

# QUADRILATERAL HOME TRUTHS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Japan Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remove their protective face masks before posing for a photograph prior to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) Ministerial meeting in Tokyo on October 6, 2020. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

Regardless of how or when [China's misbegotten military adventure is going to wind down in Ladakh](#), one thing is clear: it has breathed fresh life into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as a loose, consultative entente of like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific. On October 6, the foreign ministers of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. held a [standalone meeting in Tokyo](#). If the [Quad](#) is to prosper as a geopolitical construct, it would do well to heed four lessons drawn from the long arc of Asia's history and geopolitics.

First, there is no such thing as an 'Indo-Pacific system'. There has never been one, as such, ever since the rise of the port-based kingdoms of Indochina in the first half of the second millennium. Rather, there were two Asian systems — an Indian Ocean system and an East Asian system — with intricate sub-regional balances. The sprawling British empire never managed to combine the Indo and the Pacific into a unitary system and the effort by a U.S. in global retreat and relative decline to artificially manufacture one to encircle China will be no more successful.

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Second, the Indo-Pacific region possesses no prior experience of enduring peace, prosperity and stability engineered from its maritime fringes. Rather, dynamic long cycles of Chinese influence radiating outwards have alternated with sharp periods of centripetal turmoil as China and the Asian system collapsed upon itself.

The emerging practice of ASEAN-centred multilateralism is more in tune with regional tradition and historical circumstance than the post-18th century European 'balance of power' system, where the 'flanking powers' (Britain and Russia) resisted revisionist challengers to periodically restore the continent's equilibrium. For their part, the Indo-Pacific's 'flanking powers', India and Japan, have never balanced Chinese power throughout their illustrious histories.

Third, the sea lines of communication constitute the connective tissue that links the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. It is also a valuable arena of leverage vis-à-vis Chinese shipping and resource flows. This leverage must be wielded judiciously on India's terms, not on the Quad's terms. The latter, after all, has little to offer materially with regard to New Delhi's continental two-front dilemma but ceding this chokepoint leverage will invite overwhelming Chinese pressure against the full range of India's South Asian interests — to which the other Quad members possess neither will nor desire to answer. For the threat of interdiction to be credible furthermore, it must not be brandished off-handedly. Except during a general war, no sustained and significant campaign to interdict the maritime trade of a major power has ever been successfully mounted since the Napoleonic Wars of the 19th century.

Editorial | [Four for one: On Quad, India and the U.S.](#)

Finally, the Quad has a valuable role to play as a check on China's Indian Ocean ambitions. India must develop ingrained habits of interoperable cooperation with its Quad partners and,

thereby, pre-emptively dissuade China from mounting a naval challenge in its backyard. On the other hand, it will be more than a decade or two before the People's Liberation Army Navy will be credibly capable of projecting power in these waters.

The shores of the Indo-Pacific littoral are strewn with the bones of Cold War-vintage, pan-regional architectures that were divorced from the underlying security dynamics. The Quad must resist this temptation for precipitate design over purpose.

In 2018, in his keynote [address at the Shangri La Dialogue](#), Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted that India would “work with [its friends] individually or in formats of three or more for a stable and peaceful region, but [that these] friendships are not alliances of containment”. Reconciling this capacity to resist armed revisionism while nudging the region's geopolitics towards cooperation as opposed to conflict should be India's, and the Quad's, priority.

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