

The “Quad” and Disaster Management: An Australian Perspective

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Australian military disaster relief has matured from reluctant one-off deployments to an accepted piece of Australia’s strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. For regional cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) provides not only a practical setting for training and joint operations but also a form of international engagement acceptable regardless of political climate. The revival of quadrilateral security consultations bringing together the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia (referred to as the “Quad”) represent a potential avenue for HA/DR and related cooperation as an instrument for international diplomacy. For Australia, this form of engagement could give greater substance and a practical element to regional partnerships, tying together the concept of the Indo-Pacific and bringing India further into regional cooperation. However, existing HA/DR frameworks, the trend toward bilateral disaster relief, and the political tension generated by growing Chinese assertiveness will make it hard to convince skeptics that the Quad is viable as a means of strengthening diplomacy by HA/DR.

Australian Policy on HA/DR

Military Beginnings

Australia’s history of HA/DR cooperation highlights the varied strategic objectives linked to the country’s HA/DR goals. The Australian Defence Force first conducted HA/DR operations in 1918, when a medical team on board HMAS *Encounter* was deployed in response to an outbreak of the Spanish flu in Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga. This was not the result of any special willingness to engage in humanitarian activity. Australia’s only other relief contributions in the early twentieth century were financial grants to Sicily in 1908, Russia in 1922, and Japan after the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923. In 1921 Prime Minister Billy Hughes rejected a domestic request to have Navy vessels stationed in Brisbane and Cairns respond to annual cyclones, stating that this was “outside of the province” of the Navy, which had the primary duty of defending Australia in war.¹ Foreign disaster relief was something approached with reluctance, as an unwanted expense. When the Red Cross and the League of Nations established the International Relief Union in 1932, Australia declined to join for financial reasons.

During the Cold War, humanitarian assistance came to be viewed as part of Australia’s strategy to support non-communist actors. It was also seen as part of

Australia's growing role in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the South Pacific. In 1959, in its first significant military relief mission, Australia sent army engineers to Vanuatu to repair cyclone damage. Aid grants for disasters, such as those for cyclone relief in Northeast Asia, helped support friendly governments in the region, including Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.² While the government and armed forces were sometimes reluctant to commit resources, HA/DR became an accepted if still infrequent function of defense.

Military-to-military cooperation in disaster relief was not initially a strategy for regional engagement. For Australia, its first incarnation was as a part of the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR), where Australian personnel joined with British and New Zealand counterparts in Malaya as a forward defense against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Malaysian authorities made an ad hoc request through this framework for HA/DR support for a local disaster in 1958. Australia consequently agreed that its soldiers could assist with disaster relief through the FESR under certain conditions. While the arrangements represented a joint framework, they were not cooperation in a practical sense, and the set-up stayed safely inside the boundaries of the British Commonwealth. The FESR was replaced in 1971 by the Australian-led ANZUK (Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom), and the entire organization was quietly folded in 1975, replaced by the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

After the Cold War, Australia began to raise its international profile by increasing its engagement in humanitarian activities. The focus, however, was primarily on peacekeeping: in Cambodia in 1991, in Bougainville in the late 1990s, in the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) mission to Timor-Leste in 1998, as well as in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³ Australia also sent forces for stabilization and recovery efforts (Operation CATALYST, from July 2003 to July 2009) to Iraq, following its engagement in the initial intervention under Operation FALCONER.⁴ Disaster relief as a means of international cooperation was not initially on the radar of Australian policy.

Ripples from the Tsunami

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a major awakening for Australia on the impact of natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific.⁵ Accordingly, the country played an active role in the "Tsunami Core Group" (TCG), which was formed by Australia, the U.S., Japan, and India to respond to the crisis. It was from the TCG that the initial idea of the Quad was born. As a middle power working with modest resources, Australia has built partnerships through a variety of mechanisms as a valuable means to maximize influence through "niche diplomacy."⁶ Indeed, the TCG and its HA/DR activities helped to boost Australia's ties to India, Japan, and the U.S. and improve its relations with Indonesia, one of the main relief recipients. Henceforth, Australia became more open to fully institutionalized, multilateral HA/DR cooperation.

