

Indo-Pacific: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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History marches forward but often, it is difficult to discern its trajectory in the fog of immediate events. A keen observer can sometimes discern the echoes of history's footsteps in the tumult but political leadership is the art of convincing the world. The term Cold War symbolised the post-World War II era. Yet not many would recall that it was first used by Bernard Baruch, a successful Wall Street financier-statesman who also served as adviser to US Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman. He is better known for the Baruch plan, the first global plan to bring all nuclear activity under the supervision of the newly created United Nations that he introduced as a US delegate in the newly created United Nations in 1946. A year later, speaking in the South Carolina House of Representatives, he said, "Let us not be deceived, we are today in the midst of a Cold War. Our enemies are to be found abroad and at home." A couple of months later, his friend, Walter Lippman used the term in his widely read column; it caught on and the phrase came to symbolise the bipolar world of growing rivalry between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., the two nuclear superpowers.

For the 21st century, historians do not need to look far. Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will always be remembered as the statesman who defined the 21st century with the term – Indo-Pacific and lived to see his vision take concrete shape. During the Cold War, Asia had lost its identity; it was divided into Northeast Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia also called Middle East. The first realisation of Asian connectivity was driven home by the forces of nature, the massive earthquake on December 26, 2004, off the coast of Sumatra, followed 20 minutes later by the worst tsunami the world had seen. From Indonesia to Thailand to Myanmar to Bangladesh to India to Sri Lanka to Maldives all the way to Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa – the tsunami claimed over 225000 lives leaving behind a trail of destruction. The maritime forces of Australia, Japan, India and the U.S. emerged as the first responders, demonstrating an impressive degree of shared responsibility and coordination.

Two years later, a young Japanese politician Shinzo Abe authored a book – *Toward a Beautiful Country: My Vision of Japan*. His prescription for Japan in the 21st century was to build up ties with the U.S., Australia and especially India, a group of democracies that could come together to promote peace and prosperity across the region. He found the accepted term Asia-Pacific inadequate; it didn't extend beyond Southeast Asia and so he adopted the term Indo-Pacific to give it the stamp of political legitimacy. During his first term in 2006-07 that barely lasted twelve months, Prime Minister Abe sought to give shape to his concept. A quadrilateral Security Dialogue of mid-level officials of the four countries was held in Manila. It was followed by India inviting Japan, Australia and Singapore to join in Ex Malabar, the annual naval exercises that it had been conducting with the U.S. for over a decade. Addressing the Indian parliament in mid-2007, PM Abe delved into Indian history to bring up Dara Shikoh's 400 year old concept of the 'confluence of the two seas'; PM Abe contemporised it as a union of Pacific and Indian Oceans as a free and open region, free of force or coercion.

In politics, timing is everything. By September 2007, PM Abe's coalition lost power, in Australia, a new Sinophile Prime Minister Kevin Rudd changed course, and in the U.S., President Obama

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sought to open a new chapter in Sino-U.S. relations. The Quad proved to be short-lived. But it is difficult to keep down an idea whose time has come.

History kept marching on Xi Jinping, a relatively unknown Vice President came into the limelight in 2008 for successful organisation of Beijing Olympics. Since 2012, Xi has upset many of the naïve assumptions that the world had about China's peaceful rise'. The global financial crisis convinced the Chinese leadership that the West was in decline. In 2009, China drew the 9-dash line in the South China Sea, followed by land reclamation to build islands to assert its claims and in 2014, declared an ADIZ in the East China Sea.

Prime Minister Abe was back in 2012 and now found a more receptive environment for his vision of the Indo-Pacific. By 2016, Japan had rejoined the Malabar exercises. Australia introduced new laws to curtail Chinese funding in its political processes. A new report-Picking Flowers (abroad) Making Honey (at home) revealed the penetration by Chinese military officials in Australian scientific research establishments. In Delhi, concerns about the increase in boundary incursions, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor began to sound alarm bells. In the U.S., China was blamed for large scale theft of IPR amounting to hundreds of millions. China had stopped hiding its light and was not interested in biding its time.

A decade later, the Quad was reborn. There were still questions about what it stood for. After the initial ministerial meeting in Manila in November 2017, each of the four countries conducted their own press conferences. Yet, external developments were pushing the four democracies together. The echoes of history's footsteps in the fog that Shinzo Abe had discerned in 2006 were becoming louder. His new vision anchored in the Indo-Pacific was now taking shape. Bilateral interactions among the four nations intensified leading to fresh 2+2 dialogues. China's sanguine dismissal that it would 'soon dissipate like sea foam' changed to concern when it called it 'an Asian NATO'. Since March 2021, there have been two virtual and two in-person summits of the Quad leaders. Joint statements have now become an accepted reality.

Not all questions about the Quad have been addressed but four summits in fifteen months is a reflection of growing political will and comfort. It is not an alliance but then Asia is not Europe. In the decade of 2007-17 that the Quad did not exist, did it make Chinese behaviour less assertive? Is Quad a provocation as China would like to claim or is it a deterrent? With a dozen working groups spanning critical and emerging technologies, climate change, supplying COVID-19 vaccines, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, clean energy, maritime domain mapping and awareness, regional infrastructure and supply chain resilience, the Quad addresses critical concerns, both traditional and non-traditional. IPEF has been launched with seven ASEAN countries and New Zealand joining in.

In the Indo-Pacific, the world does not reflect clean divisions that characterised Europe in the bipolar era and therefore the European model of competing military alliances does not make sense. The late Prime Minister Abe realised it as a statesman and the politician in him found the right moment to convince the world about his vision. All the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the Indo-Pacific are not yet in place but the contours have been defined.

It is an idea whose time has come.