

Chinese Ghost Story

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Last year a four-headed apparition strayed into the halls of Asia-Pacific diplomacy, then abruptly vanished. What on earth happened to the quadrilateral?

On 5 February, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith assured his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi that Canberra had corrected the *feng shui* of a disturbing piece of the region's diplomatic architecture. Australia, he said, 'would not be proposing' a repeat of last year's four-way dialogue with the United States, Japan and India.

What a difference, it seems, a year can make. In the first half of 2007, Beijing was becoming anxious about what it perceived as an emerging axis among these four Asia-Pacific democracies. Last May, they brought their foreign policy officials together for tentative talks on the sidelines of an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Manila. It was blandly termed 'the quadrilateral dialogue', quad for short, with no announced agenda. But the enveloping rhetoric was of shared values and common interests.

Some observers wondered if this was the embryo of a pact of democracies, an Asian NATO to 'contain' rising Chinese power. A story in one Australian newspaper implied that this was indeed the plan. Beijing's diplomats lodged protests, demanding an explanation of the mysterious talks. According to the Indian press, these demarches came with petty punishments, such as visa trouble for an Indian delegation due to visit China, and hints of worse to come.

In Australia, most security commentators rallied round the view that a quadrilateral security alliance would provoke China into the very posture of defensiveness and hostility that the region needed to prevent. It soon became nigh-on impossible to meet a Chinese foreign policy scholar without hearing a variant on why the quad was bad. By September 2007, when the four democracies plus Singapore brought their navies together for exercises in the Bay of Bengal, close to China's sea lanes to the Middle East, quad hysteria was at its peak.

Yet today the idea seems to have dissipated, along with the political fortunes of its foremost advocate, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (not to mention former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, who seemed willing to play along). The quad's chief American fan, Vice President Dick Cheney, will be out of office within the year. And the Indians have done more than go quiet: when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Beijing in January he assured his Chinese counterpart that India would have no part in any attempt to contain China.

Thus, it would appear, game over: China and common sense, one; the quad and wrong-headed containment, nil. But the real story is more complicated. The quad was more phantom than menace. Its effects were mixed. And it is not quite exorcised yet.

The quad was never going to be an alliance in the technical sense of a mutual defence pact: India's allergy to such entanglements, let alone the caution in other capitals, was always going to ensure that. The quad was simply a dialogue; at most, it might be called a loose arrangement. Likewise, it was never going to be a tool of containment, another abused word in the security lexicon. Containment in its true Cold War sense was about thwarting a militarily and ideologically expansionist Soviet Union, including through a strategy to beggar its economy. Yet today's China, America and most other Asia-Pacific countries have critical stakes in each other's prosperity.

So if the quadrilateral was never what the headlines claimed, what was it? And where to now?

The quad's origins were many. One was the swift cooperation among the US, Japan, India and Australia in responding to the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This success in harnessing their maritime forces to serve the common good enthused all four capitals about working together on other transnational problems.

After all, they did not see the broader diplomatic structures of the Asia-Pacific as abuzz with promise. The ASEAN Regional Forum and APEC may once have been repositories of hope for region-wide cooperation to meet common challenges, such as terrorism, pandemics or the risk of war between states. Yet, with their unwieldy size, diverse memberships, and restrictive consensus style, progress had become insubstantial.

Instead, there was a growing taste for 'minilateralism'. Subgroups were self-selecting to pool efforts on issues that mattered to them: the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, to protect Chinese and Russian interests in the new Central Asia; a strategic dialogue among the US and its allies Japan and Australia. In Southeast Asia, exclusive institutions centred on China, especially a China-ASEAN process, were stealing the show.

Meanwhile in Washington, a massive commission of non-government experts was crafting a new grand strategy for the US in an era of changing global challenges. The Princeton Project report, released in 2006, recommended a 'concert of democracies' which might even give itself the right to authorise use of force. Such recommendations came with caveats about not seeking to contain China, but lent themselves to easy caricature in a Beijing already worried that the US was on a global ideological offensive.

Then along came Abe, on a mission to prevent Japan's eclipse by China. Before he became Prime Minister in September 2006, his manifesto *Towards a Beautiful Country* identified India and Australia as the extra security partners Japan needed. Once leader, he proclaimed a new direction of 'values-oriented diplomacy'. The Japanese foreign ministry website bore his words next to maps depicting an 'arc of freedom and prosperity', from Japan to Europe, which pointedly excluded the China-shaped space in between. An Asian concert of democracies had found its champion.

When Abe resigned a year later, I was in China, meeting scholars and officials. As the news from Tokyo came through, their concerns about the four-headed monster palpably subsided. They still voiced distrust of the idea of a regional concert of democracies, but in the more relaxed tone reserved for hypotheticals. A few scholars acknowledged that maybe China could live with a dialogue among the democracies, as long as its purposes and agenda were transparent. One even conceded that, given how fast China's power was growing, a spot of strategic hedging by others was understandable. That was perhaps as charitable as a Chinese perspective could be.

Looking back at this forum's strange rise and fall in 2007, there are some curious side-effects of this generally unsettling episode in the region's diplomatic history. For a start, it helped to cement awareness of the need for collaboration among those countries willing and able to address regional issues, like disaster relief or sea lane security, while confirming that such ventures will be more sustainable if they are based on convergent interests and the ability to contribute rather than on supposed shared values.

At the same time, the quad experience reminded Beijing that it could not rest on the laurels of its charm offensive. China's rising power will continue to unsettle as well as dazzle, other countries in the region will quietly balance as well as engage, and Beijing will need to keep doing more to reassure others of its benign intent. Indeed, although Indian Prime Minister Singh's repudiation of containment was a gain for China, it came at a cost: the joint statement from that visit showed greater Chinese acceptance of India's aspirations to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and imports of civil nuclear technology. In short, the spectre of the quadrilateral may have

helped New Delhi – usually outdone by Chinese diplomacy – to extract concessions from Beijing. The phantom menace of the quad may also have obliged China to increase its tolerance of the existing trilateral strategic dialogue among the US, Japan and Australia.

For now, the chanceries of Asia are calm again. China will detect no cause for alarm in the words of Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, and no doubt welcomes the comments by Australia's Mr Smith. Beijing also has India's assurances – even if it is unconvinced by Indian claims that any similarity between the roll-call of last September's naval exercise and the composition of the diplomatic quad was wholly coincidental.

In Washington, however, the flame of a democratic axis flickers on. It makes great rhetoric for American ears in a presidential election year. Even after Abe's fall, John McCain has promised to 'institutionalise the new quadrilateral security partnership'. The thought that a concert of democracies is just the thing Asia needs is unlikely to be confined to one candidate's camp. Meanwhile, a new conservative leadership in Seoul might fancy the quad's revival, this time in five-sided form. And the US Navy continues to develop practical cooperation with its counterparts in Australia, Japan and increasingly India, while Australia-India, Australia-Japan and Japan-India security ties steadily strengthen. China's quad-watchers won't be quitting just yet.

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