

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

India and the QUAD: Delhi's Balancing Act?

By Tara Kartha

Synopsis

Last month's meeting in Manila of officials from India, the United States, Australia and Japan, now referred to in the media as the Quad, has aroused speculation on whether this constitutes an Indian challenge to China. A closer examination of India's position points to a policy of caution at a time of turbulence in India-China ties.

Commentary

THERE HAS been considerable conjecture in the media and strategic circles about the so-called "Quad" or Quadrilateral, a term referring to the meeting between officials of the United States, Japan, India and Australia on 12 November 2017. Speculation has been rife on whether India has finally joined the big league in opposing Chinese belligerence on various fronts. After all, a similar initiative in 2007 had come to nothing, after Australia pulled out of the grouping under Chinese pressure.

Further questions were raised by the low-key nature of the meeting. First, the four countries were represented by bureaucrats rather than political leaders. Second, no joint statement was issued; each country instead issued its own separate statement. An examination of these indicates that only the US and Australia actually used the term "quadrilateral".

India's Cautious Stance

The language used by Japan, the US and Australia was largely similar and ticked almost all of eight boxes: a rules-based order in Asia, freedom of navigation and overflight, respect for international law, enhancing connectivity, maritime security, the North Korean threat, nonproliferation and terrorism. The Japanese statement did not mention connectivity, but stressed all the others.

The Indian statement was shorter and showed a degree of caution. While the issues of navigation and overflight were mentioned prominently in the statements of the other three, India preferred to use the less loaded “free and open Indo-Pacific region” in its text, dropping even the term “security” with respect to areas of cooperation.

While highlighting the need for connectivity, it forbore from use of the term “prudent financing” employed by the US, which was meant to emphasise the exploitative nature of the Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative”. In this, Japan and Australia showed a similar degree of caution. Expectedly, the short text emphasised India’s central concern of terrorism and, underlining its status as a virtually accepted nuclear-armed state, highlighted the dangers of “proliferation linkages.”

India showed careful footwork in standing shoulder to shoulder with the other three who are members of interconnected alliances. While the other statements committed themselves to “deepening cooperation” in the future, the Indian statement baldly stated that the “Act East” policy would be the cornerstone of its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Contrasting Bilateral Posture

At first glance, the Indian statement seemed to be eminently reasonable, since it highlighted India’s core concerns. Terrorism has been highlighted in almost all bilateral and multilateral forums in which India participates, with this directed against Pakistan. The “proliferation linkages” referenced the evidence provided by agencies and open sources on the Pakistani-North Korean connection in the missile and nuclear fields.

This is seen as a very real danger in India since there is a suspicion that North Korea may well provide data gleaned from nuclear and missile tests to Pakistan for a price. The term “Indo-Pacific” region serves Indian interests for the moment, though there are concerns among some officials and media that India should not be drawn into a US-China tussle for influence in the Indian Ocean and Pacific.

The central point, however, is while India showed caution at this forum it has not hesitated to commit itself in bilateral documents on the very issues that it shied away from at the Quad. For instance, an India–US bilateral statement of 2015 mentioned commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight, started a Maritime Security Dialogue, and called for responsible exploitation of resources per international law, all of which could be construed as being directed at China.

The 2017 joint statement reiterated commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight, and chose to call out the need for “responsible debt financing practices” in enhancing regional connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region. That bilateral was held while the Doklam stand-off was still on. The Joint Statement with the Japanese a month after the end of the Doklam incident went even further in calling for a “rules-based order” and considerably enhanced the maritime security dialogue. Notably, it also called for an alignment of Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and India’s “Act East” policy.

The Quad and India’s Act East Policy

Prior to this, an April 2017 Joint Statement with Australia repeated the same principles, with additional language that recognised Australia and India's common interests in respecting the maritime legal order, called for ensuring the safety of sea lines of communication, and stressed the need for a "rules-based system".

Incidentally, though India kept Australia out of the Malabar Exercises this year as well, joint naval exercises with it are due to be held again in 2018, the last round having taken place in 2015. It is these bilateral agreements that provide the basis for policy and action in the ground. Therefore, even if the Quad did not issue a joint statement, the outlines of policy between each of its components and India is fairly clear.

The final question is the reference to the "Act East" policy in the Quad statement. According to Indian Ministry of External Affairs documents, the objective of the policy is to "promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the states of the north eastern region including Arunachal Pradesh".

The special mention of Arunachal Pradesh is interesting in that it is an area claimed by China. Even a visit by Indian higher officials to the region leads to annoyance in Beijing. The sentiments of the Quad were recently extended to the ASEAN forum during the Indian prime minister's speech at the ASEAN Summit, where he extended an assurance to the forum of "steady support towards achieving a rules-based regional security architecture that best attests to the region's interests and peaceful development".

It seems therefore that India, while refusing specific commitments that might anger China in a multilateral forum, has instead chosen a bilateral route. In other words, it has chosen to provide the Quad with teeth in a bilateral context, while staying away from a process that may be seen as a "ganging up" against China, thereby leaving the door open for better relations. Overall, it has chosen an independent course based on its own needs rather than depending on a gang of four, not all of whom have proved reliable in the past.

Tara Kartha PhD, formerly a Director in India's National Security Council Secretariat, is a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Security, New Delhi. She contributed this to RSIS Commentary.
