Debating the Quad

Euan Graham, Chengxin Pan, Ian Hall, Rikki Kersten, Benjamin Zala, Sarah Percy
The Centre of Gravity series

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Debating the Quad

Editor foreword

The ‘Australia-India-Japan-United States consultations on the Indo-Pacific’—known universally as the Quad—is a challenging idea. Much like the humble Eucalyptus tree, it has sprung up independently in American, Australian and Indian soils. With some effort it can be found, too, in carefully cultivated Japanese gardens.

Yet of what kind of Eucalyptus it is we do not know. Is the Quad a seed that may spring a mighty Mountain Ash that can stand true for one hundred years in all climates? Or is it akin to the spindly, twisty Scribbly Gum upon which others will write and project their ideas? And if the Quad is indeed a seed for action, is the intention to put down deep roots into the international system to prevent further erosion? Or is it to seek new forms of growth and change that better take account of a new geopolitical climate?

As editor, I was tempted to use this moment of readers’ attention to declare my own view as to the genus and strength of this nascent seed. Indeed, the very word ‘editorial’ is regarded as a synonym for a fulsome argument, full of assertion and arrogance, declared in public.

This edition of the Centre of Gravity series emerged, however, precisely because I don’t have a view. Or more accurately, I have lots of views, and lots of questions and concerns about those views. I therefore asked six of the best placed commentators and scholars to give their firm and clear view as to the relative merits or failings of the Quad. The result is a series of papers which should hopefully push and pull your thinking. It is only through being willing to test our ideas to the harshest elements that we can have confidence in their capacity to take root and endure.

In that task, the Eucalyptus is an apt symbol. Visitors to Hiroshima will find among the concrete and steel a gentle garden surrounding Hiroshima Castle. There, just a few hundred meters from the original blast zone, is a hardy Eucalyptus, a Yellow Box, one of a select handful of trees to survive the 1945 atomic blast. That tree knows too well the price of failure. Of war over peace. It also bears witness to the remarkable changes that can occur as adversaries become allies. Only by providing the fertile soil of open and democratic debate, can we know the genuine strength of this new seed, and the mighty tree we may hope emerges from it.

Dr Andrew Carr
Editor, Centre of Gravity Series
The Quad deserves its second chance
Euan Graham, Lowy Institute

Executive Summary

✧ Second chances are rare in geopolitics – Australia can’t afford this opportunity being squandered again.
✧ The Quad has the potential to constrain China’s strategic choices beyond its maritime periphery, but not to contain it as the Soviet Union was contained in the 1950s.
✧ One important subsidiary aspect of the Quad is its potential value in strategically tethering a more unpredictable, self-focused United States.

Policy Recommendations

✧ Canberra needs to be mindful to establish bipartisanship on the quadrilateral.
✧ Expanding Quad membership to include Southeast Asian countries would not be advisable in the short term.

Second chances in geopolitics are even rarer than in politics. Now revived after almost a decade in abeyance, the Australia-India-Japan-US security quadrilateral has been given a phoenix-like opportunity to prove its worth. Australia, in particular, can’t afford that opportunity to be squandered.

Shinzo Abe’s first term in office fizzled prematurely, as did the original ‘Quad’ initiative. Like the proverbial one-hit wonder band founder, he must be hoping his comeback credentials will rub off on the rejuvenated quartet. Tokyo’s diplomatic legwork was instrumental to the Quad’s recent revival at a four-way senior officials meeting in Manila. The US Pacific Command chief, Admiral Harry Harris, has also made no secret of his belief that the Quad’s second coming is nigh. Harris will soon depart from PACOM, but as a US ambassador designate to Australia he likely will continue to be an influential advocate for the Quad.

The US and Japan have always been the Quad’s strongest backers. But the Quad’s prospects will be determined by the extent to which national interests and threat perceptions align across all four of its members. However else it’s dressed up, the Quad’s bottom-line shared interest is the maintenance of stability in Asia through the preservation of a balance of power. On that, Canberra, Delhi, Tokyo and Washington (or at least Honolulu) can all privately agree. They also hold in common that China poses the primary challenge to stability and the so-called ‘ruled-based order’. But on the extent and immediacy of China’s threat, and how to respond to it, there remain significant differences amongst the four. This helps to explain the Quad’s rather timid reintroduction as a sub-ministerial officials meeting on the margins of a multilateral summit.

A realist assessing the Quad’s low-key revival would no doubt be underwhelmed: is this all that the regional market of US allies, partners and maritime democracies will currently bear? Perhaps so. But there is an alternative way to regard the recent quadrilateral senior officials meeting. It was an intentional understatement: an expression of solidarity, enough to communicate a concerted strategic signal to China along the four compass points of the Indo-Pacific region, but sufficiently restrained to avoid significant blowback from Beijing.

The US and Japan have always been the Quad’s strongest backers.
Quad II is a more enigmatic package than its predecessor, inviting the question whether it is an incipient coalition to balance Chinese hegemonism, or a looser, more contingent diplomatic hedging mechanism. Such ambiguity gives the Quad flexibility of form, allowing it to be ratcheted up in response to negative behaviour by China, or dialed down if Beijing behaves better. Its recessed posture puts the onus smartly back on China.

In retrospect, the Quad's mistake in 2007-08 was to advance too quickly towards four-way defence exercises and an overt military agenda. That unhelpfully saddled the initiative with the baggage of 'containment' and—under intense lobbying from China—stretched Australia's political comfort level to snapping point. Given China's lesser capabilities a decade ago, it also played more convincingly to China's narrative of hostile encirclement.

Critics of the Quad, China included, have been quick to tag its reappearance as containment redux. But China has outgrown containment. This gets to an important semantic difference. The Quad has the potential to constrain China's strategic choices beyond its maritime periphery, but not to contain it as the Soviet Union was contained in the 1950s. Think of it this way, China is too big to be caged. But it is not too late to lay down some corner fence-posts in the paddock and to spool out a little mesh wire.

Paddock is a misleading choice of metaphor, for the quadrilateral is fundamentally a maritime concept. Its logic depends on the strategic connection between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific security environments. The strength of that linkage remains debatable, but China's deepening maritime forays into the Indian Ocean over the past decade, both economic and military, have had most immediate impact on the two weaker links in the Quad chain, India and Australia. Both have isolated island territories in the eastern Indian Ocean, as well as continental frontage. One should be careful not to overstate India's maritime threat perceptions, or to understate Delhi's sway within the Indian Ocean. But clearly the maritime dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative is serious and heralds a long-term presence, and potential challenge, from Malacca to Djibouti.

