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Don't allow the QUAD to die

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In the trilateral meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit held in Osaka in June, they vowed to consider an inclusive approach for the Indo-Pacific to build peace and stability in the region. They have also decided to hold consultations to explore opportunities for the three in the Indo-Pacific region.

The same was highlighted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he delivered the keynote address at the 17th Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore last year that “India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members”, and that the Indo-Pacific region “stands for a free, open, inclusive region..... It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it”. He further stated that India strongly supports ASEAN’s initiative of establishing multilateral institutions and India is part of all such institutions so “ASEAN has been and will be central to its (Indo-Pacific) future”.

This shows New Delhi’s reluctance to endorse the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) concept in its fullest manner, despite India participating in the official level meetings which are taking place on the sidelines of East Asia Summit ever since its inception in 2017. Quad is a Japanese initiative comprising US, Japan, India and Australia for maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific. It represents the militarily powerful states from the Indo-Pacific region, barring China. Critics argue that Quad is a forum against China. China views Quad as well as the term Indo-Pacific as efforts towards enhancing US power in the region. China also does not endorse the Indo-Pacific construct; for them it is still ‘Asia-Pacific’. While the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ does not indicate any sense of belongingness for India; the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ provides an immense opportunity for enhancing India’s power and prestige. Indeed, the world recognizes India as a major power in Asia because of its potential power in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

Indo-Pacific region needs a regional balancing mechanism, not another 'talk-shop'

Ever since the end of the cold war, ASEAN has taken the initiative to set up multilateral institutions such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the 1990s and then East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). In all forums ASEAN members and major powers of the world – that have considerable stake in the security of the region – are part of these institutions. In fact, all are known for being “talk-shops” following inclusive and consensual decision-making processes, with all members having an equal say. Hence, hard security matters are conspicuously absent in these deliberations or are subtly mentioned.

The Quad, on the other hand, is a small grouping of militarily powerful states from the region who share certain common security perceptions. Importantly, their security will be more affected if one country becomes the hegemon in Asia.

In fact, inclusive approach has been the basic tenet of regional groupings such as Asian Relations Conference of 1947 and Bandung Conference of 1955, ever since Asia became free from the clutches of colonialism. Statesmen like Nehru and Sukarno continued this concept in their foreign policy approach. While Mao initially embraced this concept and wanted to become the leader of third world countries, but his original intention was to convert China into a

great power equal to the US and the Soviet Union. Towards this he gradually abandoned the inclusive concept. China still harbors the same ‘great power’ dream and current Chinese President Xi seeks that to happen under his stewardship.

As realists point out, an emerging power wants to ensure that there is no peer competitor in other regions. And China believes that since US is a diminishing power, it is looking for allies and partners in the region to contain a rising China. At the same time China will not be able to establish its supremacy in Asia without the concurrence of India and Japan, the peer regional competitors. Therefore, China wants to avoid a rivalry with them in the near future as it would affect its competition with the US. However, it is not sure which way China will pursue its strategy to get its demands accepted by India and Japan in the territorial disputes. In this respect, a balancing mechanism against China is necessary; cooperation will not always contribute desired results. As a result, India necessarily requires a ‘hedging’ strategy in its relations with China. And Quad provides that platform of peer competitors of China to ensure that China would not become a hegemon in Asia.

Similarly, the region doesn’t need another multilateral, inclusive and across-the-spectrum organization. Already two prominent multilateral regional organizations exist in each of the regions, viz. the ARF and EAS in the Pacific and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and

Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) in the Indian Ocean region, thereby following the tenet of inclusiveness. However, given the nature of complexity of disputes and no permanent mechanism to address various security challenges, the Indo-Pacific region needs different levels of groupings. Where hard power is concerned only militarily powerful countries can deal with such issues.

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As noted above, hard security issues – which include Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea and Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea – still remain unresolved; and China has a central role to play in both. These have the potential of spiralling into a real military conflict in the future. To prevent that from happening, a regional balancing mechanism of secondary states must remain in the Indo-Pacific region. And the Quad fits into that gap where none of the inclusive organizations can address such issues.

At the same time, the Quad doesn't need a NATO style military format. All the members are individually militarily powerful in their respective regions: India in the Indian Ocean, Japan in the western Pacific, and Australia in the South Pacific. So when the situation demands, they can temporarily form a coalition to maintain peace and stability in the region. In this regard, it is in India's best interests to continue with the Quad mechanism.