Zone balancing:
India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

ARZAN TARAPORE *

Military balancing is a costly and risky business. When a state faces a rival great power that is rapidly growing more powerful and aggressive, it could pursue ‘internal’ or ‘external’ balancing—that is, investing additional resources in national defence, or making security commitments with other states, respectively.1 But those options are less viable when the balancing state is markedly less wealthy or powerful than the rising great power. Hard military balancing could place a prohibitively heavy burden on national capacity, or further provoke the already stronger rising power, or fail to address other strategic challenges posed by the adversary. States have a range of other balancing mechanisms; but, as I show below, most of these are closely associated with internal or external balancing, and therefore suffer the same shortcomings as policy options. India faces this situation with China. As China’s military has modernized and reformed with historic alacrity, Beijing has also pressed its territorial claims, including in a deadly border confrontation with India since 2020. What options do states such as India have to balance rising powers such as China if they consider both internal and external balancing too costly, unduly provocative or ill-suited to pressing strategic problems?

This article introduces the theoretically novel concept of ‘zone balancing’ as another option in a balancing state’s repertoire. The term denotes efforts that are designed not to match the rival state’s power symmetrically, as in internal and external balancing, but instead to bolster the capacity and resilience of other regional states. In zone balancing, the balancer seeks to harden other states against the adversary’s coercion or inducements, thereby limiting the adversary’s opportunities to build strategic influence. The balancing is still designed to gain an advantage over the adversary, but indirectly, by shaping the ‘zone’—or geographic region—of strategic competition, rather than directly, as a dyadic race for power between rivals.2

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2 In a sporting analogy, members of a football or basketball team may seek to effect ‘player-on-player’ defence, by focusing directly on a member of the opposing team, or they may seek to establish ‘zone defence’ to guard a section of the field or court from players on the offensive.

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In the Indo-Pacific region, India has conspicuously embraced zone balancing since 2020. For years, India had cautiously sought to soften its balancing against China by persisting with diplomatic reassurance—an approach Rajesh Rajagopalan labelled in this journal as ‘evasive balancing’. That policy managed to regulate the India–China rivalry for some time but, just as Rajagopalan warned, it failed to deter China from aggression against India. Starting in May 2020, Chinese forces launched major incursions into the Indian territory of Ladakh, which prompted a deadly skirmish, a militarization of border areas that continues to this day, and a rupture in the broader bilateral relationship. As a result of the border crisis, and of the economically devastating COVID-19 pandemic, India’s balancing behaviour became less evasive.

India has continued its patchy approach to hard military balancing; but, most remarkably, it dropped its earlier hesitations about deepening cooperation in the Quad, the ‘minilateral’ grouping comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States. This engagement with the Quad—short of security commitments that would represent external balancing—is driven primarily by a strategy of zone balancing. India’s strategic adjustment helps to explain the Quad’s suddenly more ambitious agenda, whereby it offers material and institutional benefits to strengthen regional states. But it also explains why, under current conditions, the Quad will not evolve into a military compact, and cannot deter some forms of aggression.

This article makes three main contributions. To begin with, it advances for the first time the theoretical concept of zone balancing, which explains certain state behaviours that traditional concepts of balancing cannot explain. Second, it shows the conditions under which states may resort to zone balancing rather than other forms of balancing—using the case of India to show how changed structural conditions prompted it to shift emphasis from evasive balancing to zone balancing. Third, it offers a novel framework to explain the Quad’s strategic logic—how the grouping hopes to use zone balancing to advance a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’, even without officially committing its members to combined military action.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, I establish the theoretical context of different approaches to balancing, and how India has applied such strategies against a rising China. Second, I introduce the novel concept of zone balancing, explaining its causal theory and its application in the past. Third, I sketch India’s post-2020 strategic adjustment, showing how concurrent crises have changed New Delhi’s strategic assessment. Fourth, I show how zone balancing has been applied by the Quad in its new work agenda. And finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the limits of zone balancing as a policy option.

Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

Balancing in theory and Indian strategy

The balance of power and individual states’ balancing behaviour are among the most intuitive and foundational concepts in International Relations (IR) theory. The concept predicts that states in an anarchic international system will seek to accumulate power, individually or collectively, when confronted by superior powers. States that engage in balancing are, more precisely, balancing against rising threats—which are a function of both power and intent. IR scholarship offers many variants of balancing behaviour.

The two best-established concepts are internal balancing, which denotes efforts by a state to improve its own economic and military power, and external balancing, which denotes moves to aggregate multiple states’ power against a rival, or to split the rival’s alliances. Those concepts can be defined and applied strictly—to mean an aggregate increase in defence resources, and the formation of binding treaty alliances, respectively. But in reality, balancing behaviour can be subtle and highly contextual. Internal balancing, for example, could be measured by the acquisition of particular military capabilities specific to the balancing state’s strategic context, or changes in force posture against a particular adversary, regardless of whether aggregate defence spending or military size increases. External balancing could be measured by combined operational planning, or greater tactical interoperability, rather than the coarse measure of establishing formal alliances. For the purposes of my argument, and for the terms to have conceptual purchase, internal balancing must involve some net increase in military capability, and external balancing must involve some reasonable expectation of a security commitment.

