

# CHAPTER 1

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## **Between the Eagle and the Panda: Philippine Perceptions on the United States–China Strategic Competition\***

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### **Introduction**

As a small power, the Philippines is in the middle of a superpower competition in the Indo-Pacific. Its political leadership has identified regional power shifts and lingering conflict flashpoints in Asia at the core of its national security interests. However, it is only in 2016 that the Philippines has seriously explored expanding its network of security partnerships beyond like-minded status quo states. This hedging strategy might be labeled as the “normalization” of the Philippines as a Southeast Asian country, given that its neighbors have pursued this approach at varying levels of intensity and success (Kuik 2016). While the republic maintains its sole military alliance with the United States (US), the Duterte administration has explored security cooperation with countries such as China, Russia, Israel, as well as Japan, India, etc. President Duterte has signaled that he is even willing to downgrade the country’s partnership with the United States in an effort to bolster its reputation as a “free agent” to other possible regional security partners. As the foundations of foreign and security policy in the Philippines are shaken by the rhetoric of its current chief architect, its bureaucracy, particularly the defense establishment, is either resisting or not entirely convinced on totally veering away from established operating practices.

This paper analyzes this current strategy of the Philippines under the Duterte administration in the midst of US–China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. It argues that the archipelago is treading on the uncharted terrain of pursuing new security partners while keeping its traditional allies. This requires tantamount due diligence, sophisticated appreciation of the regional strategic landscape, and policy consistency, all of which to a great extent remain the challenges of strategic policy-making in the Philippines. This paper utilizes a recent survey of the country’s

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security community of scholars and practitioners to examine Philippine perceptions of the various arenas related to this superpower competition. It particularly focuses on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (otherwise known as the Quad) and how it can bolster the country's national security and foreign policy goals. This paper concludes with some observations on the future prospects of security strategizing in the Philippines beyond the Duterte administration.

## **The Regional Strategic Environment: Superpower Competition**

The Indo-Pacific region serves as the main theater for the current competition between the US and China. Main factors behind this heightened and intense rivalry are the rise of China and the perceived decline in security commitments of the US in the region. China's increasing economic clout, as already foreseen by historians as early as Thucydides, gave unprecedented strategic confidence in challenging the existing global rules-based order governed by rules and norms propped up by the US. Despite its promised peaceful rise, China's revisionist stance first became evident at its immediate borders (e.g. South China Sea and East China Sea), eventually being present in every part of the world. It is also palpable in its increasing influence on multilateral institutions, international regimes, and other elements of the international order. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, and the Boao Forum for Asia are derivative institutions coming from China's assertiveness as a now global superpower (Huiskens 2019).

Side by side with China's power is the US's diminishing commitment to the region. In the aftermath of its Global War on Terror, the US was supposed to return its attention towards the region in the guise of former President Obama's pivot/rebalance to Asia. This backfired for the US both internationally and domestically. The pivot to Asia did not result in concrete measures to bolster US commitment to the region's security. The 2016 election cycle that ended with Trump's victory could be partly attributed to how the maverick candidate used US (failed) multilateralism such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and its security alliances with Japan and South Korea as a foil to reorient the US towards what was supposed to be a more strategic Asia policy (Campbell & Sullivan 2019).

The Philippines, given its geostrategic location and historical dealings with major powers, was thrown into the middle of this benign-turned-intense US-China rivalry

that started after the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012. The Aquino administration (2010–2016) decided to launch a landmark arbitral case against China in the Southeast China Sea dispute. The US attempted to strengthen its military alliance with the Philippines with initiatives such as the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Other states such as Japan and Australia followed suit in forging strategic partnerships with the Philippines (Arugay 2017).

The outcome of the 2016 election, however, caught the Philippines in the crossroads of reorienting this strategy. Duterte sought to recalibrate Philippine foreign and security policy away from the West and into the arms of countries such as China and Russia. Once a political nobody abroad, Duterte expressed a desire to embrace China, while rejecting the country's long-time ally. The often-neglected country was instantly pushed into the limelight given its new leader's musings, usually in the form of highly emotional rants in the guise of foreign policy. At one point, he threatened to scrap the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the US and at the same time, pursue deep security relations with China in the midst of their ongoing territorial disputes. These "adventures" in Philippine foreign relations were officially labeled as the pursuit of an "independent" foreign policy (Arugay 2018).

