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Asean Summit: The 'quad' meets in Manila ahead of Modi's arrival

Officials of India, US, Japan and Australia met in Manila for talks on a security architecture for the Indo-Pacific region against the backdrop of an aggressive China

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) with US President Donald Trump (left), Japanese PM Shinzo Abe (2nd from left) and other world leaders at an Asean Summit dinner in Manila on Sunday. Photo: PTI

New Delhi: Officials of India, US, Japan and Australia met in Manila on Sunday for exploratory talks on a possible security architecture for the Indo-Pacific region against the backdrop of an aggressively rising China, as Prime minister Narendra Modi arrived in the Philippines capital for meetings with the leaders of Southeast Asian nations and others in the region.

This is Modi's first visit to the Philippines, one of the 10 members of the dynamic Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) grouping that is celebrating 50 years of its existence this year. Coincidentally, India is also marking 25 years of ties with the Asean this year and hopes to host all Asean leaders at a commemorative summit in New Delhi in January 2018.

Modi's programme in Manila includes attending the 15th Asean India Summit and the 12th East Asia Summit. The latter groups together Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—which are Asean member states—along with Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States under one umbrella.

The visit comes as the geostrategic term “Indo-Pacific” as opposed to “Asia-Pacific” has been gaining currency, thanks to increased use by US administration officials to refer to a large swathe of sea and land stretching from the US Pacific coast to Australia and beyond to India.

US secretary of state Rex Tillerson made several references to the “Indo-Pacific region” in a speech at a think tank in Washington last month. And days later, Japanese foreign minister Taro Kono said that Tokyo favoured a dialogue between Japan, the US, India and Australia to boost strategic partnership among these countries. More recently, US president Donald Trump referred to the term several times when he spoke to a group of business representatives from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping in Na Dang in Vietnam on Friday. Trump had then made a pointed reference to India and its economic success.

Just hours before Modi landed in Manila, officials from India, US, Australia and Japan — referred to as the “quad” of the major democracies of the region and regarded as the possible nucleus of a possible new security architecture in Asia to promote free trade and defence cooperation — concluded their first round of talks.

“The discussions focused on cooperation based on their converging vision and values for promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in an increasingly interconnected region that they share with each other and with other partners,” a statement from the Indian foreign ministry said.

The officials 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 officials also exchanged views on addressing common

challenges of terrorism and proliferation linkages impacting the region as well as on enhancing connectivity,” it added.

Harsh V. Pant, professor of international relations at King’s College London said that the idea of a quadrilateral grouping, first proposed in 2007, “has now bounced back with a vigour few would have expected just a year ago.”

“The reason is simple: there is growing nervousness in the regional power centres in the Indo-Pacific about China’s emergence as a major global power and about the ability and willingness of the United States (alone) to manage this power transition effectively,” he said.

It was Japan’s prime minister Shinzo Abe who first proposed the idea of a quadrilateral grouping of “like minded” democracies. Back then, India and Australia were seen as diffident about joining the initiative. With China increasingly assuming an aggressive posture towards its neighbours and unabashedly staking claim to almost all of the South China Sea, many in the region are looking to countries like India to possibly counterbalance China.

On Monday, Modi is expected to meet Trump, Abe and Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull in separate bilaterals on the margins of the East Asia Summit, two Indian officials said. These meetings could see further discussions on the “quadrilateral arrangement,” one of the officials cited above said.

In his meetings with Trump and Abe, Modi could also discuss alternatives to China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative – unveiled by Beijing in May to connect China by land and sea to Southeast Asia, Pakistan and Central Asia, and beyond to the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

In his Na Dang speech, Trump had spoken of urging the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to focus on infrastructure funding in the region that would promote economic growth. This is seen as a move to counter China’s large scale infrastructure building spree in countries of Southeast Asia to Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative. India and Japan are already in discussions for the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that aims to build capacity

and develop human resource development in Africa besides creating quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity.

“The officials examined ways to achieve common goals and address shared challenges in the region. This includes upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight; increase connectivity; coordinate on efforts to address the challenges of countering terrorism and upholding maritime security in the Indo-Pacific,” said an Australian foreign ministry release on the four-nation meeting on its website.

In a near similar statement on its website, the Japanese foreign ministry said “participants discussed the direction for cooperation including with countries in the region, in upholding the rules-based order and respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific.”

The references to freedom of navigation and overflight were in the context of China putting restrictions on ships and air traffic in the South China Sea.

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