

The Quad: US Searches Edge of Asia for Allies to Contain Beijing

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Global Research, December 28, 2017

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

There has been a recent buzz promoted around the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – a coalition of sorts counting the United States, India, Australia, and Japan as members. Promoted by familiar corporate-financier funded policy think tanks, the Quad is being portrayed as a step past Washington’s ill-fated “pivot to Asia” to address its waning power in the region.

Understanding that the US “pivot” was meant to co-opt and coerce Southeast Asia into forming a united front aimed at containing China’s economic, diplomatic, and military rise in the region in order to preserve and perhaps even expand US primacy in Asia Pacific, helps explain why it ultimately failed, and goes far in explaining what the Quad is and why it is being so eagerly promoted.

The Pivot’s Failure and Declining American Power

Southeast Asia, through the supranational Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) resisted attempts by Washington to realign regional policy to suit US interests at the cost of ASEAN’s growing ties with Beijing.

There were various components to the pivot including US efforts to undermine, overthrow, and replace with obedient client regimes the governments of several ASEAN states including Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia.

The expansion of US “soft power” across ASEAN was a part of this component, particularly through the US State Department’s ongoing long-term efforts via the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its “[Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative](#)” (YSEALI) launched in 2013.

These efforts have so-far failed, with only limited success in placing a US client regime in power in Myanmar in the form of [Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy \(NLD\) party](#).

Elsewhere – in 2014 – the US-backed government of Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of long-time US ally Thaksin Shinawatra, was ousted in a military coup. Protests in Malaysia led by the US-funded and directed “Bersih” front have yet to materialize substantial results. And in Cambodia, the government under Prime Minister Hun Sen has begun an aggressive campaign to uproot and expel the US State Department’s media and opposition fronts including [the arrest of opposition leader Kem Sokha](#) and the dissolution of his Cambodia National Rescue Party – a move that may be replicated in some form or another by other ASEAN states if successful.

Another component was a series of artificial conflicts the US manufactured and then served as mediator in resolving surrounding the ongoing South China Sea territorial dispute. ASEAN collectively refused to become involved, and even supposed claimants in the dispute – Vietnam and the Philippines – have drifted away from the hardline approach proposed by the US to confront Beijing.

At one point, the Philippines even dismissed [a supposedly “international court ruling”](#) in its favor arranged by a team of US lawyers, and instead pursued bilateral negotiations with Beijing.

The final component of America’s pivot to Asia was the proliferation of terrorism [sponsored by Washington’s closest allies in the Middle East](#). This included a 2015 bombing in Bangkok allegedly carried out [by Turkish militants](#) and the sudden appearance and spread of the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) in the Philippines.

ISIS’ arrival and occupation of the southern Philippine city of Marawi was particularly “serendipitous” for US foreign policy – coming at a time when the Philippines had rebuked US involvement in the South China Sea dispute, Washington’s interference in the Philippines’ internal political affairs, and began calling for the complete removal of US military forces from its territory. ISIS’ arrival thus provided [an all-too-convenient pretext for the US to not only remain in the Philippines](#), but to expand its footprint there.

The “Quad” Picks Up Where the Pivot Tripped and Fell

At the heart of Asia-Pacific, America finds itself increasingly unwelcomed and increasingly resorting to confrontation in a “pivot” that was supposed to unify the region behind Washington’s regional agenda rather than against it.

To address this, Washington has moved to the absolute edges of Asia-Pacific in search of willing allies – resulting in the “Quad.” India finds itself at the very western edge, Australia to its very south, and Japan to its very east. The US itself, is in no shape, form, or way located in or adjacent to Asia save for its overseas military presence in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia – a fact that casts immediate doubts over the legitimacy of the coalition’s agenda.

Western editorials regarding the Quad make no attempt to conceal the true intentions of this US-led initiative – to contain China.

The South China Morning Post in an op-ed titled, [“US, Japan, India, Australia... Is Quad the First Step to an Asian NATO?”](#) would claim:

The new strategy to confront China head on with a unified front underscored a growing regional competition between Beijing and Washington. The Quad meeting came as the US appeared to be shifting strategic focus. As Trump was visiting East Asia, he too referred to the region as the “Indo-Pacific” rather than the “Asia-Pacific” – a clear shot at Beijing.

