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The Quadrilateral Conundrum: Can ASEAN Be Persuaded?

By Joel Ng

Synopsis

If the Quad cannot make clear how it addresses three inherent contradictions in its revival of the 'Indo-Pacific', it will not achieve the support of ASEAN states.

Commentary

THE REVIVAL of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a geostrategic region for the United States was perhaps less surprising than the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, better known as the 'Quad', with Australia, India, Japan, and the US negotiating to restart the forum on the sidelines of the 2017 ASEAN Summit. The first Quad collapsed when China expressed opposition, and despite protestations that it was not a Chinese containment strategy, Australia dropped out.

The success of a revived Quad will depend on two issues: Firstly, that it is not a purely strategic or security policy, as this could only be interpreted by China as confrontational. This will require a greater economic component, because China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has a long head-start and colossal resources at its disposal. Secondly, it must secure buy-in from ASEAN states, who need reassurance that the public goods on offer from the Quad are in their interests. It is only with these two in place that it can assure China that it is not a new containment strategy, and the ASEAN states in the middle of the Indo-Pacific are at the heart of the project.

Three Contradictions and a Conundrum

However, for ASEAN to accept it, the Quad needs to provide greater clarity. Three contradictions underpin ASEAN's difficulties with the Quad's revival of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept. The questions are on ASEAN's centrality, the tussle with China, and the degree of commitment likely from the Quad. Making clear how they will navigate

these challenges will be necessary to assuage ASEAN concerns about their motivations.

The first contradiction is that ASEAN lies at the heart of this project, but is not the initiator. The US and Australia have asserted that ASEAN is at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, and a free and open Indo-Pacific would be impossible without it. This is a truism but does not answer ASEAN questions. For instance, there are no ASEAN states seated at the front table of the Quad.

The absence of Indonesia, a major democracy in the heart of the “Indo-Pacific” raises questions: Why isn’t it a Quintet? Is one of the major democracies in the heart of the region either omitted or reticent? Whatever the answer, it speaks to misgivings about the Quad that will need to be overcome with more than rhetoric.

The inherent tension is that ASEAN members firmly believe their centrality is vital to security, and this centrality is not merely geographic. “Centrality” for ASEAN means securing their consultation and assent as managing the diversity of ASEAN states and interests is best done through regional fora that ASEAN has constructed.

The Quad’s present structure bypasses what ASEAN considers its crucial mechanism that balances contending interests. It is as crucial that China plays a part in ASEAN’s fora as Quad members, even if the result does not always suit an earnestly proactive state.

Rules-based Order or Stepping on China’s Toes?

The second contradiction relates to the idea of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” at the heart of the Quad’s common interests and strategy. This rules-based order sought by the Quad aligns well with ASEAN, which maintains the need for the rule of law in the settling of differences in the international arena. ASEAN states agree with this in principle.

In practice, however, the Quad’s interpretation steps on China’s toes, particularly over its claims in the South China Sea. This is something ASEAN does not want to have to take sides on. Whose rules or which rules-based order is ASEAN to follow?

If the Quad seeks to assertively require members to conform to the rules-based order or suffer penalties, ASEAN is unlikely to be enthusiastic. ASEAN has already had this debate internally before, over the nature of the legality and mechanisms of its own Charter. ASEAN opted then to choose a softer, slower approach, for all the difficulties it would entail regarding its economic integration goals.

A rules-based order that is a Trojan Horse for the concession of sovereignty is always a possible interpretation when ASEAN is not involved, particularly when proposed by major powers on its periphery.

Furthermore, Australia, growing economically closer with China, may face a commitment question if it too brings its rule of law rhetoric into confrontation with China. ASEAN is well aware that the last time round, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd blinked first, Australia withdrew, and the first Quad collapsed. Agreeing in principle

with the idea, and implementing it, are different questions and something that the Quad need to clarify on how they intend to promote this.

Liberal Democracies and Multilateral Interests

Australia's previous withdrawal brings up the final contradiction, which lies in commitment. If the Quad are committed to strengthening the liberal order through economic incentives, there is a question of just how exactly they intend to do it using free market principles. Keynesianism has largely died in the West, and it is an even harder sell to spend money outside their borders.

When budgetary allocation and distributary questions in their own economies are such contested issues in their domestic politics, it seems unlikely that they can stump up for the amounts that will be needed to seriously compete with Chinese influence. Whatever else democracies are good at, austerity has made them ill-suited to spending money overseas for long-term, somewhat ambiguous, strategic goals. China, with its large domestic surpluses and a strong bureaucracy able to direct these resources strategically, does not face this challenge and indeed this is the fuel of their international agenda.

That said, some early signs of Japanese and Indian infrastructural programmes such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor suggest that this problem is not insurmountable. Professor Masahiro Kawai of Tokyo University recently called for BRI projects to be multilateralised to ensure their success, going through existing multilateral financial institutions. The same logic should apply for any Quad projects, which would then be welcomed and not construed as something to be a choice between China and the Quad for ASEAN.

The central questions of where ASEAN's role lies, how the Quad interprets a 'rules-based order', and whether it has the will to fund an economic programme as ambitious as China's must all be answered for ASEAN buy-in to be achieved.

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