Balancing, however, is bigger and more complex than these two terms imply. Some scholars have developed another concept, known as soft balancing, to denote non-military efforts—for example, in diplomacy, international institutions and economic statecraft—to balance against a dominant power. Critics, however, suggest that this concept is so capacious that it essentially refers to a state’s foreign policy rather than specific efforts to balance a security rival. More pointedly, some states may seek to undermine an adversary or an adversary coalition directly, using negative balancing or wedge strategies.

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6 Waltz, Theory of international politics, p. 118.


International Affairs 99: 1, 2023
A range of scholarship has also sought to parse the precise mechanics of aggregating international power against a common adversary. For example, the concept of *indirect balancing* describes a phenomenon whereby smaller states seek to harness the military of a relatively benign great power to deter another more threatening great power.\(^\text{11}\) Also, some smaller states may seek to aggregate power in international organizations, through *institutional balancing*.\(^\text{12}\) The concept of *covert balancing* denotes attempts by a great power to build security relationships with smaller states under the cover of more palatable or less provocative military cooperation. This allows the smaller states to maintain a veneer of policy independence, although, as its proponents concede, it remains fundamentally a way to build external balancing capacity.\(^\text{13}\)

Balancing states may at times also seek to hedge their bets, matching any hard balancing measures with conciliation and concessions to the adversary, to ensure the rivalry remains manageable. India offers a theoretically significant case in point. For years, India crafted a policy that Rajagopalan termed *evasive balancing*, in which balancing behaviour was offset by continued diplomatic concessions to reassure China that India’s intentions were not hostile. Rajagopalan listed five such concessions: a declaratory policy that India was not seeking to contain China; continued participation in multilateral forums such as the BRICS; unilateral concessions, such as avoiding official support of events run by Tibetan exiles; pursuit of high-level dialogues such as the informal summits in Wuhan and Chennai; and—‘the most critical element’—hesitation in deepening Quad cooperation.\(^\text{14}\)

Rajagopalan warned that this mixed policy was ‘unviable’, and indeed it did not deter China from aggression in Ladakh in 2020. Notably, since the border crisis began, India has apparently abandoned at least four of these five concessions, including the most important one: as I discuss at length below, it has wholeheartedly embraced deeper Quad cooperation.

India has always sought to balance China in some fashion, and since the Ladakh crisis began has marginally accelerated both internal and external balancing efforts. In internal balancing, most visibly, India has sustained a large and indefinite deployment of troops to the border with China, accelerated permanent military infrastructure building there, and reassigned one of its three army strike corps facing Pakistan to a China mission.\(^\text{15}\)

But there are also definite limits to India’s internal balancing. Its economy continues to grow only modestly, and its defence spending is basically flat—so while a handful of specific China-related capabilities may expand incrementally, India has not contemplated the kind of wholesale military expansion that some

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\(^\text{14}\) Rajagopalan, ‘Evasive balancing’, at p. 90.

other countries, such as Australia, have announced. Defence spending as a share of government spending, and as a share of GDP, has been consistently declining over the past decade, a trend unperturbed by the shocks of 2020.\textsuperscript{16} Resource scarcity has forced India to move in the opposite direction in some cases, with every military service consistently being granted fewer resources than it annually requests.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, the new national policy of \textit{atmanirbhar}, or self-reliance, is designed to promote defence self-reliance over the longer term, but may also force the military to make compromises on the quality of equipment that it procures. Although the government is laying the institutional foundations for greater indigenous innovation and private-sector involvement in defence procurement, that remains an uncertain and, at best, long-term bet.

Internationally, India has continued to deepen strategic cooperation with a select group of highly capable like-minded partners—especially the United States, Japan, Australia and France. Whereas it previously approached such close defence partnerships with suspicion, or even used the threat of closer partnerships as leverage against China, it has recently shed much of its earlier apparent apprehension, signing reciprocal logistics-sharing agreements with the US, Japan, Australia and France. Even at the lowest tactical level, it has for example practised cross-deck helicopter operations with ships from the US, Australia and Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, India is careful to avoid any hint of foreign military commitments—even its naval patrols through the South China Sea do not signify an intent to engage in a military conflict there. Therefore, most of India’s international defence cooperation should more accurately be considered a form of internal balancing. New arms acquisitions, or exercises with capable partners, for example, are designed chiefly to build Indian military capabilities, not to aggregate international power against China. New Delhi remains unwilling to enter into any formal alliances or offer any political commitments abroad—not that such agreements are even on offer.

\textbf{Zone balancing: concept and precedents}

In most forms of military balancing—internal or external, hard or soft, indirect or covert or evasive—the balancer seeks to shape the balance of power between itself and its adversary. Ideally, the balancer seeks to gain security by deterring aggression against it or, failing that, to accumulate enough power to prevail in conflict. When the balancer enlists other states into its strategy, it typically regards them as partners aligned in that same strategic project—adding power to one pole of a dyad, with varying levels of political commitment. But balancing need not always be dyadic.

\textsuperscript{16} Tushar Chakrabarty, ‘Demand for grants 2022–23: defence’, PRS Legislative Research, 11 Feb. 2022, https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_parliament/2022/Defence%20DFG%20Analysis%202022-23.pdf. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 Nov. 2022.)

