

A plan for Asia

The renewal of the quadrilateral security dialogue between senior officials of India, United States, Japan and Australia dominated the coverage of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s annual political pilgrimage to East Asia this week. When you cut through the hype though, it is easy to see that the quad is not among Delhi's immediate priorities. The conversation between the four capitals on reviving the quad has been taking place for some time. That the meeting took place in Manila on the margins of the annual ASEAN-led meetings was just a matter of diplomatic convenience. The separate national statements issued by the four governments after the meeting underlined the exploratory nature of the consultations. It will be a while before the quad acquires unity of purpose and an action plan that can make a decisive impact on the region.

The quad's significance, however, lies in the future. That President Donald Trump referred to the region as "Indo-Pacific" is a reflection of the emerging expectations from India amidst the increasing unsustainability of the present Asian order. The rise of China, the expansion of its military capabilities and Beijing's assertiveness on territorial disputes has ended the prolonged tranquility in the region. China's pressure on its neighbours is weakening the unity of the ASEAN and limiting the options of most countries — big and small — in the region. The US, which has long dominated Asian order, as well as many of China's neighbours, want Delhi to contribute a lot more to regional peace and security. On his part, the PM has signalled India's intent to promote a rules-based architecture in Asia.

The problem, however, is with Delhi's capacity to deliver on the PM's promises. On security cooperation, for example, the Ministry of Defence neither has the time nor inclination to think positively about military diplomacy in East Asia. While substantive MoD reforms are not on the cards, the PM must be prepared to announce a specific set of measures for deepening security cooperation with the ASEAN, when all the 10 leaders of the forum show up for Republic Day celebrations in January. Modi's challenge is a lot harder in the commercial domain, given his government's apparent political discomfort with trade liberalisation. India is the laggard in the negotiations on the ASEAN framework for Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). If Trump has shocked the region by pulling America out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) talks and China is claiming the leadership of Asian regionalism, Delhi is paralysed. Without a plan to advance economic integration with East Asia, the gap between India's strategic promise and its performance will continue to grow and undermine Delhi's political credibility.

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