

## The emerging Indo-Pacific architecture

The term “Indo-Pacific” has long been in vogue among marine biologists and ichthyologists to define the stretch of water from the tropical Indian Ocean, through the equatorial seas around the Indonesian archipelago, the South China Sea, and to the western and central Pacific Ocean. The term entered the geopolitical lexicon only in the early 21st century and, predictably, has proved to be far more contentious than its scientific definition. The region has been the locale for some of the bloodiest inter- and intra-state wars in the 20th century and promises to be the theatre for similar conflagrations in the foreseeable future between failing, emerging and established nuclear-armed countries. This potential for conflict is exacerbated by the absence of a robust regional peace and security architecture.

Against this backdrop, efforts to rejuvenate the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or the “Quad”) between Australia, India, Japan and the US on the sidelines of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Manila are of notable significance. Although this meeting was low-keyed and downplayed by India in particular, the Quad itself has the potential to secure the region against great power conflict.

There are several factors why the countries chose to revivify the Quad at this juncture. For India, the Doklam confrontation with China and concerns over the latter’s so-called Belt Road Initiative (BRI) were crucial considerations. Similarly, following US secretary of state Rex Tillerson’s visit, there is a desire to engage Washington more closely in the region. For Australia, and to some extent Japan, the key drivers behind formally reviving the Quad was the concern about the commitment of the Donald Trump administration to the bilateral alliance arrangements and the quest to buttress them with the Quad commitment. For the US, the Quad offers a way to share its burden of containing China in the region.

When it comes to fruition, the Quad will not be dissimilar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato), which managed to “keep Russia out, the US in and Germany down”. Most observers have simplistically branded the nascent organization as a tool to contain China. However, to be truly effective—like Nato—the Indo-Pacific Quad will also have to fulfil three simultaneous missions: keep China out, the US in and Japan down.

While managing China and keeping Beijing on the status-quoist path, the Quad will also have to ensure the continued engagement and commitment of Washington to the region, which can no longer be taken for granted. Given the disruptive and isolationist tendency of Trump (evident in his skipping the EAS) and, possibly other future US leaders, this is a crucial role that the organization will have to fulfil. Similarly, given Japan’s brutal World War II record in the region, the Quad will also have to reassure other potential future members, including from ASEAN, that Tokyo’s role will remain benign and any revisionist tendencies will be kept in check.

Although the Quad was formally initiated in 2007 at the prompting of Japanese Prime Minister Shinz Abe, its informal origins can be traced to 2004. In the wake of the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami, Australia, India, Japan and the US launched an ad-hoc humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) mission, which allowed them to come together operationally. Since then the four navies have worked together on several occasions.

While formal Quad meetings were shelved following strong objections from China in 2007, discussions nonetheless continued. For instance, in 2015 the foreign secretaries of Australia, India and Japan met ostensibly to firm up the security leg of India’s “Act East” policy. Soon thereafter the India, Japan, US trilateral meeting was held in Honolulu. Thus, the Quad continued to function under the garb of two trilateral meetings. Subsequently, since 2015, the India-US Malabar naval

exercises have included Japan and are likely to include Australia in the next iteration, thus making the military component of the Quad a reality.

Nonetheless, the Quad's potential is likely to be limited by several internal differences. For instance, while India promotes the principle of "freedom of navigation", it is reluctant to enforce it through freedom of navigation operations by sailing warships through exclusive economic zones, particularly in the South China Seas. Thus, the 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy cautions that there may be divergent security perceptions "with nations that may be traditional friends (read US)". Members of the Quad will have to address these differences to develop the institution further.

Moreover, while the Quad is a crucial pillar of the peace and security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, it needs to be buttressed by at least two other pillars. The EAS serves the role of the political pillar and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) as the trade and economic pillar. While all Quad participants are members of EAS, India is still not a member of Apec. This lacuna needs to be remedied if New Delhi is to contribute to all three pillars of the Indo-Pacific architecture.

Finally, India will also have to shed its inherent abhorrence for formal military arrangements and cooperation, even though this might bring with it the prospect of being dragged into a war not of its making. As Nato has shown, sometimes a democratic military alliance is essential to maintain peace.

*W.P.S. Sidhu is professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs and associate fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.*

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