\textsuperscript{17} Snehesh Alex Philip, ‘Modi or Manmohan, India’s military needs haven’t been met under either for 10 yrs, data shows’, The Print, 9 March 2021.
Zone balancing, by contrast, seeks instead to shape the international field of competition in which the balancer and the rival operate. The balancer seeks to build the capacity and resilience of third-party states, to reduce the rival’s ability to coerce them. This is still a balancing strategy because it is still designed to limit the rival’s potential to build international power and influence. But it is different from traditional dyadic forms of balancing because the object of the balancing state’s policies is not the balancer’s own power, or the rival’s power, but the power of third-party regional states; the balancing effect must be mediated through those third parties. Zone balancing thereby affords the balancer less direct control over the dyadic balance of power, for the strategy’s success depends also on the power and actions of the regional states involved. The objective of zone balancing is to support the target state in inhibiting coercion; any political influence that the balancing state may accrue in the target state may be welcomed but would be purely incidental. Influence—and, even less, a political commitment or formal alignment—is not the purpose of zone balancing, and not the mechanism by which it seeks to achieve the balancing mission. In that way, it is conceptually distinct from external balancing.

The theory of successful zone balancing—how it would seek to build security in the target—centres on addressing the target state’s greatest strategic needs, and thereby to reduce its vulnerability to potential predatory influence. Any increase in that target state’s sovereign capacity decreases the rival state’s scope to coerce it. In that way zone balancing is conceptually analogous to deterrence by denial, which seeks to dissuade aggression by strengthening the deterrer’s capacity to resist that aggression. It is therefore suited primarily to reducing the risk of coercion or subversion of the third-party state; it is less apt in the event of overt military threats to the target’s territory. Not every form of international assistance qualifies as zone balancing—some may be designed simply to build influence with the target, or to fulfil humanitarian purposes. A state is only engaging in zone balancing if its support to the target state is a purposeful response to a rival, especially a rival that it assesses is expansionary or intent on coercing the target state.

Zone balancing can be executed using non-military tools of power, including diplomacy and economic statecraft, as long as those tools are used as part of the balancer’s security strategy. This point is especially pertinent in the post-pandemic Indo-Pacific, where national security strategies have routinely centred on economic self-reliance, supply-chain resilience, public health and other non-traditional forms of security. The most distinctive conceptual feature of zone balancing is that, unlike internal or external balancing—or even newer concepts such as ‘soft’ balancing—zone balancing does not seek to shape the rival’s behaviour; the target, instead, is the third-party state.

Generalizing from the Indian case, states may choose to engage in zone balancing for at least three reasons. Most basically, they may lack the material capacity or political commitment to undertake more costly internal or external
Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

balancing. Alternatively, they may be concerned about triggering a costly or self-defeating security dilemma, so they take measures that are less directly threatening to the rival. Or they may be seeking ways to counter more diffuse strategic risks, such as subversive political or economic influence and coercion, rather than direct military threats to their territory. All of these reasons apply in India’s case; but states may prefer zone balancing for any one of these reasons. And, as in India’s case, they are likely to consider zone balancing as a supplement to internal and external balancing, rather than as an alternative.

In history, states have engaged in zone balancing even if officials or scholars have not applied that term. The most prominent example may be the Marshall Plan—the suite of US economic assistance projects delivered to European target states, beginning in 1947, to balance the Soviet Union’s expanding political influence. At the time, Washington judged the most urgent threat to regional stability in Europe—then the geopolitical fulcrum of the world—to be not a Soviet military threat, but economic weakness following the devastation of the Second World War, and the potential for Soviet-aligned political partisans to exploit that weakness to gain political dominance. The United States faced a dynamic and urgent situation—it considered several west European governments to be on the brink of collapse, with communists poised to snatch power, especially after the coup in Czechoslovakia. In response, Washington initiated a massive programme of economic aid to alleviate European suffering, shore up incumbent democratic governments against their communist opponents, and thereby limit Moscow’s ability to build international power.20

The Marshall Plan’s features neatly fit the concept of zone balancing. At its core, the Plan’s theory of victory rested on the provision of material support to European target states, to build their capacity and resilience against Soviet-supported communist takeovers. It also orchestrated institutional support to lay the foundations for greater international cooperation among the European target states. In sum, it was created to shape the international environment, rather than to take any direct action against the Soviet Union. It was a package of economic aid—not military action—that was nevertheless designed to achieve security goals. And, critically, it was extended to target states with no expectation of reciprocity. The United States demanded no political commitments in exchange for the aid; it simply calculated that beneficiaries would better weather the postwar economic emergency and thereby be better able to fend off political instability. Granted, the majority of aid recipients would soon thereafter become security partners in the NATO alliance; but several Marshall Plan beneficiaries—Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland—remained neutral, not strategically aligned with the United States. Indeed, in a gesture of inclusivity, the Marshall Plan was even offered to Soviet bloc states, albeit with the expectation that those rival states would reject it, as they did.

