Moving Beyond Geopolitical Boundaries to Secure Democracy in Southeast Asia: Projecting EU in The QUAD

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Abstract

COVID-19 Pandemic has changed state’s view about development. After several economic damages, the plan to bounce back from pandemic impacts is by adopting GDP-ism development which sacrificing democracy. In Southeast Asia, The trend of deconsolidation of democracy indicated by several events such as military coup in Myanmar and protest against Omnibus Law in Indonesia. At the same time, 2020 also marked a revival of Quadrilateral talk between US, Australia, Japan, and India concerning China’s growing influence in Indo-Pacific region. Many scholars observe this cooperation is involving security strategy to contain China’s influence. But yet there are not many writings about democratization process as a way to hold China’s influence especially in Southeast Asia region. This paper is aimed to show that maintaining democracy is important for QUAD to secure their interests and this effort can involve parties beyond geopolitical boundaries. Hence, this paper would like to seek how EU engagement in QUAD can support democratization process in Southeast Asia by considering its economic influence and domestic politic situation in the region. Furthermore, as post-COVID-19 development is concerned in this paper, It is important to seek how democracy can contribute to foster state economic development and become alternative to Chinese development.

Keywords: Democracy, EU, QUAD, Southeast Asia
Abstrak


Kata kunci: Asia Tenggara, Demokrasi, Quad, Uni Eropa

Backgrounds

Southeast Asian region has been long regarded as strategic region geopolitically. The trajectories of past colonization can be the evidence that the region has special
position for both international trade and security. The current change of international regime structure has put Southeast Asian region in a more strategic position. The rise of China as an emerging economic and more develop military power drew concerns among previous great power such as US. The last trade war between them became the start of their rivalry. The BRI project and 9 Dash Line are some of China’s projects that will hugely impact Southeast Asian countries since they’re included as object to these projects. Both projects affect US influence in the region. For example, US have been long acknowledged to have friendly relationship with Philippines. Since the tension escalates between Philippines and China over South China Sea dispute, US took that as a position to defend its influence by starting a joint military operation with Philippines. The concerns over the rise of China also grow from US allies such as Japan and Australia which previously had engaged in security cooperation called the QUAD (The Quadrilateral Talk).

The QUAD was initially founded between US, Japan, Australia, and India as a disaster relief cooperation following 2004 tsunami due to Indian Ocean earthquake which later called the Tsunamis Core Group. Learning from the natural disaster relief, the group was later developing new agenda to secure the situation during the next crisis. A challenge to the security of citizens of many nations was met by modern military forces, a new kind of diplomacy and astonishing public and NGO outreach (Grossman, 2005). The group was moved towards human security cooperation. In 2007, the four countries held a summit in the mid of ASEAN Regional Forum and officially became a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which involving a joint military exercise as a way to strengthen the Indo-Pacific region’s defense. Although the concept of Indo-Pacific region remains unclear. The meeting drew protests from Chinese diplomats. Many views about the meeting stated that it would be an aggressive response for China, since its economy was growing significantly. The effort dissipated amidst member leadership transition, concern about economic repercussion from
China, and attention to other national interest (Chanlett-Avery et al., n.d.). For example, in February 2008, PM Kevid Rudd pulled Australia out of the combined exercises (“Australia and the Quad,” 2018). India also showed the same concern that the cooperation would affect its foreign policy. After 8 years hiatus, the four met during East Asia Summit and renewed their interest in the cooperation. The concern about China’s response to the meeting remain exist since the four countries have significant reliance in economy. But in 2020 amidst global pandemic, the QUAD revived again and held a ministerial meeting in Tokyo. The group discussed several issues to prioritize. They also indicated that Beijing’s behavior vis-à-vis Australia, India, and Japan over the few months increased the enthusiasm for the QUAD (Madan, 2020). For example, Japan noted that North Korea and South China Sea as prominent issues to regional security. Even the State Secretary Mike Pompeo mentioned that the purpose of the group was to protect people and partners from the Chinese Communist Party’s exploitation (Chanlett-Avery et al., n.d.). The last meeting marked a clear orientation for the QUAD to operate and put ASEAN as a key partner.

