Maximising Australia’s Memberships: Recalibrating Australia’s engagement with Indo-Pacific groups

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, the institutional landscape of the Indo-Pacific has become more crowded. Increased strategic competition between the US and China, waning confidence in older multilateral frameworks, and convergence of interests among like-minded countries have driven rapid growth in the number of regional institutions.

Australia now belongs to upwards of 20 separate Indo-Pacific institutions – half of which it joined in the last decade. Some regional groupings face declining relevance and utility, yet they continue to compete for attention and resources with new and more effective mechanisms.

Australia must adapt its engagement strategy with regional groupings to adjust to the new geostrategic realities of 2022 and beyond. Narrowing its memberships and placing participation within a hierarchy would focus scarce domestic attention and resources to the most important institutions. It would also signal deeper cooperative ambitions to primary, likeminded partners.

Four regional groupings hold the greatest potential for the realisation of Australia’s ambitions. The East Asia Summit, the Quad, the Pacific Islands Forum and a reconfigured Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral to include South Korea could be critical to promoting Australia’s strategic interests.

Australia should make a clear-eyed reappraisal of its engagement with older and less effective institutions. Groups such as the Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia (MIKTA) arrangement, the Asia-Europe Meeting, and the Forum for East Asia and Latin American Cooperation now provide limited utility. Continuing to support these dialogues is misaligned with Australia’s strategic intent.

Recalibrating Australia’s regional engagement strategy would ensure it is configured to the geostrategic challenges and opportunities of today. Preferred groups can be strengthened by committing greater resources to them and encouraging partners to do the same. It would also send a stronger signal to the region regarding Australia’s priorities and interests.
Figure 1: A proposed hierarchy of Australia’s regional engagements

RECOMMENDATIONS BOX

- Assess the current value and potential of Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategic groups and identify duplication of effort
- Conduct a mapping exercise of the national resources required to sustain Australia’s group participation on an annual basis, factoring in the potential for additional memberships
- Create a regional dialogue hierarchy and identify groups to increase, maintain, and reduce resources as well as downgrade and withdraw
  - Special consideration should be given to allocating additional resources to the EAS, Quad, PIF and AI
- Encourage regional allies and partners to prioritise – whether time, funding, new offerings, or innovations – Australia’s preferred Indo-Pacific groups

About the author

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