On another occasion, India was itself the beneficiary—the target state—of another programme of American zone balancing. In the mid- to late 1950s, the US sought to deliver economic and military aid to India to balance communist China. This was motivated not by a premonition that China would pose a direct military threat to India—as was later realized in the 1962 war—but by a growing concern of a potential Indian economic and political failure. Washington feared that a weak Indian democracy, unable to deliver for its citizens, would be vulnerable to communist subversion and present an inviting prospect for the international communist cause. The US accordingly delivered economic aid and encouraged other international donors to do the same—again, with no expectation of a strategic quid pro quo. The US objective was to build India’s resilience to communist subversion, and its capacity as an independent Asian democracy. 21

In India’s case today, the policy of zone balancing is directed at regional states that might otherwise fall into Beijing’s orbit, through either coercion or inducements. The Belt and Road Initiative of lavish infrastructure development had already won Beijing considerable economic and political influence across the Indo-Pacific. India thus began dabbling in zone balancing through policies such as Act East, Neighbourhood First and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). These policies made scattered attempts to build target state capacity and resilience—for example, with the provision of coastal radar systems for maritime domain awareness. But their overall rationale was primarily to safeguard Indian overseas interests and compete for influence in a multipolar world. In Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar’s pre-2020 sweeping characterization of India’s international history, he declared that current events demanded ‘greater realism in foreign policy’ and in the use of military force and economic statecraft, partnering with others, taking greater risks, and clearly assessing relative power in an emerging multipolarity. 22

After the concurrent crises of 2020—Ladakh and the pandemic—New Delhi became convinced that a dysfunctional international architecture was enabling and emboldening Chinese aggression. The region desperately needed more effective bulwarks against Chinese coercion, and only concerted collective action could supply them.

India’s strategic adjustment

India’s strategic policy adjustment, beginning in 2020, was a response to what it perceived as a suddenly more dangerous international environment. Two concurrent crises—China’s incursions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, and the COVID-19 pandemic—left India with less confidence in the institutional and political bulwarks of regional stability. New Delhi mounted a broad if patchy

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Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

response. In this section, I argue that the concurrent crises did shift India’s strategic assessment, but resulted in only marginal efforts in traditional military balancing.

Tensions had been mounting on the India–China border for years. Chinese incursions across the LAC had been growing in frequency and severity, resulting in stand-offs at Depsang in 2013, and in Chumar in 2014 and Demchok in 2016. At Doklam in 2017, Indian forces physically intervened to block Chinese construction of a road in territory claimed by Bhutan. The drumbeat of border incidents, and especially the Doklam stand-off, conveyed a major signal to India of intensifying strategic rivalry with China, and probably contributed to India’s willingness to relaunch the Quad later that year. Nevertheless, India judged it could still pursue its approach of evasive balancing. In large part to restore the relationship’s equilibrium after Doklam, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a pair of one-on-one summits in 2018 and 2019, and sought to strengthen the bilateral relationship. Critically, India did not consider Doklam as a decisive rupture in the bilateral relationship, or as a harbinger of international systemic disorder—as it did the crises of 2020.

In May 2020 India faced an apparent Chinese land-grab in Ladakh. Both sides rushed tens of thousands of troops to the border, tensions rose, and a skirmish killed 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers—the first combat deaths on the LAC in nearly half a century. The two sides later disengaged from most ‘friction points’, although both continue to deploy large forces, sustained by new infrastructure, near the border. Military talks continue, but the increased militarization by both sides appears to be permanent.

From New Delhi’s perspective, the crisis on the ground in the Himalayas represented a major strategic change. China’s continued forward deployment of troops poses a redoubled and ongoing threat to Indian sovereignty. But the apparent land-grab also demolished the diplomatic framework that governed the border dispute and laid the foundation for bilateral ties between India and China. Five bilateral agreements, painstakingly negotiated since normalization in 1988, had maintained ‘peace and tranquillity’ on the LAC and ensured the border dispute remained non-violent. For India, China’s aggression in Ladakh had in effect abrogated those agreements and forged a new national security consensus that China was an untrustworthy and hostile actor. More broadly, Beijing’s newly unveiled aggressive intent towards India cast other, previously ambiguous Chinese activities—from predatory trade practices to a naval build-up in the Indian Ocean—in a more threatening light, as elements of a comprehensive strategy to constrain Indian power.

Immediately, India responded by in effect suspending the bilateral relationship. In the first instance, it recognized it could exert some leverage in calling the bilateral trade, investment and diplomatic relationship into doubt. Its declaratory policy

23 Manoj Joshi, Understanding the India–China border: the enduring threat of war in high Himalaya (London: Hurst, 2022).
25 Shivshankar Menon, Choices: inside the making of India’s foreign policy (Gurgaon: Allen Lane, 2016), pp. 9–46.
stipulated that resolving the border crisis would be a precondition to normalizing and deepening relations. This was not a complete diplomatic freeze—Jaishankar relented sufficiently to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, occasionally; and Modi attended summits of the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation alongside Xi. But Jaishankar routinely clarified that India’s core demand was a reduction in the Chinese military presence on the border: ‘[The India–China relationship] cannot be normal, if the situation in the border areas is abnormal. And surely the presence of a large number of troops there, in contravention of agreements, is abnormal.’

