

# India's Act East Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era: Assessing the Role of the Quad

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## Abstract:

India's Act East Policy (AEP), a strategic upgrade of the 1991 Look East Policy (LEP), signifies New Delhi's deepening commitment to the broader Indo-Pacific region. This paper assesses the trajectory of the AEP in the context of intensifying strategic competition and critically examines the role of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—in its implementation. The transition to AEP broadened India's focus from primarily economic engagement with Southeast Asia to a comprehensive, action-oriented strategy encompassing connectivity, commerce, culture, and capacity building (MEA, 2019). This research argues that the Quad serves as a crucial, high-level strategic accelerator for the AEP, significantly bolstering its non-traditional security and economic resilience objectives through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and supply chain diversification. However, this study finds that the Quad's role remains constrained by India's persistent emphasis on strategic autonomy and the fundamental principle of ASEAN Centrality. The Quad is therefore utilized as a flexible, issue-based mechanism to hedge against regional strategic imbalance, rather than an exclusive security alliance, ensuring AEP remains an independent and inclusive policy framework.

**Keywords:** Quad, Indo-pacific, east Asia, ASEAN, BRI, Look east policy, Northeast

## Introduction and Conceptual Foundation

### Background and Context:

The 21st century has seen the geopolitical focus of the world shift decisively to the Indo-Pacific—a vast maritime expanse encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Scott, 2018). This shift is driven by tectonic plates of global trade, economic growth, and, critically, rising strategic competition. For India, a resident power at the core of the Indian Ocean, this environment necessitated a strategic overhaul of its post-Cold War foreign policy. Initiated in 1991, the Look East Policy (LEP) was an economic and diplomatic necessity, aligning India with the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union and domestic economic crises (Bajpae, 2022).

In 2014, the LEP was upgraded to the more assertive and strategically integrated Act East Policy (AEP). This change signaled a proactive shift from merely looking for opportunities to acting as a strategic stakeholder in the region. Furthermore, it cemented the security dimension alongside traditional economic and cultural ties, responding directly to the changing power dynamics, particularly China's growing presence and assertiveness (Jaishankar, 2019). The AEP is thus inextricably linked to the emerging strategic framework of the Indo-Pacific.

### Defining Key Concepts:

Understanding the relationship between the AEP and the Quad requires clear definitions of the underlying concepts:

- **Act East Policy (AEP):** India's comprehensive policy to deepen economic, political, strategic, and people-to-people engagement with the entire Indo-Pacific region, with a core focus on the "Four Cs": Connectivity, Commerce, Culture, and Capacity building (MEA, 2019). It also emphasizes the economic integration of India's North-Eastern Region (NER) as a gateway (Sarma & Das, 2020).
- **The Indo-Pacific:** For India, this concept emphasizes the geographical and strategic linkage of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Western Pacific, promoting a regional order based on a rules-based system, freedom of navigation, and overflight. India's vision, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), is explicit in its inclusive, functional goals across seven pillars, including Maritime Security and Disaster Risk Reduction (MEA, 2019).
- **The Quad:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, was revived in 2017 and elevated to the Leader-level in 2021. Its official mandate is to promote a "free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific" through practical cooperation on global challenges like health security, climate change, critical technologies, and infrastructure, rather than collective defense (The White House, 2021).

### Research Questions:

The convergence of the AEP's strategic goals with the Quad's functional agenda compels a critical assessment of the latter's influence. This paper is guided by the following questions:

- To what extent has the Quad's non-traditional security agenda provided synergistic support to the AEP's key pillars?
- How do the persistent implementation challenges of the AEP, particularly in connectivity, shape its need for Quad support?
- How does India's commitment to "strategic autonomy" shape its engagement within the Quad, and what limitations does this place on the grouping's security role?

The central Statement of this paper is: India's Quad engagement functions as a crucial, high-level strategic accelerator for the Act East Policy, significantly enhancing its non-traditional security and economic resilience dimensions in the Indo-Pacific, but is deliberately kept subordinate to AEP's foundational principle of ASEAN Centrality and India's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy.

