



The Geopolitical **OBSERVATORY** of the Indo-Pacific

THE GEOPOLITICS OF INDO-PACIFIC PORTS. THE QUAD AND ITS SHIFT TOWARDS PORTS AND CRITICAL MINERALS IN AN INDO-PACIFIC WITHOUT 'INDO'

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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This observatory is directed by **Marianne Peron-Doise**, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, and is part of the Asia-Pacific Programme.



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This Programme is directed by **Marianne Peron-Doise** and **Emmanuel Lincot**, Senior Research Fellows at IRIS.

Strategic developments in the Indo-Pacific have recently seen two significant and seemingly contradictory developments. The first relates to a meeting of the four foreign ministers from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD (namely India, Japan, Australia and the United States), held in New Delhi on 29 May 2026. The second relates to the renaming of the US Indo-Pacific Command, USINDOPACOM, which reverted to the US Pacific Command, USPACOM, on 16 June 2026. This US pivot back to the Pacific raises questions at a time when the QUAD appears to be gaining new momentum.

THE RETURN OF USPACOM: A STRATEGIC SIGNALING TO INDIA OR CHINA?

Following an initial ministerial summit in Washington in January 2025, where doubts had emerged about the group's future, the QUAD foreign ministers gathered in the Indian capital on 26 May 2026 for a further meeting.

A key mini-multilateral coordination mechanism emblematic of Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy and the defence of a 'free and open' region, the QUAD has appeared to have stalled since the start of Trump's second term. The paradox lies in the fact that, back in 2017, Donald Trump and his then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had been among the first to embrace the initiative, persuaded by Japan's Shinzo Abe, who made it the cornerstone of the archipelago's foreign policy whilst pulling off the remarkable feat of bringing India on board. In fact, the trade war and tariff hikes initiated as early as 2025 by the new Republican administration have spared none of the United States' close partners, including those in the QUAD. Moreover, all Asian countries are finding it extremely difficult to escape both the trade and military pressures exerted by Donald Trump, and as the China-US rivalry intensifies, they find themselves forced into a balancing act, consisting of cooperating and maintaining economic relations with China whilst striving to coordinate with the United States. Furthermore, throughout 2025, tensions have been mounting between Delhi and Washington, particularly regarding Russia, from which India continues to source oil and gas. Moreover, Trump has forged strong ties with Pakistan, once a pariah regime in Washington's eyes, but which has now become a mediator between the United States and Iran¹.

¹ Daniella Cheslow and Sophia Cai, "[Inside Pakistan's turnaround with Trump](#)", *Politico*, 4 May 2026.

The most immediate consequence of the growing rift between Donald Trump and Narendra Modi was the cancellation of the QUAD leaders' summit, scheduled to take place in India in late 2025, due to the US President's withdrawal – whether calculated or not.

Furthermore, this new high-level QUAD meeting – initiated by both the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and his US counterpart, Marco Rubio, who were keen to 'smooth over' bilateral relations – inevitably raised questions about its objectives and long-term prospects, given that a relative crisis of confidence has taken hold amongst its members. The decision by the US Secretary of War on 16 June 2026² to revert to the original name of USPACOM (US Pacific Command) instead of USINDOPACOM (US Indo-Pacific Command) only serves to heighten the strategic unease among the United States' partners, whose core mantra since 2017 has been the defense of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". Should this be seen as a sign of a complete breakdown in bilateral relations between India and the United States? Put more simply, is this a very 'Trumpian' way of relegating India to the role of manager of the Indian Ocean – which is itself being demoted to a secondary theatre – whilst the United States refocuses on the Pacific and its relationship with China, considered to be of greater strategic importance? Moreover, USPACOM's area of operational responsibility has not changed from the US coastline to the west of India – from 'Hollywood to Bollywood', in the words of Admiral Harris, former head of USINDOPACOM. What is more, by denouncing, a few months ago, the agreement on the return of the Chagos Islands – which had been the subject of lengthy negotiations between the British and Mauritian governments – Donald Trump secured the continued US presence on the island of Diego Garcia³.