Some other elements of the bilateral relationship continued to progress, albeit unevenly. India–China trade, for example, in aggregate numbers continues to rise and in fact break records. But India has sought to mitigate the national security risks posed by that commercial relationship. It ostentatiously banned dozens of Chinese apps from the Indian market, but also, and far more significantly, it in effect banned Chinese telecommunications firms from bidding for India’s 5G infrastructure development. It also introduced new regulations that, for example, limited Chinese investments in Indian technology start-ups and the import of Chinese-made finished consumer electronics. For India, then, the Ladakh crisis was an inflection point in relations with China—a strategic disruption that will continue to reverberate even if tensions on the border abate.

However, India’s newfound penchant for balancing behaviour cannot be explained without also taking into account the other crisis of 2020, the COVID–19 pandemic. For India, the pandemic produced two major policy impulses, domestic and foreign. In domestic policy, it underscored the need for national self-reliance and resilience. The Modi government launched a programme for atmanirbharta, or self-reliance, designed to reduce Indian vulnerability to fragile international supply chains, lure international investment away from China and bolster indigenous manufacturing. For defence procurement, atmanirbharta resulted in the phased introduction of ‘positive indigenization lists’—that is, import bans—to promote domestic suppliers. The 2022/23 defence budget proposed that 68 per cent of capital expenditure should be earmarked for domestic industry, an increase from 58 per cent the previous year—but the Indian military will remain dependent on external suppliers for its most modern equipment.

In foreign policy, India judged that the pandemic loosened some of the institutional and normative constraints on India’s greatest security rival, China. The post-pandemic system incentivized states, under acute public health and economic

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27 Ananth Krishnan, ‘Record surge in India’s imports from China in first half of 2022’, The Hindu, 13 July 2022.

28 ‘Huawei and ZTE left out of India’s 5G trials’, BBC News, 5 May 2021.


30 Arvind Subramanian and Josh Felman, ‘India’s stalled rise: how the states has stifled growth’, Foreign Affairs 101: 1, 2022, pp. 139–50.

31 Chakrabarty, ‘Demand for grants 2022–23’. 248
Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

strain, to act more competitively, and the most powerful states could compete most ruthlessly. New Delhi feared that China might be a leading beneficiary of this more nakedly self-help system. As External Affairs Minister Jaishankar wrote: ‘Already, there has been a shift from marketing peaceful rise to declaring the arrival of wolf warriors … In many ways, the role reversal in world affairs will be even more stunning after the virus.’ New Delhi—and its like-minded partners in the Quad—saw a need to prevent China from capitalizing on the catastrophe. For its part, China launched a campaign of ‘vaccine diplomacy’ to deliver COVID vaccines to developing states across the region—which India, the United States and several other states matched. These efforts were nakedly competitive, and inevitably resulted in unnecessary inequities and inefficiencies.

For New Delhi the pandemic, like the Ladakh crisis, was a strategic disruption that shook the international order. The Indian government emerged from the concurrent crises convinced of the need for bolder policy action. Despite its clarified political intent to build national power, however, it remained unable or unwilling to commit forcefully to traditional military balancing.

Zone balancing in action: the Quad’s new strategic logic

The Quad had been re-established in late 2017, after a decade-long hiatus, as a mechanism for strategic consultations among foreign ministry officials. Its purpose and agenda were opaque, public statements were kept deliberately vague, and every meeting was attended by uncertainty over the grouping’s utility and longevity. Critics either dismissed it as a meaningless talk-fest or denounced it as a harbinger of a divisive ‘Asian NATO’. Quad foreign ministers met for the first time in late 2019, although at that point there was no commitment to continue the meetings even at that level. And for India at least, there was little to suggest the Quad was qualitatively different from several other minilateral consultative mechanisms.

After the catalysts of 2020, the Quad was suddenly and decisively energized. It began meeting at national leader level in March 2021, and for the first time committed itself to tangible policy outcomes, with a headline announcement of delivering a billion COVID vaccine doses. The leaders met again at summits in September 2021, March 2022 and May 2022. The third meeting, in March 2022, was noteworthy because it was an unplanned emergency meeting occasioned by the

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32 Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda, ‘A threat to cosmopolitan duties? How COVID-19 has been used as a tool to undermine refugee rights’, International Affairs 97: 6, 2021, pp. 1671–89.
36 India had already shown a penchant for ‘forum-shopping’: see Frank O’Donnell and Mihaela Papa, ‘India’s multi-alignment management and the Russia–India–China triangle’, International Affairs 97: 3, 2021, pp. 801–22.
escalating war in Ukraine—convened at short notice, for the first time in response to a security crisis, and one which, moreover, was occurring far from the Quad’s primary area of interest in the Indo-Pacific. With each successive leaders’ meeting, the Quad and its proliferating array of working groups have met milestones and made commitments to new tangible policy outcomes.

In no small measure, India’s strategic adjustment enabled the Quad to adopt this more ambitious agenda. India began to see the Quad as the logical vehicle to implement zone balancing. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar foreshadowed this soon after the pandemic first rippled through the region, and months before the first Quad summit meeting. He wrote: ‘Plurilateralism will be the beneficiary because it has a purpose and commonality now found wanting in multilateralism.’