The 2004 disaster also served to consolidate Australia's civilian medical capacity for international disaster relief. After the tsunami, four medical teams were deployed to Banda Aceh, the Maldives, and Thailand.⁷ This was Australia's first organized civilian assistance effort; previous civilian involvement tended to be by individuals working for non-governmental organizations. However reluctant, the Australian Defence Force had traditionally provided the mainstay of human and material resources for overseas relief.⁸ Following the tsunami, the basic management and training for Australian Medical Assistance Teams (AUSMAT) was allocated to state and territory health departments. International deployments would be decided in coordination with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Health, and Emergency Management Australia. Training would be provided by the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre in Darwin. In addition to medical capabilities, Australia also has civilian disaster assistance response teams (DART) for urban search and rescue. Since 2004, both DART and AUSMAT have worked closely with the Australian military on international deployments.

Australia's Contemporary HA/DR Rationale

The central rationale of Australia's HA/DR policy is based around the goals of alleviating suffering, preserving human dignity, and, most importantly, saving lives. This position is laid out in the government's *Humanitarian Strategy* paper of May 2016. The paper also lists four strategic objectives for the Australian government:

- strengthening international humanitarian action, notably in the Indo-Pacific region;
- reducing disaster risk through the implementation of long-term strategies and investment in capabilities;
- supporting other countries to better respond to disasters through effective HA/DR; and
- supporting rapid recovery and redevelopment following disasters.⁹

As Athol Yates and Anthony Bergin point out, Australia, like other countries, also pursues a range of associated objectives when it comes to deploying defense forces in HA/DR operations.¹⁰ Australia's 2016 *Defence White Paper* links HA/DR activities to a variety of strategic objectives, including improving regional stability (especially in the South Pacific), denying safe havens for terrorists, and boosting multilateral partnerships (e.g. with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN).¹¹

HA/DR has also been used as a means of justifying the acquisition of new defense capabilities and, as such, has been a feature in long-term defense planning. The acquisition of two Landing Helicopter Docks built for the Royal Australian Navy was justified on the basis of HA/DR needs.¹² The maiden voyage of the first of these, HMAS *Canberra*, was an HA/DR mission to Fiji after Tropical Cyclone Winston in

2016.¹³ More recently, HMAS *Canberra* took part in Exercise OCEAN EXPLORER, an initiative to test the Navy's capability in sea operations for maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and warfare, including cooperation with the naval vessels from New Zealand and the UK.¹⁴

Quadrilateral to Trilateral and Back?

While the Quad was born from HA/DR under the TCG, it was soon caught up in great power politics and lost momentum not long after it was proposed in 2006. Importantly, key actors who had pushed the initial idea soon departed the political scene. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe stepped down in September 2007, while the Indian government became increasingly concerned about Chinese reactions to the initiative. The U.S. government was unenthusiastic because its "priority" was the Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD), composed of the U.S., Australia, and Japan. In Australian politics, also, there were growing concerns that the Quad represented a prototype for a "quadripartite security alliance" that excluded China — a growing presence and Australia's largest trading partner.¹⁵

Australia was particularly sensitive at this time to criticism from Beijing that the Quad was a mechanism to contain its presence in the region. The election in 2007 of a Labor government led by Kevin Rudd, an opponent of the Quad, led to abrupt withdrawal. Rudd's government favored expanding relations with China and therefore preferred the TSD as a less provocative means of dialogue.¹⁶ As the Quad faded, Australia focused on other forums, including the TSD, for disaster-relief engagement. HA/DR cooperation between TSD partners already had an established record. In the mid-1990s, for instance, the U.S. and Japan had agreed to cooperate more on HA/DR not just bilaterally but also at the regional and global levels.¹⁷ The Indian Ocean tsunami had also prompted closer cooperation. In June 2008, the three TSD partners agreed on a plan to increase cooperation on HA/DR. A key aim was to "build understanding of respective emergency response procedures and capabilities."¹⁸ As a result, several HA/DR operations were carried out over 2009–2010.¹⁹ For Australia and Japan, however, direct bilateral engagement did not acquire a framework until the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007 and no real substance until 2011, when Australia's contribution to the Tōhoku disaster response showed that defense coordination independent of the U.S. was actually possible.²⁰ As a whole, the period from 2004 through to the mid-2010s saw Indo-Pacific countries take an active interest in international coordination and capacity building for disaster response and prevention.

