

OPERATIONALISING MARITIME CAPABILITY- ENHANCEMENT WITHIN THE QUAD

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ABSTRACT

Much of the valuable maritime security capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific takes the form of training courses and workshops, which aim to strengthen the capabilities of coastal States' maritime governance organisations. However, various challenges create inefficiencies and hinder the successful operationalisation of capability-enhancement activities (CEAs). The training and education aspects of CEAs can be enhanced to make them more effective at the interface between policy and practice. This commentary focuses on how the Quad can better achieve its stated goals in this area.

Keywords: Capacity-Building, Capability-Enhancement, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Capability-Enhancement Activities (CEAs), IPMDA, MAITRI, Maritime Governance (for the last commentary)

The Indo-Pacific nations depend on their waters and sea lanes to support regional and national resilience. These waters convey imports and exports and, in turn, sustain their people's wellbeing. Unfortunately, the safety and security of these waters are increasingly under threat from States engaging in grey-zone actions and criminal activities. Private vessel operators endanger their crew and the safety of the surrounding maritime space by shortcutting or disregarding applicable regulations. Increasingly, natural disasters and dangerous weather also threaten sea lanes and littoral communities.

The burden of protecting these sea lanes and littoral communities from threats lies primarily with coastal States and their maritime forces, such as navies and coast guards. As State capacity varies tremendously throughout the region, States with greater resources, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations engage in activities designed to assist those less capable in developing their maritime security capacity and enhancing their capability.

Much of this valuable capacity-building takes the form of training courses and workshops, which aim to strengthen the human capital (capability) of coastal States' maritime governance organisations and maritime forces. These capability-enhancement activities (CEAs) encompass areas as diverse as (but not limited to) international law, oil-spill response, diving, forensics, maritime medicine, and visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) techniques. However, these CEAs suffer from a variety of challenges.

The most prevalent policy-level issue is the misalignment between initiative announcements focused on delivering diplomatic (or domestic political) outcomes and the initiatives that would be optimal for capability-enhancement.¹ Unfamiliarity with the maritime security needs, political situations, and strategic cultures of the recipient nations leads to ineffective CEAs and creates issues with willingness to participate and buy-in from recipient States. A lack of shared ownership between the CEA provider and recipient impedes efforts to develop sustainable CEAs.

Communication with CEA recipient States is, therefore, crucial. However, such misalignments may also result from poor communication between the policy, strategic, and operational levels of sponsoring States and organisations (policy coupling issues), or between agencies within those States and organisations (stove-piping problems). Policy messaging, coupling issues, and stove-piping together create dysfunctionality at the interface between policy and operations during CEA development and delivery.

The problems associated with the inefficiencies that result from a lack of coordination among CEA delivery organisations also permeate the current situation. When uncoordinated, the activities and skills transferred can be duplicative, and opportunities for training events to build upon each other can be missed. In worst-case scenarios, the training materials used by different organisations can be conflicting and counterproductive. This is especially troubling, given that the processes involved in organising CEAs require significant resource investments from host countries, as training activities reorient personnel and facilities away from operations.

This commentary examines how training and education for CEAs can be enhanced to improve their effectiveness at the interface between policy and practice. It focuses on the efforts of the Quad, the strategic partnership between Australia,

India, Japan and the United States, which has shown great promise for cooperative maritime security capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific.

QUAD CAPACITY-BUILDING AND CAPABILITY-ENHANCEMENT INITIATIVES

Maritime security has been on the Quad's agenda since leaders began regular meetings in 2017. Press releases, readouts, and joint statements have shown a desire to further practical cooperation, enhance collaboration, deepen engagement with and provide support for regional partners to address shared challenges, all while prioritising the rule of law in the maritime domain. Capacity-building was specifically mentioned for the first time at the fourth Quad Foreign Ministers meeting, held in February 2022, but it was unclear in what form it would be realised.

