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The shrinking 'Quad': How the alliance is going nowhere as Japan and India court China

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This week, Singapore ruled out signing up for 'the Quad', a consultative mechanism encompassing the United States, Japan, India and Australia. The Quad, with a history going back to 2007, was revived on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit last November. But, on Monday, Singapore's Foreign Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, said too many questions remain about the substance of the Quad for Singapore to consider joining.

This is the latest confirmation that the Quad is not fleshing itself out as a strategic entity. In fact, we might be witnessing the story of the incredibly shrinking Quad.

This will be a disappointment for some. In Australia, academics with a strong pro-American perspective have insisted on seeing the Quad as a symbol of US commitment to Asia, especially given all the uncertainties of US President Donald Trump.

Former Australian intelligence analyst and diplomat Alan Dupont wrote in February, 'The embryonic Quad...will amplify Australia's regional clout, improve our security and help diversify authoritarian risk'. Academic Rory Medcalf called the Quad 'a symbol that the best hope of moderating a strong China's behaviour involves others showing solidarity with each other'.

They would be disappointed by what Southeast Asian leaders are themselves saying. The verdict of Singapore's foreign minister follows what his own Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, said in March: 'We do not want to end up with rival blocs forming or countries having to take one side or the other'.

It's not just Singapore. Indonesian President Joko Widodo met Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on May 7. This was only six days after CNBC broke the news that China had installed anti-ship cruise missiles on

three outposts in the South China Sea. Yet this revelation was not even raised in the China-Indonesia joint statement, which instead stressed that ‘peace and stability in the region including the South China Sea serve the shared interests of the two countries’ and reiterated commitment to a code of conduct. The Philippines’ view of the militarisation of the South China Sea was summed up by President Rodrigo Duterte, who simply said, ‘Ignore the missiles there. They are not for us.’

A poll conducted by Singapore’s [ASEAN Studies Centre](#) in May 2017 showed that 74 percent of elite individuals in Southeast Asia think China is the most influential country in the region. Only 3.5 percent opted for the US.

But it’s the behaviour of Quad members themselves – India and Japan – that is now putting in context the Quad meeting of last November and some of the hopes expressed about its potential. Both are now vigorously pursuing their bilateral relationships with China, unrestrained by the anti-China messaging implicit in the formation of the Quad.

On May 9, Japan took part in a trilateral summit with South Korea and China, each country represented by their leaders. This was in contrast to the meeting between junior officials – a deputy departmental secretary in Australia’s case – that constituted the resuscitation of the Quad in November. This trilateral arrangement of China, Japan and South Korea would appear to be a weightier forum – and a more urgent one – for a Tokyo nervous of Trump’s protectionism and his flamboyant diplomacy on Korea.

Japan, it seems, is open to rapprochement with China. And both are relegating their maritime territorial dispute in the East China Sea. During Premier Li’s visit, both sides agreed to establish a maritime communication mechanism. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Japan next year. He would be the first Chinese president to make the trip in over 10 years.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be prioritising an improvement of India-China relations. Shortly before his meeting with President Xi late last month, India excluded Australia from participating in the Malabar naval exercises. That must have hurt Canberra.

Just three months earlier, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had said talks on Australia’s joining were ‘progressing very well’. According to media reports, Modi is of the opinion that the US under Trump is an unreliable ally. This could hardly be construed as evidence of any Indian enthusiasm for a Quad-like harmonisation of policy towards China.

A US official talking about the Quad in February gave vent to the half-thought-out idea that its members might consider their own infrastructure initiatives as an alternative to China’s. It was a fragile notion, but received front page coverage in Australia. It is in fact so flimsy that it might have dissolved on first airing.

The best working definition of China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is that China is exporting a surplus in infrastructure to its neighbours. India has no such surplus capacity and its 800 million voters might want to sweep from power any government that tipped funds into ‘-stan states’ rather than its own. Nor has the US an infrastructure surplus. After all, it cannot boast a single kilometre of high-speed rail to rival China’s 25,000km.

A survey published in October 2017 said [74 percent of Australians](#) think the country does not need more people: a deficiency in infrastructure appears to be behind this view.

Japan, of course, can be considered a competitor to China in building rail or pipelines. It has surplus infrastructure capacity and all the required expertise. Japan and China will benefit from healthy

competition, as will host countries like Indonesia, Thailand or the Philippines. But it won't be a Quad initiative. The US official's dream of a Quad-backed alternative to China's belt and road must wait until India's cities are linked with high-quality roads and rail, when the US finally has high-speed trains running between Los Angeles and San Francisco (a line now not expected until after 2040); and when Australia's biggest cities have the sort of underground network that Shanghai or Beijing boast.

Geoff Raby, Australia's former ambassador to China, joked this week about how the Quad gets invoked while, essentially, signifying very little. He called the concept of the Indo-Pacific on which the Quad is centred 'Orwellian' which 'as a geopolitical concept is as meaningless as the Atlanto-Pacific would be'.

His scepticism about the initiative is increasingly hard to contradict.

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