

SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE
QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM PUBLIC HEARING OF 19 AUGUST 2021
Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests
through existing regional architecture

Responses from Dr Lavina Lee

Does the Australian Government currently put enough resources into regional diplomacy and pursuing deeper cooperation with partners in the Indo Pacific?

It is difficult to quantify how much resources the Australian Government should put into advancing regional diplomacy and deeper cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific. There could always be more resources devoted to our diplomatic presence and engagement, especially at a time of greater strategic urgency. What is important is how limited resources could be directed most effectively to advance Australia's national interests. Currently, in my view, greater additional resources should be devoted towards deeper engagement (military, strategic, and economic) with the three countries in the Indo-Pacific that have the greatest capacity and resolve to counter the worst aspects of Chinese behaviour in the region: Indonesia, Vietnam and India. The India-Australia relationship has strengthened in the last year but is still very under-developed and there is great scope there for much deeper engagement in all areas. It is the least developed bilateral relationship Australia has with its Quad partners. Indonesia and Vietnam are two countries outside the Quad that have the greatest wariness of excessive Chinese influence within their societies, prefer a balance of power is maintained in the region and have the greatest scope to contribute actively to that balance of power in a military and economic sense.

What is your view on the current state of Australia's engagement in 'Track 2' and other informal diplomatic mechanisms in the region?

In line with my comments on the previous question, there could be greater emphasis on expanding Australia's 'Track 2' engagement between a broader range of organisations in Australia and those in India, Indonesia and Vietnam. However, for such engagements to genuinely advance strategic, military and economic cooperation and understanding of common interests (and divergences) the Australian government - as the funder of these activities - must be clear about the national interest objectives to be achieved. In turn, Track 2 organisations should be held to account by demonstrating how their activities are specifically advancing government objectives and the broader national interest. These organisations must also clearly demonstrate that they are arriving at insights that are not possible with track 1 or 1.5 dialogues.