The relationship of the Quad to the macro-regional Indo-Pacific construct is also worth considering. The coincidence of a revived Quad with Washington's official embrace of the Indo-Pacific, as reflected in the new National Security Strategy does not appear accidental. Moreover, Australia officially defines the Indo-Pacific in its new foreign policy white paper as extending from the Pacific seaboard of the United States to the India-Pakistan border, a neat overlap with the area of operational responsibility as defined by the US Pacific Command.
Australia’s reasons for endorsing the Indo-Pacific on one level are obvious, since it places Canberra at the centre of the action, instead of its customary lot at the cartographical periphery. But to have tangible impact, reframing the region’s strategic geography depends on Delhi buying into the Indo-Pacific as a strategic construct and the Quad as a means to operationalize strategy across this broader canvass. Yet unlike Canberra, Delhi has traditionally shied away from being strategically at the centre of things much beyond the Subcontinent.

The Modi government has made efforts to substantiate India’s ‘Act East’ policy, strengthening bilateral ties with Japan in particular. But India is still sizing up Australia with some caution, mindful of Canberra’s role in pulling the plug on the original quadrilateral a decade ago. There is also heightened caution about the reliability of the US commitment. India does not want to be left holding another quadrilateral orphan, with China breathing down its neck across their hotly disputed mountain border. Delhi and Canberra must therefore find their own bilateral comfort level as a necessary precursor to the Quad’s maturation. The advent of the first ever Australia-India secretary-level ‘2+2’ is an encouraging development in this regard.5

While concern about China is the basic driver behind the Quad’s revival, one important subsidiary aspect is its potential value to Japan, Australia and India in strategically tethering a more unpredictable, self-focused United States in the Indo-Pacific. The importance of cross-bracing their own three-way cooperation can also be read in terms of hedging against American unreliability. This makes the Quad doubly important.

One likely criticism of the Quadrilateral, from within the region, is that its composition bypasses Southeast Asia, despite this being the maritime fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific. The Quad’s membership appears at odds with ASEAN’s supposed ‘centrality’ to multilateral security frameworks in the region—a principle Australia has dutifully observed and benefited from diplomatically, by winning admission as a member of the 18-nation East Asia Summit. Canberra continues to devote diplomatic attention to ASEAN, hosting a special anniversary ASEAN-Australia summit in March 2018. But the reintroduction of the Quad, as reflected within DFAT’s recently rejigged Indo-Pacific departmental structures, is implicit acknowledgement that ASEAN-centred multilateralism is no longer up to the institutional task of maintaining regional stability. The Quad will enable Canberra to buttress ASEAN centrality with a major power framework that is less prone to dilution from lowest-common denominator consensus, and China’s targeted divide-and-rule tactics on the South China Sea and other ‘core concerns’ for Beijing.

To some observers Canberra’s renewed interest in the Quad recalls the Asian ‘concert of powers’ first mooted during Kevin Rudd’s premiership— with the glaring omission of China.6 Japan is more likely to stress the democratic linkage between the four maritime democracies that make up the quadrilateral, recalling Prime Minister Abe’s earlier ‘democratic security diamond’ concept.7 Unfortunately, this only accentuates Indonesia’s exclusion from the line-up. Jakarta’s attitude is lukewarm towards the
quadrilateral, in part because it feels slighted but also because President Joko Widodo lacks a strategic vision for the region beyond a narrow framing of Indonesia’s national interest. Privately, Singapore and Vietnam are likely to recognise the Quad’s potential value as a counterbalance to China, but declaratory obeisance to ASEAN centrality means their support and engagement will be tacit. Expanding Quad membership to include Southeast Asian countries would therefore not be advisable any time soon.

Southeast Asia will nonetheless be an important focus for the Quad, as it beds into a more regular set of activities. One area where the quartet could usefully coordinate is in deconflicting their separate maritime capacity-building efforts in Southeast Asia. The Quad agenda is likely to start off with exchanges of views and information sharing before it becomes more ‘operational’ in nature. Four-way military exercises or other aspects of defence cooperation could follow later.

The Quad’s prospects, ironically, lie largely in China’s hands. If Beijing’s maritime coercion and strategic presence intensifies in the eastern Indian Ocean, this will further pique both Canberra and Delhi’s threat perceptions and will likely see the quadrilateral develop into a more intense and overtly strategic compact, including naval drills. Anti-submarine warfare is one obvious locus that plays naturally to a geographical division of labour among the Quad membership. But this pace should not be forced and would unfold only in response to deteriorating strategic circumstances, if China opts to push its weight around at greater distances.

It is worth remembering, from a historical viewpoint, that Australia’s interest in quadrilateral architecture is not new, and has always had a balance of power element. In fact, in the mid-1970s, China was itself eyed by the Fraser government as part of an incipient quadrilateral. In Fear of Abandonment, Allan Gyngell notes Fraser’s China diplomacy was partly guided by ‘the development of a balance of forces in the Indian Ocean’. To Gyngell, this suggests “the idea of a coalition of interests between the United States, China, Japan and Australia against the Soviet Union.”

A bit of historical perspective should underline there is nothing pre-ordained or immutable about the Quad: its utility is only as strong as its weakest link and depends on a common alignment of threat perceptions. Domestically, Canberra needs to be mindful to establish bipartisanship on the quadrilateral. Fortunately, a changed political climate in Canberra in response to revelations about China’s efforts at currying influence will make it harder for Beijing to lobby against Australia’s future participation in the Quad. A repeat of cold feet under an ALP-led government in future would be highly injurious, not only for the quadrilateral’s general prospects, but for the credibility of Australian diplomacy. There will not be a third chance for the Quad.

**Policy Recommendations**

- Canberra needs to be mindful to establish bipartisanship on the quadrilateral.
- Expanding Quad membership to include Southeast Asian countries would not be advisable in the short term.

**Endnotes**

Qualms about the Quad: Getting China wrong
Chengxin Pan, Deakin University

Executive Summary

✦ In dealing with the ‘China’ challenge, the Quad strategy has got the nature of that challenge wrong.
✦ Beijing’s assertiveness in the South China Sea needs to be seen in the context of longstanding territorial disputes, and is motivated more by concern about its sovereignty and territorial integrity than by a quest for regional hegemony. It is not as amenable to external military pressure as Quad proponents would have us believe.
✦ Preoccupied with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s challenge to the so-called rules-based order is more geoeconomic in nature. To effectively meet that challenge, in its current form the Quad is not the right answer.