### Structure and Methodology:

This research employs a qualitative, policy-review-based methodology. It synthesizes official policy documents, communiqués from the Quad and ASEAN, and contemporary scholarly analysis to assess the strategic alignment and operational convergence between the two frameworks. The paper will first outline the AEP's pillars and challenges, then analyze the Quad's functional contributions, and conclude by evaluating the tensions arising from India's pursuit of strategic autonomy.

### Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

#### The Strategic Shift: AEP as Comprehensive Engagement:

The literature confirms that the transition from LEP to AEP was marked by a fundamental shift from primarily geoeconomic to geostrategic engagement (Scott, 2018). While LEP was a pragmatic response

to market liberalization, AEP is a proactive response to regional power dynamics, integrating security as an explicit dimension (Bajpae, 2022). This strategic elevation is best evidenced by the increased frequency and complexity of defense exercises and the elevation of bilateral relationships with key partners like Vietnam and Singapore to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships.

### **The Debate on the Quad's Nature:**

Academic discourse is divided on the nature of the Quad. One stream views it as a necessary but nascent balancing mechanism against China's regional dominance, essentially an attempt to create a "security community" or a "mini-NATO" (Jha, 2023). The counter-argument, heavily supported by India's official position, frames the Quad not as a military alliance but as a minilateral public goods provider focused on shared, non-military challenges (The White House, 2021). This distinction is critical because India's participation is predicated on its functional, non-coercive agenda, aligning with the AEP's inclusive rhetoric.

### **Strategic Autonomy: The Governing Principle:**

The pursuit of Strategic Autonomy is the cardinal principle of India's foreign policy, rooted in its history of non-alignment (Jha, 2023; Vision IAS, 2025). This concept refers to India's ability to adopt an independent foreign policy stance on core national interests without external constraints, especially regarding military and security choices. For the AEP, strategic autonomy means that partnerships like the Quad are tools to enhance its own capacity, but they must not dictate its overarching regional or global posture (CSIS, 2025). This explains India's simultaneous engagement in the Quad and rival groupings like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

### **Implementation and Connectivity Gaps:**

A key theme in AEP literature is the significant gap between policy aspiration and on-ground implementation, particularly concerning connectivity (Sarma & Das, 2020). The policy relies heavily on linking India's underdeveloped North-Eastern Region (NER) to Southeast Asia, yet key projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway face chronic delays due to security risks, bureaucratic hurdles, and, most recently, political instability in Myanmar (- East Asia Forum, 2024). This vulnerability in AEP's physical infrastructure component enhances the relative appeal of the Quad's coordinated efforts in digital and maritime connectivity.

## **India's Act East Policy: Pillars and Implementation**

### **The Four Pillars of AEP:**

The AEP is executed across four principal spheres, designed to create a synergistic flow of goods, ideas, and security:

- **Connectivity:** Focuses on physical (road, rail, port), digital, and energy links. Key initiatives aim to connect the NER to ASEAN markets, treating the NER as a gateway rather than a periphery (ORF, 2020).
- **Commerce:** Seeks to diversify trade and investment beyond traditional partners, aiming for deeper economic integration with ASEAN. The focus has pivoted toward bilateral agreements and the creation of resilient supply chains following the 2019 decision to opt out of RCEP (Bajpae, 2022).

- **Culture:** Aims to deepen people-to-people links through cultural exchange, Buddhist circuit tourism, and academic cooperation, fostering a regional consciousness rooted in shared history.
- **Capacity Building & Defense Diplomacy:** Involves training programs, technological assistance, and the expansion of security cooperation through joint military exercises, defense procurement, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations.

### **Connectivity: Challenges and Constraints:**

The success of the AEP hinges on the operationalization of crucial infrastructure, yet progress has been severely hampered.

**Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project:** Designed to link the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe port in Myanmar and onwards by river and road to Mizoram. Despite its geostrategic importance, the project has been perpetually delayed due to security risks and logistical issues in Myanmar (Drishti IAS, 2025).

**India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT-TH):** This critical road link, initially expected to be operational by 2015, now faces a revised deadline of 2027 but remains threatened by Myanmar's political turmoil since the 2021 military coup. Civil strife has compromised construction safety and further complicated the essential Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement (IMT-TMVA) (East Asia Forum, 2024; Ajmal IAS Academy, 2025).

These persistent challenges underscore that the AEP's most resource-intensive dimension is vulnerable to local instability, making coordinated external support essential.

### **ASEAN Centrality: The Foundational Principle**

Despite the emergence of the Quad, ASEAN Centrality remains the non-negotiable anchor of the AEP. India consistently affirms its preference for working within ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Bajpae, 2022). The elevation of India-ASEAN ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022 confirmed this commitment. Prioritizing ASEAN ensures the AEP is perceived as inclusive and developmental, avoiding the perception that India is a participant in a containment strategy, which would alienate key regional partners.

### **The Role of the Quad: Synergy and Divergence**

#### **Quad as an AEP Accelerator: The Functional Agenda:**

The Quad's formalized agenda, often referred to as the "positive and practical" approach, acts as a crucial accelerator for specific AEP goals, injecting high-level political support, technology, and financial coordination from three major global economies (The White House, 2021).

- **Maritime Security and Domain Awareness (MDA)**

The shared commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) directly addresses maritime security challenges. The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) is a significant Quad deliverable. IPMDA aims to provide regional countries with real-time, unclassified maritime data, crucial for combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and for enhancing HADR response capabilities (CSIS, 2024; Singh, 2020). This initiative significantly strengthens the AEP's 'Capacity Building' and 'Defense Diplomacy' pillars, enhancing India's image as a net security provider.

- **Economic Resilience and Infrastructure**

The Quad's economic agenda directly supports the AEP's goal of strengthening commerce and supply

chain resilience:

**Supply Chain Resilience:** The Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group focuses on securing value chains for semiconductors, critical minerals, and advancing open, secure technologies like 5G and Open RAN (CSIS, 2024). This offers a vital economic hedge, allowing India and its partners to reduce reliance on single-source suppliers (Life of Soldiers, 2025).

**Quality Infrastructure:** The Quad coordinates to offer transparent, high-standard infrastructure financing, presenting a credible and sustainable alternative to debt-heavy models (PacNet #57, 2025). This aligns perfectly with AEP's infrastructure needs, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

- **Non-Traditional Security and Public Goods**

Quad cooperation on global challenges has boosted AEP's soft power: The Quad Vaccine Partnership was a major initiative, bolstering health security and projecting a responsible image in the face of the pandemic. Similarly, Quad collaboration on climate change, disaster response, and space-based data exchange enhances India's capacity to lead regional HADR efforts, a key component of AEP's Capacity Building pillar (The White House, 2021).

### **Divergence and the Strategic Autonomy Constraint:**

The Quad's role is fundamentally limited by India's doctrine of strategic autonomy. This limits the Quad's potential and creates three key divergences:

- **Non-Alliance Stance:** India consistently resists framing the Quad as a military alliance or a collective defense pact, prioritizing its policy independence over institutionalizing security cooperation (Jha, 2023). This reluctance restricts the extent of military interoperability and joint geopolitical maneuvering that the other three partners might desire.
- **The Russia Connection:** India's substantial reliance on Russia for defense equipment necessitates maintaining a robust relationship with Moscow. This became starkly evident when India refused to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, showcasing an independent foreign policy choice that diverged sharply from its Quad partners (Global Affairs, 2025; East Asia Forum, 2022).

**Bilateral Management of China:** Despite the Quad's implicit anti-China messaging, India manages its contested land border (LAC) through complex bilateral mechanisms with Beijing, separate from the Quad framework. This confirms that the Quad is not India's primary tool for border security but rather a platform for leveraging shared interests in the maritime domain (CSIS, 2025).

