

# Why joining the Quad is not in Australia's national interest

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Australia's joining a quadrilateral group with Japan, India and the US is a bad idea, a very bad idea. It was a bad idea 12 years ago when first pushed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his stunningly brief term as Japan's prime minister, and it remains even more so today. It is a potentially dangerous response to China's ascendancy and flies in the face of more than 30 years of Australian policy engagement with China.

In 2005, recently elected Prime Minister Abe proposed a "quadrilateral grouping of democracies" comprising the US, India, Australia and Japan. This was the "big idea" from a book Abe published on his path to the prime minister's job. The purpose was to contain China. With the ideological wrapping of "democracies", it found a willing audience among the rapidly fading Bush/Cheney administration. It was also embraced by the Howard government. It might say something that all had lost power within two years of signing up.

Then, China's economy was ranked third largest in the world behind Japan's and the US. China's diplomacy was still defensive. When the quadrilateral was proposed, China reacted vehemently. It was seen by Beijing as containment, which it patently was. It was proposed by China's arch rival: Japan. It was also seen as introducing Cold War divisions in the Asia Pacific and so dividing the region, which it was. And was completely at odds with decades of regional diplomacy that sought to unify the region along non-ideological lines to promote regional cooperation and integration.

## **Why would Australia be involved?**

Beijing was particularly perplexed over why Australia would be party to this when it had been a leader in promoting deeper regional integration through APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum and various ASEAN-plus mechanisms. More recently, Australia had also initiated the Bali Process on People Smuggling.

At the time, Beijing could not understand the contradictions in Australia's regional diplomacy. Japan's motivation was clear to Beijing, while the US's was consistent with rising neo-conservative voices in Washington urging containment of China.

In the event, the quad never really got off the ground. China's protests were such that meetings were described as informal and held "on the margins" of other regional meetings. In recognising the ideological baggage of the word "democracies", emphasis shifted to practical matters of cooperation such as rescue at sea and disaster relief. To

which China reasonably responded, if that were the real purpose wouldn't it be in everyone's interest for China to participate.

De-emphasising "democracies" as the unifying theme did not placate China. It did, however, help to remove one glaring inconsistency: the omission of one of the most vibrant democracies in the region, South Korea. Being a Japanese initiative the old enmities would not have allowed Japan to include South Korea, nor South Korea's becoming a member.

### **The potential traps**

Under the weight of the geo-political realities and the internal contradictions of the quad, it disappeared along with Abe, Bush and Howard.

Apart from souring further Australia's relations with China, joining a revamped quad is fraught with potential traps for Australia alone among the group.

Recognising that Australia is more dependent economically on China than any of the others, and by a big margin, it is curious why Australia would want to join a group that China sees as hostile to its interests. It may seem preposterous in Canberra, but Beijing does in fact feel threatened by the United States. Japan's invasion and occupation of China is still in living memory. And China has a long-standing military conflict with India over disputed borders.

Viewed from this perspective, Beijing cannot understand what Australia has in common with the others. It cannot fathom why a country that has benefited so much from China's economic prosperity would wish to join a group, as Beijing sees it, intended to contain China. Nor why a country that has pursued regional integration for decades and provided effective leadership would want to do this either. No amount of spin will change the view that this is inimical to China's interests and against regional trends.

### **No competition with China**

The Australian government needs to explain why we would choose to join with a group of China's strategic competitors aligned against it. Unlike the others, Australia is not in strategic competition with China.

Joining the quad also requires the heroic assumption that other members' relations with China will not change to Australia's disadvantage. Apart from following Japan with all the territorial, strategic and historical difficulties with China, it is an act of faith on the Australian side that the current tensions in the China-Japan relationship will continue.

Japan had warm relations with China throughout the 1980s. At the time of the Tiananmen Square killings, Japan was the most reluctant to apply sanctions, despite urgings from the US. A charm offensive by China, or a new prime minister, could see Japan quickly lose interest in the quad. India is mainly concerned about its border disputes with China and China's growing presence in the India Ocean. Quad membership is a long way behind in Delhi's list of priorities and besides, membership of

the quad would hardly impact on India's relations with China. If a serious conflict were, however, to occur between China and India over the disputed borders, where would Australia stand if we were a quad member?

And in the case of the US, as the old adage goes, big powers do what they want and the rest do what they can. Membership of the quad is costless for the US and only as enduring as US interest in it. It is worth recalling that no US ally was consulted when Henry Kissinger went to Beijing in 1971, including those allies like Australia whose troops were dying in Vietnam.

For Australia to join the quad it could find itself holding the baby. The interests of others, all much bigger powers than Australia, could change in unexpected ways (remember Richard Nixon and Kissinger). It was a poorly thought through idea 12 years ago, and it remains so today. It is an intellectually bankrupt response to China's ascendancy, led by Japan which has contributed little if anything to regional leadership while it has pursued its narrow interests.

Australia needs to return to creative diplomacy in the region based on regional integration rather than regional division.

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