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India and the Resurrection of the Quad

India's decision to revive the quadrilateral security dialogue with Japan, the United States (US) and Australia marks an important departure in its engagement with the great powers. It is a decisive step towards the consolidation of the strategic partnerships with the US and its Asian allies, and in enhancing New Delhi's bargaining power vis-à-vis Beijing. As he seeks a say in defining the agenda of the Quad, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is heralding his country's self-confident pursuit of enlightened self-interest with all the major powers.

C Raja Mohan¹

The meeting of senior officials from the four countries – India, Japan, the United States (US) and Australia – on the margins of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led meetings in Manila during mid-November 2017 has drawn much international attention and generated considerable anxiety within the Indian foreign policy community. The dominant view in New Delhi cautions Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the dangers of being sucked into an unfavourable alliance with the US.²

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² See, for example, Suhasini Haidar, "Beyond big game hunting: the 'quadrilateral meeting'", *The Hindu*, 6 November 2017 – <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/beyond-big-game-hunting/article19988330.ece>; and Manoj Joshi, "Why India should be wary of the Quad", *The Wire*, 13 November 2017 – <https://thewire.in/196540/india-us-japan-australia-quadrilateral-alliance/>.

These apprehensions reflect a deep distrust of the US and entrenched fears about India abandoning its tradition of non-alignment. The arguments reflect the Indian foreign policy community's very predictable conservatism. During the last two and a half decades, it has consistently tended to oppose any diplomatic innovation by the government of the day on any issue. This nagging negativism might have bothered many of the recent governments but it does not seem to affect the Modi government.

New Delhi's perennial hand-wringing on issues relating to cooperation with America is part of the enduring legacy of non-alignment. The government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, made some unprecedented advances towards the US and was also quick to back-track amidst domestic political resistance. Whether it was the nuclear deal or the defence framework, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government did not seem to have the stomach to stay the course.

The same is true of the Quad, which was essentially a Japanese initiative. When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first proposed the idea to Singh at the end of 2006, New Delhi seemed to have accepted it without hesitation.³ India agreed to the first meeting of the senior officials from the four countries in the summer of 2007 on the margins of the annual gathering of the ASEAN Regional Forum. When he visited India a few months later in August 2007, Abe publicly articulated the idea of the Indo-Pacific as well as the imperative of India and Japan expanding their global and strategic partnership to include the US and Australia.⁴

The Japanese initiative coincided with the new warmth between Washington and New Delhi under President George W Bush and the normalisation of India's relations with Australia. India seemed to reinforce the idea of the Quad by hosting one of the largest naval exercises under the Malabar series in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007 that included the

³ The joint statement issued at the end of Prime Minister Singh's visit to Tokyo on 15 December 2006 said that Singh and Abe asked their governments to "consult on the modalities" for initiating a dialogue among "like-minded" countries in the region. Ministry of External Affairs, India, 15 December 2006. <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6368/Joint+Statement+Towards+IndiaJapan+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

⁴ "Confluence of the Two Seas", Speech by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Indian Parliament, 22 August 2007. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

participation of naval forces from the US, Japan, Australia and Singapore.⁵ The exercises led to strong protest and condemnation from China, and considerable political pressure from Beijing has the effect of derailing the Quad.⁶

In India, the communist parties, which were in coalition with the Congress-led government, launched formal protests against the exercises and, more broadly, against the emerging strategic partnership with the US. Panicking at the domestic opposition, the left-leaning Defence Minister A K Antony barred future multilateral military exercises.

The honour of formally knocking the Quad down, however, went to Australia. The new government, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd that came into power at the end of 2007, publicly signalled in early 2008 that it does not attach much value to the Quad.⁷ The US too seemed to lose interest and the resignation of Abe in Japan in September 2007 seemed to turn the Quad into a quaint short-lived phenomenon.

However, the return of Abe to power in Tokyo at the end of 2012 gave a new lease of life to the Quad concept. In December 2012, Abe wrote a column calling for the renewal of the Quad as part of the effort to construct a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and proposed the eventual association of the European maritime powers, France and Britain, with it.⁸

India, under the UPA government, seemed reluctant to do this. It was quite content with the triangular format with Japan and America that was launched in 2011. This resistance to the Quad seemed to persist under the Modi government which came into power in May 2014. New Delhi’s decision to go ahead with the idea of the Quad is, therefore, an important shift.

⁵ For the Indian Navy’s view of the exercise, see Captain Vinay Garg, “Exercise Malabar 2007: A Major Step towards Fine-tuning Maritime Capabilities”, *Sainik Samachar*, 15 September 2007. <http://sainiksamachar.nic.in/englisharchives/2007/sep15-07/h1.htm>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

⁶ See Siddharth Varadarajan, “Four-power meeting drew Chinese demarche”, *The Hindu*, 14 June 2007; and Praful Bidwai, “Five-Nation Naval Drill Presages ‘Asian NATO’?”, *Antiwar.com*, 8 September 2007. <http://original.antiwar.com/bidwai/2007/09/08/five-nation-naval-drill-presages-asian-nato/>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

⁷ See the transcript of the joint press conference by Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Stephen Smith and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Perth, Office of the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 5 February 2008. https://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2008/080205_jpc.html. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

⁸ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s democratic security diamond”, *Livemint*, 31 December 2012. <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/viqg2XC8fhRfjTUIcctk0M/Asias-democratic-security-diamond.html>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

In spite of the support for the Quad, Modi is not about to abandon its independent foreign policy and is confident that the Quad will improve India's overall standing in the region. This, in turn, must be located in his government's larger approach to the major powers.⁹ When Modi came into office, he refused to be chained by the constricting interpretation of non-alignment and was ready to see India as a "leading power" capable of shaping its strategic environment. Modi was ready to make big moves towards the major powers.¹⁰

On China, Modi was confident of constructing a new framework that would be rooted in expanded economic cooperation, pacification of the disputed boundary and intensified international cooperation with Beijing. However, as relations with China steadily deteriorated over the frequent border tensions, Beijing's opposition to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, insensitivity to India's concerns about the sources of cross-border terrorism in Pakistan, Modi did not lose nerve. Instead, he sustained the policy of engagement with China and took a firm stand against Beijing's attempt to alter the military status quo at Doklam.¹¹ The combination of firmness on core issues and the will to expand the relationship signalled a very different approach to China than what has been known from India all these decades.