Besides the growing influence of China and the revival of the QUAD group, the global pandemic of COVID-19 also marked some changes in the Southeast Asian region. The significant impact of the pandemic such as economic destruction heavily hit the countries within the region. According to ASEAN Statistics, the decline in investment emerged to be a serious drag on the economies in the region in Q2/2020, in particular, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Lee et al., 2020). The huge devastation had pushed the government to release a monetary policy support and arrange fiscal adjustment. The effort to keep the economic growth has cost the performance of democracy in the region. For example, Indonesia passed the Omnibus Law of Job Creation through an elitist way in the parliament which later sparked a massive protest from allied students and workers. Meanwhile in Myanmar, a coup initiated by military to thrown out the opposition which alleged fraud during the
election. The same protest against military rule also happened in Thailand as the youth movement demanded more democratic governance which guarantees their freedom of expressions. The decline of democracy’s performance in Southeast Asian countries is not a new phenomenon. But it remains concern for the QUAD since their government’s performance would affect their foreign policy orientation.

Meanwhile, The QUAD is more focused on military securitization as the approach to achieve the regional stability. There is no agreement achieved after the previous meeting, but a plan to strengthen the security of Indo-Pacific region through maritime partnership. For example, In October 2020, the United States and India signed a geospatial intelligence sharing agreement which could be expanded to all QUAD members (Vanak et al., 2021) as work to improve maritime domain awareness (MDA). The group also planned to solidify QUAD naval exercise called Malabar 2020 after China’s growing assertiveness in South China Sea. But yet there is no effort of democratization as a way to prevent Chinese influence in Southeast Asia region. This paper argues that the more focused on military securitization makes the QUAD’s movement limited at geopolitical boundaries. While maintaining Southeast Asian countries in the QUAD side is important, it takes effort on how to overcome the decline of democracy in the region. Hence, this paper argues that democratization can be operated to achieve the QUAD’s goals and this effort can involve parties beyond geopolitical boundaries such as European Union. Furthermore, this paper would like to show how EU involvement would look like. Critics to Military Approach and the Opportunity of Democratization

**Critics to Military Approach and the Opportunity of Democratization**

Securitization is the main idea of the Quad. Since the first idea of the regional cooperation came up as disaster relief, security issues were put under priority list. But the operationalization has changed overtime. And still military forces are the prominent instrument for securitization and clearly seen from recent meeting which
concerning China’s military assertiveness in Indo Pacific region. In International relations study, the use of military forces in foreign policy and international relation has long regarded as realist approach. Realists believe that war is inevitable in global politics and define insecurity as state of nature condition. Realism offers a crude but powerful interpretation of security, defining the term threats described solely in terms of military power (Smith, 2015). But then cold war inspired theoretical changes to the paradigm. After the end of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union entered to a rivalry but still no war was committed. Their rivalry could be seen in some cases such as Marshall Plan and Molotov Plan, NATO and Warsaw Pact. On the other hand, both state also committed in some peace building agendas including United Nations and arms control agreements such as the ABM Treaty, START I, and START II which later drew questions from liberal paradigm. The emergence of cooperative behavior from both made the realists to rethink their notion of inevitable war in global politics and military forces as instrument to maintain security.

The effort to stay relevant in security studies was continued. Some realist scholars developed changes in the traditional realism which then called as neorealism paradigm. Neorealists believes that the position of state in international structure defines its perception of threat. The explicit rejection of any assumptions about an innate lust for power due to the evil inherent human nature distinguishes structural realism from classical realism (Lynn-Jones, 1999). During the cold war, the bipolar international system encouraged balancing efforts from both United States and Soviet Union using proxy war. These changes made realism remain relevant but not for long. Critics appeared after the collapse of Soviet Union. Neorealism couldn’t provide reliable explanation on why the Soviet Union collapsed without losing in war. Instead, liberal’s explanation noted that it’s the changes of domestic politics that made Soviet Union collapsed and inability to cooperate. Realist’s critics argue that realism’s focus on factors such as the distribution of power among state ignores important variables such
as individual psychology, domestic politics, and international institutions (Lynn-Jones, 1999). Several debates and critics to realism thereby precipitating a ‘Liberal Age’ within International Relations and its various sub-disciplines (Smith, 2015). This is also marked the age of US hegemony. Even so, it is still not halting the significant use of military forces.