Once the Quad summits began, he explained India’s logic clearly:

The fact is that the days of unilateralism are over, bilateralism has its own limits, and as the Covid reminded us, multilateralism is simply not working well enough. The resistance to reforming international organizations [compels] us to look for more practical and immediate solutions. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the case for the Quad.

After the May 2022 Tokyo summit, Jaishankar asserted that the Quad was only succeeding, in contrast to its earlier abortive incarnation, because India was ‘overcoming the hesitations of history’. India’s partners also recognized the import of its strategic adjustment—US officials judged that the Ladakh crisis had a ‘galvanizing impact’ on India’s approach to the Quad.

At the same time, by the start of 2021, India’s enthusiasm was matched—and enabled—by political commitment from other members. The new Biden administration in the United States, especially, was intent on energizing America’s role in Asia. The US had already begun a programme of internal balancing, with the development of concepts such as integrated deterrence and multi-domain operations to counter China’s military capabilities; and it dabbled with external balancing, for example with small changes to its posture. But Washington also saw the value of zone balancing, with a new Indo-Pacific Strategy peppered with pledges to ‘build regional resilience’, ‘build collective capacity’ and ‘strengthen the Quad as a premier regional grouping and ensure it delivers on issues that matter to the Indo-Pacific’.

This was not, therefore, an automatic or inevitable progression. The Quad’s members took a motivated political risk to elevate the grouping to summit level, pursue costly policy outcomes, and commit themselves to keep meeting and keep expanding its agenda.

38 Jaishankar, The India way, p. 206.
Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

The Quad today exists in multiple forms, at multiple levels. Its most prominent expression is its periodic national leader summits, which can draw upon the full range of state agencies and instruments of national power. It also continues at the foreign minister level, although that has receded in prominence with the advent of the summits. But the Quad has no central authority, secretariat or charter to define itself; representatives of the four member countries often meet, plan and act together in a decentralized and uncoordinated fashion. For the purposes of this article, I consider the formal Quad to be limited to the national leader and ministerial activities that promulgate the ‘Quad’ label. Other activities involving Quad member representatives comprise what I call the informal Quad. They fall outside the boundaries of what their members consider to be part of the official Quad agenda; but when they involve all (and only) the Quad members, they maintain a suggestive—but deniable—association with the formal Quad. The Malabar series of naval exercises, for example, now includes all four Quad countries, but remains outside the agenda of formal Quad summits or foreign ministers’ meetings. In my argument, it and other activities like it are a manifestation of the informal Quad.

The Quad is not exclusively dedicated to zone balancing; some of its members’ work—especially in the informal Quad—contributes to internal and external balancing, too, as I discuss below. Nor is the Quad the only mechanism for zone balancing; India and others continue with their own policies, for example to stabilize Sri Lanka in the 2022 crisis. But the Quad is the most ambitious, both in the reach of its agenda and in the scale of its intended outcomes. By the fourth summit meeting in May 2022, the Quad had officially committed itself to programmes of work, complete with promised deliverable outcomes, in nine issue areas: COVID vaccine production and delivery; climate change; critical and emerging technologies; infrastructure development; cybersecurity; space; international education; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; and maritime domain awareness. In line with the theory of zone balancing, this agenda is designed with congruent interests in mind: to promote the capacity and resilience of regional states in a way that serves to balance China’s ability to coerce them. In the remainder of this section I outline three distinct features that define the Quad’s approach to zone balancing.

Provision of international public goods

The Quad, especially since the summits beginning in 2021, has fashioned itself as a provider of international public goods, from vaccines to infrastructure. It has self-consciously deprioritized security in its agenda, at least in public. Instead, it has emphasized support to regional states, demonstrating that the Quad is uniquely...

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43 This, incidentally, consistent with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, which states: ‘The Quad will continue to meet regularly at the leader and ministerial levels’ See White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, p. 16.
46 The Quad, in its post-2017 avatar, has even eschewed the formal name of its earlier 2005–07 incarnation, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. ‘Security’ is pointedly no longer its middle name. Its formal communiqués only refer to ‘the Quad’.
placed to address high-priority problems, which those states cannot solve alone, and for which existing institutions are not designed. Undertakings such as distribution of COVID vaccines or managing climate change do not build Quad members’ power or target China; they are not artefacts of zero-sum competition, but positive-sum efforts to provide international public goods.

The broad rationale complies with the theory of zone balancing—the Quad seeks to reduce the space available for China to coerce regional states, either directly or through international regimes. In part the Quad seeks to deliver material assistance, such as infrastructure or vaccines, so that regional states have alternatives to predatory Chinese offers of such benefits. In part it seeks to deliver international policy frameworks, especially in the regulation of critical and emerging technologies, or international regimes for space and cybersecurity, so that China is not able to set opaque, hierarchical or self-aggrandizing international standards.

For example, the Quad has championed ‘Open radio access network’ (Open RAN) technical standards for 5G telecommunications infrastructure. Whereas traditional 5G companies such as Huawei—closely affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party—would supply a complete and completely opaque infrastructure package, Open RAN offers a set of technical standards that allows 5G networks into be disaggregated into multiple interoperable components. Advocates of Open RAN claim that such standards are a way to increase the diversity and transparency—and therefore resilience and self-reliance—of global 5G infrastructure. The Quad, in turn, has committed itself to facilitating the testing and deployment of these ‘secure, open, and transparent’ telecommunications standards. Such standards do not deliver immediate material assistance to regional states; but they constitute a form of zone balancing because they present a long-term alternative to Huawei, which would otherwise be a tempting 5G supplier, and a channel for Chinese espionage, political interference or coercion.

