

US, Japan, Australia, India “Quadrilateral” alliance takes shape against China

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Yesterday’s East Asia Summit (EAS) in Manila was utilised by the United States and its key regional “partners”—Japan, Australia and India—to consolidate a military and strategic “Indo-Pacific” bloc against China’s growing influence in Asia and internationally.

US President Donald Trump initially intended only to hold talks with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on Sunday, and leave the country before the EAS convened yesterday. In the face of criticism domestically and in the region, the White House reversed course before Trump left the US and his tour through Asia was extended.

It now appears that Trump’s decision to remain for the first day of the EAS followed assurances from Japan, Australia and India that they would commit to what has become dubbed the “Quadrilateral.” In 2007, tentative steps toward a de-facto alliance between the four states collapsed when Australia withdrew in the face of Chinese opposition. Ten years later, Canberra is agitating for the “Quad’s” formation.

On Sunday, as political leaders flew into the Philippines ahead of a “gala dinner” with Duterte, top officials from the four countries held substantive talks. Each issued separate statements.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs said it had “agreed that a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large.”

The US State Department blandly asserted the cooperation of the four countries “rests on a foundation of shared democratic values and principles.”

The Australian Foreign Ministry, by contrast, bluntly spelt out the anti-China agenda. It declared that the issues canvassed included “upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight.” It also

referred to coordinating “efforts to address the challenges of countering terrorism” and “upholding maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.” The four countries “agreed to work together to address threats to international peace ... including the DPRK’s [North Korea’s] nuclear and missile programs.”

Questioned about the talks, China’s foreign ministry spokesman commented cautiously: “China is glad to see relevant countries develop friendly and cooperative relations, but we hope that such relations would not target a third party.”

The reality that the Quad is targeted against China, however, is contained in numerous strategic documents published by the governments and think-tanks of the four participants.

The Australian statement invoked all the diplomatic jargon employed to justify a confrontational stance to undermine and weaken China. The “rules-based order” means the American-dominated alliances and institutions developed following World War II. “Freedom of navigation and overflight” and “maritime security” mean challenging Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea and prosecuting the “right” of the US and allied militaries to enter such territory at will.

“Countering terrorism” is the justification for the US and its partners to intervene in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. The purported threat posed by North Korea’s weapon programs is the pretext for war and regime-change on China’s northern border.

As the meetings in the Philippines took place, a flotilla of three US aircraft carriers and their escorts, along with Japanese and South Korean warships, conducted massive military exercises off the Korean coast. Australian warships are also deployed in the vicinity.

Following Sunday's Quad talks and statements, Trump transformed a scheduled bilateral meeting with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday into a joint session with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Before their talks, the trio fronted the media in a choreographed display of unity.

Trump later met with Indian President Narendra Modi and held another private discussion with Turnbull last night.

Turnbull declared the three countries would work together to ensure "the North Korean regime comes to its senses and stops its reckless provocation and threats of conflict." Abe asserted "the immediate challenge is the issue of North Korea." Trump announced he will deliver a keynote foreign policy speech upon his return to the US, possibly on Wednesday, addressing both North Korea and trade.

In more "America First" threats—following his protectionist rant at the APEC summit in Vietnam—the US president blustered: "We have deficits with almost everybody. Those deficits are going to be cut very quickly and very substantially."

Trump's continual references to the massive trade deficits, intractable budget deficits and staggering levels of public and corporate debt in the US go to the heart of the real motivations behind the efforts to forge an anti-China coalition in Asia.

American strategists long ago concluded that US imperialism could maintain its waning regional and global position, against the emergence of China as a rival centre of world production and finance, only through military intimidation and, when necessary, war.

The Obama administration coined the term "Indo-Pacific" in 2011 and launched the "pivot to Asia," which involved a build-up of military power in the region, accompanied by intrigues to ensure that Japan, Australia and other countries collaborated with its projection of force against China.

The economic front of the pivot was the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It was designed to exclude Beijing until it dismantled financial regulations, privatised state-owned companies and strengthened intellectual property rights protection, which would facilitate greater penetration of its markets by transnational banks and corporations.

Trump repudiated the TPP upon taking office, denouncing it for making concessions to Asian and

South American countries that the US need not make. The thrust of his policy remains essentially the same as Obama's, but it is being pursued through the threat of open trade war and even greater military pressure.

Japan, Australia and India, which are determined to block China's rise for their own reasons, are backing Washington. Japanese and Australian officials delayed any progress yesterday toward the "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership" that China has proposed as an Asian trading bloc to exclude the United States.

Japan and Australia insisted that the agreement cover not only lowering tariffs, but greater access to the service sector of member economies and protection of intellectual property. As a result, any agreement was pushed back until 2018.

At the same time, Japan, with Australian support, is spearheading efforts to re-forge the TPP—with as many of the original participants as possible and without the US or China. Tokyo has largely dismissed Trump's calls for the reduction of the US-Japan trade deficit.

Behind all the displays of allegiance and deference to Washington, the political establishments of Japan and Australia are acting in the interests of their own capitalist elites. No less than the European powers, they are seeking to gain the maximum from the decline of American hegemony and the global re-division of world economic and political influence that is underway.

Even as they collaborate against China, the reality of nation-state competition guarantees that sharp tensions will emerge within the Quad, especially between US and Japanese imperialism, the historic rivals for dominance in Asia.



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