

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Institutionalising Maritime Surveillance: The Quad's IPMDA-IPMSC Continuum

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S*ummary*

The effectiveness of the proposed Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Coordination (IPMSC) will depend on the deployment of new surveillance assets.

In recent months, the summit optics around the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States—have diminished owing to various structural, political and strategic factors. Concurrent and overlapping crises in Europe and West Asia have severely stretched global attention and resources, fuelling scepticism about the grouping’s relevance and the broader US commitment to the Indo-Pacific.¹

The US Department of War’s decision to rename the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) to its original name, Pacific Command (PACOM), on 16 July 2026 surprised regional allies and geopolitical observers.² The move, as the Pentagon argues, is aimed at restoring the military command’s pre-2018 identity while keeping the command’s mission and area of responsibility unchanged.

Some subtle yet distinct strategic and rhetorical recalibrations are now evident as well. While the 2018 US National Defense Strategy signalled America’s resolve and commitment to the Indo-Pacific, the November 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) suggested a possible realignment of US interests in the region, in which US partners, including India, are expected to contribute more to the region’s security. Moreover, the Trump 2.0 administration’s use of the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ rather than ‘Indo-Pacific’ in various official readouts, including the 2025 NSS, suggests a less hawkish approach towards China in favour of greater engagement.³ In doing so, the US is sending a direct message—the Indian Ocean is not central to dealing with China.⁴

Bilateral ties between India and the US remain complicated by US punitive tariffs on Indian exports, restrictive H-1B visa policies, and disagreements over data localisation. The much-anticipated Quad leaders’ summit in India failed to materialise during India’s chairmanship of the grouping. Moreover, the killing of three Indian mariners on a merchant ship off the coast of Iran and Oman by the US Navy and subsequent failure to condemn the death of civilians in a military

¹ Monish Tourangbam, [**“Why the Quad’s Functional Cooperation Still Matters in an Uncertain Indo-Pacific?”**](#), *South Asian Voices*, 18 June 2026.

² [**“Department of War Restores U.S. Pacific Command Designation”**](#), U.S. Pacific Command, 16 June 2026.

³ China views the ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct as an exclusionary geopolitical framework crafted by its rivals to contain its influence and preserve US hegemony. China prefers the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ because it centers the region around the Asian landmass and its eastern seaboard, where China holds immense economic and political sway. Former Foreign Minister Wang Yi famously described the Quad grouping’s Indo-Pacific strategy as a ‘foam on the sea’ that would ‘dissipate’. China seeks to promote alternative security concepts, particularly its ‘Global Security Initiative’ (GSI) which advocates for which advocates for “indivisible security”. For more, see Brantly Womack, [**“The Indo-Pacific versus Pacific Asia”**](#), China US Focus, 14 December 2023.

⁴ Ken Moriyasu, [**“Why Dropping ‘Indo-Pacific’ Clarifies the Pentagon’s China Strategy”**](#), Hudson Institute, 18 June 2026.

action against a non-military target (merchant vessel) has further intensified US–India strategic friction.⁵

Are these developments indicative of a steady erosion of US–India strategic trust amid a broader American reset from its Indo-Pacific vision? In such a scenario, how will the future of Quad’s flagship initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA 2022), Quad at Sea Observer Mission (2024), Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Coordination (IPMSC 2026) shape, since institutionalising maritime surveillance and securing the maritime lanes of the Indo-Pacific is a core priority of the Quad grouping?

Operational Evolution of IPMDA into IPMSC

At its core, the Quad remains an informal and flexible grouping capable of advancing regional cooperation, balance, and the delivery of public goods in an increasingly uncertain Indo-Pacific region. Recognising this mandate is critical because the functional and practical cooperation between Quad members has continued to evolve and adapt to changing geopolitical realities, beyond leadership summits and grand strategic declarations. The Quad’s evolution into a pragmatic grouping driven by functional cooperation was evident in the 11th Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in New Delhi. It is not ideological alignment but converging strategic interests that continue to drive the Quad’s agenda.⁶

All Quad members share similar concerns regarding China’s influence across the Indo-Pacific, particularly in critical supply chains, emerging technologies and the maritime domain. Therefore, to enhance resilience and reduce strategic vulnerabilities, initiatives like the IPMSC and a new Critical Minerals Initiative Framework were launched at the foreign ministers’ meeting. Disruptions to commercial shipping routes, illegal fishing, grey-zone coercion, and an alleged ‘resurgence’ of piracy off the Somali coast are indeed pressing concerns.⁷ Subsequently, enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA) depends on regional states’ ability to monitor their waters and respond effectively to blue crimes.

The proposed IPMSC marks a shift from MDA to coordinated maritime surveillance. It is only an extension of IPMDA, which was designed to build a ‘Common Operating

⁵ Kanwal Sibal, [“US Has No Regrets. Indian Sailor Killings Collateral Damage For Them”](#), NDTV, 19 June 2026.

⁶ Harsh V. Pant, [“A Quiet Consolidation: The Evolution of the Quad as an Instrument of Order”](#), Open Magazine, 13 June 2026.

