

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing
regional architecture, 2021 - 2022

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

001 – 23 August 2021

Topic: The Quad

Question from Committee

Question

1. DFAT's submission notes that following the inaugural Quad leaders' summit in March 2021, Australia 'will contribute subject-matter experts to the Quad working groups that have been established on each these issues to take forward the agenda'.
 - a. Please update the committee on what progress has been made by the Quad working groups, and what contribution Australia has made to each of these groups.
 - b. What future activities are planned under the Quad arrangements, at a ministerial and leaders' level?

Answer

The historic Quad Leaders' Summit in March 2021 demonstrated Quad countries' positive, practical agenda to support our region respond to the defining challenges of our time. Leaders launched the landmark Quad Vaccine Partnership and announced the establishment of working groups on climate change and critical and emerging technology. All the Working Groups have been meeting regularly to progress Quad engagement on these issues.

A Quad Vaccine Experts' Group meets regularly to deliver the Vaccine Partnership. The Partnership will expand access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines in the region. It will support a boost in vaccine manufacturing in India through financing by the US Development Finance Corporation. Australia's contribution of \$100 million will support the provision of vaccines and 'last mile' delivery support in Southeast Asia.

The Quad Climate Working Group is focused on advancing low-emissions technology solutions to support emissions reduction, and strengthening cooperation on climate mitigation, adaptation, resilience, technology and finance.

The Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group is focused on facilitating cooperation on principles of technology design, development and use; technology standards development; telecommunications deployment and diversification, and technology supply chains.

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Officials are also implementing commitments made by Quad Foreign Ministers to deepen cooperation on core regional challenges, including maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and countering disinformation. Senior officials from Quad foreign ministries last met via videoconference on 12 August 2021 to progress initiatives agreed by leaders and ministers.

Quad leaders have agreed to meet before the end of 2021 and Quad Foreign Ministers have agreed to continue to meet regularly. Dates have not been confirmed at this stage. Further announcements on Quad cooperation will be made following those meeting.

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002 – 23 August 2021

Topic: Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Question from Committee

Question

2. Defence's submission states that the Indo-Pacific region 'is in a period of significant transformation, and Australia increasingly sits at the epicentre of a complex, contested and challenging geostrategic environment'.

a. How is Australia's engagement with regional initiatives seeking to ensure Australia's strategic interests are met during this time of transformation?

b. Is Australia's diplomatic footprint in the region adequate to ensure that Australia can maximise its interests in the various multilateral and bilateral relations in the region?

Answer

At a time when power is shifting to, and within, the Indo-Pacific region and the regional order is under pressure, we are strengthening our engagement across the region's architecture to secure a stable and durable regional order, reinforce the rules and norms that underpin our interests, and support the region's health and economic recovery from COVID-19. DFAT's submission to the Inquiry outlines this engagement in detail.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its architecture remains at the heart of Australia's Indo-Pacific agenda. We actively engage in the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to prosecute Australia's strategic interests – including reinforcing important norms and expectations of state behaviour – on issues such as the South China Sea, the Myanmar crisis, and on security issues such as cyber and counter-terrorism.

The Department of Defence also uses the ASEAN-led architecture to build strategic cooperation. Defence engages in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM Plus) to exchange assessments on shared security challenges. It uses the ARF Defence Officials Dialogue to bolster regional cooperation on core defence policy issues, supporting broader ARF efforts in areas such as transnational crime and disaster relief.

The Quad (Australia-India-Japan-United States) is a key pillar of our Indo-Pacific engagement, focused on practical, positive engagement on regional strategic challenges. Quad partners are deepening cooperation on the region's most pressing challenges, including COVID-19 vaccines, climate change and critical and emerging technology, counter-terrorism, maritime security and cyber security.

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We assess that our diplomatic footprint – which has expanded in recent years – is well placed to secure our national interests in the region. In 2020-21, DFAT managed 113 overseas posts. Our diplomatic footprint is kept under regular review to ensure it reflects our strategic priorities. For example, to support our deepening engagement in the Pacific, we opened three new Pacific posts in 2020-21 - in Niue (September 2020), Republic of Marshall Islands and French Polynesia (both in May 2021).

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003 – 23 August 2021

Topic: Track 2 Diplomacy

Question from Committee

Question

3. The Australian Member Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific highlighted the importance of 'Track 2' diplomacy in furthering Australia's strategic interests in the region.
- a. What is your view on the current state of Australia's engagement in 'Track 2' and other informal diplomatic mechanisms in the region?

Answer

Australia's engagement in Track 2 (non-government) and Track 1.5 (combined government and non-government) dialogues and other informal diplomatic mechanisms plays an important role in supporting our regional strategic interests.

Track 2 and Track 1.5 initiatives support Australia's multilateral and minilateral engagement in the region. For example:

- Newly-commenced track 1.5 discussions among Australian, Indian and French think tanks and government officials provide a forum for frank discussion and sharing of ideas, supporting ongoing government-to-government cooperation within the Australia-India-France (AIF) trilateral partnership.
- The long-standing Track 2 ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue (AANZ), co-led by Melbourne University's Asialink and counterpart organisations in Malaysia and New Zealand, complements official engagement with ASEAN and its architecture.
- The ASEAN Regional Forum's Track 2 mechanism, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), hosts a biennial conference and a range of workshops and other initiatives that provide a platform for exchange among regional think tanks and universities. DFAT supports Australia's participation in CSCAP, including through funding assistance, as a means to provide an additional Australian channel for engagement with regional governments and non-government organisations, supplementing government engagement in the ARF.

Given COVID-related travel restrictions, DFAT has redirected funding for the 'Canberra Fellowships Program', which is aimed at building a network of emerging Indo-Pacific leaders through visits to Australia, by delivering a series of virtual Track 1.5 dialogues on strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific with key partners in bilateral and minilateral formats, in collaboration with the ANU National Security College. These dialogues have helped sustain open channels between government officials and regional experts on shifting regional strategic dynamics, and delivered suggestions for collaboration among like-minded countries.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

004 – 23 August 2021
Topic: Regional mechanisms

Question from Committee

Question

How useful are regional institutions and groupings in addressing issues such as the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea? Can Australia play a role in strengthening the ability of regional mechanisms to deal with these issues?

Answer

Australia's long-standing approach to the South China Sea is that disputes should be settled peacefully and in accordance with international law. We see regional institutions and groupings as playing an important role in facilitating discussions among all countries with interests in the South China Sea, including littoral states as well as those with interests in the maritime domain.

Australia has supported the development of ASEAN-centred forums, including the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to provide venues to share our concerns about developments in the South China Sea with other regional states, complementing bilateral channels. We work actively within these fora to promote regional peace and security. For example, we recently co-chaired the ARF's maritime security workstream (2018-2021) with the EU and Vietnam and regularly co-host ARF workshops to improve understanding and adherence to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), most recently in June 2021 (with Vietnam, the EU, India and Canada).

The Quad is another regional grouping that provides a forum for Australia, India, Japan and the US to share views on developments in the South China Sea and discuss ways we can cooperate to assist ASEAN Member States and others address regional maritime security challenges.

We see regional institutions and groupings as playing an important role in facilitating discussions among all countries with interests in the South China Sea, including littoral states as well as those with interests in the maritime domain.