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Australia's Maritime Border Command: Grappling with the Quad to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific

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As the four members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) work to determine how the arrangement might best contribute to Indo-Pacific security, coast guard collaboration could be a key tool. Australia can play a role in focusing the Quad on the delivery of public goods in maritime security, but it will require significant reorientation of its own maritime security organizations.

Australia is a vast maritime state. The Australian Fishing Zone (as its Exclusive Economic Zone is known) is the world’s third largest, covering over 8 million square kilometers (3 million square miles). It reaches the Indian, Pacific, and Southern Oceans and multiple seas. Australia is also the world’s fifth-largest shipping nation if judged according to cargo shipped and kilometers traveled. As a middle-sized state with a population of around 25 million, the sheer size of this jurisdiction presents Australia with a challenge in protecting its vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and preventing, identifying, and prosecuting maritime crimes.

While a number of maritime states have in recent years released maritime security strategies, Australia has no such comprehensive or holistic approach. Instead, there are two broad lenses for understanding maritime security in Australia: conventional or military approaches to national security that have maritime dimensions and civil maritime security to prevent and deter illegal activity at sea. While these domains overlap, they also reflect two different views of maritime security.

Whilst Australia has a Volunteer Coast Guard, the Australian government's version of the "coast guard" is a multi-jurisdictional approach in which various agencies and departments have maritime security responsibilities. This reflects the complexity of modern maritime threats and geography, Australia's federal political system, and the vast range of engaged government and non-government stakeholders. In 2020, Australian Border Force (ABF) released a multi-agency Guide to Australian Maritime Security Arrangements (GAMSA) highlighting this complexity. Housed within the recently constructed Home Affairs Department, the Australian Border Force (ABF) coordinates border law enforcement agencies and customs services. Within the ABF, a multi-agency task force called the Maritime Border Command (MBC) is the de facto coast guard. While led by Home Affairs, the MBC is commanded by a Rear Admiral and supported with capabilities from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the ABF. The MBC works alongside Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (the lead agency for maritime safety, search, and rescue) to fulfill civil maritime security responsibilities.

Quad coast guard collaboration is already happening at the bilateral level. In April 2022, the Australian Border Force and the United States Coast Guard "conducted a joint interoperability exercise" in Queensland, Australia. In 2020, Australia and India signed a Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which includes "coast guard cooperation."

Better cooperation within the Quad framework might be advanced through a meeting of Quad coast guards and like agencies on the sidelines of the Quad Leaders Meeting, next hosted by Australia. A Quad coast guard meeting could help to solidify cross-departmental collaboration between the four states and bring it out of the meeting rooms and into the seas.

Jurisdictional complexities may present a challenge for greater Quad cooperation, as cross-departmental confusion could blur the lines on who is responsible for what. The Indian Coast Guard operates under the Ministry of Defence, the USCG is under the Department of Homeland Security, and the Japan Coast Guard reports to the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. The differing nature and reporting structure of each coast guard will necessitate detailed clarification of their various roles and responsibilities among the Quad partners.

The domestic focus of the MBC poses some issues as well. Rear Admiral Jones at the 2022 Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM), for instance, spoke on people smuggling while avoiding questions about China and strategic competition in the Pacific. At the same time, focusing on issues of domestic concern for Indo-Pacific states, such as deterring and prosecuting maritime crime, can help alleviate concerns that the Quad is only a response to China's rise. The Quad 1.0 had its foundations in public goods delivery following the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. For the Quad 2.0, a series of working groups continue to outline a clear interest in non-traditional security issues.

This focus on so-called "soft" security issues plays an important narrative function for the Quad in enabling it to maintain a key role in Indo-Pacific security architecture, while countering perceptions that it is a containment strategy against China. But constraining China's rising power is a motivating factor, especially for previous Australian coalition governments which had increasingly rejected a "pragmatic" foreign policy approach based on good relations with both the United States and China. While the aims of the Quad may not be entirely clear, the group's ability to collaborate externally with regional partners to provide tangible benefits will underpin its success, and address counter-narratives that it is an exclusive grouping of self-interested regional powers.

So far, maritime security collaboration between Quad states has manifested in the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness. The 2022 AUSMIN Joint Statement builds upon coast guard collaboration and maritime domain awareness in the region, committing to enhancing the Pacific Maritime Security Program and “further collaboration” with the Quad on the IPMDA.

Australia’s border command, in all its iterations, has been responsible for Australian MDA. The Australian Maritime Identification System, in conjunction with the Maritime Safety and Security Information System, will play a key role in maritime domain awareness at the southern end of the Indo-Pacific. Australia also has experience in delivering surveillance capabilities to regional parties through the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, which has delivered 22 patrol vessels to Pacific Island states.

As RAN Commodore (ret.) Sam Bateman once observed, the use of white hulls in maritime security cooperation is potentially less provocative than warships. Coast guard collaboration could be a platform to ensure that the Quad becomes a multilateral that is working collaboratively and meaningfully in the region, able to counter concerns that it is solely focused on constraining China and does not serve the region whose fundamental order it seeks to shape. While Chinese grey zone activities are blurring the lines between military and civil domains, the Quad still stands to benefit by shifting toward a coast guard-led approach to maritime security. If Australia wishes to be at the forefront of that cooperation, it will require significant work within the MBC to accommodate such an approach. Next year’s Quad meeting in Sydney will be a key opportunity for convincing the region of the Quad’s utility, which does not leave Canberra much time to make these adjustments. But, with concerted and focused effort, Australia could (and should) emerge as a leader in Quad maritime security efforts in 2023.