

The Quad: US and its allies want insurance against instability and coercion in Asia

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by Richard Fontaine

If all goes according to plan, officials from the United States, Australia, Japan and India will sit down together on the margins of next week's East Asia Summit. The gathering will mark a resurrection of "The Quad", the four-way dialogue that kicked off in 2007, and which died the following year after Canberra's withdrawal. Re-establishing a forum in which the four like-minded democracies can discuss and coordinate their regional aims is a modest but meaningful step in the right direction. Done right, the meeting should generate not only a few headlines, but also spur concrete four-party cooperation.

Today, the Indo-Pacific region is witnessing a shift in the balance of power and a changing mix of competition and cooperation. China's rising assertiveness is the most distinctive element, with its military modernisation, One Belt One Road infrastructure efforts, tendency toward illiberalism and penchant for coercion together focusing minds across the region. To this should be added North Korea's missile and nuclear provocations, the ever-present challenge of terrorism, a proliferation of cyber attacks and the need to respond to large-scale natural disasters. The demand for attention and resources – particularly but not exclusively in the security sphere – is rising faster than the US and its allies can provide them.

An answer to this dilemma is managed security networking: building out connections among allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific that share the aim of ensuring a rules-based regional order. Working together, like-minded countries can do more to bolster rules and maintain a balance of power than any might do alone. Indeed, pursuing new regional relationships, especially in defence, has become a recent hallmark of both US and Australian foreign policy, with Japan and India taking a similar approach.

This is why reviving the Quad is so strategically sound. In addition to cooperating on issues like defence exercises and infrastructure, closer cooperation among the four helps ensure that China rises in a region where the democratic powers are strong and working together. It creates a forum for coordination and common messages, and allows officials from each country to exchange information. And it represents a new pillar of America's regional engagement, which has come under serious question in Australia and beyond.

Critics of the concept observe that China will be displeased that representatives from the US and Australia are meeting with India and Japan, and that the arrangement suggests an ambition to contain China in its home region. Yet an Asian NATO the Quad is not, nor is it likely ever to be. It will remain a valuable mechanism for pursuing common aims, not a mutual-defence pact aimed at deterring and defeating the People's Liberation Army. Indeed, the Quad merely adds a country to the already-existing trilateral dialogues that the US has with Australia and Japan, and which it has with Japan and India. And since Beijing's actions matter more than its officials' private irritations, it's worth observing that suspending the Quad in 2008 seems to have elicited no reduction in Chinese assertiveness.

In any event, no member of the Quad would sign up to a China containment strategy. The mutually dependent economic relationship between each and China, and the opportunities for Beijing to play a constructive role in some regional security arrangements, are a far cry from the strategies of containment that Washington employed during the Cold War. That said, one should expect Beijing to decry any upgrading of regional security ties – via the Quad or other vehicles – as a form of soft containment. Officials from the four countries should contest that narrative.

They should focus more on the significant opportunities for cooperation. While this year's meeting will reportedly take place at an officials' level, the future should see a regular ministerial-level dialogue. A productive agenda might consist of defence cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness, information sharing and disaster relief. Next year's India-led Malabar naval exercise, which includes the US and Japan, should feature Australia as an observer or participant. Economic officials from the four countries should discuss and coordinate plans for regional connectivity and investment, as well as development aid. And they should bolster the values that in part unite them, for example by supporting a free and open Internet in the face of efforts by China and others to censor and restrict the information space.

Efforts like quadrilateral cooperation, backed by increasing commitments of allied and partner defence, diplomatic and economic resources, represents insurance against instability and coercion in Asia. In the discussions about how best to marshal those commitments, Australia deserves a seat at the table. A stable, peaceful Indo-Pacific, governed by a rules-based order, remains critical to Australian and American security and economic interests. It's also in the interest of others, including but not limited to Japan and India.

There's a useful message for Washington in all of this as well. Ultimately the success or failure of any regional configurations will depend in part on America's continued commitment to Asia. The Quad should further anchor US power and presence in the region, and ensure that Washington is working in combination with our closest allies and newest partners.

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