracing the legally binding regulations, delegation and bureaucratic burden associated with formal organisations through summit cycles, fact sheets, and branded maritime initiatives. From their point of view, that is a strength rather than a weakness. It maintains a reasonable political cost for collaboration. But the same choice also explains why the architecture often remains thin when you look beyond announcements. Implementation lies on national agencies, so delivery depends on shifting bureaucratic attention, uneven capacity and domestic political calendars. It becomes difficult to prove continuity and verify performance in the absence of an institutional centre that regularly monitors progress and reports it in a uniform manner. As a result, the rhetoric-implementation gap is a predictable consequence of a design that prioritises flexibility and ambiguity over delegation and oversight rather than a sporadic flaw.

This helps in situating the Quad within the broader Indo-Pacific region. There isn't only a single platform involved in regional order-building. It is developing through overlapping layers in which dense bilateral networks, alliances, and ASEAN-centered processes coexist with minilaterals. The Quad does not take the place of the larger institutional framework that currently structures the region but it can increase governance capacity in some issue areas, particularly where coordination can be carried out nationally and independently.

These dynamics present a strategic and pragmatic dilemma for India. Quad maritime initiatives support India's preferred self-presentation as a supplier of maritime public goods and fit in well with SAGAR and the IPOI. However, what India can actually embed through the Quad in the long run is limited by the institutional lightness that makes it compatible with strategic autonomy. India needs platforms that ensure continuity over time, not just political declarations across summits, if it desires to establish long-lasting regional routines, shared standards and consistent propagation of desired practices. For this reason, rather than using the Quad as the centrepiece of its Indo-Pacific strategy, India has typically used it as an amplifier of power. It takes capability and status gains from Quad participation, while continuing to invest in bilateral partnerships and ASEAN-centred forums where ownership and follow-through can be crystal clear. India cooperates enough to gain leverage and visibility but it resists deeper institutionalisation that would reduce room for manoeuvre.

Further, it shows why "delivery" can remain politically persuasive even when institutional consolidation is limited. Thin institutional forms can still produce recognisable outputs and a narrative of action, but they also impose predictable constraints when the goal shifts from signalling to sustained implementation. The policy implication follows directly. If Quad maritime initiatives are

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meant to become more than episodic signals, they need clearer operational interfaces, outputs that recur in a repeatable way and evidence that regional partners actually adopt what is being offered. Stable resourcing matters as well, because ad hoc funding and political attention produce ad hoc outcomes. A logical next step for research would be to compare the Quad's maritime record with other Indo-Pacific multilaterals and just as importantly, to examine how regional partners interpret these initiatives and whether they integrate them into their own practices. Those patterns of uptake will ultimately decide whether today's deliverables become embedded capabilities or remain summit-era messaging.

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