

Quad confusion

More than 10 days after the Quadrilateral meeting, or 'Quad', involving secretary-level officials of India, Japan, Australia and the U.S., the dust is yet to settle on just what was decided among them. To begin with, the four participants issued not one but four separate statements after their meeting in Manila. A cursory look at these statements reveals the basic differences in intent: while all four referred to keeping a "free and open Indo-Pacific", the Ministry of External Affairs statement did not mention upholding "maritime security" as an objective, while the statements of the U.S., Australia and Japan did. Similarly, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made no mention of enhancing "connectivity" as an aim, which the other three did.

The import of these omissions is clear. The Quad is yet to decide what its real aim is: maritime security, connectivity, countering China's moves in the Indo-Pacific and on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or a combination of all three. Adding to the confusion were U.S. President Donald Trump's own moves in Beijing. He lavished praise on Chinese President Xi Jinping and the two signed a slew of agreements, including one for a joint fund for the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund meant to finance BRI projects. Despite all the concerns expressed by the countries of the Quad, India remains the only one to openly oppose the BRI.

On the maritime front, India gave out confusing signals. It is the only country in the Quad that is not part of a military alliance. In June, India declined Australia's request to join the Malabar exercises, and just days before the Quad, Naval Chief Sunil Lanba told *The Hindu* that there were no plans for joint patrols with the U.S., or any country that is not a "maritime neighbour" of India, which would rule out Australia and Japan too. If India's intentions are only to patrol the Indian Ocean part of the Indo-Pacific, it remains to be seen what reciprocal value the Quad would have.

Then there is the question of where the government stands on India's position in the world. While rejecting "non-alignment" in a unipolar world, the government has decided a course that wins the country a foot in the door to every membership club. While that may seem wise, the practicalities in an increasingly polarised world are difficult: how would India explain not joining a security cooperation arrangement within the Quad, for example, even though it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation this year?

If India is willing to brave all of these contradictions and steer the course towards a closer Quad arrangement, then the final question to be answered is, to what end? A few years ago, a South Block mandarin said the basic difference between India and the U.S. was that the U.S. wanted India's assistance, along with Japan and Australia, "to the East", while India wanted the U.S.'s assistance in matters "to its West". As a result, giving in to demands for greater engagement in the East with the Quad will need to be calibrated with concrete outcomes on India's concerns with terror from Pakistan, and a free hand to pursue ties with Iran.

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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