

The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: Why ASEAN Remains Cautious

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ABSTRACT As India, Japan, Australia and the United States renew their quadrilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, there are suggestions to expand the ‘Quad’ into a ‘Quad-plus’ grouping to include the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This brief argues that the Quad will not have much to offer to ASEAN; it has, in fact, the potential to dilute ASEAN centrality which is the pillar of the regional bloc. India, too, has a stake in this conversation, as it has long championed the need for ‘ASEAN centrality and unity’ for peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2017, officials from India, Japan, Australia, and the United States (US) met on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit in Manila to begin the revival of their quadrilateral cooperation that was put on hold for a decade. The ‘Quad’ has since then been under scholarly scrutiny. Observers say that the potential of the Quad and its sustainability are hinged on the response and support of the partners around it. There have been discussions in policy-making circles that given

the centrality of Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific geography, the Quad should be expanded to a ‘Quad-plus’ mechanism by including the ASEAN countries in its fold. Southeast Asia, overall, has been gaining more attention in recent years owing to China’s conduct in the South China Sea (SCS); this region also forms the main arc in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For India as well, the Quad is seen as a platform for the promotion of its ‘Act East’ policy which is the cornerstone

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of India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. At the core of 'Act East' is the ASEAN region, and this importance was clearly shown in the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in January.

This paper argues that there will be little enthusiasm for the Quad in Southeast Asia, if it is merely another extension of great-power rivalries occurring at the expense of the interests of ASEAN. The region views existing multilateral mechanisms—including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)—as potential platforms for dialogue with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. The main aim of the Quad is to enable a regional security architecture for the maintenance of a rules-based order. This is also the primary objective of the ARF, and even the ADMM and ADMM Plus are also looking into issues of concern in the political and security arenas. The ASEAN countries also understand the importance of strengthening maritime cooperation to promote mutual trust and confidence to ensure security, peace and stability. This includes ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, which falls within the mandate of the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF).

What then will the Quad be able to offer to the ASEAN region? India is repeatedly championing the need of 'ASEAN centrality and unity' for peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and maintaining this centrality also forms the core of the country's Act East policy. Given the already existing divide within the ASEAN on issues such as the conception of the "Indo-Pacific", the need for a

more overt role in the SCS dispute by external powers, the question of inclusion of the ASEAN countries in the Quad will only contribute to the deterioration of an ASEAN-centred institutional system in Asia.

Against this backdrop, and given that the Act East policy is gaining momentum, this brief scrutinises whether the Quad will indeed push India's Act East policy. This will be done by, first, outlining the aims of India's Act East policy in relation to the ASEAN. The brief will then look into the Quad countries' divergent notions of the "Indo-Pacific" concept, as well as the perspectives of Southeast Asian countries of the Indo-Pacific region, and whether the "China factor" has a role in both. The succeeding section will look at whether a greater involvement of "outsider" countries, especially India, is welcomed by the ASEAN in dealing with the SCS dispute. The brief will then describe the Southeast Asian countries' perspectives on the BRI, and conclude with the Southeast Asian countries' views on the Quad's revival.

WHY THE QUAD?

In August 2007, in a speech before the Indian Parliament, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried to draw a strategic link between the Indian and the Pacific oceans and spoke of the "confluence of the two seas". This was envisioned as the Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy. Abe had then posited that "Japan and India had a shared responsibility, as maritime nations located at the opposite edges of the two seas, to ensure the maintenance of peace and prosperity anchored by democratic principles."¹

The first Quadrilateral meeting involving the US, Japan, India and Australia was held on

the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in the Philippines in May 2007. The first Quad also had a maritime element, whereby the four countries along with Singapore conducted a naval exercise. The first Quad meeting was described as a US project, “an axis of democracies”, a “security diamond” or a way to contain China. Days after the first Quad meeting, China demanded that the participating countries explain its purpose. This was one of the prime reasons for the non-sustainability of the first Quad.²

The push for the first Quadrilateral came after the Tsunami Core Group in 2004-05, which was a coordinated response to the tsunami of 2004. This was followed by the concept of “concert of democracies” finding a place in the US policy circles. PM Abe also desired a closer cooperation with India and Australia and a value-based foreign policy. In December 2006, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan and the two sides acknowledged the need for a dialogue between India, Japan and other like-minded countries to discuss issues of common interest in the Asia-Pacific region. There were also reports that then US vice president-elect, Dick Cheney, despite some hesitation had endorsed the idea of a quadrilateral dialogue in addition to the already existing Trilateral Strategic Dialogue involving Japan, US and Australia. There were other important meetings that preceded the 2007 Quadrilateral meeting which paved the way for the first Quad: the visit of Dick Cheney to Australia in February 2007, the then Australian Prime Minister Howard’s visit to Tokyo, the visit of the Indian Foreign Minister to Japan, the then Japanese Foreign Minister Aso’s trip to India, and Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Washington.³