Policy Recommendation

✦ Rather than investing too much in the Quad, Australia should adopt a more pragmatic, more multifaceted, and more nuanced China policy to match China’s pragmatic foreign policy as well as the complex challenges posed by its rise.

The long defunct Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) recently received a new lease of life. Apparently ticking many policy boxes, it seems to be a long overdue idea we can ill-afford to let go (again). It is at once an Indo-Pacific grouping of like-minded democracies to uphold the rules-based order in light of China’s rise and relative American decline, and a perfect match for Australia’s (and Japan’s) latest focus on values-based foreign policy. ‘All upside, no downside’ is the verdict given by Greg Sheridan, The Australian’s Foreign Editor.¹

If that sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Despite frequent disavowals, the Quad redux is primarily about China. This maritime-based, largely military response is predicated on at least two assumptions of the ‘China’ challenge: first, the challenge is believed to be primarily military in nature; second, China’s rise poses an existential threat to the rules-based international order. Both assumptions, however, get the nature of this challenge wrong.

It is true that Beijing’s land-reclamation activities in the South China Sea have military implications. But before we treat those activities as unequivocal evidence of Chinese military adventurism or even extrapolate them to China’s foreign policy as a whole, it is important to note that those activities took place in the interactive context of longstanding territorial disputes.² In these disputes, all sides appear genuinely concerned with their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Although the scale and speed of China’s land-reclamation may have now outdone what other claimants have attempted so far, China has not behaved fundamentally differently from other claimants.³

As such, the complexities of the South China Sea disputes defy easy or quick solutions. Because of that, China has been open to more pragmatic ideas of shelving disputes and seeking joint development.⁴ One should not be naïve about the efficacy of such an approach, but one can be certain that there will be no Quad-inspired solution to China’s behaviour in the South China Sea. Insofar as sovereignty is at stake, no amount of quadrilateral (or any number of multilateral) naval operation could effectively deter Beijing, whose legitimacy would be on the line if it was seen as still unable to defend China’s territorial integrity. Some Australian observers have rightly pointed out that as a sovereign nation, Australia’s decision to
join the Quad should not be subject to Beijing’s approval.\textsuperscript{5} Strangely, the same observers seem to believe that China’s position on matters of its sovereignty can somehow be vetoed by Australia and its Quad partners.

Instead of forcing China to change tack, exacerbating China’s strategic vulnerability, will achieve precisely the opposite: prompting it to further strengthen its military capabilities. This is a classic example of the security dilemma, which is not being helped by the fact that a key factor behind China’s modern quest for power has been its traumatic experience of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ at the hands of Western imperial powers.\textsuperscript{6} Rightly or wrongly, many Chinese are likely to interpret the Quad efforts and US freedom of navigation operations in terms of new gunboat diplomacy.

Proponents of the Quad have argued that ‘All the bad things the quad would supposedly provoke have occurred in its absence.’\textsuperscript{7} Leaving aside the debate on whether China has indeed become more assertive,\textsuperscript{8} some of the ‘bad things’ coming from China may be better read as Chinese reaction and sometimes overreaction. While the Quad may have been absent in the past decade, there has been no shortage of other tough measures targeting China in the interval, with Barack Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ being the most notable example.

Given this, contrary to the Quad’s professed goal of strengthening the rules-based order, one can expect more ‘bad things’ from China should the Quad operate in full swing. China is certainly guilty of not always following the rules. Given that it was not at the table when many of those rules were made, Beijing does not hide its displeasure at certain aspects of the existing order. But then China is not alone in cherry-picking international rules and norms.\textsuperscript{9} India’s nuclear and missile programs, Japan’s defiance of the International Court of Justice’s ruling on whaling, and Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers all come to mind. In fact, arguably the biggest blow to the rules-based international order in recent memory was the US invasion — without either UN authorisation or Congressional approval — of Iraq, whose catastrophic and destabilising consequences are for all to see. Meanwhile, the United States accuses China of threatening freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, but it has not itself ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

So defending the rules-based international order is more likely a disguise for the Quad countries to constrain China’s rise and maintain a balance of power in their favour. There is now a growing concern that China’s ambitious BRI, if unchecked, may threaten to challenge US dominance in the region. To meet this largely geo-economic challenge, however, the Quad’s military response is far from the right answer or an effective alternative. China’s appeal, at least in many ‘Belt and Road’ countries, rests on its ability and willingness to address the latter’s practical needs in terms of infrastructure and connectivity. By contrast, thus far the \textit{modus operandi} of the Quad has been largely fear and division.
But relying on fear and division can only go so far. Amidst the heightened fear about terrorism 15 years ago, a Malaysian lawyer and writer complained about the United States’ obsession with the War on Terror: ‘We’ve all got to live. We’ve all got to make money,’ he said. ‘The Chinese want to make money, and so do we.’ In case someone wonders why the Philippines made a surprising about-face on its China policy, this might just offer some clue. And the Malaysians and the Filipinos are not alone. After all, none other than Tony Abbott admitted that Australia’s China policy was driven partly by greed.

That the Quad countries are now in talks to set up a Belt and Road alternative may be a belated but still encouraging recognition that the ‘China’ challenge cannot be effectively countered by maritime military cooperation alone. And a senior US official noted that this plan is an ‘alternative’ to the BRI rather than a ‘rival’. If true, the Quad-based Belt and Road alternative may have a much better chance of helping the Quad achieve its goal of countering China’s influence. But if that is indeed the Quad’s real intention, it needs to set more realistic expectations: there is always going to be some ‘Chinese’ influence on the world stage, not least given that ‘Chinese’ influence has resulted from China’s increasing integration into the global supply chains and production networks, of which all four Quad countries are a part.

Given such increasing interconnectedness, the Quad’s determination to set itself apart from China through its trade-mark of like-minded democracies is all the more intriguing. There is certainly a lot of like-mindedness among strategic elites of the four countries, but even so, the supposedly ‘same’ democratic system shared by the Quad countries did not, and probably will not, produce the same strategic responses to China. The different emphases in their separate statements issued after the first ‘working-level’ meeting in November 2017 are a case in point. In Australia, a change of government after the next election could also see this country signing up to Beijing’s BRI. All this does not bode well for a grouping that prides itself on ‘like-mindedness’. Certainly ‘like-mindedness’ has been put to test when Australia chose to distance itself from Washington’s open reference to China as a threat.
Just as Canberra’s disagreement with Washington on the ‘China threat’ should not be read as pro-China, it would be helpful to refrain from using the label ‘local China lobby’ on anyone who is critical of the utility of the Quad. It would be regrettable and strategically unhealthy if political debate and strategic policy-making is simply constrained by fears of attracting such a label, or being seen as ‘soft’ on Beijing.