In providing such international public goods, an important ancillary objective is building acceptance and legitimacy among regional states. The Quad’s members recognize that such acceptance is vital for the grouping’s utility and longevity. The Quad does not seek to extract any political commitments from regional states, and it does not demand recognition as the region’s primary architecture. This effort to be inclusive and uncontroversial is consistent with the Quad’s rhetorical observance of ‘ASEAN centrality’—its pledge that it does not seek to displace the primary institutional node of the region, or contravene the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)’s standing norm of non-alignment in great power rivalries.

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51 Evan Laksmana, ‘Whose centrality? ASEAN and the Quad in the Indo-Pacific’, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 252
Security and the informal Quad

Security is not a priority for the Quad’s agenda, but nor is it absent. Part of the Quad’s agenda—especially at the foreign minister level—remains fixed on regional security issues, especially its firm devotion to the principles of freedom of navigation and maritime security. It has also tentatively explored some quadrilateral security activities, such as counterterrorism tabletop exercises. At the summit level, many of the Quad’s initiatives—including those pertaining to technology, space and cybersecurity—have an inescapable security dimension. Many of these initiatives serve an internal or external balancing function, helping to strengthen individual members’ national security or ability to coordinate with their partners.

The Quad leaders’ most directly security-centric initiatives, however, echo the theory of zone balancing. Members pledged to establish a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mechanism and a new collective maritime surveillance initiative known as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). The latter scheme is designed to collate, process and disseminate a common picture of the region’s key maritime areas. It recognizes that fast and accurate situational awareness is the elusive core requirement for regional states seeking to deter or counter illicit activities at sea. By pledging to supply this maritime domain awareness to regional states, the Quad would increase target states’ capacity to protect their economic and security interests, and reduce the scope for China to surreptitiously exploit their resources.

Even when the Quad has engaged in security-related activities, however, it has ensured they were largely non-military. For example, IPMDA will harness unclassified data from commercial providers, exploiting the recent availability of remote-sensing capabilities from non-government sources. Some military involvement is inevitable—for example, the Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, run by the Indian navy, will be a key dissemination node. But the Quad downplays the military role in public statements, largely to ensure that its initiatives retain an unprovocative, non-competitive tenor. Indeed, it is most likely this non-military character that helped secure India’s willingness to energize the Quad. On that, the contrast with he AUKUS security pact is instructive. That new minilateral grouping is designed unabashedly to develop and share sensitive technologies for military applications. AUKUS demonstrates clearly the trade-off—wherein unambiguously military activity may come at the cost of alienating regional states—that the Quad seeks to avoid.

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In effect, the theory of zone balancing has become the litmus test of the Quad’s security activities. To date, most of the Quad’s publicly promulgated security initiatives contribute to the capacity or resilience of regional states. Most other military activities involving some or all Quad members—the informal Quad—may contribute to their internal or external balancing efforts, but have been excluded from formal Quad proceedings, especially at summit level.

Quad members are, of course, at the forefront of regional efforts to compete with China—but they often act either individually, or bilaterally or trilaterally, or in combination with non-Quad members such as France and Indonesia. Quad members India and Australia, for example, have radically transformed their bilateral defence relationship. In a move that would have been unthinkable until very recently, an Indian navy P-8I maritime patrol aircraft landed in Darwin while on operations—not exercise—and an Australian P-8A reciprocated with a deployment to Goa. Quad militaries also train and consult together as a foursome, albeit again without official Quad branding. The annual Malabar naval exercise began to include all Quad navies in late 2020, after India relented to accept Australian participation—not coincidentally, soon after the concurrent crises of Ladakh and the pandemic.

Generally, then, the Quad’s members relegate most activities that contribute to their traditional military balancing to the informal Quad. Indeed, it is precisely this new ‘latticework’ of bilateral and trilateral ‘2+2’ ministerial meetings, military exercises and enabling agreements among Quad members that has helped to build the trust and habits of cooperation needed for deeper Quad cooperation.

Policy agenda based on common regional interests

When the Quad reconvened in 2017, it represented a signal, especially to China, that powerful like-minded states could and would coordinate. Beijing regarded this as a US-orchestrated effort to contain China; therefore, simply sustaining the Quad and slowly building its momentum posed a threat to China’s plans. Whether or not the Quad’s architects intended it, this signalling function was the early Quad’s greatest strategic significance.

The Quad’s strategic significance has shifted since the leaders’ summits began in 2021. Its mere existence is no longer enough; it seeks to achieve policy outcomes.

Zone balancing: India and the Quad’s new strategic logic

Zone balancing depends on policy outcomes: building target states’ capacity and resilience depends on the achievement of actual effects, whether material or institutional. These effects are greater when we also consider the informal Quad, with some or all of its members acting in other channels, for example to track submarines across the whole Indo-Pacific, or to build resilient undersea communication cables in the south Pacific. For the formal Quad, achieving policy outcomes is a new undertaking, with few results to date but substantial promise.

