

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

How ASEAN and the Quad Are Quietly Aligning in an Era of Strategic Competition

Simran Walia

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S*ummary*

An annual high-level QUAD-ASEAN Forum could provide a structured platform for ensuring sustained cooperation and policy coordination.

The strategic architecture of the Indo-Pacific is undergoing a significant transformation amidst great-power competition. While the Quad and ASEAN remain distinct groupings with unique institutional structures and strategic priorities, the space between them is narrowing. The 59th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and other ASEAN-led meetings were held from 18 July to 24 July 2026 in Manila, Philippines.¹ The coincidence of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting with the Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on the sidelines, held on 22 July, followed by the first dedicated joint statement on cooperation with ASEAN, shows that the relationship is moving beyond rhetoric to ASEAN centrality.²

The 59th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, held under the chairmanship of the Philippines with the theme, ‘Navigating our Future Together’, brought together ASEAN members and external partners as well.³ ASEAN also reaffirmed the centrality of its own mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and ADMM-Plus, in sustaining an open and rules-based regional architecture. Against this backdrop, the Quad foreign ministers met in Manila on 22 July. The four Quad ministers issued a joint statement on cooperation with ASEAN, identifying themselves as ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partners and further reaffirming their support for ASEAN unity and centrality. This marks a significant step in the evolution of the Quad–ASEAN partnership.

For years, ASEAN Centrality has been a part of Quad statements. Despite that, some ambiguity has remained over how the Quad’s security agenda relates to ASEAN-led institutions. ASEAN has sought to preserve its strategic autonomy and also avoid being drawn into bloc-based competition between the US and China. The dedicated joint statement also indicated that this gap may be narrowing, with a focus on functional cooperation rather than institutional integration.

The Quad also identified four areas of cooperation with ASEAN: maritime and transnational security, economic prosperity, critical and emerging technologies, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). It further linked these areas to the practical implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This is particularly important because these are the areas where ASEAN’s requirements

¹ [**“Joint Communique of the 59th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”**](#), Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 23 July 2026.

² [**“Joint Press Release on Cooperation with ASEAN by the Quad Foreign Ministers”**](#), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, 22 July 2026.

³ Joanne Lin and Aries A. Arugay, [**“Navigating Our Future Together? The Philippine Chairmanship in a Year of Strategic Tension”**](#), Fulcrum, 6 March 2026.

and the Quad’s capabilities can intersect further without compromising ASEAN’s identity. The Quad can contribute through resources, capacity-building and technology, while ASEAN provides a broader regional framework and institutional platforms.

Maritime security is likely to become an important bridge between ASEAN and the Quad, as the joint statement asserted that peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain are of utmost importance. For ASEAN, maritime security encompasses freedom of navigation, illegal fishing, disaster response, protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and maritime domain awareness.

For the Quad, maritime security has become central to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. This creates scope for cooperation and initiatives like information sharing, coast guard cooperation, search and rescue, and capacity-building for Southeast Asian maritime agencies as a practical expression of this alignment. The objective is primarily to strengthen Southeast Asian countries’ ability to manage maritime challenges through ASEAN-led mechanisms. Even at the recently concluded BRICS Summit in New Delhi, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos emphasised that ASEAN is advancing maritime cooperation and disaster preparedness.⁴

The very fact that the Quad ministers met on the sidelines of ASEAN-related meetings is politically significant as well. Japan’s Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi noted that having the Quad meeting alongside the ASEAN meetings sends a strong signal of support for ASEAN Centrality and AOIP.⁵ This also creates an evolution in the Indo-Pacific’s minilateral security architecture. Minilateral groupings are seeking to embed their initiatives within the broader regional architecture. Therefore, the Quad is becoming more of a capacity-enhancing partner within the ASEAN regional order.

Another important aspect of the July statement is that the relationship also extends beyond maritime security to include economic security, critical and emerging technologies and humanitarian assistance. This reflects the changing nature of strategic competition. Supply-chain vulnerabilities, critical minerals, digital infrastructure, AI and cyber threats have direct security implications. ASEAN’s emphasis on resilience and connectivity also widely complements Quad’s focus on

⁴ Darryl John Esguerra, [**“Marcos Presents ASEAN Priorities Peace, Growth Before BRICS Leaders”**](#), *Philippine News Agency*, 13 September 2026.