This is because Australia’s relationship with China is inherently multifaceted and complex. China, for all its differences and faults, cannot be reduced simply to a competitor. Even if it is one, the best way of competing is not the military grouping of the Quad, but a more pragmatic, more multifaceted, and more nuanced approach that involves dialogue, engagement, cooperation, adjustment, resistance and deterrence. Ultimately, the true test of Australia’s strength vis-à-vis China lies not in an impulsive display of firmness or simply being at ‘the centre of action’, but in the longer-term consequences of its policy for its broad national interests and lasting prosperity. After all, internationally China is playing a long, and largely inclusive game rather than just war games. So should Australia.

**Policy Recommendation**

Rather than investing too much in the Quad, Australia should adopt a more pragmatic, more multifaceted, and more nuanced China policy to match China’s pragmatic foreign policy as well as the complex challenges posed by its rise.

**Endnotes**


5 Sheridan, ‘Labor’s Damaging Quad Qualms an Insult to India’.


Meeting the Challenge: The case for the Quad
Ian Hall, Griffith University

Executive Summary
- The Quad is neither a proto-alliance nor an instrument for containing China.
- The initiative is better conceived as a forum for information sharing, policy coordination, and policy de-confliction.
- The Quad provides a useful and timely opportunity for Australia to work together with like-minded states to meet common challenges.

Policy Recommendations
- Australia should maintain and deepen its engagement with the Quad initiative.
- Canberra should communicate clearly the Quad’s purpose and agenda to both regional partner governments and publics.

Much has changed since officials from Australia, India, Japan, and the United States got together for a conversation on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Manila back in 2007. Back then the Global Financial Crisis was yet to break and Beijing yet to assert its sovereignty claims within the ‘Nine Dash Line’; America’s attention was still overwhelmingly on Afghanistan and Iraq; and the ‘Indo-Pacific’ was but a twinkle in the eye of a few enterprising strategic analysts. President Obama’s Pivot was two years away and the first inklings of President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) four years more.

Yet despite all that has changed, the Quad continues to cause angst in sections of the Australian policy community.

When the idea first emerged in 2007, worries soon surfaced in both the media and parliament that it was some kind of ‘quadrripartite security alliance’, as ALP Senator and later Defence Minister, John Faulker, put it.1 So pervasive were the jitters that Coalition ministers went to some lengths to address them – revealing, in the process, some of their own doubts. Prior to Manila, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer publically ruled out any kind of Quad-based ‘alliance’. Afterwards, following more domestic criticism and Beijing’s angry demarche, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson dismissed the notion of formalising the Quad discussions, calling the ARF meeting merely exploratory, and questioning whether there would be more.2

These arguments failed to do the trick, of course, and the Rudd government finally pulled the plug on the Quad 1.0 in early 2008. But however poor the optics of that announcement – made by Stephen Smith with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi at his side – the concern in Canberra that the Quad was unduly provocative to Beijing were widespread and, to a degree, bipartisan.3

The advent of Quad 2.0 has raised similar and new worries. Hugh White and others have condemned it, for example, as an ‘empty gesture’ lacking the binding commitments from all parties necessary to make it consequential in a crisis.4 And the local China lobby has been quick to jump in, suggesting that the initiative was ‘potentially dangerous’ in terms of regional security and unquestionably inimical to Australia’s interests.5

Critics misconceive its purpose and what it might achieve.
This time, however, there were also strong Australian voices backing the Quad— and for good reason, as its critics misconceive its purpose and what it might achieve.

The Quad – or more properly the ‘Australia-India-Japan-United States consultations on the Indo-Pacific’ – is not an alliance or proto-alliance, and should not be assessed as such. It does not purport to offer a security guarantee. It is neither backed by a treaty nor embedded in an institutional framework.

Nor is the Quad a means of ‘containing’ the People’s Republic of China (PRC). To suggest otherwise is to stretch the concept of containment beyond what it can reasonably bear. Containment means something specific: restricting access to markets, resources, and technologies; systematically opposing military threats and encroachments; blocking attempts to use international institutions to gain influence; and waging ideological warfare against the target’s political system. It is expensive, risky, and not always successful – it might have worked for the US and its allies with the Soviet Union, but it manifestly did not work in the 1930s with Imperial Japan.

In any event, since the early 1990s the West’s approach to China has been one of hedges engagement, and it continues to be so, despite growing doubts about whether economic growth will bring about political reform.⁷ Containment is simply not an option, given China’s centrality to the global economy and its growing military power, and the costs it would generate for the Western taxpayer and consumer, not to mention to those international regimes and institutions in which the PRC is embedded and where Beijing’s cooperation is needed. The Quad, moreover, does not signal any kind of shift towards such a strategy.

Instead, the Quad offers something more prosaic and evolutionary: a forum for discussion and information exchange intended to lead to better policy coordination between like-minded states with a stake in the rules-based order. It is novel in neither design nor talking points. It is merely another minilateral – an extension of the bilateral and trilaterals that have proliferated in the region since the early 2000s.⁸ And its agenda for the 2017 meeting – covering freedom of navigation and over-flight, regional connectivity, counter-terrorism, and nuclear proliferation – did not include anything that has not been discussed in multiple settings for years.

Aside from signaling concern to China about its new assertiveness and its conception of a new regional order,⁹ in other words, the Quad is a nascent means of better managing our individual and collective responses. It is, after all, readily apparent that greater coordination between the like-minded – or at least policy de-confliction – is needed. The Quad states have repeatedly been knocked off-balance by the PRC’s initiatives in recent years, resulting in contrasting responses that sometimes generate negative externalities for others in the region and opportunities for Beijing to exploit.