Policy outcomes are more feasible when a coalition of partners can pool resources or exploit complementary advantages. For example, Quad members sought to identify vulnerabilities in their semiconductor component supply chains, so that they could reconfigure them with greater reliability and resilience among trusted partners. In biotechnology, they may rapidly increase the scale and pace of clinical trials for new pharmaceuticals, or pool data for genetic sequencing. That, in turn, could create network effects, whereby the Quad represents an attractive core group around which other capable and like-minded partners could gather to deepen cooperation on key technologies.

Expansive as the policy agenda is, it remains firmly rooted in common regional interests, with no ambition to expand into some universalist or global value system. This distinction was thrown into sharp relief after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. New Delhi was forced into a very awkward policy juggle, wherein it sought to gingerly distance itself from Russia through almost imperceptibly subtle signals, while not alienating its most vital arms supplier. On the other hand, India was also determined to signal that the Ukraine invasion did not shake its commitments in the Indo-Pacific. Despite frenzied scorn among some western observers, India joined the other Quad members in the emergency summit meeting of March 2022, where the leaders met at short notice to reaffirm their common interests in regional stability, and also pressed on with a US–India 2+2 bilateral, and a fourth Quad summit in Tokyo.

The Quad was largely unperturbed by differences over the Ukraine war because its agenda was based on a specific set of interests in Indo-Pacific stability, founded on abiding structural dynamics and a specific strategy of zone balancing to advance them.

Conclusion: an incomplete strategy

Since it began summit meetings with a clear and expanding agenda, the Quad’s strategic logic has closely followed the theoretical logic of zone balancing. But it is not enough to safeguard regional stability. Most fundamentally, the Quad’s zone balancing does not offer broad-spectrum protection against aggression, either for

Quad members or for other regional states. The Quad does not, for example, seek to deter China from militarily attacking Taiwan. Zone balancing could still serve as a useful enabler for some military preparations—for example, the Quad’s IPMDA initiative could help states to respond to ‘grey zone’ tactics below the threshold of conventional attack. But such enablers will only be effective if they are also accompanied by the commitment of regional states’ own military capabilities and political resolve to act swiftly and decisively. Zone balancing, therefore, is no substitute for internal or external balancing; building military power remains the core of national security, and the surest way to deter military aggression.

States, however, do not have to choose between these various types of balancing. As the Indian example illustrates, a strategy of zone balancing would usually be a supplement, rather than an outright replacement, to other forms of balancing. Even with the Quad itself, now fashioned as a coalition for zone balancing, other forms of balancing coexist in the informal Quad, where members engage in more tangible military cooperation outside the group’s formal diplomatic process. Bilaterally and trilaterally—though not under the Quad’s auspices—Quad members have signed agreements to share logistics support, conduct combined training or execute specialized operations when deployed. As the Quad continues to mature, its broadening span of both formal and informal activities is likely to add more and more contact points between the partners, across their respective government agencies and militaries. This regularity and diversity of Quad interaction will, over time, build the ‘habits of cooperation’ among its members that would position them to make more robust and effective collective responses to regional security crises. In that way, a group dedicated to zone balancing may also create incidental pathways for more internal and external balancing.

Any balancing is part of a strategic competition between adversaries. India and its Quad partners have calculated that their efforts to build regional capacity and resilience are less provocative than direct military balancing; but still, they cannot expect China to accept them passively. Zone balancing still holds the potential for triggering a security dilemma, even if that potential is lower than in the case of internal or external balancing. And even if China does not feel directly threatened by the Quad’s activities, it is likely to launch efforts to neutralize or counter the Quad’s initiatives. The Quad’s expanding agenda, and the Indian strategic adjustment that catalysed it, form only one phase in a cycle of action and reaction in strategic competition. India and the Quad’s strategy of zone balancing is incomplete without accounting for these second-order effects.

Finally, as with any strategy, no concept or agenda is complete without effective execution. By delegating specified tasks to subordinate working groups, the Quad has begun to mark milestones in its programme of work; and it will be able to claim success as agenda items come to fruition, from vaccine delivery to education fellowships. Those milestones and outcomes are critical in establishing the Quad’s credibility as a provider of international public goods. Equally important, given widespread regional scepticism and misapprehensions about the Quad, are effective communications. On the one hand, the Quad must be able to transmit
its messaging, so that target states and potential adversaries alike comprehend
the changes in regional capacity and resilience it represents. Policy outcomes
are necessary, but will deter coercion only if their effects are internalized by the
adversary. On the other hand, the Quad must also be able to receive messaging
with humility—to understand the policy priorities of target states, so that it can
best tailor its agenda to achieve the greatest strategic effects. The strategic preoccu-
pations of south Pacific states are emphatically not the same as those of peninsular
south-east Asia. The Quad was regenerated in 2017 and has gained momentum
since 2020 because its members perceive the region through the prism of strategic
competition with China; as a coalition, however, the Quad’s strategy of zone
balancing can succeed only if it leavens its priorities with a sensitive and nuanced
appreciation for regional concerns.