

India and the idea of 'Quad' - Daily Times

The second season of the idea of a 'Quad' involving India, US, Japan and Australia has just started. Will the idea materialise this time? And is the idea of Quad bigger than what is generally perceived — a partnership to contain China? Will the Quad succeed, given the differences within?

The Quad plan was not a recent one; it was mooted a decade ago. India was working closely with the US, as a part of establishing a nuclear partnership. In the east, New Delhi's relations with Japan and Australia were also developing. However, the first season of the idea of Quad was driven by the think tanks (especially in the US), than the policy circles. It was more of a coalition of four democracies. While the idea was welcomed in India, there were no serious steps at the governmental level to operationalise it.

In the last ten years, substantial development has taken place globally. Increasing influence of China under Xi with grandiose plans including the OBOR; Donald Trump and Narendra Modi assuming office with specific slogans; a decline of the US role in the Indo-Pacific and the fall of Trans-Pacific Partnership; the hardening of Chinese approach towards its immediate neighbourhood, especially in Asia; and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region trying to enhance their bargaining position. The same period, also witnessed a growing bilateral divergence in the relationships of US, Japan and India vis-à-vis China.

Despite the multiple political interactions between India and China, and US and China, the bilateral relations remain tense. In the first bilateral construct (India and China), though the economic relations are increasing, diplomatic interactions remain tense. In the second bilateral construct (US and China), though the diplomatic interactions remain moderate, economic relations continue to be troubled. Japan-China relations during the last decade have remained cold. The idea of Quad returning in 2017, has to be interpreted in the above global context.

For India, its foreign policy agenda in the mainland — covering the immediate (Southeast Asia) and extended (East Asia) east, sits well with the idea of Quad. Since the 1990s, India has been pursuing a policy of 'look East' towards Southeast Asia. The first decade of New Delhi's Look East approach, remained more in the paper, than in action. Though it wanted to Look East, it did not have the required economic strength and political clout to pursue it. Nor did the 'East' look back at India. Besides, the ASEAN countries had their own economic turmoil in the 1990s. During the last decade, there was a second-generation push towards India's Lookeast approach. Though its success was below than the expectations, it laid the platform for the third generation expansion during this decade.

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During the recent years, New Delhi made three significant changes to its Look East strategy. First, it

expanded the notion of East — from the ASEAN countries — all the way to include South Korea and Japan. Second, it started investing in specific countries and building strategic partnerships with; for example Japan and South Korea in East Asia, and Myanmar and Singapore in Southeast Asia. Third, New Delhi revised its approach from a 'Look East' to 'Act East'. Some of its policies have been given a new push towards materialising the objectives, than 'keep looking'.

Also during this phase, the East has also started taking India seriously, than the previous decades. The visits not only from ASEAN countries — but also from Australia, South Korea and Japan at the highest levels would underline this slow but steady transformation on how rest of the world in the East looks at India. India's growing presence in ASEAN and East Asian Summit would underline the above.

With the recent meetings in Manila, will the four countries be able to operationalise the idea? The four countries have their own objectives and agenda; and obviously, there is a dragon in the Quad. How far will the idea go in the next decade, especially with China outside it?

For India, as explained above, it is an extension of Look East/Act East trajectory. Besides, the political component of the above in the mainland, for India, there is also substantial security component in the maritime.

Japan's relations with China under Prime Minister Abe have been troubled. Japan is more anxious about the idea of Quad, than the other countries. Besides the bilateral relations with China, Japan is also competing with Beijing for influence in ASEAN and the entire Bay of Bengal region — stretching up to Sri Lanka.

US relations with China is well known and needs no separate mention. Trump administration's current strategy towards the Indo-Pacific and Trans-Pacific Partnership is not as positive as that of Obama's. Washington would also like to assure its strategic partners across the Pacific about its commitment, which is now being doubted. The Quad would fit this and even decentralise the responsibilities across the Pacific with getting three more democracies in.

Australia's relations with China have been nuanced during the last two decades. Strategically, Canberra remains in the US realm, but economically, China-Australia relations are now in a different league. China is the largest economic partner for Australia; their bilateral trade is more than Australia's trade with Japan and US put together.

On the other hand, Australia's relations with ASEAN and South Asia are independent of its relationship with China. While economically, Australia's interests are tied up with China, it has larger political, economic and strategic interests in all the four regions — East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Although Beijing is a factor in the Quad, there are larger strategic issues for the four countries to move ahead with the idea. The ability of the four countries to go beyond the rhetoric and make concrete

investments and institutions would drive this idea further.

Whether or not they move beyond the rhetoric is yet to be seen.

The idea of Quad is into the second season. The leaders have made the right noises. For India, Quad should be a win-win. It provides another platform to the country to be in East Asia. If there is a China factor, New Delhi should be carefully happy to make use of it.

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