

A Militarising Asia Pacific: A Modern Threat to Peace

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Pax Christi in Australia recently organised a webinar on *Sustainable Peace or a Militarised Asia Pacific?* to address growing militarisation of this region within the framework of the Nonviolence Initiative (CNI). Is the militarist mindset of nations the way to sustainable peace?

As the centre of contemporary geopolitics and economic activity continues to shift to the East, developments here will have serious implications for peace or instability globally. Already hosting the three biggest economies in the world – the US, China and Japan – India will join them in a few years to form a quartet of the world's top economies based in Asia Pacific.

Comprising nearly 2/3rds of the world's population spread across several countries, this region is again impacted by strategic rivalries, especially between the US and China. As alignments and alliances multiply, countries are divided along adversarial lines.

Alliances The QUAD, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, is a source of much regional anxiety. Involving India, Australia, Japan and the USA, it was initiated by Japan in 2007 as an “Asian Arc of Democracy” but ceased operating a year later. However, on the sidelines of an Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) meeting in 2017, US President Donald Trump urged a new security strategy for the democracies of the region that he designated “Indo-Pacific”, a term now widely used. The Indo-Pacific is promoted as “a zone of peace and prosperity”, as “free, open, inclusive and stable”. Nevertheless, the QUAD's diplomatic objectives go hand in hand with military objectives, the two becoming interchangeable. QUAD countries participate in regular joint naval exercises called the Malabar exercises, while each country's increased defence outlays and bilateral agreements within it strengthens it further.

Australia, for instance, warned of “a dangerous future” by its Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has allocated US \$300+ billion to upgrade its military technology and hardware over the coming years, in addition to the annual budgetary amounts for defence. Inter alia, it has signed a 10-year secret Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US that will bolster a US military base in Darwin in northern Australia. There is already a longstanding top secret US-Australia satellite surveillance facility known as Pine Gap near Alice Springs.

The most recent defence pact in the region was signed (17 November 2020) between Japan and Australia. This landmark agreement will allow more maritime war games, military aviation exercises, the stationing and deployment of troops in each other's countries more quickly and with less red tape. China has expressed its deep unhappiness at the pact.

Focus on China All these moves and negotiations between the countries speak of security without naming any country in particular, but it is broadly understood that China is their focus. The reference to the two oceans in ‘Indo-Pacific’ serves to put pressure on China, with whom each QUAD country is in conflict. China has repeatedly attacked the invigorated alignments

between the four countries, considering them as a strategy for its “encirclement” or “containment”. It views the QUAD as an Asia Pacific NATO structured against its rise. As suspicion and mistrust grow, the consequence of all this is a tit for tat Arms Race as well as dispute in other arenas, especially trade that affects people’s livelihoods.

Visionary diplomacy is urgently needed to de-escalate the tension and reverse the direction of the parties away from the brink. In the circumstances, awareness of China’s history, and of what it considers its more than a century long “Age of Humiliation” at the hands of Western powers would help greatly. The reinstatement of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, and his interpretation of Chinese-style Marxism have provided the impetus for China’s presentday economic pre-eminence and enable it to recover its standing in the world. There is particular sensitivity when actions and policies by Western powers (and its allies) today are perceived as reminiscent of its past. A spokesman recently declared, “If you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy.” Kowtowing to China and not holding it accountable for its Human Rights and other violations is not what is suggested, but more sophistication in how we deal with a complex power is.

Just before the Japan-Australia defence pact was signed, the world’s biggest regional trade deal known as the *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP) was announced. It brings together the ten Southeast Asian nations and China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, and over time will eliminate tariffs and quotas on 65% of goods traded in the region. Covering 30% of the world’s population, and accounting for nearly 28% of global trade in 2019 figures, some hope that RCEP will offer a platform for resolving differences. Time will tell if geopolitics will play a bigger role in this regard.

The Pax Christi Nonviolence Initiative, inspired by Pope Francis, asserts that militarism does not secure lasting peace, that violence invites violence. Leaderships that place their trust in weapons and military preparedness, without acknowledging that investment in arms has not made the world safer, will only lead us to more insecurity. Policy making that meaningfully incorporates the soft diplomacy of mutual trust and confidence building, the systems and institutions committed to peace-making, and voices advocating nonviolent ways of transforming conflict is a better and humane pathway to genuine peace.

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