

Revival of Quadrilateral: A shift in India's Policy towards China?

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The prospect of a revival of the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#) (QSD), involving the US, India, Japan and Australia, has recently set the international media abuzz. The [first meeting of the Dialogue](#) was held in Manila on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit on 13-14 November.

Beijing, on expected lines, has [reacted sharply](#) stating that “relationships between countries in the Asia-Pacific region should not be a zero sum game and that good relations between US and India or Japan and India should not be at someone else’s expense”.

The QSD, an informal strategic dialogue between the US, India, Japan and Australia, had initially been established in 2007. The Dialogue was paralleled by combined military exercises of an unprecedented scale, as witness [MALABAR 2007](#), which saw participation by all four countries, and Singapore too. This diplomatic and military arrangement was widely perceived as ‘signaling’ to an assertive China. Beijing responded by issuing a *démarche* to the participating countries. Subsequently, in 2008, with the withdrawal of Australia during Kevin Rudd’s tenure as the Prime Minister, owing to concerns about Beijing’s reactions, the QSD ceased.

Since then, Australia has not participated in MALABAR, whereas Japan participated in 2009 and 2014 and became a permanent partner in the exercise with effect from 2015. The last edition of the exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal in July 2017, with a total of 16 warships (including one aircraft carrier each from the participant countries, namely USS Nimitz, INS Vikramaditya and JS Izumo), two submarines and 95 aircraft participating in the exercise.

Ever since Prime Minister Kevin Rudd demitted office, and especially since 2015, Australia has regularly been bidding for restoration as a participant in MALABAR series. In the run up to MALABAR 2017, Australia [renewed its request](#), but, although its request was endorsed by the US and Japan, India, acting partly out of concern for Chinese sensitivities, and partly owing to its own reservations against multilateral military groupings/ alliances, [declined to accommodate the Australian request](#).

Of the three countries envisioned to be involved with the US in the QSD and the expanded MALABAR exercises, only India has had reservations as it has traditionally guarded its ability to forge an independent foreign policy, staying equidistant from the multilateral security arrangements. Also, risks and benefits involved in such multilateral security dialogues and exercises, which Beijing might consider as inimical to its interest, would be totally different for India and Japan, being China's next door neighbours, than for the US and Australia.

The Quadrilateral was dormant for almost a decade since withdrawal of Australia in 2008. The expansion of MALABAR was also put on hold, despite consistent nudge by all other stakeholders, owing to India's discomfiture with multilateral groupings and exercises and also India's attempts at maintaining cordial relations with China. What has changed then between May this year, when India declined the Australian request for participation in the MALABAR exercise and now, in November, when India appears to have shed its inhibitions and the QSD now appears to be taking a formal shape?

There have been two major developments of particular significance recently that explains the possible reasons for the change in India's approach. In past one year, China has witnessed an unprecedented consolidation of power by its President, Xi Jinping, who today, is unarguably, the most powerful Chinese President of all time. And the history of modern China amply indicates that each time China has used military as its foreign policy tool, this has been preceded by consolidation of power by the Chinese President.

With most power concentrated in Xi's hands, it is almost certain that China would get even more aggressive in the coming times. An all-powerful leader in a totalitarian powerful state is not a good news for its neighbors, especially those with which it has unresolved territorial disputes. India would surely be aware of the consequences of these changes in China and consequently, is bound to explore various possibilities to offset the resultant developments.

Also, Xi's consolidation of power was simultaneously followed by Beijing's intransigence and bellicose posture over the Doklam crisis, thereby exacerbating India's concerns. PLA's belligerent stand at Doklam, duly supported through regular acerbic and provocative Chinese media observations on the issue, would have probably pushed New Delhi towards exploring various possible avenues to counter an increasingly aggressive China. The US, Japan and Australia easily qualify to be the like-minded partners with converging interests in the region. The formalization of the QSD and expansion of MALABAR exercises, in partnership with these nations, appear to be the foremost of the available options.

The recent developments, therefore, appear to be a move towards the return of the Quadrilateral arrangement to supplement the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. The enhanced trilateral engagements existing between the four nations (US – India – Japan, US - Japan - Australia) would provide a sound groundwork for a seamless return to the QSD. Formalisation of the QSD could lead to expansion of MALABAR, and it might be possible that 2018 edition of MALABAR features Australia too.

India has long followed the policy of hedging against China, carefully carrying out the policies of engagement and balancing simultaneously. With Beijing getting increasingly more assertive and aggressive in articulating and furthering its core interests, some of these unfavorable to India's interest, New Delhi would look to explore potent and credible avenues to balance Beijing's moves in the region. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and expanded MALABAR exercises are palpably two of those possible avenues. Also, if Beijing continues to push its aggressive agenda with obstinacy, even other nations of the region that are uncomfortable with the Chinese assertiveness, such as Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia etc, might also join in either of QSD/ MALABAR in coming years.

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