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## *Containing China & Russia: Challenges for Asia and the West*



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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue foreign ministers meeting took place in Melbourne last week against a very tense global backdrop. Geo-strategic tensions have sharpened considerably in both the eastern and western hemispheres in recent months.

Worryingly, a new partnership is emerging between Beijing and Moscow to challenge what they depict as Western over-reach in their respective spheres of influence. If this axis develops further it could prove a potent challenge to the West and those who sympathise with it.

The Quad partnership, involving the US, Australia, Japan and India, is only one element in a much wider web of initiatives among “like-minded” democratic partners aimed at this challenge. Few would argue it is the strongest.

The involvement of two great Asian democracies certainly sends a useful message to other regional countries living in Beijing's shadow. But even if Japan's defence posture has stiffened a little in recent years – and recent reports of growing defence co-operation with Australia is a welcome sign – there are still strict constitutional limits on its ability to act militarily outside the

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East China Sea. For its part, India may no longer use the Cold War language of “non-alignment”, but shows little interest in joining formal military alliances. Its strategic concerns are centred on the Indian Ocean and its own border with China, rather than on East Asia and the Pacific. And it is a longstanding and privileged consumer of Russian defence equipment.

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have another advantage. They do not have the same challenge in carrying their constituencies on defence and security issues as the Western democracies that are seeking to organise the collective global response.

AUKUS demonstrates this point. It was rightly seen by most serious Australian commentators as a significant collective security initiative when it was first announced five months ago. Attention focussed on the headline initiative to augment Australia’s military capability through nuclear-powered submarines. But in strategic terms it is both an indicator of Australian and US determination to contain China and Britain’s need to develop its place in a post-Brexit world, building on its relationship with trusted partners in a region where it sees new opportunities. It was clear from the quick and virulent response from Chinese media organs that it had rattled Beijing.

In Australia, where trust in China has been severely damaged, the impact of AUKUS was undermined by communication breakdowns, from France to Indonesia and the nations of the Pacific. All expressed varying degrees of surprise and unease. The issues with France quickly fused with existing domestic undercurrents to feed debate about the honesty and competence of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. When Defence Minister Pete Dutton followed up with a series of hawkish comments about China the government was accused of manipulating public concerns ahead of the Australian federal elections.

Australia’s “natural” Western democratic partners have their own domestic handicaps and preoccupations too. US President Joe Biden sent a message when he was elected that international issues would have to take a back seat to the COVID domestic crisis, and that when it came to foreign policy, East Asia and the Pacific would be the top priorities. But he has found himself facing bitter criticism for the Afghanistan withdrawal and the stakes for him are very high over Ukraine. A Russian invasion would risk underlining US impotence, and the deployment of American troops in a conflict zone carries serious dangers at home. These issues risk diluting the administration’s intended focus on China.

British considerations are equally complex. In addition to the “tilt” towards Asia, Boris Johnson’s government needs post-Brexit to develop and exploit British technological and other links with US defence industries. Although useful and practical military co-operation continues with France as Britain’s closest European military analogue, the political relationship with the Macron administration is at its lowest ebb for decades. And Johnson faces sustained and continuing challenges in maintaining public trust at home as a result of the “partygate” scandal that could lead to a vote of confidence in his leadership.

It certainly doesn't help that key Western governments are struggling to win and maintain public trust at home. And the eventual success of Indo-Pacific security initiatives may ultimately depend as much on developments in eastern Europe as on China's determination to continue its assertive security policy.

In any event, the Quad participants will need to put significant resources into these initiatives. Just as AUKUS will need to develop well beyond submarine procurement if it is to be credible and robust, the Quad will have to mature to the point where the Asian partners are prepared to back it with serious defence muscle and strategic intent.

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