For its part, the QUAD's final communiqué⁴ revealed the group's new ambitions for the Indo-Pacific. It refers to the development of cooperation in the areas of regional situational awareness and maritime surveillance (*Maritime Domain Awareness*) – in which India and its navy play a prominent role – as well as numerous initiatives to strengthen the resilience of critical infrastructure in the South Pacific (expansion of submarine cable links, digital connectivity, port modernisation in Fiji, access to AI), and partnerships on critical minerals.

² US Department of War press release, "[Department of War Restores U.S. Pacific Command Designation](#)", 16 June 2026.

³ In May 2025, the United Kingdom and Mauritius signed an agreement providing for the return of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, situated in the northern Indian Ocean, to Mauritius, whilst maintaining a major US-British military base on one of the atolls, Diego Garcia. Although Mauritius gained independence in 1968, the archipelago remained under British administration. This agreement was strongly criticised by Donald Trump, despite the 99-year lease secured for the base. The Pentagon regards Diego Garcia as a major strategic asset for its operations in the Middle East, including, at present, those against Iran. Since then, the situation has been uncertain, leaving the fate of the Chagossians – who were evicted from their homes during the construction of the base, which began in 1967 – in limbo.

⁴ US Department of State, Joint Statement from the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi.

A QUAD AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MARITIME GEOECONOMICS

The impact of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, decided by the Iranian government on 28 February 2026 in response to the outbreak of Israeli-American attacks, and the resulting global energy chaos, served as a textbook example. It was clearly demonstrated that, beyond military capabilities, the conduct of a modern regional conflict would inevitably involve the use of force targeting the infrastructure, logistics networks and maritime corridors that underpin trade, energy flows and connectivity. The initiatives announced in New Delhi reflect this strategic realisation, highlighting the extent to which maritime economic geography is a central factor in regional power dynamics.

QUAD's emphasis on supply chain resilience, connectivity and strategic minerals can be understood in this context, although it is not a new development. As early as 2021, President Biden had recognised the full importance of the QUAD as a multidimensional framework for cooperation to help develop an inclusive vision of the Indo-Pacific and soften its initial identity as a tool for *containing* China. Nevertheless, in a post-Covid regional context, the aim remained to counterbalance the impact of the transport infrastructure and regional connectivity projects undertaken by China from 2013 onwards through the Silk Roads⁵ and the strengthening of its influence across all the seas of Asia. Consequently, the QUAD quickly organized itself into working groups centered on four, and then six, pillars from 2022 onwards. The topics addressed thus revolve around climate change and adaptability, emerging and critical technologies, cyber security, health security, infrastructure (including the *Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience*) and space.

Finally, the QUAD's original maritime focus remains paramount through the regular holding of naval exercises promoting interoperability between the navies of member states and certain partners (including France, the Philippines and South Korea), as well as the implementation of HADR (*Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief*) operations. In 2022, the QUAD therefore launched the *Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness* (IPMDA) initiative to improve regional maritime situational awareness, promoting access to the US maritime information-sharing platform *Seavision*⁶. The New Delhi meeting aims to put

⁵ Marianne Péron-Doise, 'Is the QUAD a pillar of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy?', *The Conversation*, 21 April 2021. [Is the QUAD a pillar of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy?](#)

⁶ Sarabjeet Parmar ["What next for the QUAD after the 11th Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi?"](#), *Times Now*, 29 May 2026.

this approach into practice by substantially expanding it through *the Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Cooperation (IPMSC)*, which aims to establish a *Common Operational Picture*⁷.

