

India, the Quad and Indo-Pacific Maritime Security

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Summary

The Tokyo summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – a forum that brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (US) – has unveiled a significant maritime security initiative that serves several shared interests of the four partners. The new framework for maritime security cooperation will also widen the strategic footprint of India, the only non-treaty partner of the US in the Quad.

One of the substantive new initiatives to emerge from the Quad summit in Tokyo in April 2022 is the plan to build an [Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (IPMDA). The objective is to develop and disseminate real-time information on activity, especially dark shipping in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, that will help the littoral states gain greater control over their waters.

Maritime domain awareness is about developing an actionable understanding of the ocean environment that helps promote the safety, security and sovereignty of nations, individually and collectively. Growing commercial and strategic exploitation of the Indo-Pacific waters and the rising importance of non-traditional security threats, including environmental challenges, and gaining an accurate picture of the maritime spaces have become major imperatives.

The idea of shared maritime domain awareness among like-minded countries and partners has emerged as a major focus in [the Indo-Pacific engagement of all the Quad partners](#). It involved strengthening national capabilities to gain greater awareness of ocean traffic and pooling information to produce a real-time integrated picture of the activity across the vast Indo-Pacific theatre. The IPMDA is rooted in the Quad's conviction that maritime domain awareness – which provides a true picture of the ocean space – is a “requirement for peace, stability and prosperity” in the littoral. By allowing the littoral states to “see” the real-time picture in the oceans and act upon it, the IPMDA will “[transform the ability of partners](#) in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region to fully monitor the waters on their shores and, in turn, uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific”.

The initiative involves leveraging a range of existing and future technologies and deploying commercially available information. The IPMDA hopes to offer near real-time information and provide a “common operating picture” across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This, in turn, will allow the monitoring of legal and illegal (or “dark”) shipping activities in the Indo-Pacific. Besides allowing states to combat illicit and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Indo-Pacific, the IPMDA will enhance regional capabilities to address natural and humanitarian disasters.

The [joint statement](#) issued at the end of the Quad summit declared that the IPMDA “will support and work in consultation with Indo-Pacific nations and regional information fusion centres in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands by providing technology

and training to support enhanced, shared maritime domain awareness.” The most important impact of the IPMDA is to reinforce the efforts of the Quad to be seen as a coalition providing public goods in the Indo-Pacific rather than a geopolitical gang-up to counter China. The earlier Quad initiative during the pandemic, which saw the distribution of 257 million doses of vaccines, certainly contributed to that goal. The latest initiative will strengthen that claim. [Two analysts argued](#) that “if properly executed, this effort could be a flagship project for demonstrating the Quad’s value to regional countries”.

The Donald Trump administration had sought to develop the Quad as an explicit military coalition against China. But India resisted that proposal and insisted on keeping the Quad a non-military formation. The Joe Biden administration readily accepted the Indian argument and sought to widen the broader public goods agenda of the Quad. ‘Non-military’ does not mean ‘non-strategic’, though. In fact, the focus on ‘dark-shipping’ would inevitably make China an important focus of the IPMDA. According to American officials cited by Western media, China is said to account for [nearly 95 per cent](#) of illegal fishing in the Indo-Pacific that has caused havoc across the region.

It was no surprise that Chinese media reacted sharply against the IPMDA. A [commentary](#) in China’s *Global Times* conceded that the Chinese fleet have been involved in some illegal fishing but insisted that Beijing is now taking “many effective measures to regulate China’s distant-water fishing activities, by raising fines and confiscating fishing vessels”. It added that Beijing’s “IUU fishing activities have significantly declined as China pays more attention to environmental protection, and as relevant authorities become more aware of management and control”. Yet, the commentary dismissed the IPMDA as an attempt to “launch a new international campaign to stigmatise China through so-called information sharing”.

By sharing information with partner countries and making it public, the Quad could step up pressure on Beijing to address its IUU fishing activities. More broadly, the initiative underlines the Quad’s growing capability to contest China’s, until recently, triumphalist narrative in the Indo-Pacific.

India, which has been on the defensive in relation to China’s growing Indo-Pacific profile in recent years, can build on the IPMDA to strengthen its positive outreach to the Indo-Pacific. Over the last few years, [India has indeed ramped up](#) its national effort to strengthen maritime domain awareness, develop a network of observation facilities in friendly countries, negotiate agreements for sharing white shipping (commercial) information with a range of countries and support the construction of regional information fusion centres.

This Indian effort will contribute significantly to the development of the Quad initiative on maritime domain awareness. The IPMDA, in turn, will strengthen India’s technical and institutional capabilities to shape the regional environment in association with the Quad.

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