⁷ Anja Shortland and Federico Varese, [“Somali Piracy is Back – Fuelled by Political Turmoil, Aid Cuts and the Iran War”](#), The Conversation, 29 May 2026.

Picture’ (COP) using regional information integration.⁸ It aims to translate that COP into coordinated surveillance and operational interoperability, thereby institutionalising collaborative surveillance protocols, real-time intelligence sharing, expert exchanges, and common assessment processes among the Quad members around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).⁹

This hints at QUAD’s prioritising the Indian Ocean while the US simultaneously renamed INDOPACOM to PACOM. Therefore, IPMSC must be understood as an operational arm that recognises fragmented information architectures and uneven institutional coordination, synchronising surveillance capabilities and collective maritime responses in an increasingly contested IOR.¹⁰

The Indian Ocean's Maritime Information Ecosystem

The Indian Ocean has evolved into a fragmented yet overlapping six-layered maritime domain architecture. First, the India-led IFC-IOR (Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region) coordinates actionable intelligence with over 28 partner nations, drawing on data from Network for Information Sharing (NISHAR), Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), and Coastal Surveillance Radar Network (CSRN). NISHAR is positioned as a maritime information management network developed by the Indian Navy. It relies on ‘Mitra’ (Maritime Information Terminal for Reciprocal Association) to provide real-time email, chat, and document-sharing capabilities for timely responses.

Moreover, the CSRN feeds real-time data into the IMAC, which serves as the centre for the National Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (NC3I) Network, thereby connecting real-time operational nodes of the Indian Navy and Coast Guard. Additionally, IFC-IOR primarily depends on voluntary AIS data sharing.

Second, under the EU’s MASE (Maritime Security) programme, the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC: Madagascar) and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC: Seychelles) utilise the encrypted digital web platform IORIS for maritime information sharing. Third, the USA facilitates AIS

⁸ [“Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Tokyo Summit 2022”](#), The American Presidency Project, 23 May 2022.

⁹ Rushali Saha, [“What Does Quad’s New Surveillance Initiative Mean for Indian Ocean Security?”](#), *The Diplomat*, 29 May 2026.

¹⁰ Anuttama Banerji and Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, [“The Quad’s Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Cooperation Initiative: Balancing Intent, Actions, and Limitations”](#), *India’s World*, 15 June 2026.

(Automatic Identification System) data into its MSSIS (Maritime Safety and Security Information System) database in encrypted form, which SeaVision then visualises.

Fourth, China primarily relies on its Yuan Wang ships to function as mobile intelligence gatherers, along with Yaogan and Gaofen satellites, which are highly regarded as Chinese ‘Eye in the Sky’, providing electronic intelligence (ELINT). Further, BeiDou constitutes the central node of the Space Silk Road. Fifth, the Gulf States primarily respond through their Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a Bahrain-based 47-nation maritime security partnership. Lastly, the Quad-led IPMDA was launched to address institutional fragmentation, as the region is equipped with surveillance systems yet demonstrates limited interoperability. The existing systems are connected but not systematically integrated.

Given the Indian Ocean's unique challenges, the IPMSC is designed to serve as a trusted platform for exchanging maritime information and coordinating maritime governance across the region.

However, information sharing is not just about who owns powerful technical systems, but also about who sets the rules, standards, and trusted, interoperable networks. India prioritises its indigenous NISHAR, which has limited international interoperability. It chooses not to join the EU’s Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) to maintain technological sovereignty. Further, IORIS lacks surveillance capability despite being a secure communication platform. However, New Delhi adopted the USA’s SeaVision, which operates under controlled conditions, with data sharing contingent on access permissions, thereby balancing technological autonomy with operational advantages.¹¹

Surveillance Capabilities: From Assets to Integrated Awareness

The effectiveness of the proposed IPMSC will be grounded in the extent of deployment of new surveillance assets, rather than solely in the integration of existing MDA systems within a unified operational framework. India's multi-layered surveillance architecture, constituting space-based assets, coastal radar networks, air-based reconnaissance, and long-range maritime patrol aircraft such as the P-8I, can be complemented by IPMDA.

Even ISRO’s satellite capabilities can be leveraged to deploy a commercial satellite constellation using Radio Frequency detection technologies to enable persistent

¹¹ [“India – Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness”](#), Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 30 April 2025.

tracking of vessel movements, including ‘Dark-Shipping’ vessels operating without AIS signals.¹² Institutionally, the National Committee for Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS) can act as a national nodal inter-agency body that compiles intelligence from the Indian Navy, Coast Guard, Intelligence Agencies, Port States, Ministries and commercial ships.

Integrating under IPMSC, this national framework could serve as the principal node of a broader regional surveillance network, enabling regional partners to integrate space-based intelligence, coastal sensor data, and operational information into a real-time, shared maritime operating picture. Conclusively, IPMSC’s strategic value lies not merely in enhancing surveillance but in transforming dispersed national capabilities into an interoperable architecture for real-time collective maritime security.

¹² Sukalp Sharma, “[How Energy Tankers are Using a Shadow Fleet Ploy to Slip Out of Hormuz](#)”, *The Indian Express*, 7 June 2026.

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