

Australia has to step away from grandiose US Quad ideas and work with China, not against it

by Ciara Morris

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At the first ever Quad summit convened by US President [Joe Biden](#), the grouping, which also includes India, Japan and Australia, said it was [committed](#) to promoting “a free, open rules-based order” in the Indo-Pacific. In reality, the main concern of the Quad – shorthand for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – is containing China.

In this, the [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (Unclos) has often been cited. The United States was outraged when China rejected the results of a 2016 arbitration on its actions in the South China Sea, yet Washington refuses to sign and ratify Unclos. China’s actions in the South China Sea are not defensible, but it should be noted that it has never threatened the freedom of commercial navigation in the Indo-Pacific.

China relies on free trade flows through the region. Meanwhile, the US navy routinely conducts freedom of navigation operations within the exclusive economic zones of many countries in the Indo-Pacific, including China and fellow Quad ally [India](#).

So, let’s call a spade a spade. The US wants freedom of movement for its military ships and aircraft in the Indo-Pacific. It is terrified that it has let China grow too powerful and it is trying desperately to rewind the clock.

Caught up in this tussle, the Australian government needs to do what is possible to get its relationship with China back on track.

The constant reliance by Australian politicians on vague “[shared values](#)” to justify Australia’s alliance-driven foreign policy is a dumbing-down of its diplomacy. Shared values are not always synonymous with converging interests. Thousands of Australians died or were wounded while Australia played deputy sheriff to the US during the Vietnam war.

In 2003, more Australians disapproved of the nation’s participation in the [Gulf War](#) than approved of it. Today, how many Australians would support backing the US in a conflict over Taiwan if it came to it? I doubt many would, and not for a lack of support for democratic values. Australia’s economic ties with China are too strong. A conflict would be crippling.

The Quad wants to see the region “anchored by democratic values”. Australia would do well to step away from America’s grandiose ideological doctrines to democratise the world.

China is not going to become a democracy because the West tells it to, and it is definitely not going to become a democracy because the West shuns it for not being one. If China does become a democracy one day, it will be the doing of the Chinese people. To proselytise democracy in China – or any foreign nation – is as naive as it is arrogant.

Australia is no longer the only wealthy nation in a region of poverty and instability. China is not the same nation it was 20, or even 10, years ago. It is powerful and increasingly assertive and there are legitimate reasons to be cautious. But there is nothing for Australia to gain from being excessively confrontational.

Of course, Canberra should stand up to Beijing on issues that matter, such as the outrageous [arbitrary detention](#) of Australian citizens. But Canberra can only stand up to Beijing from a position of power. Clinging to US coattails at Quad meetings will not create a situation in which Beijing takes Canberra seriously.

Respect goes both ways. Both Australia and China are to blame for the state of relations. But the diplomatic deep-freeze hurts Australia more than it hurts China. The US might think it is doing Australia a favour by [jumping to its defence](#) over economic spats with China. But this reflects a deep misunderstanding of Australian interests.

The Quad claims to be “inclusive” and represent “diverse perspectives” across the Indo-Pacific. But, by excluding China, it lacks one of the most important perspectives in the region.

Some may not like it, but Australia has to work with China – in regional forums, global forums and even bilaterally. Only by sitting at the same table as Beijing and discussing the security of the region together can Canberra ensure peace and stability.

In using ideologically driven groupings like the Quad to exclude China from regional discussions, and in so doing risk confrontation with Beijing, Canberra only hastens the onset of a new cold war.

Ciara Morris is a policy officer at China Matters.