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Quad 2.0: Facing China's Belt & Road?

By Tan Ming Hui and Nazia Hussain

Synopsis

The short-lived multilateral Quad of four democracies appears to be earning a new lease of life, partly due to a combined push by the US and Japan. Is this in response to China's growing clout and assertiveness in the Asia Pacific?

Commentary

REUTERS RECENTLY reported that the United States, Japan, India and Australia are discussing an [alternative](#) to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Otherwise known as the 'Quad' or quadrilateral security dialogue, talks of deepening cooperation between the four democracies were only resurrected last November. Short of a joint statement, the separate statements issued after the meeting agreed that the four nations shared similar visions and interests to ensure a "free" and "open" Indo-Pacific region.

The quartet first came together in response to the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which saw their navies collaborating in relief operations. Initiated by Shinzo Abe during his first stint as Japan's Prime Minister, the Quad held their first summit and also participated in a large naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. However, the Quad suffered an early demise when the Rudd government in Australia pulled out under Chinese pressure.

Not an 'Asian NATO'

There are many speculations floating around of what the newly resurrected Quad is and what it is intended to accomplish. As before, Beijing believes that the quadrilateral grouping is part of a containment strategy against China and has immediately raised

its concerns. Chinese scholars say Beijing should stay alert to such a [security alliance](#) which might reshape the regional geopolitical landscape.

Though China is cautiously not named in any of the statements, the revival of the group is undoubtedly motivated by increasing nervousness at China's assertiveness and ambitions in the region. China has been building artificial islands in the contested South China Sea to back its claims, and ignored a judgement by an international tribunal in The Hague without any real consequences. Worryingly, it seems that China also does not shy away from using its economic leverage for political aims.

However, Quad 2.0 is not a first step to an 'Asian NATO'. While both Japan and Australia are US allies, they have yet to show any willingness in following United States Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) into 12 nautical mile zone around contested territories.

Moreover, India has traditionally been non-aligned and is unlikely to enter any kind of formal alliance. In fact, the Indian statement revealed calculated caution in avoiding even the phrases "rules based order" and "freedom of navigation" - both of which are frequently used in Indian government documents.

Limitations

In addition, even though Abe successfully pushed through a bill in 2015 to reinterpret Japan's pacifist Article 9 and allow collective self-defence, he still faces considerable [legal limitations](#) in terms of what Japanese troops are permitted to do in support of allies, on top of widespread public criticisms and protests.

It is thus difficult to imagine that Japan would or could help to defend India's disputed borders with China, or that India would reciprocate in the East China Sea to support Japan. It is also unlikely that Australia would commit itself to an alliance that might drag it into geographically distant conflicts and risk its relations with China, its largest trading partner.

The quadrilateral grouping is likely to remain a loose and flexible partnership, involving closer naval cooperation such as joint exercise, information-sharing and consultations. Bureaucratically, it might be more efficient to consolidate the numerous existing trilateral agreements among the quartet, but this will never amount to an institutionalised military alliance like the NATO.

Rather than confronting China head-on, the Quad serves more as a diplomatic signal of solidarity and warning against any challenges to the status quo. Moreover, the idea of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an alternative suggests the members' preference for soft hedging.

Substance and Sustainability

Quad 2.0 need not suffer the same fate as its predecessor if it can move beyond statements and reaffirmation of principles. While it need not be institutionalised, it should work towards a roadmap with actionable items and show tangible results, such as by stepping up coordination in counter-terrorism, cyber security, and disaster relief.

The four countries must define the scope of the Quad and what more can be done that is not already being achieved through bilateral and trilateral agreements. There are today much more evolved US-Japan-Australia, US-Japan-India, and India-Japan-Australia dialogues.

Also, the Quad failed the first time around when Australia caved in, which supposedly made India skeptical about participating in Quad 2.0. While Australia has shown interest in participating in the Malabar exercise along with the US and Japan, it remains to be seen if India would accept Australia's request to join the exercise this year. Rectifying from past failures, the Quad will do good if Australia and India try to cement deeper ties to increase confidence.

Navigating Chinese Sensibilities

Thrashing out the agenda clearly and maintaining a degree of transparency may help to dispel some of China's suspicions, if the Quad wants to avoid being branded as an anti-China clique.

[Japan and Australia](#) both depend on China for approximately 22 percent of their trade and will avoid placing their economies at risk. India will not want another Doklam-like crisis with China (73-day military standoff along the Himalayas in 2017), or intensify competition in the Indian Ocean which India regards as its sphere of influence. China is the [largest holder](#) of US debt, US\$1.18 trillion as of 2017. Furthermore, the US is preoccupied with domestic concerns and may become more inward-looking.

At the same time, the quartet will bear in mind that accommodating China's sensibilities in the past may have done little to soften China's assertions in the region or increase China's sensitivity to its neighbours' security concerns. Hence, they are likely to pursue policies that will avoid over dependence on economic relations with China, especially if Beijing is willing to use economic leverage.

Overall, the continuity of Quad 2.0 will hinge on how well the four members stand their ground in the face of Chinese pressure, as well as possible economic or political pushbacks.

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