

QUAD IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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In a speech at the Heritage Foundation on October 22, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the “Quad” between Japan, Australia, India and the United States would ensure that “China retains only its proper place in the world”. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying retorted on October 25 to condemn the American plainspeaking as habitual lies and malicious slandering. Such a war of words between the US and China is now routine. Yet, the spotlight is on the future of the Quad, which convened again on November 4 at the level of senior officials on the margins of the EAS in Bangkok a little over a month after the high-profile meeting on September 26 in New York. The September meeting was the first at the level of the foreign ministers.

A proposal by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in early 2007 to hold a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was endorsed by US Vice President Dick Cheney and the governments of India and Australia, leading to the first meeting at the official level. There was a general understanding, even when the four countries engaged, along with Singapore, in a maritime exercise in 2007, that it would not take on a military dimension against any country. The strategic community in China, nevertheless, had branded it an emerging “Asian NATO”. Beginning with maritime-centric concerns, it was gradually seen by China as a means to an end, involving the use of the wider Indo-Pacific theatre to target China. That year, Abe’s “Confluence of Two Seas” address to the Indian Parliament gave a fresh impetus to the nascent concept. Abe had spoken of a new definition of a “broader Asia” taking shape at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It recognised the economic rise of India and brought Japan and India together as part of an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, the US and Australia. It was seen as an open and transparent network that would allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.

The Quad dissipated when Australia, under PM Kevin Rudd, walked away on account of Chinese sensibilities. Yet, China’s suspicion resurfaced with Abe’s reference in December 2012 to Asia’s “Democratic Security Diamond” involving Australia, India, Japan and the US to safeguard the maritime commons from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. President Obama’s rebalance or pivot to Asia policy, never implemented, only had the effect of spurring China, under President Xi Jinping after 2013, to immediately act on its irredentist claims in the South China Sea and also vigorously promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Nuanced differences among the Quad countries seem to have narrowed down in the last two years. There are common references to the creation of a free, open and inclusive regional architecture, rules of the road, freedom of navigation and over-flight, and, [ASEAN](#) centrality. There is pragmatic appreciation that not all nations grappling with the rise of China are democracies.

Even as the US has upped the ante by describing China, along with Russia, as a revisionist power and a strategic rival in its National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy and the

Pentagon's report on Indo-Pacific Strategy, Japan has quietly dropped the word "strategy" from its own Free and Open Indo-Pacific in deference to better ties with China. Taking into account its overwhelming economic dependence on China for prosperity, Australia's White Paper has been careful to highlight continued commitment to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China and to describe China as a major geopolitical player with the capacity to influence virtually all of Australia's international interests.

China believes that the concept of the Indo-Pacific, and more particularly the Quad, is a sinister plot hatched by the US aimed at containing its rise, opposing the BRI, questioning its developmental finance and connectivity projects, disparaging what it regards as its highly successful political, economic and cultural narratives, and, laying the foundation for a military alliance to undermine its future. It believes that trilateral compacts involving the US, Japan and India and the US, Japan and Australia are the thin end of the wedge, aimed at strengthening the Quad.

China remains wedded to "Asia-Pacific" for building an inclusive regional cooperative structure. For China, a switch to "Indo-Pacific" implies erosion of its pre-eminence. Recently, Chinese scholars and officials appear to have changed tack and are beginning to discern between the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou attended a high-level dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation in Jakarta on March 19, where he too underscored ASEAN centrality, and, of course, China-ASEAN cooperation. It is increasingly clear that China is now adopting a wait-and-see approach towards the Indo-Pacific instead of opposing it, since ASEAN centrality affords it an opportunity to dilute narratives in the Indo-Pacific that could prove inimical to Chinese interests.

That China sees ASEAN centrality as an opportunity to steer the Indo-Pacific away from a security agenda focused on China is supported by Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks to foreign and Chinese journalists on July 31, following the China-ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Bangkok. His five-point formula entailed making greater efforts to work together on the BRI, forging China-ASEAN digital cooperation, including in 5G, fully implementing the China-ASEAN FTA, finalising regional rules-of-the-road based on the negotiating text of the Code of Conduct (proposed by China), and engaging in joint maritime exercises (already undertaken between China and ASEAN in October last year).

China's spokesperson said that during the China-ASEAN Summit on November 3 in Bangkok, Premier Li Keqiang and ASEAN leaders agreed to join hands in upholding peace and stability in the South China Sea and advance the Code of Conduct consultations following an agreed schedule. Premier Keqiang also pitched for synergies between the BRI and ASEAN's development. Three outcomes documents were released, including the Joint Statement on the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative. China has signed bilateral agreements with ASEAN countries to advance transportation routes, including the existing economic corridors, China-Thailand Railway, China-Laos Railway and Jakarta-Bandung high-speed Railway.

India's commitment to "strategic autonomy" has generally proved reassuring to China. It suggests that India would never agree to fully align itself with the US against China. This impression has been reinforced by India holding up Australia's participation, so far, in the annual Malabar naval exercise, currently limited to just three of the four Quad nations. India did not join the Indo-Pacific Business Council. This, and Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s speech at the Shangri-La event were viewed positively in Beijing. Equally, China would not have failed to note that it is India's decision that permitted the Quad to meet at the ministerial level. Notably, the decision came quick on the heels of China's egregious, though unsuccessful, attempts to support Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir and [Article 370](#) at the UN Security Council and the UN

Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The recent Mamallapuram summit between President Xi Jinping and PM Modi is a positive development, valued by both sides as key to giving strategic guidance to stakeholders on both sides. With Japan, the opportunity for China lies in working together on agreed-upon projects in third countries and using the proposed visit of Xi Jinping to Japan in 2020 as a high watermark. Australia, also an alliance partner of the US, is involved in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. China would want to leverage its deep economic engagement and extensive cultivation of opinion makers to balance the hard line now being taken by Australia's security and intelligence establishment.

China remains wary of the Quad and its future contours. It remains worried about the advantages that the Quad process might offer to India in the Indo-Pacific. Naturally, it will seek to use its considerable bilateral engagement with Japan, Australia as well as India to ensure that the Quad does not flip over from a regional coordinating mechanism focused on connectivity and Infrastructure, capacity-building, HADR and maritime security and cyber security and counter-terrorism to become an "Asian NATO". Much, though, will depend on China's actions and how others perceive her capabilities and intentions.

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