On the US, Modi ended India's "historic hesitations" about engaging America.¹² He resolved the pending dispute over nuclear liability and completed the implementation of the nuclear accord. He renewed the 10-year defence framework agreement with the US and moved towards military interoperability with US armed forces by signing the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. He invited an American president for the first time to India's Republic Day celebrations in 2015, signed, with US President Barack Obama, a joint vision statement for Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.¹³

⁹ For a discussion of Modi's approach, see C Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence*, Harper Collins, 2015.

¹⁰ See Ashley J Tellis, "India as a Leading Power", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/04/04/india-as-leading-power-pub-63185>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

¹¹ Pranab Samanta, "India's handling of Doklam shows us the way to talk tough issues with China", *Economic Times*, 4 September 2017.

¹² "Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Address to the Joint Session of US Congress", 8 June 2016. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=146076>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

¹³ "Statements by US President Barack Obama and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi", The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 25 January 2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press->

Modi also put Japan in a very special position in his great power hierarchy. It was the first country he chose to visit outside South Asia. Modi also recognised that Japan can play a major role in transforming the Indian economy. Modi was receptive to Abe's aspirations to make Japan a normal power and was willing to lend him full support in the international arena. Modi also took advantage of Japan's regional activism to unveil a plan for strategic economic cooperation with Tokyo in the Indian subcontinent.¹⁴

Yet, Modi was not ready to immediately accept Abe's entreaties for reviving the Quad. If Modi was waiting for an appropriate moment to move forward, the advent of the Donald Trump Administration in the US in 2017 seemed to provide it. Trump's surprising emphasis on confronting the sources of terror in Pakistan, his willingness to acknowledge India's special role in the Asian or 'Indo-Pacific' balance of power system and the endorsement of India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative,¹⁵ seemed to provide a good moment to signal New Delhi's readiness to raise the quality of strategic interaction with the US and Japan.

When Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono went public with the call for the renewal of the Quad, India signalled that it was ready but insisted that New Delhi will join on its own terms. In a statement issued in October 2017, the spokesman of the foreign office said that India has an "open mind to cooperate" with like-minded countries but only on "an agenda that is relevant to us".¹⁶ The government also pointed that unilateralism has become quite common in India's current diplomacy and there was no need to attach an extraordinary significance to the Quad. New Delhi also appears to have insisted that the process begin at the level of officials rather than ministers.

office/2015/01/25/statements-president-obama-and-prime-minister-modi-republic-india. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

¹⁴ Darshana Baruah, "Toward Strategic Economic Cooperation between India and Japan", Carnegie India, 1 December 2016. <http://carnegieindia.org/2016/12/01/toward-strategic-economic-cooperation-between-india-and-japan-pub-66326>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

¹⁵ For a discussion, see C Raja Mohan, "Rex Tillerson in South Asia: An American Tilt towards India?", ISAS Brief No. 518, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, 30 October 2017. [https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS_Briefs_No._518-_Rex_Tillerson_in_South_Asia\[1\].pdf](https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS_Briefs_No._518-_Rex_Tillerson_in_South_Asia[1].pdf). Accessed on 13 November 2017.

¹⁶ "Tokyo for quadrilateral talks", *The Hindu*, 28 October 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tokyo-for-quadrilateral-talks/article19935709.ece>. Accessed on 13 November 2017.

Quite clearly, New Delhi was not going to simply line up behind the US and Japan on the Quad. It has no desire to be a 'junior partner' to America that many in India fear. Modi appears quite confident that he can negotiate the terms of engagement on the construction of the Quad. Underlying that proposition are three important factors.

The first is the extraordinary self-assurance of Modi and his senior foreign policy advisers. If the previous governments were hesitant to play for high stakes, Modi is ready to explore the limits of India's bargaining power.

The second is the counter-intuitive assumption that moving closer to America will actually improve India's room for negotiation with China. Fearing China's displeasure, India's foreign policy makers in the past tended to limit their options with the US. Modi's advisers argue that ceding a veto to China over India's ties to America has not resulted in any flexibility on Beijing's part. Modi is likely to follow the relaunch of the Quad process by demonstrating his will to advance the ties with China – again on his own terms. There is no guarantee that this approach will succeed. However, it has opened the door for new thinking about India's China policy.

Finally, Modi is acutely aware that China's rise and political assertiveness, the growing regional concerns about Beijing's unilateralism and America's efforts to retain its long-standing primacy have generated a rare moment of strategic opportunity to elevate India's regional standing. At the same time, New Delhi has learnt from its previous experience with the Quad that the temptations for the US, Australia and Japan to cut separate deals with China are real. Modi, therefore, wants to develop the Quad slowly and deliberately, and retain a big say for India in its agenda. In doing so, he is heralding an India that is quite comfortable with playing hard-ball geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

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