## **The Quad and Indo-Pacific: Reassuring Asia?<sup>1</sup>**

In 2007, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue brought the United States, Japan, India, and Australia together in a loose security dialogue. The members of the Quad, as it has later come to be known, sought to strengthen each other's relative positions based on shared values and interests, particularly on maritime security from East Asia to the Indian Ocean. Despite its potential, the Quad suffered an untimely death when Australia withdrew from the association in 2008. Today, however, there seems to be an apparent connection between the revival of the Quad in 2017 and the formation of the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which is especially prominent in the context of China's assertiveness in the region.

The FOIP is the current Asia policy of the United States. It first gained ground during US President Donald Trump's inaugural five-country Asia tour in 2017 and was given more clarity during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. The US approach

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<sup>1</sup> This section drew heavily from Arugay et al., 2020.

to the Indo-Pacific has at its core a focus on three areas: security, economics, and governance. The Quad is seen as the core of the FOIP.

While the articulation of such an approach or strategy is welcome, several points need careful attention. First, in terms of security, the pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific rests on championing not only an interdependent and interconnected vision of the world, but also a rules-based international order. While not discounting that Quad members put a premium on the same goals and values, the FOIP presupposes strategic convergence amongst the four states. Strategic convergence might have been the case, were it not for China's economic dynamism and influence. In fact, China is India's most important trading partner, while Australia remains the second largest recipient of accumulated Chinese investment, with US\$99 billion since 2008 (Valencia 2018).<sup>2</sup> Japan's aging population constrains it to be similarly dependent on China's growth. These economic links constitute the Quad members' hesitation towards the FOIP.

Second, these deep economic linkages are arguably the impetus for the reframing of the FOIP from its original focus on security to its recalibrated incarnation involving economic interactions. The updated FOIP emphasizes that enhancing shared prosperity rests on creating partnerships, building momentum in energy, infrastructure, and the digital economy, and tapping the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to grow economic partnerships and strengthen people-to-people connections.<sup>3</sup> An alternative explanation for the recalibration is that a security-focused initiative is likely to be interpreted as a way of containing China. However, the focus on economics likewise raises the question of how this component works relative to other initiatives in the region, in particular China's Belt and Road Initiative. Also, how can the Quad's strong encouragement of regionalization and focus on individual sector-specific efforts be sustained in light of the US' protectionist tendencies?

Finally, the conflation of the FOIP with the Quad is likewise problematic, coming on the heels of suggestions to shelve the Quad. US Indo-Pacific Command's Admiral Philip Davidson said that the region's reception to the Quad was lukewarm and that

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<sup>2</sup> *Demystifying Chinese Investment in Australia* (Sydney: KPMG and the University of Sydney), 2018. <http://demystifyingchina.com.au/reports/demystifying-chinese-investment-2018-June.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region," US State Department, 18 November 2018. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/11/287433.htm>.

“there wasn’t an immediate potential” for it.<sup>4</sup> While his remarks might have been taken out of context and blown out of proportion, this is nonetheless symptomatic of the disconnect between the FOIP and its operation via the Quad. It is precisely these ambiguities, i.e. the security-economics nexus and the intersection of the FOIP and the Quad, that diminish the potential impact of the US’ new Asia strategy. These ambiguities spill over to Southeast Asian states and their respective bilateral relationships with the US. Similarly, the vagueness of the FOIP raises questions about ASEAN’s role in the US’ Asia strategy.

It matters that the US Asia strategy is perceived in the Philippines as unsound, not least because of the Philippines’ longstanding alliance with the US. This brings to the fore recent calls—led by the Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana—to review the MDT. To quote Lorenzana, “That’s the reason why the MDT needs to be reviewed because my forecast is that it’s the US that will be engaged in a conflict first, not the Philippines” (Santos 2019). The defense secretary’s remarks highlight the strategic problem facing decision-makers: does the Philippines want to follow the US into another conflict, given the former’s closer relationship with China and uncertainty regarding US commitment to its treaty ally? This is not to say that the Philippines is not committed to the alliance; the Duterte administration’s national security policy clearly states its belief that the EDCA signed by the two countries to implement the MDT would lead to “increased [US] military presence for maritime and security operations.” Clearly, however, Philippine security policy is ambivalent because the same policy document sees the US security presence as a “stabilizing force” and describes the Trump Administration’s approach towards the region as something “that remains to be seen” (NSC 2018).