⁵ [**“Quad Foreign Ministers Reaffirm ASEAN Ties Amid China Concerns”**](#), *Mainichi*, 22 July 2026.

economic security. This is where the real possibility for cooperation on resilient supply chains, cybersecurity, critical technologies, and capacity-building exists. Quad initiatives could also provide options to smaller Southeast Asian countries while remaining aligned with ASEAN’s priorities.

ASEAN’s growing engagement with the Quad can also be viewed as diversification. Nevertheless, the strategic context cannot be separated from the competition with China. The Quad ministers discussed developments in the South China Sea, while Japan also reiterated opposition to attempts to change the status quo by force.

For India, the ASEAN-Quad alignment carries significant weight, as India’s Indo-Pacific vision places ASEAN centrality alongside its commitment to a free, open, and rules-based regional order. The developments in Manila also reinforce a diplomatic approach in which the Quad and ASEAN are viewed as complementary components of the Indo-Pacific order.

Furthermore, India’s experience in maritime domain awareness, HADR, public infrastructure, capacity-building and maritime security partnerships can provide more areas for cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries. India can also help ensure that the Quad’s engagement with ASEAN remains primarily focused on regional capacity-building. This would align with India’s strategic autonomy and ASEAN’s focus on inclusivity.

Despite these alignments, the Quad’s and ASEAN’s approaches to great-power competition and China remain different, though a quiet alignment of interests is emerging. ASEAN provides the centre of gravity for the Indo-Pacific’s multilateral architecture and the Quad provides a flexible mechanism for mobilising capabilities and resources among four democracies. Their interests majorly intersect in maritime security, emerging technologies and humanitarian assistance.

Quad-ASEAN cooperation also faces geopolitical challenges arising from divergent strategic priorities. A key challenge is these divergent strategic priorities. The Quad emphasises countering China’s assertive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region and strengthening defence partnerships. ASEAN’s approach is more inclined towards economic integration and non-alignment, as China is the major trading partner of ASEAN countries. ASEAN countries focus on maintaining neutrality.

This challenge therefore limits alignment of their security perspectives. Moreover, ASEAN operates through consensus-based decision-making, while the Quad operates among four like-minded countries and can make decisions more quickly,

which could create implementation challenges. Even when members agree on issues like maritime security, ASEAN-led initiatives can slow down because of divergent national interests. ASEAN member countries also have divergent views; for example, the maritime priorities of the Philippines and Vietnam differ from those of Cambodia and Laos.

Since ASEAN’s approach is more non-confrontational, Quad should focus on areas of mutual interest such as sustainable development, coast guard capacity building, maritime safety and HADR. The AOIP also focuses on maritime cooperation and inclusivity, areas where cooperation with the Quad can be strengthened. Furthermore, Quad members could expand trade partnerships and technology transfers to ASEAN countries, reducing economic reliance on China.

For instance, the Philippines’ acquisition of India’s BrahMos missile system showcases the potential for technology partnerships among Quad members and ASEAN states to expand beyond traditional cooperation.⁶ Building on initiatives like this through technology transfers and capacity building could perhaps strengthen ASEAN countries’ strategic capabilities.

Moreover, establishing an annual high-level QUAD-ASEAN Forum could provide a structured platform for ensuring sustained cooperation and policy coordination. It could facilitate discussions on regional security and emerging technological challenges. QUAD and ASEAN must also look for opportunities to define a long-term vision that balances security imperatives with economic prosperity.

The future of the Indo-Pacific could be characterised by overlapping and reinforcing networks. ASEAN-led institutions can provide inclusivity while the Quad can provide resources and specialised capabilities. The 49th ASEAN Summit will be held in November 2026, which could further reinforce ASEAN’s emphasis on Indo-Pacific and ASEAN centrality by strengthening ASEAN-led mechanisms and partnerships aimed at an open and rules-based regional order. The real test and challenge is in implementation. If the Quad can turn its commitments into tangible cooperation with ASEAN states in maritime security, technology, and HADR, it could demonstrate the emergence of networked and overlapping partnerships.

⁶ Aritra Banerjee, “[BrahMos & The Philippines: A Strategic Fortification Against China’s Ambitions](#)”, *Indian Aerospace and Defence Bulletin*, 3 October 2023.

About the Author



Ms. Simran Walia is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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