The Quad is a nascent means of better managing our individual and collective responses.
Take, for example, the cases of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI, on both of which the Quad states’ stances diverge. India joined the AIIB early, in 2014. Australia followed a year later, despite pressure from Washington. The US and Japan remain outside the AIIB, though influential voices in the latter have mooted membership.10

When it comes to the BRI, on the other hand, India is vehemently opposed, despite its infrastructure needs, partly because the BRI-linked China-Pakistan Economic Corridor runs through disputed Kashmir, and partly because they have deep worries about its strategic intent.11 By contrast, Australia and Japan have been mostly noncommittal and the US inconsistent, acknowledging the BRI—to Beijing’s joy—in the text of the recent US-China trade deal while publicly expressing doubts about its purpose and design.12

These divergent stances on do not simply represent differing interests—they also highlight incongruent strategic assessments of the intent of the BRI or AIIB, their usefulness, and the roles they might play.13 As a result, these otherwise like-minded states have so far failed to advance a coherent and coordinated line on how they would like to see them develop, beyond occasional joint statements issued in the wake of bilateral meetings.14

Alongside these two examples can be set many others, such as decisions made on Chinese investment in ports or other infrastructure, including fixed broadband and wireless networks, or indeed commitments to military operations to test and demonstrate the will to uphold freedom of navigation and over-flight under international law. They multiply further if the behaviour of other like-minded states with stakes in the region and the rules-based order are included in the sample, like Singapore or South Korea, or indeed Britain or France, that are all wrestling with similar policy dilemmas.

In this context, forums like the Quad are clearly needed. Far from being balancing alliances, they are better (if less dramatically) conceived as analogous to the inter-agency coordinating mechanisms that have emerged in governments over the past 30 years to manage the problems that emerge from the ‘silo-ing’ of information and decision-making in the face of complex but common challenges. And if they also build ‘more advanced habits of cooperation’ between like-minded states at a working level, as Tanvi Madan has suggested, that is an added advantage.15

We need the Quad because we have done a poor job in coming up with the responses we need to Beijing’s attempts to remake the region, and because the instruments we have—particularly the US-centric hub-and-spokes alliance arrangements and the ASEAN-centric regional institutions—are not fit for that purpose. We need to do better.

It is now clear that the PRC’s preferred order is one in which it uses its economic clout—and particularly access to its market and its capital—to reshape the region in its own image. The Chinese Communist Party seeks the same bargain with the region that it has imposed on its citizens: economic prosperity in exchange for the acceptance that it sets the rules, and that it will punish those who break them or organize with others to change them. Meeting that challenge will require collective action by the like-minded, and a forum like the Quad provides one opportunity to develop it.

Policy Recommendations

- Australia should maintain and deepen its engagement with the Quad initiative.
- Canberra should communicate clearly the Quad’s purpose and agenda to both regional partner governments and publics.
Endnotes

1 Senator Faulkner quoted in the proceedings of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 28 May 2007, http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=(Dataset%3ACommittees|CommitteeName|Standing%20Committee%20on%20Foreign%20Affairs%2C%20Defence%20and%20Trade%22|Department|Department%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20and%20Trade%22|rec=11).


Japanese the Quad
Rikki Kersten, Murdoch University

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- Commentary on the tentative revival of the Quad tends to attribute this development to two shifts in the security environment of the region: the increasing assertiveness of China, and growing uncertainty surrounding US commitment to the region under Trump.
- For Japan, what matters most is the confluence of this geopolitical context with developments in its own security policy thinking.
- Japan under Abe is seeking to harness rising insecurity to underpin its own regional leadership credentials and enhance the geographical scope of its security policy ambition.

Policy Recommendations

- Australia can influence how the Quad progresses through carefully shaping its institutionalization, and influencing the priorities that this group addresses collectively. The structure and sequence of bilateral and trilateral relations between Quad member states has followed the template set by Australia-Japan security relations. This provides Australia with a strategic opportunity as it continues its own deepening of security ties with its partner Japan.
- Australia should establish a high level bilateral dialogue between National Security Advisors with Japan and India to influence the articulation of an aligned security outlook and policy framework to underpin the evolution of the Quad.
- Australia should facilitate India joining the TPP.

Commentary on the tentative revival of the Quad tends to attribute this development to two shifts in the security environment of the region: the increasing assertiveness of China, and growing uncertainty surrounding US commitment to the region under Trump.1 But for Japan, what matters most is the confluence of this geopolitical context with developments in its own security policy thinking.

Specifically, Japan under Abe is seeking to harness rising insecurity to underpin its own regional leadership credentials and enhance the geographical scope of its security policy ambition. Australia can influence how the Quad progresses through carefully shaping its institutionalization, and influencing the priorities that this group addresses collectively.

Since his first term in office as Prime Minister in 2006-7 – which coincided with the first abortive appearance of the Quad idea – Abe portrayed the Quad as desirable mainly because it was a collective of democracies.2 In other words, Abe’s exposition of Japan’s proactive security diplomacy was from the outset framed as a normative project. This normative thrust drove the elaboration of foreign policy during Abe’s first truncated term in office in the form of the ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’ idea, and it was there again as Abe regained office in 2012 in the shape of the ‘security diamond’ concept. Comprising Hawaii, Japan, India and Australia, the ‘security diamond’ was evidence of the tenacity of the Quad idea in Abe’s thinking. The rhetoric of liberal internationalism has underpinned Japan’s bilateral and trilateral diplomacy towards India, Australia, and the US since then.
Subsequently, China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea has been the catalyst for a carefully calibrated exercise on Japan’s part to associate its regional diplomacy with guardianship of the global commons, particularly the maritime sphere. In his speech to the Indian parliament in 2007, Abe depicted the Pacific and Indian oceans as ‘a dynamic coupling of seas of freedom and prosperity’. In his concerted bilateral diplomacy towards India since then, Abe has made maritime strategic cooperation the centrepiece of the Japan-India security partnership. In the 2016 Defence of Japan White Paper, India was depicted as ‘the world’s largest democratic nation positioned in the center of sea lanes of communication’. The normative framing of maritime security is now embedded in Japanese policy under the rubric of a ‘free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific’.

Defending the liberal international order has thus become the normative vehicle for Japan’s move towards regional leadership in two senses: as a ‘thought leader’, and as a leader in forging regional institutions and partnerships that align with the rule of law, human rights, free trade and open sea lines of communication. This is also a not-so-subtle attempt to engage in the normative shaming of China in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as a deliberate effort to create entities that could counter-balance China’s growing influence.

China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI) has prompted Japan under Abe to stretch the parameters of its own policy ambition further. Acknowledging that the BRI has made infrastructure into an arena for strategic competition, Abe has responded by infusing his own nation’s overseas development assistance with a normative imperative. It is significant that the ‘free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific’ is an aid policy, rather than one associated with defence or security.

At the same time, the strategic importance of counter-balancing China in the arena of values is unmistakable: the Japan-India Joint Statement of September 2017 accordingly advocated the alignment of Japan’s Free and Open Seas with India’s Act East policy: ‘through enhancing maritime cooperation, improving connectivity in the wider Indo-Pacific region, strengthening cooperation with ASEAN, and promoting discussions between strategists and experts of the two countries’.

