



## Japan, the Indo-Pacific, and the “Quad”

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On the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in November 2017, officials from the United States, Japan, India, and Australia met to discuss the revival of quadrilateral cooperation among four of the region’s major maritime democracies. Japan chaired the meeting, focusing on the theme of a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” This refrain, which also has been adopted by the Trump administration, echoed language from Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s visit to India two months prior. Tokyo has emerged as the biggest cheerleader for the “quad,” asserting its leadership and pressing other partners to embrace the new framework. What are the motivations that drive Japan’s enthusiasm for this “mini-lateral” initiative? Can Tokyo, with its own limitations, remain a driving force behind the concept and operation?

### Japan’s Motivations and Limitations

Japan has been at the forefront of pursuing the quadrilateral arrangement, with Abe in particular championing the concept and using his personal ties with President Trump to influence US policy. Japan’s eagerness to pursue the quad appears driven above all by its concern over China’s increasing power and influence in the region. Security concerns about China’s intentions have spiked in Japan since a territorial dispute over a set of islands in the East China Sea (known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyutai in China) flared in 2010. As this tension continues, Abe is anxious to establish a regional order that is not defined by China’s economic, geographic, and strategic dominance. To this end, he is pursuing stronger security relationships along China’s maritime periphery, particularly India. Expanding the region to include the South Asian subcontinent—some claim that Abe himself coined the concept of the “Indo-Pacific”—broadens the strategic landscape. To those suspicious of Chinese intentions, engaging India eastward forces Beijing to divert some of its resources and attention to the Indian Ocean.

Japan’s insecurity is heightened by perceptions that the United States may be a waning power in the region. In addition to shared concerns about China, uncertainty about US credibility and staying power may also motivate Delhi, Tokyo, and Canberra to keep the United States engaged via the strategic framework. Fears of

Washington's diminishing power may have been heightened by President Trump's election and his administration's "America First" policy, particularly after the US withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. According to some analysts, India, Japan, and Australia thus have reason to embrace a framework that draws US security attention to the region, as well as to develop diplomatic structures with one another independent of the United States, such as the Japan-India-Australia trilateral dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

## Post-Abe: Will Japan's Posture Recede?

As prime minister, Abe has accelerated reforms to Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) to make it a more flexible and advanced military. He pushed through a revised interpretation of Japan's right to engage in collective self-defense, increased Japan's defense budget, passed security legislation to increase SDF capabilities, created a national security council to centralize Japan's foreign policy-making, and supports changing the Japanese constitution to explicitly refer to the SDF as a military force. With a fractured opposition, Prime Minister Abe has been singularly successful in achieving these reforms, despite some misgivings among the public about whether Japan should develop a more muscular posture. Abe, the longest-serving premier since the 1960s, appears likely to remain in office until September 2021. After he steps down, however, it is unclear whether Japan's next leader will embrace defense commitments that extend far beyond Japan's territorial boundaries.

## Origins of the Quadrilateral Framework

The origins of the quad grouping arose from the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. One of the deadliest natural disasters in history, the tsunami killed an estimated 250,000 people in at least 15 countries, from Indonesia to Madagascar. In the aftermath, the US military launched "Operation Unified Assistance" and deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln to Aceh, the region of Indonesia hardest hit by the tsunami. Other regional militaries joined the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief effort, with the navies of Australia, Japan, and India providing the most capable and willing forces. As ad-hoc operations proceeded organically, the "Tsunami Core Group" spontaneously developed. Together, the four militaries contributed over 40,000 troops and humanitarian responders, in addition to dozens of planes, helicopters, and ships to assist the victims of the disaster.<sup>2</sup> The efficacy of the response and the ease of coordination among the four parties may have provided the initial inspiration for further cooperation in the maritime domain.

Three years later, the idea of the quadrilateral arose again, driven in at least some degree by Prime Minister Abe, then serving his first term. Visiting India in 2007, he gave an impassioned appeal in a speech to the Indian Parliament, saying, "The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability—and the responsibility—to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture

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<sup>1</sup> J. Berkshire Miller, "[How Abe and Modi Can Save the Indo-Pacific](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Grossman, "[The Tsunami Core Group: A Step Toward a Transformed Diplomacy in Asia and Beyond](#)," *Security Challenges*, Volume 1 Number 1, 2005.

and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency.”<sup>3</sup> During his 2006-2007 term, Abe employed a “values-based diplomacy” approach to foreign affairs, calling for an “arc of freedom and prosperity” among democratic countries. This rhetoric echoed some of the tenets of the George W. Bush administration’s foreign policy at that time.

