Geo-economic shifts

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James Curran

Is the Quad a strategic alliance or lots of talk with no action?

Australian advocates of the so-called "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" – which brings together the United States, Japan, India and Australia – must now feel as if the wind is in their sails.

Although it did not directly name the "Quad", the Turnbull government’s Foreign Policy White Paper, released late last year, signalled a willingness by Australia to work more within "plurilateral arrangements". Shortly afterwards, President Trump’s National Security Strategy took the more direct route by affirming that the United States would “increase quadrilateral cooperation” with Tokyo, New Delhi and Canberra. The summary of the Pentagon’s National Defence Strategy made no secret of Washington’s intent to expand Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.

It is little wonder then that, upon seeing four generals from the respective Quad countries sharing the stage at a recent security conference in New Delhi, one Australian observer marvelled at watching “history being made”. It was interesting to note, then, that in the next breath he observed that the group was doing little more than swapping notes on each countries’ respective strategic concerns. Nonetheless, the release of the new Pentagon and White House strategic documents explains these new and heightened expectations for the Quad. US Asian allies, once nervous at the prospect of a Trump presidency, have been somewhat calmed by the more traditional noises emanating from the White House. Trump was even talking the language of shared sacrifice and solidarity. The transactional impulse remains strong, but it is being uttered with much less venom than it was on the campaign trail.

After all the concerns before Trump’s election about the content of his regional approach, there is a tendency now to see in these documents the reassertion of a more traditional US Asia policy, and to believe that the US has renewed strategic confidence and certainty about how to meet the threat posed by a "revisionist China." Likely trade action against Beijing by the Trump administration this year would seem to support the view that the more hawkish and interventionist elements in Washington’s national security community have the President’s ear.

After the disappointment and suspicion engendered by Canberra’s withdrawal from the Quad in 2007, there is little doubt that the coming-together of these four democracies again is a diplomatic development worthy of note. In essence, the Quad has already done the job its proponents want it to do: sending a warning to China. This warning is not to be underestimated, given the legitimate concerns about Chinese strategic behaviour in recent years.

The problem with the Quad is that no matter how important or symbolic this gesture, sooner or later the lack of real substance in its strategic intent will show.

For Australian leaders, the Quad sometimes appears to be the love that dare not speak its name. During his recent summit in Tokyo with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Malcolm Turnbull did not mention the Quad at all. Its absence was all the more noticeable given the rather lacklustre communique to emerge from the trip. Minister for Defence Industry Christopher Pyne expressed the woolly hope on a recent visit to Delhi that the Quad could develop into "something of use to all four countries". While also not being seen by anyone in the region as "any kind
of attempt to limit their activities". No one, least of all Beijing, is fooled by ministers or prime ministers speaking with forked tongues.

In an interview with The Australian Financial Review, Abe was emphatic that the Quad “does not mean necessarily engaging in any military activities”. He said it had to do with “raising our voice” about the importance of co-operation, especially where that cooperation concerns freedom of navigation, maritime enforcement capabilities and the promotion of international standards in infrastructure and ports. Joint military exercises are one thing, but Tokyo and Canberra remain unwilling to follow the US into the 12 nautical mile zone around contested territories in the South China Sea.

This begs the question that continues to dog the Quad. Its advocates habitually fall over themselves to refute any kind of suggestion that it aims to become an Asian NATO or that it may be an alliance in the making. They tend to say what the Quad is not rather than what it is. For all the commonality and shared values, each country knows that when it comes to the brass tacks of respective national interests - particularly where those concern China - divergence abounds.

Some potential positive outcomes might come from a more formalised Quad, but not the kinds that are beloved of Canberra’s security hawks. One is that it would surely release Australia from the obligation to be by Washington’s side during any China-US conflict over Taiwan, since India would never accept such a role.

It is easy to flick the switch to hyperbole at the sound of military top brass talking tough. But beyond the importance of the declaratory statements, the real strategic ballast in the Quad is hard to discern.

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Shinzo Abe, Donald Trump and Malcolm Turnbull at the ASEAN summit in November. For all the commonality and shared values, divergence abounds when it comes to national interest. PHOTO: AP