For Japan, this is a strategy that is infused with a moral mission. Infrastructure and the maritime global commons are now the conduits for Japan’s ambition to become the defender of the liberal rules-based order. China’s aggression and Trump’s ambivalence have together created an opportunity for Japan to lead.

Japan has also responded to the BRI and the prevailing geostrategic environment by stretching its conception of the region. We are accustomed to the notion of the Asia-Pacific, which has underpinned Australia’s growing security partnership with Japan. On his 2017 tour of South-East Asia, Trump drew global attention with his use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’, a term that is often attributed to Australian diplomacy. However, the Trump administration understands Indo-Pacific to mean an area stretching from the west coast of the U.S. to India.
But the Abe government is now conceiving of a ‘wider Indo-Pacific’ that reaches as far as Africa. In his address to the 2016 TICAD conference in Kenya, Abe outlined Japan’s expanded regional responsibility as follows: ‘Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous’.8

It is noteworthy that the 2017 Japan-India Joint Statement included the creation of a Japan-India dialogue on Africa, uniting the respective initiatives of those two nations (the Tokyo International Conference on African Development and the India Africa Forum Summit). Including Africa in the conception of the Indo-Pacific, which Japan and India seem predisposed to do, would make the Quad a blatant counter-balancing entity to China’s BRI.

The Japanese government wants Quad 2.0 to be seen as a Japanese initiative because it aspires to lead an ethical endeavour that reaches beyond the Asia-Pacific region. This represents a step-change in post-war Japanese foreign and security policy thinking, which has focussed on respecting constitutional constraints and rationalising their circumvention.

Propelled by a bullish China and an ambivalent Trump, Japan may be saddling the fledging Quad 2.0 with too much in terms of its possible geographical scope and ambitious counter-balancing role. But it is important to recognise that Japan is doing so with full intent and deliberation, focussed outwardly on a wider Indo-Pacific.

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**Policy Recommendations**

- Australia can influence how the Quad progresses through carefully shaping its institutionalization, and influencing the priorities that this group addresses collectively. The structure and sequence of bilateral and trilateral relations between Quad member states has followed the template set by Australia-Japan security relations. This provides Australia with a strategic opportunity as it continues its own deepening of security ties with its partner Japan.

- Australia should establish a high level bilateral dialogue between National Security Advisors with Japan and India to influence the articulation of an aligned security outlook and policy framework to underpin the evolution of the Quad.

- Australia should facilitate India joining the TPP.

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**Endnotes**


8 Shinzo Abe, Address to TICAD VI in Kenya, 27 August 2016.
It is by now beyond obvious to state that Australia’s strategic neighbourhood is undergoing a profound change in terms of the distribution of power and influence between its major actors. Much of the criticism of Australian foreign policy in recent years has centred on what some perceive as a degree of stasis in Australian foreign policy and a lack of strategic imagination during a period of important geopolitical change. An over-reliance on Canberra’s decades-long political and military alliance with Washington is usually thought of as undermining Australia’s independence and foreign policy dexterity as it navigates the Indo-Pacific’s power transition.

If there is substance to these criticisms, it is not unreasonable to expect the Australian government to respond by looking for new avenues for promoting and protecting Australian interests that go beyond the alliance. In principle, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue could offer a way for Canberra’s voice to be heard in new forums and Australian interests to be pursued with other powerful actors in a coordinated and effective manner.

However, this would require the Quad to have a clear common purpose and one that is exclusive to its four members. Canberra would need to be able to do what the proponents of the initiative have not yet done – articulate why these four states (and not others) should coordinate on security matters in the region. Doing so could allow the initiative to have both a symbolic and practical impact. But that impact can be both negative and positive for the prospects for peace in Australia’s region. Therefore we must be clear on the purpose which the Quad is meant to serve. Only then can we carefully weigh up the potential costs and benefits as they relate to the prospects for maintaining peace in the Indo-Pacific.

We must be clear on the purpose which the Quad is meant to serve.
A Quad to what end?

So far the Quad, even – or perhaps especially – for its proponents, does nothing substantial. Its proponents have been quick to highlight its informality and the lack of commitments incumbent upon its members.3 There is no real agenda yet, beyond a sense that these four countries should coordinate on security issues in some way. For its proponents this includes all sorts of issues that affect all states in the region, from disaster relief to maritime security, from counter-terrorism to cyber security.⁴ None of the issues that advocates of the Quad are hoping for coordination on are unique to these four states.

Of course more dialogue and coordination between states in the region is always good but this is a part of the world that is drowning in regional groupings. These four states are already members together of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit and are brought together as members or dialogue partners of the Indian Ocean Rim Association. While meeting as a quartet might be a little easier to manage than these larger forums, until there is something specific and substantial that the four seek to do together the diplomatic benefits are very hard to discern.

Having few benefits is not a problem per se. The benign but ultimately (thus far) uninteresting middle-power grouping of MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia) is a good example of this. The problem is that the lack of benefits of the Quad must be measured against the potential downsides. MIKTA may have no real benefits for Australia so far but equally it has few costs. The only real downside to MIKTA is the political embarrassment of the group including Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian Turkey.

By contrast, the Quad has a simple and obvious cost. The potential for signaling to a rising China that a group of states seek to thwart its increasing power and influence – no matter how misplaced that perception may or may not be – is an extremely important downside to take into account.

Without a clear and compelling rationale as to why these four states in particular need to coordinate on issues that are of equal concern to all states in the region, dispelling the idea that this is simply a grouping aimed at subtly pushing back against China's rising ambitions is not going to become any easier than it has been to date. Given that the defining feature that these four states all share is their liberal democratic political systems, the Quad is in effect a resurrection of the misplaced idea of a 'concert of democracies' just on a smaller, and specifically regional, scale.⁵

The response to China's rise

Given the potential for Beijing to view the Quad as an avenue for Washington's allies and partners to constrain Chinese power, Australian policymakers must consider two issues. First, whether taking any Chinese concern about containment seriously is, in itself, something that Australia should consider reasonable and prudent. The idea that any Chinese protest against the Quad is predictable and therefore can be dismissed out of hand is short sighted and ultimately dangerous.

Second, if Australia is to take Chinese concerns seriously (which of course does not necessitate accepting such concerns), it requires us to examine the baseline or starting point for China's much discussed 'rise' in the Indo-Pacific. China today is not just rising to become 'one of' the great powers in an already multipolar region. If it were, a grouping like the Quad could ensure that it remains one of the great powers rather than an all-dominant regional hegemon.

