

Connectivity, terror dominate Quad talks for stable Indo-Pacific region

India Mum On 3 Nations' Call On 'Rules-Based Order' At Meet

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New Delhi: Connectivity, counter-terrorism and cyber security dominated the conversation at the third meeting of the 'Quad' countries — India, Japan, the US and Australia — on the margins of the East Asia Summit in Singapore on Thursday evening.

The meeting, like the previous two, was held at the senior officials' level, that is at the joint secretary level. India was represented by Gourang Das and Pranay Verma from the MEA. In a conservative and minimalist statement, the MEA said, "The discussions focused on cooperation in areas such as connectivity, sustainable development, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and maritime and cyber security, with a view to promoting peace, stability and prosperity in an increasingly inter-connected Indo-Pacific region that the four countries share with each other and with other partners."

All four countries issued separate statements at the end of the day, as before. The US, Japan and Australia emphasised "rules-based order" in their statements, which was missing from the Indian statement. India took a more general view of the Quad's common agenda,



PM Narendra Modi at the 13th East Asia Summit in Singapore on Thursday

while the other three were happy to provide details, for instance, a serious discussion on Sri Lanka and Maldives, both in India's immediate neighbourhood and touched by China's expansionism. In fact, India's omission of the "rules-based order" was curious given that it is the biggest beneficiary of such an order.

The idea of the Quad has evoked mixed reactions in the Asean region, while China and Russia are openly opposed to it. But the idea behind reviving the informal grouping is to build a balance to China's aggressive rise in Asia. India has resisted militarising this grouping by keeping cooperation at the civilian level, through infrastructure and connectivity projects.

Japan and India, both of which have articulated closely coordinated Indo-Pacific policies, have insisted on keeping Asean as the centrepiece of this policy. This has been stressed by all the Quad members. PM Narendra Modi stressed on this in his Shangri-La Dialogue while Japanese PM Shinzo Abe has spoken about this as well.

The Indian statement on Thursday said, "The participants reaffirmed Asean centrality as the cornerstone of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. They agreed to partner with other countries and forums in the region to promote a free, open, rules-based and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific that fosters trust and confidence. They committed to strengthening connectivity and quality infrastructure based on sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity of all nations, as well as transparency, economic viability and financial responsibility."

India and Japan have been going out of their way to make the Indo-Pacific policies palatable to the region. The Asean countries do feel oppressed by China's aggression but are wary of making their region a battleground for superpower rivalry. They also have to battle a perception fuelled by China that the Quad is an exclusive military club. Indian and Japanese leaders emphasise that the Quad is one of "many" arrangements.

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