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Commentary: The Indo Pacific, a security diamond, a 10-year Quad?

A strategic framework for a free and open Indo Pacific involving the US, Australia, Japan and India has been around for a while, says Yale-NUS College's Rohan Mukherjee.



SINGAPORE: In August 2007, a first-time Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, nearing the end of his first year in office delivered a speech in the Indian Parliament titled Confluence of the Two Seas.

He laid out a bold vision of the “dynamic coupling” of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, a “broader Asia” that would expand to include the United States and Australia.

This network would be open and transparent, allowing people, goods, capital and knowledge to flow freely in an “arc of freedom and prosperity” along the outer rim of the Eurasian continent.

A month later, Abe was out of office but the idea of the Indo-Pacific had taken root in strategic circles.



SECURITY DIAMOND

Abe returned to power in December 2012, and the day after taking office, authored an article calling for the development of “Asia’s democratic security diamond,” which would involve Japan, India, the US and Australia.

This grouping is what has come to be known as the Quadrilateral, or Quad, which many US and Japanese strategists see as the bedrock of a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

It is hardly surprising therefore that during President Trump’s recently concluded visit to Japan, Abe — fresh from a major electoral victory giving him another four years in office — reprised his vision of a “free and open Indo Pacific” predicated on the involvement of these four countries.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had laid the groundwork in a speech on US-India relations in Washington last month, which was explicitly about the need for the Indo-Pacific region to be free and open over the next 100 years.

While praising existing trilateral engagement between the US, India, and Japan, he hinted at the possibility of adding Australia to the mix, thus endorsing in advance Abe’s desire to revive the Quad in some form.

Form matters a great deal in this case. When Abe had first proposed the Quad a decade ago, Beijing had strongly objected through official diplomatic channels, viewing the grouping as an initiative aimed at containing China.

Since then, the four countries have been careful to deepen their cooperation without formalising anything resembling a multilateral arrangement. Japan and Australia are already US allies and have been engaged in a trilateral security dialogue with Washington since 2002.

The main task therefore has been to bring India into the fold. Thus, the India-Japan partnership has grown by leaps and bounds; New Delhi has signed important security agreements with Canberra; and the Obama Administration designated India a “major defence partner” in mid-2016, a relationship that has continued to deepen under the Trump Administration.



THREE GOALS

The goals inherent in this vision of the Indo Pacific are threefold. The first is to uphold the principles of a rule-based regional order, particularly with regard to the resolution of maritime territorial disputes.

The second is to promote free trade by liberalising regional trading regimes and promoting freedom of navigation, which is essential for the secure passage of the vast volume of commodities shipped through the Indo Pacific.

The third is to provide security assurances to smaller countries, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, that the Quad countries are willing to put their muscle behind ensuring freedom and openness in the region.

All of the above is complicated by one major change that has taken place since Abe first introduced the Indo-Pacific vision. China's regional ambition and footprint are far greater now than they were a decade ago.

Not only has China become more assertive regarding its core interests in the region, it has also developed its economic and military capabilities at a rapid clip during this period. The Belt and Road Initiative signals China's desire and ability to establish a commercial empire of sorts stretching across the region.

This change alone explains why, in a shift from past rhetoric, in his speech last month Tillerson singled out China's “predatory economics” in the region, referring to the large-scale infrastructure projects in developing countries in South and Southeast Asia funded by loans from Chinese state-owned enterprises.

Given these realities, Beijing is in a better position today to undermine the Indo-Pacific vision than it has ever been.



INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS

The Quad is all the more precarious because of its own internal contradictions. Japan and Australia both depend on China for approximately 22 per cent of their respective trade volumes.

Antagonising Beijing through the Quad is unlikely to play well among domestic constituencies in these countries, particularly at a time when President Trump has publicly signaled his desire to revisit the terms of US-Japan trade, which he views as “not fair or open”.

Washington has also killed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which could have acted as a major pillar of the Indo-Pacific vision.

India, which shares a longstanding border dispute with China that recently contributed to a 73-day military standoff between the two countries, is naturally wary of provoking Beijing into further risky manoeuvres in the Himalayas.

New Delhi and Canberra were the quickest to back away from the Quad upon Beijing's protestations in 2007 – the present calculus of power is hardly likely to provoke a different response.

Indeed, the official Indian reaction to Abe's recent articulation of the Indo-Pacific vision was measured, stating that India has "an open mind" towards cooperation, but "obviously on an agenda which is relevant to us".



A WEAKER US

India's attitude reveals the most fundamental flaw in the Indo-Pacific vision. When it was first proposed, the US seemed powerful, confident, and willing to shoulder the burdens of maintaining order in Asia.

Today, the US is relatively weaker, has backtracked from many previous commitments to the region, is openly questioning its alliances, and acting in ways that might grievously undermine regional order.

Against this backdrop, the Quad seems more like an effort to pass on the costs of containing China to regional actors, not just the democratic major powers but also smaller countries across the Indo Pacific.

Without greater constructive leadership from Washington, the "free and open Indo Pacific" is likely to remain a catchy slogan whose time has passed.

Rohan Mukherjee is assistant professor of political science at Yale-NUS College.

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