Instead, China's power and influence is rising in a region in which an extra-regional power (the United States) is the militarily dominant player.⁶ Close to 80,000 US military personnel less than half a day's flight from mainland China, major military bases across the region and Washington's string of formal military alliances, all result in China's rise (in its own region) being highly constrained from the outset. We have few examples in recent history of a state's rise in terms of power and status under such conditions.
Despite the increasing concern about Chinese ‘assertiveness’ in the region, we must remember that in military terms Beijing’s rise is starting from a low baseline. It is unsurprising that the recent focus of its military modernisation efforts have been characterised by American analysts as being aimed at ‘anti-access/area denial.’

In plain English this means Beijing is more concerned about keeping its peer competitor from being able to operate militarily in China’s own immediate strategic backyard – hardly an ambitious goal for a rising power. Balancing against a relative increase in Chinese power under such conditions is so premature as to simply be a form of containment. This is likely to foster instability and tension.

The trouble with ambiguity:
From secret alliances to informal ‘partnerships’

The only substantial benefit of these four states meeting together and acting in concert would be in the military realm. Otherwise for what reason do these four states in particular need to get together to discuss issues that affect all states in the region?

Joint military exercises are important for both practical and symbolic reasons. Practically they help achieve interoperability. In the event of the members having to act together militarily, each can ensure they are all, to some extent, using similar procedures, language, decision-making processes etc.

Symbolically they can show adversaries that this group of states are prepared and able to pool their resources and act as one. Engaging in joint military exercises is of course no substitute for formal military alliances. Australia conducts joint military exercises of various kinds with a range of countries – including China. But there is an enormous difference between for example, the September 2017 ‘Exercise Panda Kangaroo’ involving 10 soldiers each from Australia and China doing some joint drills in Yunnan Province, and the kind of major naval exercises and simulations involved in, for example, the Malabar exercises.

Australia and Japan both have existing military alliances with the United States and the Quad has no practical bearing on either arrangement. The Chinese know that in the event of US-Sino relations going seriously south, both Australia and Japan would be on Washington’s side. This is the point of a formal alliance, it is a way for the members of the alliance to signal their future intentions both to each other and the rest of the world.

Beijing is more concerned about keeping its peer competitor from being able to operate militarily in China’s own immediate strategic backyard.

But what significant joint military exercises between informal ‘partners’ does is to begin to blur the lines between formal and (somewhat) predictable alliances and this more modern category of ‘strategic partnerships.’ From Beijing’s point of view there is no ambiguity about Canberra or Tokyo’s loyalty in the event of a serious downturn in the US-Sino relationship. Yet adding India to the mix is a serious step-change.

It should be noted that the Quad is not the only example of this blurring of lines between ‘strategic partnerships’ and military alliances. Joint Russian-Chinese military exercises raise similar issues. The question for policymakers in Canberra is whether Australia wants to be part of this trend towards blurring the lines between formal alliances and less formal partnerships in our region.

One of the lessons from historical power transitions is that ambiguity around whether a state’s existing bilateral undertakings would compel them to join a conflict if its ‘partner’ is attacked can raise the likelihood of pre-emptive war. If a state cannot be sure of how many fronts it may eventually have to fight on, the temptation to act first and knock one side out of contention in a surprise blow is difficult to resist. This is why a norm against secret alliances developed over time and was consolidated after the First World War.
The risk today is not the return of secret alliances but that ambiguous ‘strategic partnerships’ between states fond of conducting joint military exercises without a clear purpose or intended target puts us back into a world of ambiguous political and military commitments. While power transitions do not have to result in war, there are few historians or theorists who would argue that the risks of conflict do not increase during such times. Caution and prudence are never more appropriate.

Given what is at stake, Australia’s decision to push forward with the Quad must be measured against a clear sense of the potential costs and benefits of the initiative. The potential risks associated with sending containment-like signals to Beijing in the short-term and the potential for misperceptions over ambiguous commitments during a future crisis in the longer-term clearly outweigh the benefits of the current vague aspiration to cooperation with no clear purpose.

There are other forms of cooperation that Australia can and should nurture that are more useful and more important, even if such cooperation does not require Canberra’s formal involvement. There is likely to be a genuine need for quadrilateral coordination between four states in order to keep the peace in the Indo-Pacific in the years to come but it will not require Australia, nor Japan. The emerging multipolar order is likely to hinge on the strategic interactions between the United States, China, India and Russia.

Finding avenues for dialogue; some degree of trust-building, no matter how shallow or short-lived; and perhaps even in time, a degree of action in concert for these four major powers should be the goal that all states in the region, including Australia, work towards.

Pretending that the Quad proposal is not about constraining China’s rise when it is the only logical purpose that could bring Washington, Tokyo, New Delhi and Canberra together at this moment will work against, rather than in favour, of the goal of stable major power relations in the Indo-Pacific. For that reason it is not an initiative in which Australia should invest its time, resources or reputation.

Policy Recommendation

Given the lack of clear benefits combined with the magnitude of the potential costs of involvement in the Quad, Australia should avoid any further entanglement in this grouping in its current form.

Endnotes

8 Russia of course is likely to play a relatively smaller role than the other three but I include it on this list as a major strategic actor in the region given both its ability to project military power into the region (particularly its nuclear forces) and its ability to influence major regional flashpoints such as the Korean peninsula. See, Jacob W. Kipp, ‘Russia as a Nuclear Power in the Eurasian Context’ in Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark & Travis Tanner (eds), Asia in the Second Nuclear Age: Strategic Asia 2013-14 (Seattle & Washington D.C.: NBR, 2013), pp. 35-64.
9 It should be noted that some supporters of the Quad have been more honest in their advocacy about the initiative’s potential in regards to balancing against Chinese power. For example, despite arguing that “Creating a better understanding of the nature of the Quad can help address sensitivities” Tanvi Madan has also stated that “the quadrilateral could be a useful platform to share assessments of Chinese capabilities, intentions and actions, and ways of dealing with them.” Tanvi Madan, ‘The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad’, War on the Rocks, 16 November 2017.
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Discussions of the Quad’s high politics have thus far obscured the more practical and interesting questions about how it might function and contribute to maritime security and countering maritime crimes.

Maritime crimes including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, smuggling of a wide range of illicit goods (narcotics, weapons, and people) and piracy all constitute significant security challenges.

The day-to-day operations of most navies and most states are focused on the more proximate security challenges posed by maritime crime. However, the Quad will have to work together on maritime crime in such a way that it does not deliver China an opportunity to further enforce its interests.