The maintenance of strategic autonomy, while ensuring diplomatic flexibility, means that the Quad is viewed by New Delhi as one tool among many—a powerful minilateral for functional goals, but subservient to the larger, multi-aligned AEP strategy.

### **Critical Analysis and Future Trajectory**

#### **Synergy: Quad as a Force Multiplier**

The analysis confirms that the Quad functions as a force multiplier for the AEP. The Quad's greatest value is in its ability to pool significant political will, financial backing, and high technology across four major democracies to achieve common, non-military AEP objectives. It effectively multilateralizes the burden of upholding a rules-based order, which directly benefits India's trade and security interests in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the Quad elevates India's diplomatic status, positioning it as a key geopolitical actor that can simultaneously engage with the West while championing the Global South (CSIS, 2025).

### Implementation Gaps and Strategic Incompleteness

However, the Quad cannot fill the gaps in the AEP's core physical connectivity projects. The Myanmar crisis and the attendant delays to the Kaladan project and the IMT-TH are localized geopolitical problems that require India's direct, bilateral engagement (Ajmal IAS Academy, 2025). This highlights the limits of minilateralism: the Quad can coordinate funding and policy on high-end issues like 5G and MDA, but it is not a substitute for the challenging on-ground political and security work required to physically link the NER to Southeast Asia.

### Future Trajectory: Towards a Multilateral Ecosystem

The AEP is evolving into a strategy operating within a complex multilateral ecosystem. Its future success will rely on:

**Sustained Functional Delivery:** The Quad must transition from joint statements to sustained, large-scale delivery on its public goods agenda (PacNet #57, 2025). Initiatives like IPMDA need to be robustly funded and integrated into the operational capabilities of regional partners.

**Balancing Multi-Alignment:** India will continue to utilize the Quad for strategic leverage while simultaneously deepening its engagement in other forums. The AEP requires India to maintain the diplomatic goodwill of ASEAN by avoiding any action that solidifies the perception of a Sino-centric containment bloc.

**Domestic Strengthening:** To fully realize the AEP, India must aggressively address the infrastructure deficit and develop local industries in the NER, transforming it from a mere transit corridor into a production hub (Ajmal IAS Academy, 2025).

The trajectory suggests the Quad will remain a permanent, vital feature of the AEP, but its utility will be defined by its flexibility and its capacity to enhance, not overshadow, India's broader, inclusive regional policy.

### Conclusion

The assessment of India's Act East Policy in the Indo-Pacific era affirms its transformation into a comprehensive strategic blueprint for India's regional engagement. The study finds compelling evidence that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue acts as a crucial strategic accelerator, lending high-level political and material support to AEP's non-traditional security and economic resilience objectives. The Quad's focus on maritime domain awareness, resilient supply chains, and public goods effectively complements the AEP's 'Capacity Building' and 'Commerce' pillars, positioning India as a vital provider of public goods alongside three powerful democratic partners.

Crucially, the central argument holds that the Quad's role is purposefully constrained by India's foreign policy tradition. New Delhi's commitment to strategic autonomy ensures that the AEP remains the overarching policy and that ASEAN Centrality is preserved. By utilizing the Quad as a pragmatic, issue-based hedging tool rather than a formal alliance, India maximizes its strategic options in a multipolar world, insulating its core foreign policy from the binary choice of great-power rivalry.

Ultimately, the AEP's resilience stems from its multilateral depth, using bilateral, ASEAN-led, and minilateral (Quad) channels simultaneously. Future research should examine the long-term impact of Quad infrastructure funding compared to China's BRI on local economies, and how the growing functional integration of the Quad may further challenge the boundaries of India's strategic autonomy. The AEP's

success is defined not by choosing a side, but by securing the capacity to act in India's own interest within a complex, evolving Indo-Pacific order.

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