After the first Quadrilateral meeting, however, no formal agenda was released nor a date set for the next meeting. The differing expectations of the four countries and a fear of irking Chinese sentiments had led to disagreements at the end of the meeting. Though there was still some appetite for the Quad left, as was seen with the 2007 visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India and his mention of the ‘confluence of the two seas’ in the Indian Parliament. Most importantly, the maritime Quad involving Singapore took place in September 2007. In 2007, two editions of Malabar was held—one bilateral off the coast of Okinawa which saw Japan’s participation for the first time, and a multilateral one in the Bay of Bengal.⁴

Cracks had begun to appear as early as July with the visit of the then Australian Defence Minister Brendan Nelson to China. With Australia’s faltering steps, Abe’s resignation in 2007 and with then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh getting caught in contestations due to the maritime exercises conducted from his alliance partners, the first Quad failed.⁵

A Japanese scholar notes that there are two major factors for the current efforts to revive the Quad. First, even though China was already on the rise in 2007, most were optimistic of such growth and the country’s assertive nature did not yet provoke as much concern as it does today. The US was also seen as trying to engage with China to ensure its rise as a “responsible stakeholder” in the international stage. India and Australia too were engaging with China and looking at its rise from an economic viewpoint, rather than a strategic one. These views have since changed, given the “aggressive assertion of its

sovereignty claims in the SCS and on disputed borders, its frequent use of economic coercion and economic espionage, and its ‘predatory’ investments under the guise of the BRI.”⁶ Second, there is greater concern from Japan—given the decline of US influence in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific—if the US will be playing a leading role in ensuring a peaceful order in the region. In Japan’s opinion, the presence of the US and engaging the US in the Indo-Pacific region will help keep a check on China’s rise. Therefore, Japan is trying to engage with like-minded countries and ensure that the US continues its engagement in this region.⁷

The second Quad meeting took place in Manila in November 2017 on the sidelines of the ASEAN and EAS to discuss “issues of common interests in the Indo-Pacific region”.⁸ According to the statement issued by India’s MEA after the meeting, the discussions aimed at cooperation based on a shared vision and the desire for the “promotion of peace, stability, and prosperity in an increasingly inter-connected region that they share with each other and with other partners.”⁹ The need for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” was the theme around which the first working level Quadrilateral meeting took place. The core issues that were addressed at the meeting were the following: the need for a rules-based order in Asia; freedom of navigation and overflight in the maritime commons; respect for international law; boosting connectivity; maritime security; the North Korean threat and non-proliferation; and terrorism.¹⁰

For Japan, the Indo-Pacific strategy is a “free and open Indo-Pacific region for ‘international public goods’ and a maritime order based on the rule of law.”¹¹ For India, “a

free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large.”¹² India is engaging with the four Quad partners with the view of promoting its Act East policy in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy, meanwhile is a “shared vision for increased prosperity and security in the Indo-Pacific region and to work together to ensure it remains free and open.”¹³ Australia’s recently released Foreign Policy White Paper also expresses its attempt to engage with other partners, along with the US, for a free, open and rules-based order in the Indian and the Pacific oceans. The US’ national security strategy refers to China as a “strategic competitor in political, economic and military spheres, and a ‘revisionist power’ seeking to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”¹⁴ The shared vision for increased prosperity and security in a free and open Indo-Pacific idea has also been added in the national security strategy of the US.¹⁵

Further, the Japanese statement issued after the Quad meeting in Manila highlighted the need for upholding a rules-based order, respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific, tackling proliferation tests, ensuring freedom of navigation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, and countering terrorism.¹⁶ The Australian statement also stressed on the same objectives and added a clause on increased connectivity in the region.¹⁷ The US statement underlined the same themes as those of Japan and Australia.¹⁸ The Indian statement, meanwhile, highlighted most of the same clauses, but remained silent on aspects of freedom of navigation and overflight, and maritime security.¹⁹ Given that no joint statement or even a future plan of

action was issued at the end of the meeting, the Quad appears to be a work in progress.