The Diplomat in its piece titled, [“US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation,”](#) would note regarding the statements produced from the dialogue, that:

The Australian and the U.S. statements touched on all seven of the issues highlighted above under the aegis of a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” Japan’s statement omitted any mention of enhancing “connectivity,” which, for India and the United States, has come to mean offering an alternative vision to China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

The piece would go on to state:

Meanwhile, India’s statement on Saturday’s meeting omitted any explicit reference to freedom of navigation and overflight, respect for international law, and maritime security. Delhi has however, in various bilateral statements and declarations with each of the other quadrilateral participants, voiced support for these principles.

Both the Indian and Japanese omissions aren’t a statement of disinterest, but rather intended to assuage concerns in Beijing that the reconvened quadrilateral will explicitly attempt to contain China.

The Diplomat would conclude by noting much work would be required to offer the rest of Asia incentives to uphold “the status quo regional architecture and a rules-based order,” (read: US primacy in the region) “versus China’s competing vision.” Considering that fact and that even among the Quad, there is an obvious disconnect between each members’ agenda and with reality in regards to containing China, Washington faces a difficult, uphill battle in doing this.

Convincing India or Australia to refuse cooperating with, benefiting from, and thus enabling China’s rise will be an increasingly difficult proposition over time. For Southeast Asia, refusing to engage constructively with China ranges from difficult to impossible. Many states in Southeast Asia have already signed agreements and are beginning construction on portions of China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. This includes Laos and Thailand which are constructing high speed rail lines that will ultimately connect China’s southern city of Kunming to Malaysia and Singapore through both nations.

Southeast Asia’s armed forces are also increasingly turning to China both for new hardware and for joint training exercises – two realms once dominated by the United States, but no longer.

Hammering a Quad Peg into a Round Hole

It is clear that part of Washington’s uphill battle then will consist of destabilizing and removing from power those governments in the region overseeing joint projects with China, and placing into power governments that will either delay or abandon such projects. This goes far in explaining the uptick in overt political interference by the US, including directly through US embassies in nations like Thailand and Cambodia where opposition groups are openly sheltered and shielded by US embassy staff.

In Thailand, the US along with the EU have been pressuring the interim government [to hold premature elections in hopes of returning Shinawatra to power](#). In Cambodia, the US and EU are threatening sanctions against the government for its moves against US-funded and directed opposition groups. And in Myanmar, the US [has engineered violence on both sides of the Rohingya crisis](#), threatening to upend stability should joint projects with China not be abandoned.

In essence, the US plans to continue all of the activities it has pursued during its “pivot to Asia” – including political subversion, confrontation with Beijing, and even terrorism. The Quad is not an alternative for ASEAN to turn to instead of Beijing, it is an alternative for ASEAN to turn to as a means of escaping US coercion and subversion.

The Quad is a Threat to Three out of Four Members

The success or failure of nations like Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar in navigating around Washington’s provocations will determine the overall success or failure of Washington’s Quad initiative. And even for India, Japan, and Australia, a destabilized Southeast Asia in no way serves their best interests – whether the respective leadership of each Quad member recognizes this or not.

Genuinely constructive ties between Quad members and a stable Asia would benefit the region as a whole and provide a windfall of benefits to each respective nation. This is a point that has not gone unnoticed in Beijing or by ASEAN members. As much as Washington sees India, Australia, and Japan as a counterbalance to China, these three nations are seen as potential economic and security alternatives to Washington’s increasingly unwelcomed role in Asia Pacific.

While Washington seeks to co-opt and dash the other members of the Quad onto the rocks of confrontation with a rising China for the sake of preserving its own regional primacy, China may seek to offer a safe and calm harbor instead. Economic ties between China and Quad-member Australia are already significant with China serving as Australia’s largest trade partner. India also does considerable business across Asia and increasingly with China.

Washington’s plans to continue interfering in the region for the sake of its own primacy may well drive the Quad to at the very least transform into a trilateral effort – seeking to cut deals with China on their own terms without compromising or setting back their own interests for the sake of Washington.

Without the Quad, the US will have to search even further for partners in its quest for Asian primacy. With the UK signaling interest [in sending warships around the planet](#) to assist the US in provoking the Chinese off their own shores, perhaps Asia-Pacific will be relabeled once again – from Indo-Pacific to Anglo-Pacific, and the Quad replaced by an Anglo-American Duo.

Tony Cartalucci is a Bangkok-based geopolitical researcher and writer, especially for the online magazine [“New Eastern Outlook”](#) where this article was originally published.

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