The announcement of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness initiative (IPMDA) at the Quad leaders' summit in May 2022 noted that the Quad would provide training to support enhanced, shared maritime domain awareness (MDA) in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and the Indian Ocean. IPMDA has since emerged as the most comprehensive of the Quad's maritime activities. Yet, to date, Quad capacity-building and capability-enhancement in this area remains underwhelming.² IPMDA activities, which include the sharing of MDA platforms and the provision of satellite data, have been fundamentally bilateral activities between individual Quad members and partner nations, but with the addition of Quad-branding. It is difficult to observe how exactly regional MDA capacity would be different had the IPMDA framework not been established.

Increased commitment to capability-enhancement was demonstrated with the announcement of the *Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific* (MAITRI) at the 4th Quad Leader's Summit in September 2024. MAITRI is designed to enable Quad regional partners "to maximise tools provided through IPMDA and other Quad partner initiatives, to monitor and secure their waters, enforce their laws, and deter unlawful behaviour"³ and its first symposium is on track to be held before the end of 2025. If fully realised, MAITRI could help the Quad move closer to executing its vision of catalysing joint efforts that yield results greater than the sum of their parts, particularly in coordinating capability-enhancement.

The MAITRI symposium could provide an ideal venue to take stock of current training efforts and to lay out a roadmap for expanding cooperation among the Quad nations. However, the symposium also risks becoming either a one-off skills training event focused narrowly on enhancing the technical capabilities of those using the MDA platforms under IPMDA, or, worse still, another round of strategic-level discussions that never translate into action.

The IPMDA and MAITRI remain the only Quad activities that provide a platform for maritime capacity-building and capability-enhancement to regional partners. Despite the Quad's general emphasis as a provider of public goods, its maritime security activities thus far have focused more on strengthening cooperation and interoperability among the Quad nations themselves, with the aim of maintaining peace and stability in regional waters. These efforts include the Maritime Security Working Group, the Quad Maritime Legal Dialogue, and the Coast Guard Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission.

THE COORDINATION SPECTRUM

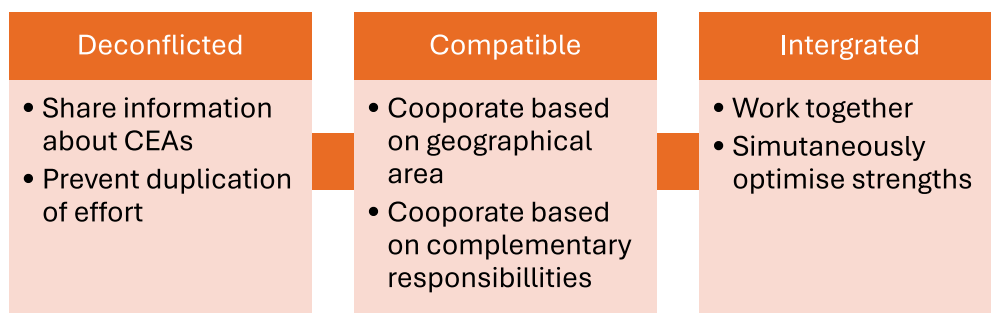
With the exception of IPMDA and MAITRI, all the other capacity-building and capability-enhancement activities conducted in the Indo-Pacific by Quad nations are not Quad-branded. They typically take place bilaterally or trilaterally, where one or two Quad members engage with a regional partner. While a few of these activities are executed effectively, many suffer from the challenges described above. It is precisely in response to such shortfalls that some see the Quad's promise: the idea that the four members, by combining their individual strengths, can deliver activities that are more efficient and have greater impact.

Unfortunately, many of the capability-enhancement shortfalls stem from poor communication, either within governments or between CEA provider governments and partner nations. Without systematic reform and the full involvement of all Quad members in CEAs, simply adding more participants without addressing these communication problems is likely to exacerbate rather than resolve them. Moreover, the Quad nations do not all share the same geostrategic priorities. As a result, collective Quad capability-enhancement initiatives involving all four members are likely to prove difficult to operationalise.