Some analysts refer to the Quad as an initiative which is aimed at “containing China than about anything else. For most areas that the four countries see as the base for cooperation, China is seen as a major competitor and rule breaker.”²⁰ Official statements from China are also reflective of the suspicion that this move might be directed against a “third party”, given the “exclusion of relevant parties”^{*} from such meetings.²¹

INDIA'S 'ACT EAST' POLICY AND ASEAN

Under the administration of Prime Minister Modi, India's 'Look East' policy was rechristened 'Act East'—for “accelerated across the board engagement between the two growth poles of a vibrant Asia.”²² India has been working with ASEAN for the creation of a regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region that will focus on the peaceful settlement of disputes, finding “collaborative” solutions to emerging traditional and non-traditional security threats, and support for the centrality of ASEAN.²³ The Delhi Declaration released after the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in 2017 also stresses “India's support for ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture and its continued contribution to regional peace, security, and prosperity and to ASEAN integration towards the realisation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.”²⁴

Even though India's Act East policy has been gaining momentum in the recent past, there is still plenty of room to push the country's engagement with ASEAN. There is a need for India to “do a more convincing job as a beneficial strategic partner of the ASEAN.”²⁵ According to a recent statement by secretary-East of the MEA, “All 10 ASEAN leaders want India to play a more assertive role in the strategically important Indo-Pacific while recognising New Delhi's growing stature in ensuring regional peace and stability.”²⁶ Due to India's “not very overt presence” in the region, many Southeast Asian countries are not even taking India's Act East policy in a serious manner. The name of the policy has once been referred to as ‘At ease!’[#] by a scholar in Thailand.²⁷

If India chooses to actively participate in the Quad, it will have to make sure that the core focus and objectives of India's Act East policy is not compromised. Therefore, there is a need to understand the perspective of the ASEAN on the issues that the Quad purports to address.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES' PERSPECTIVES ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

The crises of the SCS and the Korean Peninsula demand that countries work together. This makes it seem that in principle, the core issues being addressed by the Quad will garner unqualified support from the ASEAN

* “The relevant proposals should be open and inclusive and should be conducive to win-win cooperation and avoid politicizing or excluding the relevant parties,” – stated by Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

As has been quoted by Arun Prakash in a recent article in the Indian Express, a panellist during the CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific) held in Thailand had remarked that though India's Look East policy have been elevated to an Act East policy, but “to us it seems that you are simply 'At ease!'”

countries. In reality, the probabilities of the Quad being caught up in great-power politics and rivalries in the region will deter the ASEAN countries from formally extending their support for the initiative. ASEAN has always been sensitive of being overshadowed by big powers. More importantly, ASEAN member states are wary of the possibility that ASEAN centrality might get diluted. Some scholars have also pointed out that a reason for some Southeast Asian nations not welcoming the Indo-Pacific concept has been the scepticism over including India within the strategic domain of the Asia Pacific. These critics say that this would lead to an excessive focus on India and dilution of focus on ASEAN countries in maritime security discussions in platforms like the EAS and the ARF.²⁸

The preferred way of engagement for the ASEAN countries for the promotion of a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific adhering to international law and principles of multilateralism will be through the platform of existing institutions, most importantly the ASEAN—this ensures that the centrality and unity of the regional bloc is upheld. These multilateral platforms include the EAS, which involves most of the countries of the Indo-Pacific region and the evolution of which has been the effort of middle powers like the ASEAN countries and not initiated by big powers like China, US and India. There is also the platform of the IORA.

Countries like Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and to some extent Thailand, are growing to embrace the Indo-Pacific concept, but there are also countries like Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia who have remained silent so far. For Indonesia, “together with

ASEAN, Indonesia will continue to contribute in advancing a strong positive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, instead of a cooperation that is based on suspicion or worse, a perception of threat.”²⁹ Its aim is to work with the countries of the region to develop an Indo-Pacific cooperation “based on a ‘building blocks’ approach to ensure peace and stability amid geopolitical changes.”³⁰ The Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi in January this year outlined the country’s foreign policy priorities for 2018 which talks about strengthening the unity of the ASEAN and seeking a stronger presence for the ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region.³¹

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hseing Loong has said, “This geopolitical uncertainty gives new impetus to ASEAN’s cooperation with key partners like India. ASEAN and India share common interests in peace and security in the region, and also an open, balanced and inclusive regional architecture for the region.”³² While both countries may be receptive of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” idea proposed by the Quad, the priority is an inclusive and balanced cooperative framework in the Indo-Pacific.