By contrast, the return of the Quad in late 2017 represents a shift back to a focus on more traditional security concerns. Ideas about a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and a "rules-based" order — in opposition to China's "community of common destiny" and Belt and Road Initiative — point to greater competition over how the region should operate.²¹ Issues such as denuclearization on the Korean peninsula, stopping militarization of the South China Sea, and improving cooperation on

maritime security have become central to the Quad.²² Likewise, much has changed in terms of the four partners' attitudes toward the region. Australia has shifted to a less conciliatory stance on China in the wake of political donation scandals, cyber-espionage incidents, and various diplomatic spats.²³ The question then becomes whether the Quad is an appropriate forum for HA/DR, if other issues dominate the agenda.

Opportunities and Challenges

The revival of the Quad, therefore, offers both opportunities and challenges for greater HA/DR cooperation. Perhaps the central challenge concerns whether the renewed emphasis on the high politics of strategic rivalry — in other words, how the Quad is to interact with China — will leave space for “low politics,” including policies and engagement central to HA/DR.²⁴ A renewed Quad inevitably raises questions about whether the forum is a mechanism for containing China. Indeed, this constitutes a major debate in Australia today. As Greg Raymond notes, a more robust, formalized Quad may simply confirm Chinese suspicions of encirclement.²⁵

The lack of clarity surrounding the Quad's central purpose also highlights problems of strategic alignment between the four partners. In Australia, critics of the Quad ask why Australia would join together with major powers who are in competition with China when to them it “flies in the face” of decades of positive policy — and especially trade — engagement.²⁶ In fact, there is now much evidence that Australia too has become entangled in a broader strategic competition with China, with the country and its politicians becoming more willing to criticize Chinese policy and express solidarity with the U.S. and Japan.²⁷ Yet Australia, with its own regional interests and at a significant geographical distance from China, has different interests from the other three countries. India's pursuit of “multi-alignment” and partnerships that are not held hostage to the strategic agendas of other states sets it apart from Australia, Japan, and the U.S.²⁸ Japan on the other hand is starting to take a stronger position, holding ground on the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and seeking to reform its security posture in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness.²⁹ The U.S. under President Donald Trump has engaged in diplomatic hostilities that may become a full-fledged trade war with China, much to the horror of Australian policymakers.³⁰ The Quad is so associated with these issues that it could limit engagement even on HA/DR.

Then there are the challenges for the Quad related specifically to HA/DR. First, military and civilian involvement in disaster relief and prevention is primarily done on a bilateral basis. The U.S. and Australia provided military and civilian resources to Japan after the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in March 2011 by bilateral agreement.³¹ After Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the Philippines made bilateral requests for assistance. In Nepal in 2015, while the U.N. provided the framework to manage relief, the agreements on providing resources were again largely bilateral. For Australia, it arguably makes less sense to attempt to shift such

bilateral efforts into a minilateral effort such as the Quad, especially when regional forums such as ASEAN, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), or its ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF-DiRex) are already established and accepted means of promoting disaster relief and related cooperation. These frameworks avoid the “high politics” linked to the Quad and provide the capacity building and common understanding for more flexible approaches to civilian and military HA/DR deployments.

Second, because it focuses on major security issues, the Quad is at odds with the civilian tradition of disaster response and preparedness. While militaries are increasingly accepted as important actors for fast and efficient relief, the basic principle is to maintain civilian leadership. It is an important principle to which Australia continues to subscribe. Further, Australia — and indeed also Japan — has excellent records with their civilian search-and-rescue and medical teams. Military HA/DR can in many cases be slower and more costly than civilian deployments (the U.S. with its extensive bases and resources overseas being a notable exception).^a Quad-based efforts to coordinate overseas disaster responses may simply override or complicate the effective use of these well-established civilian capabilities.^b