Instead, the Quad's emphasis should be on a coordinated approach to CEAs.⁴ An optimum role for the Quad is to create clear lines of communication between Australia, India, Japan and the United States to discuss their respective CEAs in the region. The goals would be to share information about bi- and tri-lateral CEAs to prevent duplication; to cooperate on and coordinate CEAs based on geographic focus areas or formally identified complementary responsibilities, and/or to work together on activities which could be optimised using the strengths of two or more Quad members. This may already be happening to some extent in the Quad maritime working group, but coordination is not permeating through to the practical and operational levels.

A useful way to think about coordination in the maritime security capability-enhancement arena is to borrow concepts from the continuum of interoperability as used by NATO and the armed forces of Australia and the United States.⁵ Interoperability with partner nations ranges from being deconflicted to compatible and finally, to full integration. In the context of Quad CEAs, the continuum could be interpreted as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Spectrum of Capability-Enhancement Activity Coordination



Source: Provided by the author.

A deconflicted CEA might be as simple as the Quad nations sharing information so that training activities keep an appropriate tempo. For example, in early 2025, Australia, Japan and the US all arranged training for the Palau Marine Law Enforcement (Palau's coast guard equivalent) in the same month. This diverted a large share of the small nation's forces from their regular patrol routine. The Palauan defence coordinator has tried to mitigate this strain by arranging meetings with representatives from partner-nation CEA-providers stationed on the island, yet, as a single person, he is inevitably overstretched.⁶

In the case of the US and Japan, they exhibit a compatible CEA. In the Philippines, the US leads technical training for outboard diesel engine maintenance aboard small vessels, and Japan focuses on training for generators and propulsion engines on multi-role response vessels (MRRVs). This division of complementary training began after the Philippines raised concerns about receiving conflicting training for engine maintenance procedures before 2017.⁷

Furthermore, Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand, the UK and the US had provided integrated capability-enhancement through VBSS training during the 2023 Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) multilateral exercise. In this case, too, the capability provider nations worked together to deliver aspects of the classroom training that played to their strengths.

Military doctrine sees the continuum of interoperability as a progression. It is generally understood that the goal should be to advance cooperation along the continuum to integration. However, with regard to capability-enhancement, it is better to describe this framework as a spectrum.⁸ Neither point on this spectrum is necessarily a goal more important than the other. In many cases, the goal of deconflicted CEAs is enough, yet in others, compatible or integrated CEAs may be the preferred outcome. CEA providers should assess where on the spectrum their CEA should fall.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Quad CEA aspirations fail at the interface of policy and practice. The Quad needs to pursue a coordinated approach to capability-enhancement training with open communication at the working level. The following recommendations highlight how this might be achieved.

- (a) **Embassy-level coordination is key.** Representatives from Quad States who are based in CEA-recipient nations should meet regularly to share information on their activities and develop strategies for CEA coordination. Coordination at this level is essential to complement discussions at the Quad maritime security working group, as the embassy is the focal point that funnels the CEAs funded and carried out by various agencies to the recipient country. In short, embassies are best placed to keep a track of all the activities being performed by the large Quad

governments. Moreover, the representatives based at diplomatic missions have the most nuanced understanding of their partner nations' maritime security needs, political situations and strategic cultures, and, therefore, can build sustained relationships. However, in many host nations, meetings between the CEA delivery embassies tend to be *ad hoc* and instigated by proactive individuals. Once this individual rotates out of the country, the meetings become wane. Meetings also often hold limited value due to the inconsistent participation by representatives of other CEA-provider embassies. For example, an Australian official organised such a meeting in Jakarta, but attendance was inconsistent, and the initiative ceased once he was transferred.⁹ Senior leaders at Quad nation embassies should prioritise the participation of their staff in regular capacity-building and capability-enhancement discussion meetings.

Resources required: This recommendation requires embassy personnel to undertake additional work. The amount of labour required would be relatively smaller and may or may not need additional human resources.

(b) **Implementers must understand strategic priorities and share CEA feedback.** Quad leader and working group-level policy goals mean nothing if they are not clearly communicated to those implementing the CEA training. Those on the ground must realise why they are undertaking the training so that they can align course content with goals, engage the optimum audience, and select appropriate delivery methods. More often than not, that is not the case.¹⁰ Feedback obtained from course participants and instructors should be evaluated by the CEA-provider organisation to determine the effectiveness of the training, assess its sustainability, and prevent duplication of effort. Without the careful design and monitoring of CEAs, embassy-level coordination will fall short.