It has been difficult to find a consensus amongst the ASEAN member states on security-related issues, as they have varying interests in ASEAN as an institution. They view the regional architecture differently, and have their own stakes with the powers in the region. It will thus be difficult to find the bloc openly endorsing the Indo-Pacific conception as one, unified voice.³³ The Southeast Asian countries prefer an inclusive regional architecture, engaging as many regional stakeholders as possible. The premise of this

engagement is two-pronged: 1) using ASEAN as a platform; and 2) engaging major and other middle powers bilaterally.³⁴

DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The issues in the South China Sea (SCS) are critical, and from statements issued by some of the individual countries in the region, it is inferred that a multi-stakeholder platform for dealing with the issues may be welcome. Here again the divide within the ASEAN becomes evident. Countries such as Vietnam and Singapore, for example, would expect India to play an overt security role, and this is attested to by the fact that Singapore and India have conducted annual SIMBEX-series naval exercises, rotated in the SCS and the Indian Ocean. This implies Singapore's readiness to work alongside with India in the preservation of this access through the SCS in times of crisis. Vietnam has openly called on India to engage more frequently in the SCS, through more regular visits by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard to its ports, such as the Cam Ranh International Port. However, most other ASEAN countries do not seek greater involvement of India with regard to this issue. It is difficult with respect to the ASEAN to get an explicit statement supporting a more overt role for external players like India in resolving of the dispute as it could mean the downplaying of ASEAN's own importance in Southeast Asia.

Supporting the Code of Conduct (CoC) is a safe bet if India wants to support ASEAN. India is already doing so, as was clear from the statement of the 15th ASEAN-India Summit held in Manila in November 2017. It was also expressed in the recent Delhi Declaration,

where India urged the ASEAN countries to “conclude a substantive and effective COC consistent with universally recognised principles of international law and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) at the earliest opportunity.”³⁵

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The Quad arrangement and the free and open Indo-Pacific are a kind of subtle competition against China's BRI initiative. This region, after all, remains an important pillar in China's BRI. The degree of support extended to China's BRI by the ASEAN countries is also varied. Malaysia and Thailand, for example, are expected to serve as pivot countries in this initiative.³⁶ The BRI initiative has considerably more resources compared to the generic “free and open Indo-Pacific” idea. Malaysia would incline more towards China to draw on the latter's resources. Unless Japan musters resources to build up this “free and open Indo-Pacific” idea, it is hard to make Malaysia lean more towards the Quad initiative.³⁷

The Philippines and Indonesia, for their part, are more enthusiastic about the BRI and are cooperation partners in whom China sees potential. However, it is hard for them to pursue a close relationship with China, owing to the territorial and maritime disputes between the Philippines and China. Indonesia, on the other hand, is committed to becoming the leading nation of the ASEAN and tends to limit the influence of other countries and is particularly sensitive to the rising influence of other big powers in the ASEAN.³⁸ Therefore, China's investment is mainly aimed at boosting Indonesia's hinterland connectivity

rather than the ports which are the main focus of Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) policy.³⁹

Singapore also enjoys drawing the commercial benefits from China, but refrains from indulging in a special relationship with China, especially on security issues. Though Singapore may not emerge as a primary partner in China's BRI, it can be an important partner in the economic and cultural fields. Cambodia is also highly supportive of China's BRI, whereas Vietnam is more cautious in indulging in friendly relations with China given the SCS issue; it does not appear enthusiastic about the BRI.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The Quad signals the commitment of big powers to be present in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN has also focused its efforts on enhancing regional connectivity and the importance of economic interdependence for regional stability and peace. Even if ASEAN welcomes this Indo-Pacific stance, it will choose to remain cautious. If this Indo-Pacific idea morphs into a form of great-power politics that is aimed at countering China's increasing influence, then ASEAN would not wholly support it. The Quad can be said to add on to the Act East, in such manner as giving it a strategic vision and clearer directions. ASEAN or Southeast Asia cannot be said to be the focus of this policy.⁴¹

The first and foremost priority for ASEAN countries, notwithstanding their varying attitudes and national approaches, is to ensure that the institution continues to lead in the shaping of a regional architecture. ASEAN member states would want to prevent the unravelling of the grouping.

The Quad, as it is currently formulated, might overshadow the influence of the ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region for the sheer imbalance in these countries' influence and might. The division within the ASEAN is also mostly due to the issues that the Quad is aiming to resolve like the SCS and the need for greater involvement of the big powers in resolving these issues. The tough question for ASEAN is this: Should it keep itself away from such a platform knowing that most of the issues being discussed have a direct bearing on the Southeast Asian region? Or will the question of being a part of the initiative cause more friction within the grouping?

For the Quad to attract more attention from the ASEAN countries, there is a need to present the Quad in a way that does not cause further strategic disruptions in the region.⁴² Given that India has been a long-time supporter of ASEAN centrality and ASEAN is the central pillar of the country's Act East policy, its engagement with the Quad may be seen as compromising that strategy. How India will balance these contradictions remains to be seen, and whether making it a 'Quad plus ASEAN' will fulfil the expectations of the ASEAN, especially in maintaining its centrality in the region. 

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