Policy Recommendation

Australia should encourage the Quad to focus on a single issue of maritime crime, as this will be most likely to yield practical benefits and enhance cooperation. IUU fishing is an issue that affects not only the members of the Quad but the region more generally; it is also an area where robust enforcement could have a strong impact and would make a good starting point.

The reinvigoration of the Quad has prompted robust discussion (some of it among the contributors to this issue) about whether or not cooperation between India, Japan, Australia and the United States is an attempt at containing China, and, if it is, whether or not that attempt will succeed.

Sometimes these questions of high politics obscure more practical, and more interesting, questions about why maritime security cooperation is so effective, and what benefits could accrue to members of the Quad outside the realm of grand strategy.

Whether or not the Quad checks an expansionist China, or ensures that the US stays involved in the region, or is indeed intended to do either of these things, may be less interesting than the fact that the Quad could have a tangible impact on maritime security issues more broadly.

There is good news for Quad watchers, whatever they think motivates reinvigorating cooperation among its members: maritime security cooperation is an effective way to build links between states, it can have a clear impact on security challenges, and is capable of yielding innovative solutions to military cooperation that can be applied in other areas.

In other words, maritime security cooperation among Quad members will likely have benefits for their wider relationship and the sorts of security concerns that all four states share, regardless of whether or not the Quad is an effort to keep the Chinese out and the Americans in. If the Quad were to focus on cooperating against maritime crime, it could improve the security situation for these states and the region, as well as setting the stage for more developed cooperation down the track.
Maritime security issues that fall outside the sphere of high politics but that are nonetheless important enough to attract the interests of states are ideal for organizing security cooperation. Most types of maritime crime constitute this type of issue. States are increasingly recognizing that a wide variety of maritime crimes, including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, smuggling of a wide range of illicit goods (narcotics, weapons, and people) and piracy all constitute significant security challenges, many of which are interlinked. IUU fishing is a serious threat to some regional economies, such as Indonesia, and an existential threat to small island states. All types of smuggling pose direct threats to states, but activities like narcotics smuggling aid insurgency. Understandably, states are keen to cooperate to limit the security impact of these crimes.

Choosing a cooperative strategy to counter maritime security is also an easy win, as cooperating in the maritime sphere seems to be particularly easy for states. Security problems occurring on the high seas necessarily entail a collective response, as no one state has sovereignty in this area. Even crimes that occur in a state’s territorial waters, such as narcotics smuggling or IUU fishing, inevitably begin on land, cross the territorial waters of many states, and end up in a destination state that may be far away. Effective control of maritime crime requires a cooperative effort.

The Quad’s informality is no obstacle to the effective provision of maritime security. Naval cooperation on maritime security need not be elaborate to be highly effective. Maritime security cooperation can be informal and non-hierarchical, relying on innovative communication and coordination practice.

It is often particularly successful to deal with immediate problems, as naval assets in an area can be redeployed easily. Unlike armies, which must be specifically (and thus expensively) deployed on a task, navies always have ships at sea. All four members of the Quad have a regular maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific, so organizing them to work together would be low-cost and potentially yield significant benefits.

There are at least two examples where multinational naval cooperation has yielded significant benefits while incurring relatively low financial costs and avoiding the creation of formal structures and institutions. Multinational maritime security cooperation can be effective with very informal structures and need not bear any resemblance to traditional alliance behaviour to have an impact.

The informal maritime cooperation that resulted after the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 is widely perceived to have been a success, and it is no coincidence that the Quad has its origins in this response. The multinational response to the Asian tsunami used technology innovatively in order to facilitate cooperation, and was cooperative and non-hierarchical.

The multinational naval response to Somali piracy is a longer-term demonstration of the positive impact maritime security cooperation can have. International navies as disparate (and occasionally adversarial) as the United States, India, Russia, Australia and China cooperated alongside EU and NATO contingents, in order to control Somali piracy.

Coordinating counter-piracy efforts among these states and groups was challenging, but also essential, given the size of maritime space involved and the security problems posed by piracy itself. Clearly, formal military cooperation was impossible, so states adopted innovative practices such as the use of regular informal meetings and novel communication channels between vessels at sea in order to facilitate the naval intervention.

Counter-piracy off the Somali coast was a success, with attacks declining to almost nil after 2014; however the withdrawal of the NATO contingent and the reduction of patrols by other navies has led to resurgent pirate activity over 2017.

The Quad could have a strong impact cooperating on security challenges like crime without formal alliance structures. More importantly, the experience of counter-piracy in Somalia demonstrates that informal military cooperation does indeed plant the seeds for more formal types of cooperation, simply by bringing together navies that do not often cooperate and providing structures for them to do so, as well as by bringing officers together.
Given that the Quad’s maritime security cooperation is likely to be low cost, and could yield significant security benefits in relation to maritime crime, it could seem obvious that it is worth pursuing. Once we move our analysis below the level of grand strategy to consider other security issues and strategies, the Quad looks very different.

In a region that, the media would tell us, is characterized by significant geostrategic challenge, it is easy to forget that the day-to-day operations of most navies and most states are focused on the more proximate security challenges posed by maritime crime, ranging from the minor (small amounts of narcotics smuggling) to the major (enormous ecological and financial losses associated with illegal fishing, or the funding of insurgent groups through smuggling), rather than the prospect of naval conflict between superpowers.

Even a small improvement in maritime crime threats would be of great benefit, and could begin to build a stronger relationship between the four states.

No initiative is cost-free, and one feature of Quad cooperation on maritime crime that would have to be carefully balanced is facilitating more robust ‘crime-fighting’ in the region by China. China already uses the enforcement of fishery rights as a pretext for extremely robust patrolling, and its enthusiasm for counter-piracy was in part an effort to demonstrate the gains made in its naval capability, an effort that may have been more focused on Chinese shipping than protecting the global commons.5

The Quad would have to work together on maritime crime in such a way that it did not deliver China even greater pretext to do the same, except its interests may diverge sharply from those of the Quad. In other words, while grand strategy may obscure the issue of maritime crime, grand strategic concerns may well infiltrate the issue.

The evidence from other situations where states cooperate on maritime crime suggests that the Quad would yield tangible and possibly lasting benefits from such cooperation. Maritime crime affords the US, India, Japan and Australia with a real opportunity to, at the very least, have an impact on security, and at best, sow the seeds of future, more lasting cooperation.

Policy Recommendation

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Endnotes

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