

Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing regional architecture.

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

18 August 2021

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the committee. ASPI does not take corporate positions on policy matters. The following comments represent my personal views. At the Committee Secretariat's request I have focused my comments on the QUAD. I will be happy to address other matters with the Committee at the public hearing on 19 August 2021

The arrival of the QUAD as a grouping of Australia, Japan, India and the US being driven by the Heads of Government of each country is a significant and welcome security development. This may be one of the few positive outcomes to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. It would have been challenging to coordinate regular face-to-face meetings for the QUAD Heads of Government. The requirement to meet virtually has allowed a faster development of QUAD engagement.

The other driving factor in the QUAD has been the People's Republic of China. Each of the QUAD countries has experienced the difficulties of dealing with a more assertive Beijing, of having to respond to the aggressive 'Wolf Warrior' rhetoric, dealing with large-scale cyber intrusions and the rest. While each QUAD country has its own equities to manage with Beijing, all identify more of a shared interest in grouping together.

Will the QUAD succeed? My answer is a cautious 'yes'. We need to be realistic about the situation. The United States is beset with internal challenges, which will be the top priority for the Biden Administration. Washington wants its allies and friends in the Indo-Pacific to do more heavy lifting in regional security. Australia and Japan are America's two closest allies in the region and increasingly like-minded on the strategic outlook. The trilateral-Australia-Japan-US relationship has the potential to become a powerful shaper of regional security. But Japan has some internal political and cultural constraints on its military posture and Australia is still deciding how far it can or should play a leading (as opposed to supporting) security role.

India for its part is a friend but not a treaty ally of the United States. New Delhi is shaping a new international security role for itself with roots in its non-aligned past. I expect India to play a more cautious role within the QUAD. It will not want the grouping to be seen as directed against China.

I suggest the best approach would be for the QUAD to build for its own success by pursuing a five-part strategy comprised of the following elements:

First, set the agenda at the Heads of Government level. The QUAD will work best if it is driven from the top down. Asking four different bureaucracies to shape a creative policy agenda is

unlikely to produce quick results, but if the President and three Prime Ministers can shape an agenda and use their positions of power to demand outcomes, then the QUAD will quickly gain strength.

Pleasingly, this seems to be happening. President Biden clearly wanted to be seen giving priority to a Quad leaders meeting soon after his inauguration. The first (virtual) meeting of the QUAD Heads of Government, held on 13 March 2021, announced an intent for a physical meeting before the end of the year and set out a substantial work program. If the QUAD leaders are taking the grouping seriously then so too will the four countries' policy makers and implementors.

Second, focus on the positives of democratic cooperation, not on the PRC. As Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said last June 'We see the Quad together as leaders as an enabler. We see it as an accelerator of freedoms and prosperity and living standards within our region.' The aim is to sound a positive tone and to create 'another opportunity to demonstrate the virtue and value of liberal democracies and to see markets succeed.'ⁱ The QUAD may have been reanimated out of a concern about the PRC, but it will thrive if it succeeds as a vehicle promoting democratic values inside an international rules-based framework.

Third, identify a practical work program of activities. Again, we have seen a promising start. The virtual leaders meeting issued not only a vision statement on the part of the leaders,ⁱⁱ but also 'QUAD Summit Fact Sheet' announcing the establishment of three working groups on vaccines, climate and critical and emerging technologies. In each case the working groups have been ambitious policy objectives. For example the vaccine working group is to steer a QUAD commitment 'taking the shared action necessary to expand safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing in 2021, and will work together to strengthen and assist countries in the Indo-Pacific with vaccination.'ⁱⁱⁱ This is a massive undertaking and one that sets a huge test for QUAD administrators, but practical goals are surely better than lofty meeting declarations that often lack practical plans of action.

Fourth, expand practical QUAD defence and security cooperation. Between Australia, Japan and the US there has been an ever-thickening pattern of bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation. Australia has struggled to deepen extensive practical Defence cooperation with India. India-Japan and India-US defence engagement has been growing but from a low base. The QUAD presents an opportunity to expand four-way military-to-military engagement, and this has indeed been happening. After years of requesting to be involved, Australia joined the maritime exercise Malabar in November 2020, involving India, the US and Japan in 'a range of high-end training, including air defence and anti-submarine exercises, aviation, communications and at-sea replenishment between ships.'^{iv}

In August 2021, the Indian Minister of Defence announced that 'a Task Force of Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet is scheduled to proceed on an Overseas Deployment to Southeast Asia, the South China Sea and Western Pacific from early Aug 2021 for over two months.' This deployment

'would also participate in multilateral exercise MALABAR-21 alongside the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force, Royal Australian Navy and the United States Navy in Western Pacific.'^v

For the QUAD to be successful these promising early examples of practical military to military cooperation should be expanded and extend also to QUAD activity on Cyber security, defence industry collaboration and other areas.

Fifth, engage with 'QUAD +' partners. One element of the international response to PRC aggression has been to bring to the fore a range of different countries and groupings now increasingly looking for ways to find 'strength in numbers' to resist PRC pressure. While this has been far from perfect it suggests that the QUAD countries are likely to find willing partners interested in focusing on ways to strengthen the international system against a powerful authoritarian challenge.

The QUAD is in an early stage of development, which suggests to me it should resist attempts to open its membership to other countries until such time as the QUAD countries have developed a sense of comfort in the shape, weight, and direction of their own cooperation. But that still leave open the possibility for making specific activities 'QUAD +' depending on the interest and availability of other partners.

In conclusion, the QUAD is a valuable new grouping in Indo-Pacific security, perhaps most useful for the three allied countries, the US, Japan and Australia, to engage India. The QUAD's value is that it creates a way for democracies to cooperate in developing positive strategies to enhance regional security. Hopefully this form of cooperation will consolidate, broaden, and strengthen, giving other countries the hope that there are ways to preserve the international order to the benefit of free societies.

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ⁱ Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Transcript of a question and answer session at the Perth-US Asia Centre, 9 June 2021. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/ga-perth-usasia-centre-perth-wa>.

ⁱⁱ Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad", 13 March 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/quad-leaders-joint-statement-spirit-quad>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Quad Summit Fact Sheet*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/quad-summit-fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

^{iv} Senator Linda Reynolds, Minister for Defence, Australia joins Exercise MALABAR 2020, 3 November 2020, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/australia-joins-exercise-malabar-2020>.

^v Indian Ministry of Defence, 'Eastern Fleet Ships on Overseas Operational Deployment', 2 August 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1741640>.