

Quad is a good idea, not Quad-plus

US President Donald Trump is on a 12-day-long Asia trip. On the last day, he will attend the East Asia Summit in Manila. It is also expected that the quadrilateral dialogue between India, the US, Japan and Australia will resume on the margins of this summit after a hiatus of nearly a decade. The voices in support of resuming “the quad” had grown louder in recent weeks. First, it was Rex Tillerson who had, in his important speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies last month, clearly expressed America’s desire to include Australia in the India-US-Japan security collaborations. More recently, Japanese foreign minister Tar Kono also made a similar call. Kono went a step ahead and suggested that Britain and France too could be involved in this grouping.

The coming together of India, the US, Japan and Australia is being seen as building a strategic partnership to deal with China’s rise and its implications. As all these countries have noted in different ways, China’s rise has presented a serious challenge to a rules-based international order. India, the US and Japan already engage with each other in a ministerial-level trilateral dialogue and annual naval exercises. The logic of expanding membership in a security-focused group is not very obvious. Unlike, say, trade negotiations where the involvement of more countries helps achieve uniformity of standards and, consequently, greater scale, more intra-supply chain compatibility and higher efficiency for businesses and economies, security collaboration among a larger group is a challenging task as success depends on the credibility and commitment of each participant. Moreover, the greater the number of people at the table, the narrower the agenda on which a consensus can be achieved.

India has been reluctant in accepting Australia in the grouping for multiple reasons. One, it was Australia under prime minister Kevin Rudd which had decided to exit the quad last time around in 2008, in deference to China’s concerns. Two, Australia’s economy is heavily dependent on commodity exports to China. Three, Chinese money is deeply enmeshed in Australian politics owing to lax rules related to the foreign funding of political parties. And four, unlike Japan and India, Australia has no direct dispute with China.

However, there is some merit in considering Australia’s entry and concomitant resumption of the quad. First, despite all its economic and political ties with China, Canberra has been very critical of Chinese activities in the South China Sea. Second, Australia is mulling reforms to its political donation laws in order to limit foreign influence in its politics. Third, Australia is a major maritime democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. India, the US or Japan, all of them frame this partnership in terms of common political values rather than as a counterweight to China—a strategy that makes a lot of sense. Fourth, there are already three trilaterals in operation—India-US-Japan, India-Japan-Australia, and US-Japan-Australia. Coalescing them into one quadrilateral will not be a bad idea. And fifth, the last time the quadrilateral engagement was attempted, it was successful in making China sit up, take notice, and register protest with all the members. In essence, the coming together of these four powers had worked.

The above arguments are, however, not valid for either Britain or France. Even if the two have islands and military facilities in the region, they are extra-regional powers. Both their capacity and willingness to engage in tough operations in the region is suspect in case the US chickens out—and the unreliability of the US is one of the reasons (goo.gl/HF24sy) being given for their inclusion. Most importantly, the European powers are still too fixated on Russia (rather than China) as the primary security threat to be of much utility to their Asian partners.

The resumption of the quadrilateral dialogue, therefore, is a good idea but there isn’t much rationale for involving Britain and France at this stage. This doesn’t preclude India and other members of the quad from having separate, productive partnerships with the European powers.

But some strategic analysts in India are still debating the utility of the Indian partnership with the US and Japan, leave alone Australia, Britain or France. They argue that India is needlessly dragging itself into the US-China rivalry. There cannot be a more misleading argument. As the world's biggest military and economic power, the US is more than capable of meeting the China challenge without New Delhi's helping hand. But can the same be said of India? Facing a huge power deficit, India needs partnerships to balance China. Another argument is that India's political profile in its neighbourhood will stand diminished if it accepts the need for assistance from other powers. To the contrary, India's neighbours—as foreign secretary S. Jaishankar has pointed out—are bound to feel more reassured of India's (as against a rapacious China's) words if New Delhi has the economic, military and political backing of major powers in the region.

And one should never forget that for all of New Delhi's grand political and moral standing as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), not many countries chose to condemn Chinese aggression against India in 1962. There isn't a starker lesson from independent India's history.

Should India support the inclusion of Britain and France in the quadrilateral dialogue? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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