Tokyo and Canberra, already part of coalition forces in the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, were keen to continue security cooperation. With India engaged, the quadrilateral enjoyed a brief heyday, culminating in the four powers plus Singapore together holding naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. Beijing, sensing an incipient quasi-alliance of democracies, lodged diplomatic protests and a growing number of security observers criticized the quad as cornering China into a defensive posture.<sup>4</sup> The leaders who had championed the quad thinned out in 2007: Abe resigned, Australian Prime Minister John Howard lost his seat, and President Bush’s popularity sagged at the end of his presidency. The incoming Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decided to pull out of the arrangement, finding that its economic relationship with China could suffer, and the quadrilateral energy dissipated.<sup>5</sup>

## India’s Appeal to Tokyo

Engaging India in a broader security framework has been seen by many analysts as the primary challenge to establishing a quadrilateral arrangement. India and Japan have both been keen to develop stronger ties for several years, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Abe. During Abe’s first stint as prime minister in 2006-2007, he pursued tighter relations with India, both bilaterally and as part of his “security diamond” concept. For India, deepening engagement with Japan is a major aspect of New Delhi’s broader “Act East” policy. Under the two leaders, the countries have developed more bilateral dialogues at all levels of government, supported each other on areas of geopolitical concern, and bolstered educational and cultural exchanges. Modi and Abe share a forceful leadership style and appear to have established a strong personal rapport.

Analysts point to the lack of historical baggage between the two countries, mutual respect for democratic institutions, and the shared cultural and religious ties in Buddhism that have allowed the relationship to flourish. According to India’s External Affairs Ministry, “The friendship between India and Japan has a long history rooted in spiritual affinity and strong cultural and civilizational ties.” It notes that “the two countries have never been adversaries. Bilateral ties have been singularly free of any kind of dispute—ideological, cultural, or territorial.”<sup>6</sup> Over the past decade, Beijing has at times wielded its new influence in ways that have alarmed other regional states, especially when Beijing is perceived as acting too assertively or even aggressively. This has been the case with Japan and India—both of which have longstanding territorial disputes with China—and leaders in the two countries have sought to increase their bilateral cooperation in apparent response.

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<sup>3</sup> “[Confluence of the Two Seas](#),” Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Rory Medcalf, “[Chinese Ghost Story](#),” *The Diplomat*, February 14, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Grant Wyeth, “Why Has Australia Shifted Back to the Quad?” *The Diplomat*, November 16, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Bilateral Relations,” Consulate General of India, Kobe-Osaka, December 2016.

Prime Minister Abe has held India in special regard due to his own family lineage as well as his perspective on Japan's World War II legacy. Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, enjoyed a close relationship with India and visited India as prime minister in 1957. Kishi, grateful for India's friendship in the difficult years after World War II, made India the first recipient of Japanese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) as Japan began its economic recovery and became an aid donor to other countries.<sup>7</sup> Abe has often emulated his grandfather as a political role model, and his affection for India appears to be deeply personal.

Abe has also expressed appreciation for Radhabinod Pal, the Indian judge who served as one of eleven justices on the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (or "Tokyo Tribunal") that was established to try Japanese leaders for their responsibility for the war and aggression throughout Asia. Pal was the only justice to vote to acquit all defendants on all charges; among the accused war criminals was Nobusuke Kishi. Pal became a hero in Japan and inspired a movement that deemed the tribunal illegitimate and unjust.<sup>8</sup> As Prime Minister in 2007, Abe paid tribute to Pal in a speech to the Indian Parliament and later visited Pal's son in India to pay his respects.<sup>9</sup>

### **Australian Ties Deepening**

Japan has also been steadily developing defense relations with Australia over the past decade. Australia is Japan's top energy supplier, and a series of economic and security pacts have been signed under Prime Minister Abe. In 2017, Tokyo and Canberra signed an updated acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) and are in the process of negotiating a visiting forces agreement. As another US treaty ally, Australia uses similar practices and equipment, which may make cooperation with Japan more accessible.

Although Japan had some difficult World War II history with Australia, Abe himself has made efforts to overcome this potential obstacle to closer defense ties. In 2014, during the first address to the Australian parliament by a Japanese prime minister, Abe explicitly referenced "the evils and horrors of history" and expressed his "most sincere condolences towards the many souls who lost their lives."<sup>10</sup>

### **South Korea's Exclusion**

Leaders in Tokyo may find the absence of South Korea an additional advantage of the quadrilateral grouping. Tokyo and Seoul have often been at odds and resistant to US encouragement of closer trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. During the Obama administration, the United States emphasized trilateral cooperation to deal with North Korea, pressing Japan and South Korea to resolve disputes over history issues in order to develop stronger security relations. A 2015 agreement between Tokyo and Seoul to address the issue of the "comfort women"—Korean women forced into providing sexual services to Japanese soldiers during the World War II era—was praised by US officials as a breakthrough. The

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<sup>7</sup> Ananth Krishnan, "Coming Full Circle: Shinzo Abe in India," *The Hindu*, May 13, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "Decades After War Trials, Japan Still Honors a Dissenting Judge," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> "Japan PM Meets Son of War Crimes Judge," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> [Remarks By Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament](#), Tuesday, July 8, 2014.

agreement—criticized by much of the South Korean public—appeared to clear the way for Japan and South Korea in 2016 to sign a long-stalled intelligence sharing agreement, known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Although low profile trilateral efforts continue, at South Korea’s insistence they are focused on North Korea.