The ambiguities surrounding the FOIP have several implications that can be categorized into various levels of analysis. Despite calls to review the MDT, the alliance remains intact. This begs the question, however, of the sustainability of such an arrangement. One challenge to the longevity of the alliance is domestic in nature: how well can the alliance withstand Duterte’s policy of pivoting towards China? Similarly, how will the alliance be affected by domestic policies in the US and the 2020 elections? At the regional level, Southeast Asian countries need to not only define their role in the overarching FOIP narrative, but also to identify mechanisms

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<sup>4</sup> “US Commander Hints that Quad Grouping May be Shelved,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2019.

to ensure ASEAN centrality. Hence, if the US' Asia strategy is itself mired in inconsistency, then it is not surprising that it translates into diverging reactions in the Philippines and the wider region. Another explanation has to do with Filipinos' deep knowledge of domestic politics, challenges related to long-term strategy analysis, and biases related to trust and confidence in the major powers.

## **Philippine Perceptions on US–China Strategic Competition**

In order to examine the perceptions of Philippine foreign and security policy elites, this paper utilizes a 2019 online non-random survey of Filipino members of the country's strategic "community" (Arugay et al. 2019). In particular, they comprise scholars, researchers, members of the civilian bureaucracy, and officials from government agencies with national security functions and responsibilities. It also has respondents who are middle-level officials from the security sector (military, police, coast guard, etc.).<sup>5</sup> This paper presents survey data according to three themes; (1) awareness of and support for the Quad and its linkages with the Indo-Pacific concept, (2) the relationship between the Quad and regional players like ASEAN and China, (3) and expectations about the likely roles that the Quad will play in the region and their impact on regional security.

### ***Awareness of and Support for the Quad and the Indo-Pacific***

Surprisingly, only a thin majority of the respondents are familiar with the Quad. 40% of those surveyed are not familiar with it. This seems to suggest that there must be a more diligent effort on the part of the Quad countries in reaching out to other important stakeholders in the Philippines and informing them about the idea behind the Quad and its possible role and contribution to regional security.

A related survey conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) found general support for the Quad. Southeast Asian experts overwhelmingly support the Quad, with 51% expressing support, 39% being open to future support, and only 10% saying they did not support it. In particular, Filipino and Vietnamese experts displayed high valuation (e.g., support and optimism) of the Quad, compared to

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<sup>5</sup> The survey ran from 1 March until 11 April 2019 and received 228 unique responses. Our non-random sample had a good balance between members of the security sector (55%) and the civilian sector (45%) that comprised the academe, civilian government officials and personnel, and members of the private sector.

Indonesians and Singaporeans who appeared to be Quad skeptics, primarily because of what they feel is a lack of clarity regarding the Quad’s purpose and fears that its strong public image as part of China containment may fuel tensions (Huong 2018).

**Figure 1: Awareness of the QUAD**

	Aware*	Not Aware
<i>Whole Sample</i>	60% (136)	40% (92)
<i>Affiliation</i>		
Academe	58% (25)	42% (18)
Government (Civilian Bureaucracy)	76% (32)	24% (10)
Government (Security Sector)	57% (72)	43% (54)
Private Sector	41% (7)	59% (10)
<i>Education</i>		
Bachelor’s	55% (48)	45% (40)
Postgraduate	61% (11)	39% (7)
Master’s	62% (64)	38% (39)
PhD	83% (10)	17% (2)
No Answer	(3)	(4)
<i>Training</i>		
No training abroad	55% (61)	45% (50)
Training abroad	64% (75)	36% (42)
<i>Training by Country**</i>		
Australia	56% (19)	44% (15)
United States	65% (34)	35% (18)
<b>India</b>	50 % (2)	50% (2)
Japan	67% (12)	33% (6)
China	67% (14)	33% (7)

\*Figures in percentages, followed by raw number of respondents

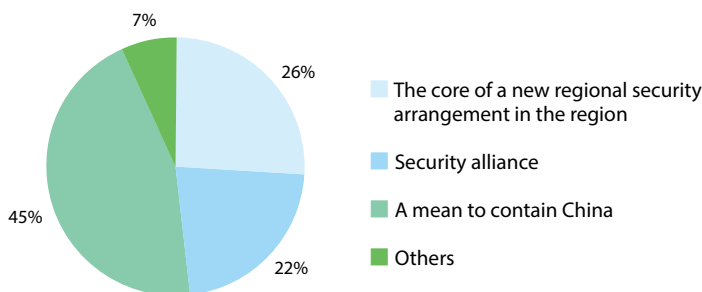
\*\*Some respondents received training in multiple countries

The variation in Filipino perspectives can be accounted for in two ways. First, disparities in Filipino strategic thinkers and practitioners’ reception of the Quad are symptomatic of the very ambiguities of its role within the US’ Asia strategy. Second, these varying views stem from a deep knowledge of domestic politics, challenges related to long-term strategic analysis, and biases related to trust and confidence in the major powers such as China and United States. Despite enormous trust in traditional security allies, the prevalence of ambiguity in the Quad’s core mechanisms and principles contributes to a misunderstanding of what the Quad is truly intended for. More notable is the fact that all four country-members of the Quad have strategic relationships with one another.