Liberal paradigm departed from fundamental notion that human nature is kind and has willingness to cooperate. What is important for liberals, however, is that the occurrence of interstate conflict, while a possibility, is not an inevitability as suggested by the Realist tradition (Smith, 2015). For liberal, security can be achieved through cooperative action rather than war. After the end of cold war, the idea of security cooperation was blooming and involving US as the influential power including in the Quad. Collective security concept had proposed after the end of the First World War and the founding of League of Nations as part of the classic liberal paradigm of social contract. Collective security can then be seen as plan for maintaining peace through an organization of sovereign states, whose members pledge themselves to defend each other against attack (Ebegbulem, 2012). But the central dilemma is always how to achieve a peaceful international political legal order while retaining simultaneously the sovereignty of states (Egerton, 1983). A critics directed to collective security concept is that it has encouraged the use of military forces significantly in the name of maintaining peace. Placed in relation to the international, the enforcement of cosmopolitan law, and indeed its inauguration, comes to be instantiated through interventionist wars fought in the name humanity, wars proclaimed as responsive for humanitarian crisis situation (Jabri, 2010). For example the invasion of Iraq by US, NATO’s intervention in Libya, and US intervention in Afghanistan during war on terror.

Several critics to realist and liberal paradigm of securitization also mean that the use of military forces is not the strategic option anymore. The Quad’s plan to held joint military action against China’s influence in Southeast Asia should be reconsidered.
Some scholars expressed their skeptical opinion toward the Quad’s action. The Quad’s decision to assertively respond China’s appearance in South China Sea ignore the fact that the group is one sided. It is unclear whether all of the countries in Southeast Asia support the Quad’s action. And also there is lack of a clarity among Southeast Asian states on whether China represent the biggest challenge for their respective interests (Laksmana, 2020). Some countries may consider China as potential partner for its significance economic growth; the others may consider China’s presence as threat to their security. Considering the doubts, it is important for the Quad to prepare framework of cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries or ASEAN to open the gate of engagement in the regional issue. The Quad’s external engagement with ASEAN would be effective if it meets the strategic interests of both group and when the specific engagement mechanism are a good match for ASEAN”s pro-existing initiatives and capacity with what the Quad could offer (Laksmana, 2020). Hence, the Quad needs to find what regional issue can be proposed cooperation.

It has been stated in the previous passage that global COVID-19 pandemic has sparked some changes to our geopolitical shape. During the pandemic, there were three mass protests against government demanding more democratic regime. In September 2020, protest erupted among young people in Thailand. The protest led by student calling for democratic reform. Students are mostly united around calls for the dissolution of parliament, an end to harassment of government critics, and for changes to the military-backed constitution (Ratcliffe, 2020). Then on November 2020, the Indonesian parliament passed Omnibus Law of Job Creation which later sparked mass protest from allied students and workers across the nation. The law is considered only benefited the elites and violated democracy. Because the parliament didn’t provide enough transparency of the Bill and there are some violation to the opposition side in the parliament. For example, the chief of parliament, Puan Maharani, alleged turned off the mic of the opposition representative during assembly meeting. Meanwhile
more radical action happened in Myanmar. Leader of democratic party, Aung San Suukyi arrested by military alongside with her supporters for alleged fraud after winning the election. Students marched against military coup in the capital city Yangon which later sparked clash between students and police. The clash left hundred casualties and public facilities destruction. The military also scheduled internet shutdown to block international supports. These events indicated the decline of democracy in the region. The trend of authoritarian leader in Southeast Asia is not a new phenomenon. But still the debates over it and power contestation within domestic politics contribute to the regional instability. The popularity of democracy among youth in Southeast Asia will likely mark a change for future regional politics outlook. As their future is more challenging with climate and digitization issues, they demand a safe environment which guarantees their aspirations in daily life. Something that democracy could provide.

The chain of democratic decline and crisis in Southeast Asia during pandemic which also showed the popularity of democracy among young people, must be a concern for the Quad since the group views Southeast Asia as strategic region to contain China’s influence. The idea of “Quad Plus” can be initial effort to engage with other parties such ASEAN. But it would not be easy if the group doesn’t start to assure ASEAN that their presence in their region could preserve ASEAN member’s interest. The initial foundation of the Quad as security cooperation has contributed to some Southeast Asian countries skepticism towards the group. By focusing on more practical cooperation, the Quad has gone some way to allow Southeast Asia a good entry point for cooperation (Kwek, 2021). However, the opportunity to build cooperation still exists with different approach.

Discussions about democratization in Southeast Asia always involve cultural aspect. Culturist perspectives argue that the uneasy implementation of democratic system and authoritarian inclination are caused by cultural factors. But the perspective
cannot provide explanations why countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan (in Northeast Asia), Indonesia, Thailand, Timor-Leste (in Southeast Asia), and India (in South Asia) emerged and why it has become more liberal than other systems in these region (Peou, 2015). Asian culture values are not contradictory to democratic values. Some ideologies from Asia such as Confucianism or Islamism teach about preserving human rights and freedom. In conclusion, it is structural factors such as poverty which affect implementation of democracy in Southeast Asia. According to Samuel Huntington, authoritarianism is one of the phases of democratization process. The demand of political liberty after economic growth produced by authoritarian regime will lead to implementation of democracy. The trend of democratic decline and structural factors faced by some Southeast Asian countries can be the entry point foot the Quad to meet the interest of these countries and start the cooperation.

