

Finding Common Ground: India, the Quad and ASEAN

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Summary

As the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) forum increases the frequency and intensity of its engagements and expands the scope of its regional public goods activity, there are signs of change in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) attitudes. While the Quad on its part is making a special effort to address the many reservations of Southeast Asia, sections of ASEAN too are beginning to take a fresh look at the Quad.

As the summit-level meetings of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) become routine, there is some evidence that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is now less sceptical of the forum that brings Australia, India, Japan and the United States (US) together in the Indo-Pacific. The signal from the Hiroshima summit of the Quad leaders was that the leaders are to complement and strengthen the various pre-existing regional forums. In the [joint statement](#) issued after a brief meeting in Hiroshima on the margins of the G7 meeting, the Quad leaders underlined their support for “the region’s development, stability, and prosperity through the Quad’s positive, practical agenda.” They added that “respect for the leadership of regional institutions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), is and will remain at the centre of the Quad’s efforts.”

There is some indication that sections of ASEAN are beginning to rethink their views of the Quad. In a [recent interview](#) with *New Straits Times*, Indonesian President Joko Widodo said the ASEAN “should view the Quad and AUKUS as partners, and not competitors.” AUKUS is a trilateral partnership between the US, the United Kingdom and Australia to develop nuclear propulsion and other advanced defence capabilities. It was unveiled in Washington in September 2021. Like the Quad, AUKUS generated intense opposition in Beijing and much unease in Southeast Asia.

India, whose ‘Look East’ policy has long been anchored in the partnership with ASEAN, has a special stake in reinforcing the message of complementarity with the Quad. After all, India’s renewed engagement with Asia in the 1990s was mediated and mentored by ASEAN. Unlike in the 1950s, when Jawaharlal Nehru’s India was animated by the idea of a “leading Asia”, Delhi now came back into the region with the recognition that India had fallen behind its Asian compatriots on the economic front and was not part of a new ASEAN-centred Asian regionalism. ASEAN deepened and widened its institutional architecture in the 1990s amidst a new wave of economic globalisation and relative harmony among great powers. For India, this was an opportune moment to reconnect with Asia and integrate with ASEAN-led economic and regional security institutions.

This quiet convergence on ASEAN-led regionalism began to come under a cloud soon. Singapore’s participation in the September 2007 Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal,

convened by India, and included Australia, Japan and the US saw vigorous protests from China that dubbed the exercise as the precursor to the formation of “Asian NATO”. Beijing also protested against the [first meeting of the Quad forum](#) – at the level of senior officials in May 2007. Chinese objections promoted Delhi to walk back from large-scale multilateral exercises. Beijing’s protestations also saw the Quad being put on ice by its members.

The advent of the Donald Trump administration in the US in 2017 saw the revival of the Quad as well as Washington’s adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework. The twin ideas of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad came to the fore during [Trump’s November 2017 visit to Asia](#) to attend ASEAN-led regional meetings. Together, they marked a fundamental shift in the US’ approach to China as well as its conception of the Asian security order that now put India at the very centre.

The renewed border conflict with China in the Doklam plateau saw Delhi too significantly change its attitudes towards Beijing and Washington. As it faced up to the growing Chinese assertiveness along the border, Delhi’s ambivalence about the Quad diminished and so did its hesitations about embracing the Indo-Pacific framework. This inevitably brought some tension between the Indian and ASEAN approaches to the new dynamic in Asia. After all, ASEAN, which had thriving partnerships with both China and the US, did not want to [choose between them](#).

In his [formal articulation](#) of India’s Indo-Pacific policy in 2018 at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took pains to emphasise India’s “inclusive approach” to the Indo-Pacific as well as the centrality of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific. The message has been repeatedly reaffirmed since then.

Two factors appear to be making a difference to ASEAN’s perception of the Quad today. One, US President Joe Biden administration’s doubling down on the Quad and the Indo-Pacific had begun to convince the region that the new strategic constructs are here to stay. The region is also coming to terms with the fact that the Sino-US conflict is here to stay and so is the India-China rivalry. The region now knows neither of these can be wished away and must be dealt with. Second, the Biden administration has abandoned the Trump framework of turning the Quad into a military alliance. The Indian opposition to making Quad a military alliance played a key role in this change. The Quad has now [“reframed its purpose](#) from exclusively countering China to a broader vision that appears to support ASEAN countries.” The emphasis on the provision of public goods such as health , infrastructure, climate change, and disaster response had helped reduce some of the negative perceptions of the Quad.

India and its Quad partners, however, have no reason to take ASEAN for granted and need to intensify their efforts to engage ASEAN on a sustained basis and address their potential concerns.

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