The ASPI study found that support for the Quad is high among its respondents, however the graph above shows that there is variation in the role that Southeast Asians ascribe to it. Most respondents view it as either a form of “minilateralism” (32%), or another form of informal dialogue among major powers. Our survey displays the same trend in variation with no consensus as regards to the role of the Quad. While four out of ten respondents see it as a means to contain China’s power, the others view it as either a security alliance between the four powers (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) or as the core of a new regional security arrangement. In the future, we expect that this diversity in opinions regarding the role of the Quad in the region might likely persist unless there is more clarity regarding the Quad’s intentions on whether it will further project itself in the region (Huong 2018).

As with the overall purpose of the Quad, Filipinos seem to have low expectations on the role the Quad can play in the regional security architecture, as only 26% of respondents view it as forming the core of a new security arrangement in the region. However, what is significant is that most believed that the Quad is a means to contain China (45%).<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 2: The Quad and ASEAN**



While this survey did not ask about the specifics of either concept, it did ask respondents whether the Quad and the Indo-Pacific are the same. Six out of ten said that both projects are the “same,” and that they manifest the same institutional configuration. This might continue to be the prevailing view among Filipino strategic thinkers and practitioners unless the countries that are pushing for the Indo-Pacific

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<sup>6</sup> This is contradictory to the ASPI study, which found that respondents from the Philippines were least likely to think about the Quad/Indo-Pacific concept as a means to contain China (17%), compared to the 25.4% average for the whole of Southeast Asia (Huong 2018).

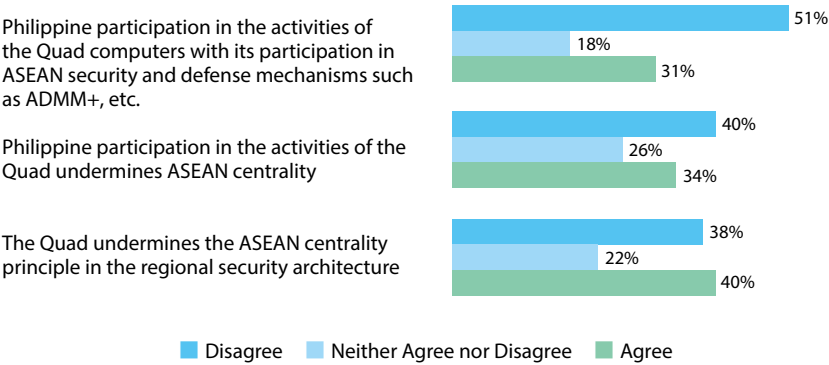


concept provide more details.

***Linkages Between the Quad and Regional Powers***

The survey does not show an overly optimistic view toward the Quad’s relations with ASEAN. A significant proportion chose to “neither agree nor disagree” with the statements that the Quad (a) undermines ASEAN centrality (22%) and (b) competes with ASEAN’s regional security mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) (18%). Specifically, the majority of respondents (51%) expressed the view that the Quad

**Figure 3: The Quad and ASEAN**



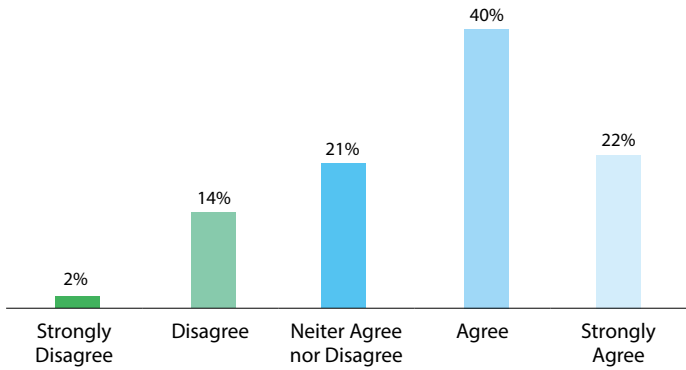
does not compete with the ASEAN-led regional security architecture. However, the respondents were relatively more ambivalent as to whether or not the Quad undermines ASEAN centrality (although the largest percentage responded that it does not).