Third, coordination on HA/DR through the Quad may also be hampered by the need for equality amongst partners. Greater alignment would be required, not only in terms of shared strategic goals but also in terms of sharing and deploying resources. Marc Grossman argues that a key feature of the TCG was the commitment of the parties to spend “serious money” on relief operations.³² However, it is not clear that there is the same level of commitment to the Quad or joint disaster response. In fact, all four partners are currently too distracted by regional concerns, strategic rivalries, or domestic populism to invest resources in an Indo-Pacific approach to HA/DR. Even Japan’s capacity for international HA/DR is uncertain in light of the country’s defense force restructure and shift back to traditional security priorities.³³ Australia may be more keen to act on HA/DR in the South Pacific, especially in response to the recent surge in Chinese activities including FDI, developmental assistance, infrastructure projects, high-level diplomatic visits, military aid, and port calls with the *Peace Ark* hospital ship.³⁴ It is not clear, however, that the other members, perhaps with the exception of Japan, share this interest. Again, Australian priorities may be more effectively achieved through bilateral cooperation with Japan in this area.

a. The process for deploying the JSDF, for example, is often time-consuming and can miss the initial “golden period” for foreign disaster response. A common view in Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense is that civilian teams on commercial aircraft can reach disaster zones much faster, in part because civilian teams can be so readily mobilized and in part because a commercial aircraft avoids the need to request permission for military aircraft to fly through other countries’ airspace.

b. Both Australia and Japan’s search and rescue teams are qualified as “heavy” (top-level) teams evaluated by the International Urban Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG). Japan’s medical teams acquired a “Type 2” classification under the WHO Emergency Medical Team (EMT) system in 2016, following a gradual buildup in capabilities from the Bam Earthquake in Iran in 2003 to the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Australia’s AUSMAT teams have the same EMT qualification. The Israel Defense Force Medical Corps and the China International Emergency Medical Team (Sichuan) are the only teams with verified “Type 3” hospital capacity, including for complex surgery and beds and care for up to 100 patients. See the World Health Organization website: <https://extranet.who.int/emt/emt-classification>.

Policy Recommendations for Australia

Turning the Quad into an effective international body would require a number of new initiatives. Problematically, however, the questions of high politics “obscure more practical, and more interesting, questions about ... what benefits could accrue to members of the Quad outside the realm of grand strategy.”³⁵

Ian Hall argues that the Quad requires greater communication of key objectives, more efficient policy coordination, a more focused agenda, and potentially a diversification of membership. Importantly, the idea of the Quad as a mechanism to contain China would have to be dispelled.³⁶ Focusing the Quad on issues such as HA/DR could help provide the group with a clearer range of objectives that overcome the suspicions currently raised about its central purpose. With HA/DR as a relatively straightforward area for “niche” diplomacy, the Quad may appeal to a middle power such as Australia.

Certainly, there are ample opportunities for greater cooperation on HA/DR through a regional framework such as the Quad. Joint capacity building, including information sharing and the transfer of “know-how” regarding relief operations, could do much to improve HA/DR engagement and disaster preparedness across the Indo-Pacific. For Australia, the Quad may also be an opportunity to engage with India on HA/DR and other mutual concerns such as maritime security. Undeniably, Australia could do more to engage India. Existing bilateral cooperation falls well behind its engagements with Japan and the U.S. Australia also remains outside the India-U.S.-Japan Malabar naval exercises.³⁷ India has significant HA/DR capabilities that could be more fully plugged into the broader region through the Quad. Its efforts to create disaster management mechanisms through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have progressed only slowly.³⁸

Finally, the Quad could be used to coordinate better institutional frameworks within and between the four partners. Australia could take a leadership position in this regard, especially in light of its experience helping to coordinate cooperation between multiple countries in the search for missing Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.³⁹ Darwin might offer a valuable hub for regional HA/DR training exercises.⁴⁰ This, along with the training programs provided by the Australian Civil Military Centre and AUSMAT, could also underpin Australian contributions. First, however, Australia should assess whether the Quad will be beneficial for HA/DR policy in the region. If such a case exists, Australia should then clarify its commitment to the Quad and outline its vision for the Quad’s future as a key HA/DR forum.

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INTERNATIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE

Rebuilding the Quad?

EDITED BY YUKI TATSUMI & JASON LI



Part of the *Views from the Next Generation Series*

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