

Act East and Indo-Pacific: Assessing the responses from ASEAN

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a central role in India's Act East Policy (AEP). After Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who envisioned India's Look East Policy in the early 1990s, subsequent Indian prime ministers have been following the trend of placing ASEAN in the centre of India's engagements in the Asia-Pacific. As India has shown more enthusiasm to be a strong stakeholder in the Asia-Pacific (and, in the Indo-Pacific) in recent years, developments like Quadrilateral consultation forum (Quad) needs to be examined in order to understand the implications of such actions, especially from the perspectives of ASEAN member-states. This will help in understanding the future trajectory of India's AEP and its approach towards the Indo-Pacific. So far, several ASEAN heads of state have expressed their scepticism about the formation and objectives of the Quad forum. This scepticism has actually motivated India and its Quad partners to invite other countries to join the forum and convert it into a consultation grouping. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses various aspects related to ASEAN's responses towards India's take on the Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

'I think it's very desirable for us not to have to take sides, but the circumstances may come when ASEAN may have to choose one or the other. I am hoping that it's not coming soon.'

-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 15 November 2018 ([ASEAN has to work with the world as it is: PM Lee Hsien Loong, 2018](#)).

The notion of Indo-Pacific has gained a lot of momentum in recent years. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in April 2017, Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper, issued in November 2017 and the National Security Strategy of



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the US, published in 2017 all emphasise the importance of maintaining and sustaining an inclusive and thriving Indo-Pacific region for national and regional interests (Lee, 2018). In June 2019, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated the significance that New Delhi attaches to the Indo-Pacific region by calling it the 'highway for trade and prosperity' (PTI and Business Standard, 2019). The Quad forum is being considered as one of the manifestations of the Indo-Pacific strategy developed by Japan, Australia, India, and the United States.

The Quad forum started in 2004 when the above-mentioned countries came together to coordinate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami. This was followed by an informal meeting in 2007 in Manila where representatives from the four countries met on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit. In the same year, the four countries decided to conduct a joint military exercise under the umbrella of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. However, Quad 1.0 could not succeed as Australia chose to withdraw showing ambivalence towards the strategy, as the country was not ready to face opposition from China, who objected to the military exercise. The next phase of Quad, (popularly known as Quad 2.0), surfaced in 2017 when Taro Kono, the Foreign Minister of Japan proposed to revive the grouping. The first meeting of Quad 2.0 took place in Manila in 2017, again on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit. Since then the representatives from the four countries have met a few times and discussed issues relating to freedom of navigation and overflight in the maritime commons, respect for international law, enhancing connectivity, maritime security, nuclear security, etc. In the last year and a half, three more meetings have been conducted under the ambit of Quad 2.0 and it is now being referred to as a consultation grouping instead of security grouping. From the Indian perspective, which has always maintained that ASEAN remains at the core of its Act East Policy, it is important to understand how ASEAN members view the current developments as the Quad consultations are likely staying for some time now. The argument here is that ASEAN members have responded to Quad 2.0 in an uncertain way primarily due to the fear of antagonising China. Rather, they appreciate the larger concept of Indo-Pacific as it offers plenty of opportunities to nurture development and cooperation. In light of this response from most ASEAN members, India and the other Quad partners have chosen to address this issue by allowing for flexibility in the nature of the Quad grouping and adopting an all-encompassing nature for the Indo-Pacific region with a focus on development and cooperation.

ASEAN and Indo-Pacific and Quad: identifying the concerns

- The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has carried out a survey on the image issue of Quad in Southeast Asia. According to the survey result, 40% of the respondents viewed Quad as a symbolic and diplomatic initiative. 57% of the total respondents associated Quad with the need to balance China (Le Thu, 2018). While this shows that people from ASEAN member-states represent a mixed reaction to Quad, the same goes for the perceptions of the leaders towards the initiative. According to a few scholars, the perception issue of Quad can be handled by relating the history of its origin to the Core Group of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), which evolved after the tsunami in 2004, and not with the expanded Malabar Exercise planned in 2007, which attracted Chinese opposition to the idea of a military

partnership in the Indian Ocean without China. Quad has the potential to enjoy more popularity within the ASEAN region if it is associated with non-traditional security issues, development, and cooperation, and not with military and defence cooperation and the containment of China (Parameswaran, 2019).

- ASEAN is worried that Quad, which was designed and developed by non-ASEAN countries, will eventually loosen the concept of ASEAN centrality and damage the regional status that ASEAN (and ASEAN-related organisations) enjoys as it links countries from the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. ASEAN is also worried that its involvement in the Quad and other developments in the Indo-Pacific might distance it from its stand of neutrality. As Quad is a grouping that involves the US - but not China - ASEAN countries are anxious about losing their neutrality by involving themselves with Quad (Lee, 2018). A commentary in the *Foreign Policy* reminds us that: ‘ASEAN states, however, have long preferred to remain nonaligned in order to avoid involvement in any potential conflict between the United States and China, so they would not be interested in becoming full-fledged Quad members’ (Grossman, 2018). Similar emotions were expressed by the Singaporean prime minister, presented in the beginning of this paper. While most countries from the region have expressed similar ambivalence towards the development of Quad, countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have shown enthusiasm about the ‘free and open’ Indo-Pacific (Lee, 2018). Last year in August, the Indonesian Minister of Defence, Ryamizard Ryacudu, mentioned his country’s adherence to the rule of law and reiterated the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific during a meeting with the US Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Having mentioned this, ASEAN member states have started showing a positive interest in the larger concept of Indo-Pacific (Rajagopalan, 2018).
- The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, released on 23 June 2019, serves as a set of principles for ASEAN’s stakes in the Indo-Pacific. It mentions the ‘rise of material powers’, which means economic and military powers and how they have been affecting the balance in the region. On the same time, it refrains from mentioning the name of any individual country and suggests ways for ASEAN to fruitfully contribute to the development of the region by enhancing cooperation in areas like maritime security, connectivity, and economy. This perfectly sums up the collective will of ASEAN as it welcomes the concept of Indo-Pacific. The Outlook reiterates the idea of ASEAN centrality at the core of the Indo-Pacific region, which should emphasise on the following issues:
 - a. ‘A perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role;
 - b. An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry;
 - c. An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all;
 - d. The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional

architecture' ([ASEAN 2019](#)).

India's take on Quad 2.0: focus on ASEAN centrality, all-inclusive growth, development, and cooperation

In India's Act East Policy (AEP), which is a strengthened form of the Look East Policy (LEP), India has always given ASEAN a central place. Because of India's geography, geopolitical importance, and its decades-old partnerships with its member states, ASEAN continues to enjoy a privileged position in India's external relations with the neighbours located in the Indo-Pacific. The press releases and other media statements issued by India on Quad consultations have focused on connectivity, maritime security, non-traditional security issues and not so much on military and defence cooperation. The foreign ministry officials from the Quad countries met in Bangkok on 31 May 2019 and discussed the potential of 'cooperation in the areas of connectivity and infrastructure development; regional security, including counterterrorism, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief; maritime cooperation; and cyber security issues, with a view to promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region' ([MEA, 2019](#)). The same press release mentions that 'The participants reiterated their strong support for ASEAN-Centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms in the regional architecture for the Indo-Pacific and in this regard welcomed the initiative of ASEAN towards a common vision for the Indo-Pacific.' Prime Minister Modi called for the need of 'growth together' at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue. He also mentioned China's significant contribution to the region's development and suggested that China needs to be included within the broad concept of Indo-Pacific ([Le Thu, 2018](#)). In order to appease the ASEAN members, India, along with the other three partners in Quad, has advocated enhancing the scope of the consultation forum to include the ASEAN states in it. India would also want to enhance participation from ASEAN states in Track 1.5 and Track 2 level dialogues involving civil society, think tanks, academicians and policy makers to create awareness on various development related issues, which would be beneficial to both sides.

From India's perspective, another way to engage ASEAN members states involves enhanced bilateral relationships with the countries in the region. In recent years, India has improved its bilateral relationships with most of the Southeast Asian countries. Now, it has become one of the significant military and defence partners of Vietnam. During the Indonesian President Joko Widodo's visit to New Delhi in 2016, both countries adopted a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, which aims to nurture the prospects and address the challenges as Comprehensive Strategic Partners in this domain. Both countries have agreed to work together in areas like trade and investment, tourism (between Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India and the Indonesian island of Sumatra), direct business-to-business linkages, sustainable development, and protection of marine resources, which also includes combating climate change and safeguarding the environment and natural resources. They have also agreed to work on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing in the marine space.

At the multilateral level, India has taken initiatives like Security and Growth for All in the Indian Ocean Region (SAGAR) to ensure that Indian Ocean littoral neighbours are reminded about India's

potential and desire to work towards development and cooperation. This is in sync with many of the Southeast Asian countries' visions for an Indo-Pacific that ensures growth and development for all.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is a development that has been welcomed by most of the Southeast Asian countries as it offers opportunities for all. This is why Prime Minister Modi has referred it as 'a natural region' (Dobell, 2019). On the other hand, from the perspectives of the Southeast Asian countries, Quad 2.0 is mostly considered to be a grouping that excludes China. However, India, along with its other partners in Quad, has been cautious to avoid this branding. For the Southeast Asian countries, it will take a long time to accommodate it in their national and regional discourses in a positive way. The geographic proximity of China to the region, its economic profile, permanent membership at the United Nations Security Council, the capability of it to challenge existing international norms by creating new multilateral organisations, and the Belt and Road Initiative all have transformed China into a strong influential actor in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

Hence, New Delhi is likely to maintain a stable and balanced approach to the region. It is imperative that India continues to work on its relationship with China on the one hand, and with the Quad partners on the other to preserve a unique place for itself in the Indo-Pacific with a clear focus on strong neighbourly relationships with the ASEAN member states through ensuring cooperation and development for all. For most ASEAN states, better engagements with India are already viewed as an avenue to manage any apprehension that comes with China's rise and its assertiveness in the region. As India speaks about inclusive development of the Indo-Pacific, this will further enable New Delhi and the ASEAN capitals to foster more partnership and cooperation. Perhaps, India can do this by engaging with the ASEAN capitals along with Beijing, DC, Canberra and Tokyo through more Track 1.5 and Track 2 level dialogues and formal regional/sub-regional organisations. New Delhi's initiative to invite the BIMSTEC members at the BRICS Summit in Goa in 2016 was welcomed by the international community, especially the fellow BIMSTEC member countries as it added a special dimension to the idea of regionalism and sub-regionalism connecting South and Southeast Asia. Such initiatives are likely to enhance India's footprints in the Indo-Pacific. To conclude, one may remember that India is guided by its tradition of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) which is reflected in its policies towards the Indo-Pacific as well.

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