THE CREATION OF A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL MINERALS

The QUAD has also announced a new framework for critical minerals aimed at strengthening supply chains for minerals essential to cutting-edge technologies, defense and green energy. Securing these supply chains is one of the most significant long-term challenges facing the group. Sovereignty in this area is proving essential not only for economic resilience but also for geostrategic maneuverability for all its members. This initiative, backed by an investment of twenty billion dollars, is structured around three areas: financing and investment, regulatory alignment and the global environment, and the recycling and recovery of critical minerals⁸.

China's increased use of export controls on rare earths as a tool of geopolitical pressure has heightened the urgency of diversifying supply chains for the four QUAD members⁹. The controls imposed by Beijing¹⁰, extended until 2026, cover materials central to defence and semiconductor supply chains, such as antimony, gallium, germanium and graphite. Japan, moreover, has had the bitter experience of China's increasingly restrictive stance. In the weeks leading up to the New Delhi meeting, China suspended its exports of rare earths to Japan – notably materials used in aerospace, defense and semiconductor manufacturing – as a sanction in response to remarks made by the new Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, regarding Tokyo's involvement in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait. However, Japan imports the majority of its processed rare earths from China, a dependency that the QUAD hopes to help alleviate in the medium term.

There is no shortage of obstacles, notably limited trust and inconsistent internal coordination, with each partner – particularly the United States – prioritizing its own national industrial agenda.

⁷ Anutama Banerji and Sarabjeet Parmar "The QUAD's Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Cooperation Initiative: Balancing Intent, Actions and Limitations", *India's World*, 15 June 2026.

⁸ US Department of State "QUAD Critical Minerals Initiative Framework Involving the US, Japan, Australia and India", 26 May 2026.

⁹ China currently accounts for 70 per cent of rare-earth mining and around 90 per cent of their processing.

¹⁰ Tae Yoon-Kim et al., "With new export controls on critical minerals, supply concentration risks become reality", *International Energy Agency*, 23 October 2025.

THE QUAD AND THE PORTS OF THE FUTURE

In the Indo-Pacific, the sea is the main driver of prosperity and growth. The bulk of Asian trade depends on maritime routes stretching from the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea to the Pacific. The economic importance of the South China Sea extends far beyond the region itself. Around a third of global maritime trade passes through its shipping lanes, including 30 per cent of the world's crude oil trade and 40 per cent of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

As trade and supply chains become increasingly concentrated around a relatively small number of shipping routes and chokepoints, infrastructure has taken on greater strategic importance. Ports, logistics centres, telecommunications systems and submarine cables are no longer regarded merely as commercial assets. They are assessed in terms of resilience, access and economic security, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

The development of the Maritime Silk Road and Beijing's growing economic footprint have accelerated this recognition of the importance of critical infrastructure. China has financed or constructed infrastructure projects in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Chinese businesses and service companies have also developed commercial interests in ports, logistics facilities and telecommunications networks across several strategically important maritime regions, from the Indian Ocean to the East and South China Seas and as far as Oceania.

QUAD's interest in port construction systems became evident with the launch in 2024 of a specific project, *Quad Ports of the Future*. The forum had already been focusing on the development of high-quality infrastructure through programmes led by the United States – such as Joe Biden's *Build Back Better* initiative – or by Japan, based on high standards and transparency, as opposed to poorly executed Chinese projects that disregard environmental considerations. The QUAD's new project on ports of the future, presented at a conference in Mumbai in October 2025, proposes an outreach to the South Pacific through a renovation Programme in Fiji.

REINVESTMENT IN OCEANIA THROUGH THE FIJIAN PORT SECTOR

Until recently regarded as on the periphery of the Indo-Pacific, the South Pacific islands have seen the rivalries between major powers and the strategic ambitions of key regional players shift towards them, whilst China has become more visible¹¹. China's diplomatic engagement in the region is, however, long-standing and, since the 1990s, has aimed to reduce Taiwan's influence, against which it employs 'chequebook diplomacy' with the island states. Ten years later, Beijing has become a major contributor to local development aid, providing grants on a bilateral basis without any conditions attached (unlike Australia, the leading contributor, Japan and the United States). Oceania is thus included in the Silk Road infrastructure project, which will benefit, amongst others, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands¹².