European Union in the Quad and Potential Partner for Democratization

European countries involvement in Indo Pacific sometimes being put aside since geographically they are outside the region. But China’s megaproject Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) also directed to European continent. All of China’s “belts” and ”roads” lead to Europe, as a result of which Chinese investments there, particularly in strategic sectors and critical infrastructure, are under intense scrutiny (Mohan, 2020). The current China’s active presences in international level appear concerns among parties such EU. EU acknowledges that its relation between China is intertwined. While China has often repeated its legitimate request for reforming global governance to give greater participation and decision-making power to emerging economies, it has not always been willing to accept new rules reflecting the responsibility and accountability that come with its increased role (High Representative of The Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2019). This is in line with the evident in EU strategic policy which referring China as “shifting balance of challenges”. EU also raises its concern over
China’s human right violations in Xinjiang and military assertiveness in South China Sea. Which is also in line with the Quad’s concern.

The EU and Quad is synergizing each other. They have initiated and coordinated some efforts to balance China’s influences. Although Quad was initially aimed to secure Indo Pacific region, the expanding China’s project to European continent and the EU’s concerns make the cooperation beyond geopolitical boundaries is inevitable. Japan’s concern over China’s infrastructure diplomacy in Southeast Asia meets with EU’s concern over BRI project, led to the making of Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality infrastructure between them during G20 Osaka Summit in 2019. This partnership is in line with Blue Dot Network, an initiative project pioneered by the United States in partner with ASEAN, Japan and Australia to evaluate and certify every infrastructure projects within the region. Despite economic rivalry issue, the EU also raises issue about China’s violation against international law and order would affect their relation. EU has long become the partners mainly in trade for both ASEAN collectively and individually to its members. During COVID-19 pandemic, EU has sent „Team Europe” package worth over EUR 800 million for health care in domestic and regional level. EU’s good engagement with both Quad and ASEAN would fill the gap of interest between them and potentially reduce their skepticism which prevent them to form „Quad Plus”.

According to survey held by ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, ASEAN showed highest confidence rate to EU in trade cooperation compared to BRI and the United States. 34% of total respondents also showed their confidence to state that EU will do the right thing to contribute in global peace, security, and governance. These confidences come from perpetual mutual partnership between EU and ASEAN collectively and its members individually. Since the first engagement, both actors focused on building Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The EU is ASEAN’s second-largest partner, with 13% share of ASEAN’s total trade with the world (European, n.d.). EU also has particular treatment
for ASEAN member states. Such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand with Free Trade Agreements, Myanmar, Cambodia, Philippines with assistances during democratic transition and Rohingya crisis. EU active assistance and partnership in the region, would be opportunity for the Quad to secure democracy in Southeast Asia. And in the end, contain China’s influence in the region. The current situation in the Southeast Asia is opportunity for the EU to secure democracy in the region. The mass mobilization of young people against authority demanding more transparent and less oppressive regime indicated the growing popularity of democracy among youth. Less assertiveness and military securitization would put ASEAN and its member’s trust in uncertainty. The debate between which power would favored ASEAN and its member’s interest has also tightened the uncertainty. Hence, it would be a good step if the Quad success engage EU in the group and continue EU involvement as trading partner and democratic assistance to secure in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The Quad need to focus on securing democracy in Southeast Asia. If the Quad’s interest also involves China’s influence containment, securing democracy in the region would be good start instead of showing assertiveness using military forces. Military response will likely worsen their relation even spark a military attack. This kind of phenomenon should not be happened. The idea of ‘Quad Plus’ is a good start to initiate the democracy securitization process. ‘Quad Plus’ will allows the Quad to engage with related parties such as ASEAN and European Union (EU) also which concerned about democracy and has well-settled relation with Southeast Asian countries. But, it takes efforts to synergize the interests between the parties. The Quad should prepare framework of cooperation for both parties to encourage them participated in the democracy securitization. The involvement of EU in the group would mark a shift of geopolitical map of the Quad. The Quad no longer focus on Indo-Pacific region. For a long period, this will likely spark dualism with NATO. Hence, the Quad
should be mindful how to involve EU as partner to support democracy securitization in Southeast Asia.
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