***The Future Impact of the Quad***

Given that the Quad is still a relatively new security arrangement, the surveys also explore the expectations of strategic thinkers and practitioners on how it may affect the regional strategic environment. Respondents of the ASPI survey are generally enthusiastic about the potential of the Quad to contribute to stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region, which contrasts with the “frequently disseminated view that Southeast Asians are predominantly negative about the Quad” (Huong 2019:11).

The survey asked respondents to evaluate the potential of the Quad to help manage tensions in the West Philippine Sea. Six out of ten respondents believe that the Quad can contribute to achieving this objective.

**Figure 4: The Quad can help manage tensions in the South China Sea.**

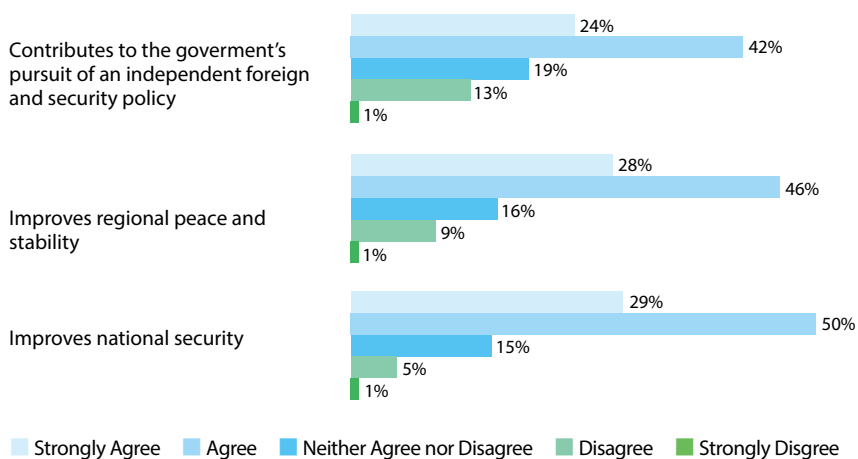


The survey asked direct questions on the possible participation of the Philippines in the initiatives and activities of the Quad. Respondents were asked to speculate on the likely reactions of China if the Philippines decided to cooperate with the Quad. Our Filipino sample *positively* assessed the impact of the country’s participation in the Quad that it could possibly: (1) improve national security (79%); (2) improve regional peace and stability (74%); and (3) contribute to the pursuit of an independent foreign policy (66%). However, Filipino strategic thinkers and practitioners are split on whether the Quad undermines the ASEAN-led regional security architecture, with 38% believing that it does not, 40% agreeing that it does, and 22% being neutral. Finally, almost eight out of ten respondents believe that the participation of the Philippines in the Quad will likely be resented by China.

The optimism of Filipino respondents in the survey regarding the benefits of participation in the Quad’s activities is consistent with other surveys which found that Filipino (and Vietnamese) experts generally welcomed the initiative (p. 21). In the ASPI survey, it is worth noting that other ASEAN states like Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand primarily see the Quad as a “vague idea” (36%) rather than a “welcomed initiative.” Further research is necessary in order to explain the variation in perceptions between Filipino experts and their regional counterparts.

The positive views of Filipino experts towards the Quad can be traced to the generally good relations that the Philippines has with three of the four Quad members: it has a treaty alliance with the US, a strategic partnership with Japan, and a comprehensive partnership with Australia. While the Philippines has a cordial relationship with India, it is imperative to point out that it sees the latter as one of the states “crucial in contributing to the peace, stability, and prosperity of the East Asian region.” (NSC 2017:9)

**Figure 5: Perceptions of the QUAD’s Benefits**



What the Quad contributes to the Philippines is a sense of familiarity and cordiality in diplomatic and military relations. Despite some heated rhetoric coming from Malacanang in recent years, the Philippines and the US have committed to more security and defense-related activities and exercises in 2019 (Viray 2018). Japan and the Philippines also have strong bilateral ties. The two countries “have common cause to seek closer security cooperation with each other” (Amador 2013). Duterte himself wishes to deepen the Philippines’ strategic partnership with Japan, and in his visit to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in May 2019, agreed to enhance the two countries’ relations in defense, maritime security, and maritime domain awareness (Rappler 2019). With Australia, the Philippines maintains a strong defense partnership, and in 2017, the two governments agreed to cooperate on counterterrorism, ship visits by the Royal Australian Navy, as well as to “enhance

intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Southern Philippines, strengthen information sharing, maritime security engagement, and bilateral maritime patrols” (Cheng 2017). While Indian–Philippine security relations remain muted, the two countries have been working together on several important activities. High-level exchange visits by diplomatic and security officials from the two countries continue, while Indian navy and coast guard ships have made port calls in Manila.<sup>7</sup> An important development occurred in May of 2019 when the navies of the US, Philippines, Japan, and India sailed together en route to the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise (MARSEC FTX) through the South China Sea (Mangosing 2019). This is the first time that such an activity has been carried out and is potentially very significant in continuing efforts to manage conflict in the South China Sea.

## **Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

The positive view held by the Filipino security community on the role of minilaterals in the country’s national security could attest to the potential of the country to work with Quad members individually and collectively. The Philippines should use its good defense relationships with all Quad members to enhance its military modernization program. The EDCA needs to be implemented with haste to allow “US troops and military platforms to access and preposition equipment” and contribute to the immediate and long-term modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) (Poling & Cronin 2018). Achieving the goals of the EDCA will build the AFP’s capability and capacity in the long-term and allow the Philippines to take a more active and leading role in its external security to comply with its treaty obligations. The continuing strong ties between the US military and the AFP show the maturity of the alliance and the capacity of both sides to manage political noise.

The Philippines should seek to acquire more equipment and ships from Japan and Australia for maritime security, maritime law enforcement, and maritime domain awareness. The recent history of aid assistance in acquiring multi-mission response vessels between the Philippines and Japan and the Philippines and Australia all point to the capacity of the three countries to work together to beef up Manila’s capabilities

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<sup>7</sup> “India-Philippines relations,” Ministry of External Relations, October 2017. [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India\\_Philippines\\_October\\_2017.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_Philippines_October_2017.pdf).

in order to enforce its rights in the South China Sea. Countering terrorism and violent extremism is where all Quad members have worked closely with the Philippines individually. This is an area where the Quad, after consulting with the Philippines, can reap positive dividends in helping the latter to fight terrorists and extremists, especially in its southern frontier. Countering terrorism and violent extremism, however, should not detract from the overall aim of strategic cooperation in maritime security, where the true challenge lies.

These comprehensive security linkages between the Philippines and select Quad member-countries indicate that security dialogues and agreements may still persist even in the absence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue itself. Moreover, these linkages may also serve as avenues for the Philippines to access non-traditional security allies such as India.

The South China Sea remains the crucible of tensions and the testing area for the Quad in managing tensions among the claimants. While not all Quad members take sides in territorial claims, all of them seek to uphold freedom of navigation as a principle of international law, and to prevent any one country from dominating the area and disregarding the Convention on the Law of the Sea. Filipino experts see the Quad as contributing to regional peace and stability by upholding the rule of law and balancing against a potential hegemon. Participating in freedom of navigation activities while enforcing its sovereign rights through increased maritime patrols should be the priorities of the Philippine government, and the Quad members should be ready to step in and assist when asked.

The Filipino security specialists surveyed, however, see the Quad as a challenge to ASEAN centrality, however the remedy for this is by emphasizing that the Quad upholds ASEAN's goals in making sure that conflicts are managed peacefully and deterring countries from using force in enforcing their claims. The Philippine government must take pains to emphasize that cooperating with the Quad does not take away from its commitments to ASEAN or its other bilateral relations. Filipino diplomatic and defense officials need to work with the Quad to ensure that ASEAN's centrality is neither undermined nor seen as negatively affecting that centrality.

Lastly, the prevalent disjoint between domestic perception of the Quad and the Quad's true purpose can be understood as setting the bar too high, especially for

a security dialogue as loose as the Quad. In the context of China's assertiveness in Asia, presenting a loose security dialogue like the Quad as an "anti-China" bulwark may have serious peace and security repercussions, thereby affecting the FOIP strategy altogether. It is crucial, first and foremost, that management of expectations on the capacity and purpose of the Quad must be done in terms of managing US–China strategic rivalry. Although the Quad itself poses promising security dividends, the notion that it is a containment strategy is misleading, however this notion is prevalent precisely because two country-members are US allies and one is US' close partner in East Asia. Together, all four country-members have strategic relations with each other. Managing expectations of the Quad is all the more critical for the Philippines as it seeks to balance its relations amidst the intensified competition between the US and China.

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