In 2022, the signing of a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands – leading, in particular, to police cooperation – has heightened the concerns of traditional powers, including Australia and the United States. For these powers, Beijing's increased economic activity in the island states is aimed at gradually facilitating broader strategic access, particularly to regional marine resources, whilst enabling the Chinese navy to gradually establish a presence¹³. The Pacific island states control vast exclusive economic zones spanning millions of square kilometres of ocean; they define themselves as 'major ocean states'. These maritime areas lie along routes linking Asia, Oceania and the Americas and form part of the wider Indo-Pacific communications and logistics architecture. The South Pacific is vital for global digital connectivity¹⁴. Several major submarine cable networks linking North America, Asia and Oceania pass through the region. The United States, Japan and Australia have taken very proactive steps to prevent China from becoming involved in submarine cable projects (notably the construction of transcontinental submarine fibre-optic cables and improvements to satellite data transmission) led by China and its operator *HMN* (formerly *Huawei Marine Network*). One example is the Coral Sea cable system laid by *Vocus Communication* and *Alcatel Submarine Network* in 2019, connecting Australia to Papua New Guinea and to Honiara, Auki, Noro and Taro in the Solomon Islands¹⁵. Another landmark project, closely monitored by the United States, is the Eastern Micronesia cable network,

¹¹ Guangyi Pan, "Pacific Island countries in the time of great power competition", pp. 69–92 in *Small islands and invisible boundaries**, ed. Deborah Nandy and Monojit Das, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025.

¹² Sarah Mohamed Gaillard, "The Geopolitics of Oceania", *Le Cavalier Bleu*, 2026, pp. 78–85.

¹³ Anna Powles 'Geopolitical duel in the Pacific: Solomon Islands security at risk as Australia and China compete', *The Interpreter*, 7 July 2023.

¹⁴ Er Kritika, 'Trusted infrastructure, contested sovereignty: submarine cables in the Pacific', *ORF*, 26 May 2026.

¹⁵ In 2023, the anchor of a Taiwanese container ship, which had drifted off course due to a severe storm, damaged the cable linking the Solomon Islands, causing long-term disruption to communications between the main islands.

which involves military bases such as Guam and the Marshall Islands, home to the Kwajalein Atoll test site.

This explains the significance of the QUAD's decision to support the refurbishment of port infrastructure in Suva and Lautoka in Fiji¹⁶. The island regularly hosts Chinese vessels, including fishing fleets and the space and missile surveillance ship *Yuan Wang 7*. This initiative is significant for what it suggests about the evolution of strategic priorities across the Indo-Pacific. By combining support for port and digital infrastructure with maritime surveillance and maritime awareness programmes, the QUAD seeks to strengthen intra-island and trans-Pacific connectivity whilst enhancing its visibility and influence in a region vital for trade, communications and strategic access.

CONCLUSION

As attention turns to the security of critical maritime routes and the infrastructure that supports them, the importance of key chokepoints linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans has become more apparent. Hence the renewed importance of the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea for all QUAD members, particularly India, whose naval deployments are increasingly extending from the Indian Ocean into South-East Asia and which has strengthened its military presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, some 90 kilometers from the Strait of Malacca.

The focus on Fiji's development signals a broader conceptual shift. The QUAD is often cited primarily as a response to China's growing military power. However, its agenda is increasingly extending beyond traditional security issues. Critical minerals, undersea cables, supply chain resilience, digital infrastructure and maritime domain awareness now take centre stage in the mechanism's discussions, as they lie at the intersection of economic security and strategic competition.

¹⁶ Kaneka Naimatau, "[Suva, Lautoka ports for QUAD upgrade](#)", *Fiji Sun*, 27 May 2026.

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