An added complication is the tension between Seoul and Tokyo that has returned since Moon Jae-in was elected president in May 2016. Although the Moon administration ultimately decided not to demand a renegotiation of the comfort women agreement, his criticism of the pact has left lingering distrust in Japan.<sup>11</sup> Moon’s October 2016 promise to China that South Korea would neither integrate its missile defense system nor form an official alliance with Japan reflects Seoul’s limited appetite for advancing defense relations with Tokyo.

When Abe first proposed the quad in 2007, his administration framed the concept as advancing cooperation among liberal democracies, describing Japan’s vision of “an arc of freedom of prosperity.”<sup>12</sup> Although the approach included an outreach to European countries, neighboring South Korea was not sought out for more engagement. The recent iteration of the quad idea centers on maritime cooperation in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean among the four navies, which also may marginalize—intentionally or not—South Korea’s role in the security architecture of the region. This may be preferable to Seoul, which traditionally has shied away from taking positions that anger Beijing. Only in 2016 did South Korea and China partially resolve tension surrounding Seoul’s acceptance of a US missile defense battery, and South Korea’s progressive government may be reluctant to seek membership in a framework that raises Chinese suspicions about encirclement.<sup>13</sup>

## Japan’s Interest in US Facilitation

Japan is anxious to ensure that the United States remain a dominant presence in the region, and the quad formulation demands that the United States assert leadership and stay engaged. In the past, the United States has generally encouraged the development of closer relationships among its allies and partners in Asia. Washington, New Delhi, Canberra, and Tokyo share concerns about China’s increasing military and economic power in the world, although the concerns have different nuances. Japan’s alarm is the most acute given its territorial and maritime boundary disputes with China in the East China Sea. The United States is concerned about China’s overall challenge to US global leadership and leadership in East Asia. Australia is nervous about China’s economic and geopolitical dominance in its neighborhood, not to mention evidence of Chinese attempts to influence Australian politics. India is wary of Beijing’s intentions (particularly in periodic land border disputes), but reliant on China for its own economic growth. Overall security trends have increased momentum, with Japan developing a more muscular security posture and India moving away from a traditional focus rooted in the “non-aligned movement” of

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<sup>11</sup> Mina Pollman, “[What Next for Japan-South Korea Relations?](#)” *The Diplomat*, May 29, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> “Speech by Mr. Taro Aso, Minister for Foreign Affairs on the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan’s Expanding Diplomatic Horizons.’” [Full text.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Tom Corben, “[South Korea and the Quad: Missing Out or Opting Out?](#)” *The Diplomat*, December 23, 2017.



developing countries. Officials in the other capitals look to Washington as a critical facilitator and indispensable enabler of more military interoperability.

Defense analysts have coined the term “mini-laterals” to describe these groupings. Security cooperation—with the United States serving as a facilitator—has expanded, particularly in the maritime arena. In 2015, Japan became a permanent participant in the annual Malabar naval exercises, which had for two decades been bilateral US-India exercises, with other countries invited as observers or one-off participants. The 2017 exercises featured aircraft carriers (Japan calls its vessel a “helicopter destroyer”) from all three navies and focused on anti-submarine warfare, notable because of the increasing presence of Chinese People’s Liberation Army-Navy submarines operating in the Indian Ocean.<sup>14</sup> Some analysts have identified the Malabar exercises as a platform for defense engagement in the Indo-Pacific as a whole, potentially boosting like-minded militaries interoperability in the maritime domain.<sup>15</sup> In 2018, Australia has expressed interest in joining the other three navies, although India has indicated some reservations. If Australia does participate in the exercises later this year, it may provide a boost to those hoping for the operationalization of the quad. For Japan, such positive momentum will likely be seen as a victory in its campaign to assert the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific. ■

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<sup>14</sup> “India-Japan-US Malabar 2017 Naval Exercises Kick Off With Anti-Submarine Warfare in Focus,” *The Diplomat*, July 10, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “The Malabar Exercise: An Emerging Platform for Indo-Pacific Cooperation?” *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2016.