

Four-power meeting drew Chinese démarche

U.S., Japan keen to rope in India in quadrilateral security cooperation

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Last month, India held a quiet meeting with Japan, Australia and the United States to discuss security issues. Each member of this new ‘four power’ initiative denies the aim is to gang up against China. But Beijing is wary of this new alignment.

New Delhi: Days before the first-ever official-level security consultation between the United States, India, Japan and Australia last month, China issued démarches to each of the participants seeking to know the purpose behind their meeting.

A démarche is a formal diplomatic communication made with the purpose of, inter alia, eliciting information from another State and reflects the seriousness of the issue at stake.

Unlike India, Japan and Australia are close military allies of the U.S. and trilateral security cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and Canberra has been going on for some time. New Delhi — which had been resisting the idea of a quadrilateral security meeting for more than a year because of its ‘encirclement of China’ connotations — finally [committed itself](#) to a dialogue with Japan “and other like-minded countries in the Asia-Pacific region on themes of mutual interest” during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Tokyo last December.

Concrete plans for this new quadrilateral dialogue process [were firmed up](#) after the visit to Delhi last month of Japan’s Vice-Foreign Minister, Shotaro Yachi. The first “exploratory meeting” at the level of senior officials took place on the sidelines of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) security policy meeting in Manila on May 24-25. The U.S. was represented by Christopher Hill, Washington’s point man for the Six-Party talks on Korea, India by Additional Secretary K.C. Singh from the MEA, Japan by Chikao Kawai, deputy Vice Minister for foreign policy, and Australia by Jennifer Rawson from its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Largely mindful of China’s concerns, however, the four countries decided to meet without any formal agenda and to not publicise the meeting itself or the subjects discussed. “In the run up, the Chinese had démarched all four of us to find out what was going on, and I suppose we were conscious of not trying to create the impression of a gang-up against them”, a senior official told *The Hindu*.

India, said the official, “certainly does not wish to send such a signal to China and I think at this time, none of the others wants to either”. On May 27, Ms. Rawson [told an Australian parliamentary panel](#) that the four countries were not seeking to create a new security alliance and were only “looking at issues of common interest”.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso has been pushing the idea of bringing New Delhi into the

existing trilateral security process with Australia and the U.S. since his visit to Delhi in January 2006. For Japan, India is a key part of the 'Arc of Prosperity and Freedom' it is trying to build around the "outer rim of the Eurasian continent". In practice, this 'Arc' — which bears no resemblance to the actual geometrical shape — skirts almost entirely along the borders of China and Russia.

India as 'common strategic objective'

On its part, the U.S. has been quick to realize the value of a quadrilateral framework for dealing with strategic developments in Asia. In particular, the Bush administration has sought to build a patchwork of military and strategic partnerships around China with a view to "encouraging" Beijing to play the role of a "responsible stakeholder" in Asia.

Since 2005, the U.S. has officially begun to speak of India as part of this network of "values-based relationships" surrounding China. And this year's U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee joint statement made a direct reference to New Delhi, the first time this has happened at that forum.

The high-level statement — issued on May 1 by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso and Defence Minister Fumio Kyuma — [sets out as a "common strategic objective"](#) the task of "continuing to build upon partnerships with India to advance areas of common interests and increase cooperation, recognizing that India's continued growth is inextricably tied to the prosperity, freedom, and security of the region."

By meeting on the sidelines of the ARF, Indian officials hope the message went out that the new 'quadrilateral' sees itself as essentially an adjunct to Asean. "Just as the ARF itself is Asean-plus, the Quad is an ARF-plus arrangement. For example, anything we do on the maritime security front, or humanitarian front like tsunami relief, would have to involve the Asean countries", an official said.

Asked what the logic of creating a 'mini-ARF' was, the official said that there were many overlapping structures in Asia and this did not mean they were competing with each other. "India, for example, is not part of APEC and the U.S., Japan and Australia are not part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)", he said.

Given the explicit military dimension to the cooperation envisaged, however, it is unlikely that others in Asia — least of all China — will see the 'Quad' as just another "overlapping structure".

The Indian, Japanese and Australian Navies worked together under U.S. "leadership" after the 2004 tsunami and in April this year, India, Japan and the U.S. staged trilateral naval exercises off Japan's eastern coast.

Predictably, the latest "humanitarian" exercises did not go down well in Beijing. In [a commentary on April 21](#), *People's Daily* wrote: "It is absolutely not new for Japan and the U.S. to sit down and plot conspiracies together but it is rather intriguing to get India involved". Unconvinced by the Indian Navy's plans to have joint exercises with China and Russia, the official Chinese newspaper saw the trilateral exercises as "a signal for a new balance of force in the Asia region". The U.S., it said, was "an old-brand power" but is "striving to win the support of Japan and India in a bid to prevent China and Russia from

joining forces”.

Though no date has been fixed for the next quadrilateral meeting, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is expected to try and upgrade the process to the ministerial level when he visits New Delhi later this year. At that point, say officials, India will have to carefully evaluate the inevitable signals any enhancement of security cooperation between the ‘four powers’ will likely send to China and the rest of Asia.

Jai Hind !

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