Resources required: No additional resources are required. These activities should already be in place, yet in practice, they are often lacking.

(c) **A Maritime Governance Centre of Excellence would make a big impact.** A Quad-sponsored Maritime Governance Centre of Excellence (COE) could serve as a hub for capacity-building and capability-enhancement in the Indo-Pacific. The COE would receive guidance from the Quad working group and gather information from, and provide advice to, the Quad embassies in the region. The COE would function to

coordinate and expand Quad CBAs by deconflicting duplicative activities and creating pathways for providing cooperative and integrated CEAs. It would incorporate the functions previously identified by Corben *et al* under their proposed *Maritime Capacity-building Initiative*.¹¹ Specifically, the COE would aggregate knowledge of integrated, tri- and bi-lateral Quad CEAs; share information on CEA goals and outcomes; and gather understandings and conduct needs assessments of recipient country priorities. Additionally, the COE could be a centre for academic research that also hosts practical maritime security training for practitioners from across the Indo-Pacific. Personnel would be drawn from the Quad countries to work full-time in the centre. Experts from other regional nations would also be welcome. The establishment of such a Quad-sponsored COE was previously recommended at an international conference held in Singapore in July 2023.¹²

Resources required: Establishing a Quad Maritime Governance Centre of Excellence would require substantial resources, but would not be as expensive as some might imagine. A centre staffed full-time by a senior director, representative directors, plus two junior researchers from each Quad country and admin support staff could conduct all of the above activities for a little over 2 million USD a year, to be divided between the four Quad countries.

(d) **Maritime Domain Awareness centres could achieve more together.** There are multiple national and regional MDA centres throughout the Indo-Pacific. They share information to promote collaborative maritime safety and security, but coordination is underdeveloped. The Quad could establish an annual forum where representatives from national and regional MDA centres, as well as those from relevant international MDA organisations, meet for dialogue about best practices for MDA information-sharing and coordination of CEAs.¹³ Participants would include representatives from national MDA centres, the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore, the IFC–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in India, the Pacific Fusion Centre (PFC) in Vanuatu, and the Regional Maritime IFC in Madagascar, among others.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP) has held five similar meetings under the Forum of National Maritime Fusion Centres (FNMFC). However, these meetings invite the heads of national MDA centres from Southeast Asia only. A Quad-led forum with hosting responsibilities rotating between the Quad member States could be wider in geographic scope and would enable direct information gathering to allow for more efficient Quad CBA coordination.

Resources required: An annual meeting with two representatives from each national MDA centre, regional MDA centre, and relevant international organisations could involve as many as a hundred people. This would be a costly event if the Quad nations were to fund all travel. Instead, the Quad nations could provide the venue and admin support, and each participant nation could utilise its own budget or existing security cooperation and development assistance funds to support travel.

CONCLUSION

The Quad has been ascribed much potential to create synergetic outputs for maritime security capacity-building and capability-enhancement. However, from a practical standpoint, it has proven difficult for the four partners to align their efforts in a way that creates those outcomes. The Quad States can take three essential steps to maximise the impacts of their capability-enhancement endeavours. To build a strong foundation, Quad States must first focus on their internal communication and implementation processes. Misalignments between the policy, strategic and operational levels should be addressed. As the funnels for the delivery and management of national CEAs, embassies should consistently maintain processes for holistically tracking and monitoring training, ensuring the synchronisation of strategic objectives and implementation. Second, communication between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States must be regular and ongoing, and cooperation should be thought of in terms of deconfliction, compatibility, and integration. Again, embassy-level meetings can achieve this. The outcomes of these discussions can be coordinated with the Quad working group priorities via a maritime governance COE. Third, the Quad nations should create fora for others to coordinate at the regional level. This

could be a valuable function of the COE. A Quad-led gathering of MDA centres would also be a high-impact forum in this regard. The Quad's next investments in regional maritime security capability should focus on improving processes and establishing mechanisms that enhance efficiency.

ENDNOTES

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