

SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM PUBLIC HEARING OF 19 AUGUST 2021

“Opportunities for advancing Australia’s strategic interests through existing regional architecture”

RESPONSES FROM THE:

AUSTRALIAN MEMBER COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Question 1:

Please summarise the role that “Track 2” dialogue mechanisms and other informal diplomatic ties have to play in advancing Australia’s strategic interests in the region?

Response:

Track 2 engagement, involving academics, think tank analysts and practitioners, can play an important role in advancing Australia’s strategic interests by helping to complement and support engagement at the government, or official, level.

As noted in our submission, in Track 2 we seek to build networks with influential specialists in Asia-Pacific countries, many of whom are former government ministers and senior civil servants who remain influential with their governments. Through our participation in Track 2, we can play a role in explaining Australian Government policy to wider audiences in our region, as well as contribute to the shaping of attitudes and approaches to key foreign and security issues both in the region and in Australia. CSCAP offers the opportunity to explore influential non-government and government views from the Asia-Pacific, with a view to helping inform the thinking of our own Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence on key issues.

Advantages of Track 2 engagement include that:

- i) it has the potential to tackle sensitive issues which might be contentious or awkward to raise at official level;
- ii) it can explore and investigate new possibilities for collaboration, where governments themselves may wish to avoid a public commitment;
- iii) it can provide access to thinking in member countries which may not align with government policies; and
- iv) it can provide useful feedback to government, gauging where one official initiative or another may or may not meet with regional approval.

As noted, areas in which Track 2 discussion has made a contribution to official processes over the last decade or so include counter-extremism, refugee and other illegal people movements, South China Sea maritime relations, peacekeeping, regional architecture, post COVID-19 pandemic prospects and deliberation on the Rules Based Order.

Question 2:

DFAT notes in its submission that some observers have described the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific as a ‘spaghetti bowl’ of complicated arrangements that might impede prosecution of Australia’s international agenda.

- a. Do you agree with this view?**
- b. How should Australia prioritise its engagement with the variety of regional forums and initiatives in which it is involved?**

Response:

Our submission also noted the complexity of the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. But we stressed that the region itself is highly complex – shaped by historical experience far more diverse than that of Europe. The institutional structure is complicated as well because it embraces so many issues – political, security and economic. Some institutions are summit-like bodies (EAS, APEC Leaders); others are subject focussed (ARF, ADMM, APEC).

The wide-ranging nature of this architecture serves rather than impedes the prosecution of our interests. It enables us to engage on a large set of challenges, with sub-regions as well as the region as a whole, and at multiple levels - Heads of Govt/State, Ministers, officials, and second trackers.

ASEAN-led institutions can be frustrating for Australia – partly because the ASEAN determination to promote regional unity can hinder decisive action in a crisis. These institutions, however, have helped over fifty years to stabilize our region; also, with their inclusive all-Indo-Pacific reach, they offer the opportunity to engage all major powers with interests in this region.

Some ASEAN-led meetings are dismissed as ‘talk-shops’ – but ASEAN insists on the value of talk, not only in handling disputes but also in building a sense of ‘region’. To be able to influence our strategic environment, Australia needs to be positioned inside not outside this conversation – and to keep in mind that ASEAN is indigenous to the region, and often sensitive regarding proposals likely to challenge its centrality.

As to the question about ‘prioritizing’, it would weaken Australia’s influence to give up on any element in the current architecture - but we must maintain a strong focus on strategic level meetings, and must maintain a strong position in economic and trade related forums. We need to know in addition what is going on in non-inclusive institutions – such as the China-led Shanghai

RESPONSES FROM THE:

AUSTRALIAN MEMBER COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Cooperation Organization. Our own interests in the Quad and the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' are relatively recent developments that may bring solid benefits, including its underpinning message about the continued presence and interest of the US in the region.

The Australian priority, however, should be to harness our growing relationships with Japan, India, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam - and our long-established intimacy with the United States - to strengthen the effectiveness of inclusive institutions (APEC, ASEAN-led and Track 2), and thus to help prevent the region drifting toward a new Cold War, or worse.

Question 3:

How has the leaders-level meeting of the Quad in March 2021, and the commitments made at that meeting, changed the future for the Quad as a regional grouping?

Response:

In our view, as explained in our submission, the primary purpose of the Quad is to signal that China cannot set the regional order unilaterally. That signal is intended not only for China but also for other countries of the region.

We would expect that the meeting of the Quad leaders in March has reinforced that message for both China and the region. The commitments made, including in relation to the Vaccine Partnership and the Working Groups on Climate and Critical and Emerging technology, would have underlined for non-Quad countries of the region that the Quad can be more than just a "talk shop."

While this diplomatic signalling is valuable in terms of Australia's interests, it does not in itself change significantly the Quad's future as a regional grouping. At this stage it remains hard to see other countries joining the Quad. While military exercises between the four members will benefit the relationships between the four member countries and reinforce the 'signalling', our view as 'Second Track' observers is that it is still unrealistic to expect that the Quad will acquire the status of a military alliance as some of its proponents - and some of its critics - have foretold for it.

RESPONSES FROM THE:

AUSTRALIAN MEMBER COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC