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**THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA
IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**
A Rising Power in a Changing Region

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Editors' Note

Readers, welcome to volume 7, number 6 of the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, a publication that, in its September–October 2024 issue, dares to grapple with nothing less than “The Future of Australia in the Indo-Pacific: A Rising Power in a Changing Region.” Our distinguished guest editor, Dr. Andrew Dowse, director of RAND Australia, has assembled a coterie of scholars and military minds to dissect this antipodean nation’s role in a region teeming with both promise and peril.

As we stand at the precipice of a new era in the Indo-Pacific, Australia finds itself in a position that would have been unthinkable mere decades ago. No longer content to be a mere outpost of Western civilization in the South Pacific, this continental nation’s invigorated efforts to influence regional security and stability make it a fulcrum upon which the balance of power in the region may pivot. At the heart of these efforts is a national defense strategy that directs a more potent military capability to deter aggression, which Dr. Dowse examines in this issue’s opening senior leader perspective.

Within these pages, you will find a veritable smorgasbord of strategic analysis, from the lofty perspectives of Air Vice-Marshal Carl Newman of the Royal Australian Air Force, deputy commander of US Pacific Air Forces, to the academic rigors of Dr. Peter Layton’s examination of Australia’s grand strategies. We delve into the intricacies of narrative-based coalition building, courtesy of Drs. Alice Dell’Era and Félix E. Martín, and navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of US-China rivalry with Dr. Alexander Korolev as our Odysseus.

The journal does not shy away from the thorny issue of deterrence, with Drs. Chris Rahman and Prakash Gopal offering a critique that may ruffle feathers in Canberra and Washington alike. And lest we forget the broader context, Drs. Peni Hanggarini and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita provide an Indonesian perspective on Australia’s evolving posture.

The contribution of Paul Bowes, Dr. Cristian Birzer, Jacinta Carroll, and Dr. Vincent Daria, “South Pacific Nations’ Absorptive Capacity for Air-advising Missions,” adds a crucial dimension to our understanding of the region’s security landscape.

As we peruse these pages, let us remember that the game of nations is not for the faint of heart. Australia’s metamorphosis from a “lucky country” to a strategic lynchpin is a testament to the dynamism of our age. Whether this transformation will lead to a more stable Indo-Pacific or merely add another layer of complexity to an already Byzantine geopolitical tapestry remains to be seen.

So, dear readers, gird your intellectual loins and prepare to engage with ideas that may challenge your preconceptions and, dare we say, even enlighten you. For in the realm of international affairs, as in life, it is not the critic who counts, but

those who dare to think boldly and act decisively. Australia, it seems, has chosen to do both. 🌟

—the Editors

Australia's Defense Strategy

DR. ANDREW DOWSE AO

Abstract

This article examines Australia's 2024 *National Defence Strategy (NDS)* within the context of evolving regional dynamics and global strategic competition. Emphasizing deterrence by denial, the *NDS* prioritizes capabilities aimed at thwarting aggression and safeguarding Australia's interests, particularly in its northern approaches. The strategy underscores the importance of integrating military power with broader national resilience and international partnerships, including through initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS. Critically analyzing the *NDS*, the article explores its implications for regional stability, defense modernization challenges, workforce constraints, and the need for clearer strategic communication. It argues for a nuanced approach to deterrence that considers diverse methods beyond military means, addresses regional perceptions, and adapts to unpredictable geopolitical shifts. As Australia navigates these complexities, the article calls for continuous assessment, adaptive strategy, and robust engagement with regional actors to effectively uphold security in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia has responded to the most challenging strategic circumstances since World War II by updating its defense strategy. The 2024 *National Defence Strategy (NDS)* addresses a fundamentally new approach to the defense of Australia and its interests.

The 2024 *NDS* introduces a broader concept of coordinated national power, together with the development of a military force capable of achieving effects with enhanced lethality and at greater range.¹ This strategy represents a shift for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) from a balanced force, ready for a range of contingencies, to one focused on “the most consequential risks.” Australia's strategy is characterized as *deterrence by denial*, with prioritization of capabilities that will hold at risk projection of force against the nation from its northern approaches.

This article examines Australia's defense strategy, emphasizing national power and deterrence, future ADF capabilities, and the assumptions underpinning this new approach.

¹ 2024 *National Defence Strategy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

Evolution of Australian Strategy

For nearly five decades, the Australian government has published defense white papers reflecting its commitment to national defense and outlining, at an unclassified level, its defense strategy. Although these white papers have been produced sporadically, their frequency has increased over the past 15 years.² While defense can be a battleground for Australia's two main political parties to establish comparative credibility, there is generally a high level of bipartisanship on defense investment, and consistency across white papers commissioned by either side of politics. This bipartisanship provides continuity but has also been criticized for restricting policy creativity and accountability and reducing engagement.³

Until recently, these white papers provided a modest approach to defense investment, balancing such spending with other priorities. For example, the 2009 white paper was constrained by the global financial crisis, while the 2016 white paper noted that a military attack on Australia by another state was no more than a remote prospect in the foreseeable future.⁴

In 2020, the Australian government released a strategic update acknowledging a deteriorating geostrategic environment. Citing factors such as strategic competition, assertiveness, and military modernization, it assessed an increased prospect of high-intensity conflict and the inability to rely on strategic warning time.⁵ The loss of warning time necessitated improved preparedness, rather than relying on long lead times to develop capability in response to emerging threats. The update defined its strategy in terms of shaping the environment, deterring aggression, and responding to events. It committed to a defense spend of 2 percent of GDP, a benchmark level Australia had not achieved since 1995.⁶

Following a change of government in 2022, Australia's defense strategy underwent further updates in the 2023 *Defence Strategic Review*. This review highlighted the rising risks of increasing competition and military modernization in the Indo-Pacific region. It reiterated the framework of shaping, deterring, and responding, while emphasizing the importance of self-reliance and partnerships to build capacity for these objectives. Specifically, it stated that the ADF must defend Australia, deter power projection against it, protect economic connections to the

² Department of Defence, "Defence White Paper," n.d., <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

³ Andrew Carr, "I'm here for an argument: Why partisanship on security makes Australia less safe (discussion paper, The Australia Institute, August 2017), <https://australiainstitute.org.au/>.

⁴ 2016 *Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁵ 2020 *Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁶ David Watt and Alan Payne, "Trends in Defence expenditure since 1901," Australian Parliamentary Research Paper, 2013, <https://www.aph.gov.au/>.

region and the world, and collaborate with partners to ensure the security of the Indo-Pacific and uphold the rules-based order.⁷

The 2023 review recommended shifting from intermittent white papers to a biennial strategy. The first of these strategies, the *NDS*, was released in April 2024, alongside an investment plan.⁸

The strategic documents from 2023 and 2024 are framed within the context of China–United States competition. They address Chinese military and economic activities, which, while benefiting many Indo-Pacific countries, lack transparency or reassurance of their strategic intent.⁹ Promoting a focused force structure, the 2023 review and the 2024 *NDS* prioritize investments in military capabilities that will contribute to deterring the most consequential risks. Although the *NDS* does not specify what scenarios might represent such risks, it is primarily concerned with attempts to project power against Australian territory and its northern approaches.¹⁰ Thus, the strategy emphasizes possessing credible capabilities to deter such acts.

Integrated Deterrence

The 2024 *NDS* underscored the importance of international engagement activities to bolster deterrence. Central to regional engagement is transparency about Australia's strategic intentions to build trust. The *NDS* outlines defense engagement efforts to strengthen international relationships and maintain peace and security across the Indo-Pacific, including multilateral arrangements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

While emphasizing the need for self-reliance, the *NDS* also acknowledged that the alliance with the United States remains fundamental to Australia's security, particularly concerning US extended nuclear deterrence. The US relationship, embodied in the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, reflects Australia's foreign policy, built around this strong alliance, which the late Allan Gyngell characterized as a *fear of abandonment*.¹¹

Earlier Australian defense white papers recognized the value of broader international engagement. However, the 2024 *NDS* and the 2023 review also highlighted a whole-of-nation approach to deterrence and the need for a unified national approach to security threats. They introduced the concept of *national defence* as a

⁷ *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁸ *2024 Integrated Investment Program* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁹ *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023*, 23.

¹⁰ *2024 National Defence Strategy*, 24.

¹¹ Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*, updated ed. (Carlton, Victoria: La Trobe University Press, 2021).

broader way of harnessing all arms of national power to protect Australia's security and interests. National defence encompasses integrated statecraft, national resilience, industry resilience, secure supply chains, enhanced innovation and skills, and a robust intelligence community.

The second chapter of the *NDS* elaborates on the need for national defence, recognizing that the Defence Department would contribute the military power aspects of this concept. It implies that other areas of government would pursue other whole-of-nation initiatives, though no published government document addresses their implementation or coordination. This reflects the broader debate in Australia about the absence of a national security strategy.¹² Unlike the Defence Department portfolio responsibilities reflected in the *NDS*, the whole-of-nation initiatives are not clearly linked to other government portfolios, obscuring their funding and the commitment of other departments to deliver the national defence concept. The lack of a higher-level strategy could hinder Australia's ability to manage integrated deterrence, develop strategies tailored to specific threats, or assess the economic and diplomatic implications of the *NDS*.

The international and whole-of-nation dimensions of deterrence in the *NDS* reflect the US concept of integrated deterrence, a key focus of the 2022 *US National Defense Strategy*, which devoted a chapter to it.¹³ While this term is not used in the *NDS*, its dimensions are integral to the Australian strategy. The 2024 *NDS* incorporates these dimensions, acknowledging that Australian military capabilities alone offer a limited deterrence effect.

The Australian *NDS*'s emphasis on deterrence by denial is also featured in the 2022 US strategy. However, the US strategy highlights the importance of deterrence through resilience and cost imposition and explains the need to tailor deterrence approaches "for specific problems, competitors and setting."¹⁴ Both the Australian and US strategies promote a credible military force, with lethality as a central characteristic. Both strategies also emphasize the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) partnership as a means to enable the future force through technology cooperation to develop advanced capabilities.

¹² Stephen Kuper, "Renewed call for a new national security strategy," *Defence Connect*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/>.

¹³ 2022 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: US Department of Defense, October 2022), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

¹⁴ 2022 *National Defense Strategy*, 8–9.

Denial

The *NDS* emphasizes deterrence by denial, aiming to make aggressive actions infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thereby denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives.¹⁵ Consequently, the *NDS* and its supporting investment plan prioritize acquiring various long-range strike capabilities. The logic behind this strategy is that an aggressive act against Australia would be deterred because the ADF would possess the capability to defeat such aggression, particularly in its northern approaches. Thus, the foundation of the Australian strategy lies in the implicit threat that strike responses would alter an aggressor's calculus of risk and cost.

While this approach has its logic, focusing excessively on denial through offensive capabilities may have unintended consequences. Such capabilities could be perceived as reflecting a general policy of hostility, reducing their effectiveness in deterring actions. This perception, combined with the limitations of the ADF's strike assets and a lack of defensive capabilities, could lead an aggressor to sidestep the strategy. An aggressor might pre-emptively strike against these capabilities, without its forces being held at significant risk by the ADF. Therefore, it is crucial that a denial approach balances achieving deterrence objectives and managing escalation.¹⁶

This highlights a potential disadvantage of the *NDS*'s shift toward a "focused force." The ADF may not be prepared for, or likely to deter, situations outside the scenarios focused on the most consequential risks that have shaped the force design. Based on the *NDS*, these scenarios seem preoccupied with operations to defeat aggression within Australia's immediate northern approaches. At one end of the spectrum, there would be little to deter an aggressor that incrementally gains territory or advantage through gray-zone activities. At the other end, the force may be poorly prepared to deter attacks involving long-range, including ballistic, missiles.

The *NDS* also reveals a potential weakness in its balance between offense and defense. A strategy of denial should focus on reducing the likelihood of successful aggression, demanding not only strike but also resilience and counterstrike capabilities. There is a view that the *NDS* affords insufficient priority to the ADF's acquisition of air and missile defense systems.¹⁷ On a positive note, the *NDS* emphasizes the need for resilience, with funding allocated to hardening defense

¹⁵ Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," *RAND Perspective*, 19 April 2018, 2, <https://www.rand.org/>.

¹⁶ Jacob Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Denial is the worst except for all the others: getting the U.S. theory of victory right for a war with China," *War on the Rocks*, 11 June 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

¹⁷ Carl Rhodes, "National Defence Strategy: too slow on air-and-missile defence," *The Strategist*, 10 May 2024, <https://www.aspirstrategist.org.au/>.

facilities in northern Australia and enhancing cybersecurity. However, compared to the 2023 review, it narrows resilience to that associated with military capabilities, providing little clarity about investment in national resilience, given it falls outside the defense portfolio.

A deterrence approach should also account for the full range of factors that weigh on the cost-benefit calculus of a potential aggressor, not just those derived from military power. While the *NDS* acknowledges the importance of a whole-of-government approach, it would add deterrence value to explicitly address broader ways to dissuade adverse acts. Raising the cost of aggression should utilize other forms of power, such as information, economic, and diplomatic tools. The strategy should also embrace dissuasion through reassurances and benefits, making an aggressive action unattractive or unnecessary.¹⁸

What constitutes an effective deterrence-based strategy is a complex topic, given the difficulty in attributing causality to an aggressor's action (or inaction). Yet, there is a strong basis for three conditions that affect the success of a deterrence strategy: understanding the aggressor's motivation, clarity of the object of deterrence and the response if the threat is ignored, and the credibility of the deterring state's capability and will to carry out the threatened response.¹⁹

Of these conditions, the first demands analysis that embraces the full range of options to dissuade aggression. The second highlights the importance of clear communication. The third, the will to carry out responses, requires a sophisticated consideration of escalation dynamics.²⁰ Additionally, it is crucial to assess whether the ADF has the capability to impose a heavy price for aggression.

The Right Stuff

The *NDS* aims to achieve an effective future force structure through investment in “key capabilities to bolster Australia's deterrence capabilities.”²¹ These capabilities are intended to enable force projection against threats, hold an adversary's forces at risk, protect forces and critical infrastructure, sustain protracted operations, and maintain effective situational awareness and command and control.²²

The Australian government's approval of the *NDS* facilitated a AUD 50-billion increase in defense investment over the next decade, focused on 11 capability

¹⁸ Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” 5.

¹⁹ Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” 8.

²⁰ Bec Shrimpton, “Deterrence, escalation and strategic stability: Rebuilding Australia's muscle memory,” *ASPI Special Report*, May 2024, <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/>.

²¹ 2024 *National Defence Strategy*, 7.

²² 2024 *National Defence Strategy*, 28–29.

priorities.²³ This appears to be a significant commitment to the ADF's military modernization, but whether it will support the deterrence strategy must be considered in the context of several challenges.

The first challenge is whether the *NDS* will realize capabilities consistent with the perceived urgency and loss of strategic warning. The *NDS* emphasizes that significant and urgent changes are needed to transform the ADF. Yet, 90 percent of the additional funding in the decade sits outside the next four years of defense budgets. At a time when the Australian government has achieved a budget surplus, this delay in increased funding contradicts the *NDS*'s characterization of urgency.²⁴ While this may reflect the reality of a lack of agility in existing acquisition processes, it has also drawn criticism for not moving fast enough.²⁵

The second consideration relates to the resultant focused force of the ADF. Of the additional AUD 50.3 billion in investment over the decade, more than AUD 49 billion will be consumed by just two programs: nuclear-powered submarines and general-purpose frigates.²⁶ This means that the vast majority of new ADF capability will be in the maritime domain, with maritime systems comprising 38 percent of the total investment budget over the decade. While this aligns with Australia's identity as a maritime nation, submarines and surface combatants are not the only capabilities that can achieve effects in the maritime domain.

While more weapons will integrate with air combat platforms, the investment plan no longer includes a Super Hornet replacement program, opting instead to extend the life of the existing F/A-18F fleet. This is partly balanced by the anticipated integration of future unmanned systems like the Boeing MQ-28 Ghost Bat. Similarly, future programs for maritime support and mine countermeasures have been discontinued, with expectations that these functions, along with some underwater missions, will transition to unmanned vessels. In land investments, littoral maneuver vessels will dominate, reflecting the anticipation of strategic risks primarily within Australia's northern approaches. Other key upgrades for the Army include infantry fighting vehicles and battlefield aviation.

Although the future ADF will enhance its capability to exert influence over greater distances, the focused force represents more of an evolutionary step than a revolutionary change. A chapter in the 2023 review and sections of the 2024 *NDS*

²³ 2024 *Integrated Investment Program*, 6–11.

²⁴ Greg Sheridan, "Why Labor won't face reality on defence spending," *The Australian*, 21 May 2024, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/>.

²⁵ Mick Ryan, "Australia's New National Defence Strategy: Mostly Continuity but with Some Change," *CSIS Commentary*, 3 May 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

²⁶ Marcus Hellyer, "The 2024-25 Defence budget: one project to rule them," *Strategic Analysis Australia*, 15 May 2024, <https://strategicanalysis.org/>.

and investment program emphasize the importance of asymmetric advantage. These efforts, particularly through the accelerated development of the Advanced Strategic Capability Accelerator (ASCA) and allied cooperation under AUKUS Pillar II, prioritize achieving technological superiority.

However, positive asymmetry can derive from various sources, including exploiting intent, environment, resources, methods, and socionormative factors. Combining these sources can enable advantages over adversaries by imposing significant costs at low risk, such as through the development of affordable mass capabilities and autonomous systems. While the exploitation of emerging technologies through the ASCA and AUKUS Pillar II will contribute to future capabilities, competitors are also advancing in technological development. Therefore, achieving a true asymmetric advantage will likely require significant breakthroughs or the strategic integration of technological advantages with other sources of asymmetry.

An additional challenge will arise from the tension between innovative development and the *NDS*'s emphasis on speed to capability in acquisition. Achieving balance will hinge on conducting early analysis and risk reduction to establish clear objectives for each capability program.

The *NDS* also recognizes that people are the ADF's most valuable asset and are crucial to achieving the strategy's goals. In 2022, the previous government announced a plan to increase the ADF workforce by 30 percent by 2040.²⁷ However, by the following year, the ADF workforce had shrunk.²⁸ Recruitment targets were not met, and high separation rates further exacerbated the shortfall. With a workforce deficit of 4,400 at the time of the *NDS* publication, the inability to effectively build and train the ADF workforce poses a significant risk to Australia's deterrence strategy. While the *NDS* outlines initiatives to enhance recruitment and retention, these efforts do not appear significantly different from current practices to reverse the trend. This underscores the necessity for an effective strategy that considers the agency of key actors and other external factors.

Agency and Uncertainty

To address workforce shortfalls, the *NDS* identifies initiatives to broaden eligibility criteria for new recruits, streamline processes, and encourage longer service among current personnel. However, only the latter acknowledges that individuals have their own interests and agency to act on them. While changes to eligibility

²⁷ Nicole Brangwin and David Watt, "The state of Australia's defence: a quick guide," Australian Parliamentary Library Research Paper, 27 July 2022, <https://www.aph.gov.au/>.

²⁸ 2022–23 *Defence Annual Report* (Canberra: Australian Government, 18 September 2023), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

criteria and recruitment processes may offer marginal improvements, they do not fundamentally address what motivates individuals to join, remain in, or leave the ADF.

Similar to the ADF workforce, Australia's industry also acts with agency. The *NDS* underscores the need for a domestic defense industrial base capable of operating at full capacity, resilient to disruptions, competitive in delivering necessary systems and support, and innovative to maintain technological edge.²⁹ It also emphasizes supporting industry through targeted grants and opportunities in key areas called Sovereign Defence Industrial Priorities.

However, achieving a robust defense industrial base faces challenges inherent to working within the Australian defense sector, such as difficulties in doing business with the Defence Department and recent declines in opportunities.³⁰ This revenue decline has resulted in reduced focus by Australian industry on defense projects and a significant downsizing of their defense-related workforce.³¹ While new opportunities could potentially reverse this trend, industry may prioritize other sectors based on its own interests and motivations. Therefore, the Department of Defence must consider its requirements for industry support from both demand and supply perspectives, taking into account industry motivations to contribute effectively to a strong support base.

Regional nations also possess the agency to act in their sovereign interests. While the *NDS* acknowledges this point, it may be somewhat understated, particularly since the strategy assumes access for ADF operations in the region.³² As noted by Marigold Black and Austin Wyatt, assumptions that international engagement activities will automatically lead to support or acquiescence for "impactful projection" operations could be flawed.³³

Many regional nations have recently updated their defense strategies, which bear similarities to the Australian *NDS*. Indonesia's and Malaysia's strategies address regional challenges and emphasize the importance of strong military forces

²⁹ *2024 National Defence Strategy*, 57.

³⁰ Liam Garman, "Businesses struggling to operate in defence industry, latest Australian Defence Industry Report finds," *Defence Connect*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/>; and Keira Joyce, "The decline of Defence tendering," *Australian Defence Magazine*, 25 January 2024, <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/>.

³¹ Keira Joyce and Kylie Leonard, "Losing the defence industry workforce," *Australian Defence Magazine*, 15 February 2024, <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/>.

³² *2024 National Defence Strategy*, 45.

³³ Marigold Black and Austin Wyatt, "Is Australia's Defense Strategy Based on a Mistaken Assumption?," *RAND Blog*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.rand.org/>.

supporting a deterrence-based approach.³⁴ Japan's defense strategy justifies a significant increase in spending, driven by a deteriorating security environment and the imperative to deter aggressors over longer distances.³⁵ South Korea's latest defense plan increases defense spending to enhance deterrence, develop preemptive strike capabilities, and bolster missile defenses.³⁶

Given the regional context, it is unlikely that the Australian *NDS* will singularly stand out or precipitate significant economic or diplomatic implications. Many Indo-Pacific nations historically maintain a posture of nonalignment, necessitating sustained engagement and statecraft to translate shared interests and concerns into cooperative behavior; such cooperation cannot be assumed.

Crucially, a deterrence-focused strategy must account for the agency of potential aggressors, understanding their motivations, beliefs, and perceptions. The most noteworthy response to the release of the *NDS* came from the Chinese government, which criticized the strategy as grounded in "unwarranted anxieties" and a "misjudgment of China's strategic intentions."³⁷ While this reaction could potentially impact the recovering Australia–China relationship economically and diplomatically, Premier Li Qiang struck a more conciliatory tone during his June 2024 visit to Canberra.

Official Chinese defense policy states no intentions of hegemony, expansion, or interference;³⁸ yet ambiguity persists regarding China's military buildup and its influence efforts in the Pacific.³⁹ Timothy Heath suggests that discerning Beijing's intentions is best achieved through monitoring official and public communications as well as potential preparations for conflict.⁴⁰

³⁴ Yudo Margono, "Archipelago Defence Strategy," *Kompas*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/>; and Malaysia's National Defence Policy (Kuala Lumpur: Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 22 July 2019), <https://www.pmo.gov.my/>.

³⁵ Andrew Dowse, Naoko Aoki, and Phoebe Felicia Pham, "Japan," in *Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution in Comparative Organizations*, vol. 5, ed. Stephanie Young et al. (Santa Monica: RAND, 2024), 89–118, <https://www.rand.org/>.

³⁶ Leilani Chavez, "South Korea to increase defense spending over five years," *DefenseNews*, 14 December 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

³⁷ "Australia's new defense strategy a miscalculation of Asia-Pacific situation," *Global Times*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

³⁸ "Defense Policy," PRC Ministry of National Defense, n.d., <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

³⁹ Miles Maochun Yu, "China's Strategic Ambiguity," Hoover Institution, 25 June 2018, <https://www.hoover.org/>; and Jonathan Pryke, "The risks of China's ambitions in the South Pacific," *Global China Project*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁴⁰ Timothy Heath, "Is China Prepared for War?: Indications and Warning of a Potential Chinese Conflict with the United States," Testimony to U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 13 June 2024, RAND CT-A3381-1, <https://www.rand.org/>.

An effective defense strategy should also consider potential adversaries' ability to anticipate and adjust, gaining advantages in counterstrategies.⁴¹ It is conceivable that such analyses have been conducted within classified components of the *NDS* but were not apparent in the public document.

Just as adversaries may seek to disrupt a strategy, external changes, uncertainty, and surprises can undermine even the most carefully laid plans. This underscores the adage that while plans themselves may become obsolete, the process of strategic planning remains indispensable.⁴² Strategic planning processes must adeptly manage uncertainty and pivot as circumstances evolve. Assumption-based planning (ABP) emerges as a valuable tool in this context.⁴³

ABP involves identifying *load-bearing assumptions* that underpin the success of a strategy, actively monitoring these assumptions, taking corrective actions when feasible, and devising contingency plans for when assumptions fail. The Australian government's Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act advocates for the management of assumptions as a best practice, with the Defence Department already implementing ABP in several major acquisition programs.

While the specific methods employed by the Australian Department of Defence to handle uncertainty beyond ABP remain unclear, the biennial nature of the new *NDS* and its accompanying investment plan suggests an ongoing analytical process. This approach implies a commitment to continuous analysis and adaptation in response to evolving threats and strategic landscapes.

Conclusion

Concerned by the instability stemming from great power competition and challenges to the global rules-based order, Australia's updated defense strategy directs the future ADF force structure towards capabilities aimed at thwarting aggression, thereby advancing deterrence through denial. The decision to adopt a biennial cycle for the defense strategy aims to enhance the agility of Australia's defense policies and plans, underscoring the imperative for preparedness to deter conflict.

⁴¹ Andrew Dowse, "Scenario Planning Methodology for Future Conflict," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 18–31, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁴² Attributed to Dwight Eisenhower.

⁴³ Paul K. Davis, *Lessons from RAND's Work on Planning Under Uncertainty for National Security*, RAND Technical Report 1249 (Santa Monica: RAND, 31 July 2012), <https://www.rand.org/>.

However, the strategy may face several challenges that should be addressed in or before the next update, specifically:

1. Integrated deterrence requires consideration and coordination with other elements of national and international power, that are referred to but are not within the remit of the *NDS*. Australia needs a national security strategy.
2. The timing and scope of modernization programs do not reflect the urgency conveyed in *NDS* rhetoric. Clarification is essential to determine whether the pace of modernization is appropriate, as investments slated for several election cycles ahead may be met with cynicism.
3. The *NDS* should appreciate the interests and intentions of key nation states and communicate clearly about the objectives of deterrence. It should adopt a more tailored approach to deterrence, encompassing all effective deterrent methods to prevent unintended consequences arising from perceptions of hostility.
4. The ongoing nature of the *NDS* necessitates continuous analysis of the risks associated with the strategy and its underlying assumptions. This includes assessing what constitutes the most consequential risks. It should also consider at what point the aggregation of incremental acts of aggression become consequential.
5. Workforce challenges remain a significant obstacle to Australia's defense ambitions. Simply enhancing remuneration and adjusting entry eligibility criteria are unlikely to meet recruitment targets. The Defence Department must explore fundamentally different approaches that address the motivations of potential recruits. Similarly, the agency of industry and its workforce must be considered to achieve the sovereign capability envisioned in the *NDS*.
6. Technology development and cooperative initiatives such as AUKUS Pillar II are critical enablers to achieving capability advantage and deterring aggression. However, given the programs are similar to competitor nations' efforts, they are unlikely to achieve truly asymmetric advantage unless combined with other sources of asymmetry.

The *NDS* represents a milestone in Australia's foreign policy, aiming to safeguard national and regional interests in pursuit of a stable, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. For the strategy to effectively deter aggression, it must be accompanied by efforts to comprehend the motivations of potential aggressors and adopt a comprehensive, integrated approach to dissuading aggression. 🌐

Dr. Andrew Dowse AO

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Australia in the Indo-Pacific

AVM CARL NEWMAN, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

Abstract

In the evolving strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, Australia's *National Defence Strategy (NDS)* emerges as a comprehensive framework to address the region's increasing security challenges. The *NDS* leverages a whole-of-government approach, integrating all elements of national power to safeguard Australia's interests. Recognizing the region's significance, home to more than half the world's population and pivotal maritime trade routes, the strategy underscores Australia's reliance on regional stability for its prosperity. Amid intensifying great-power competition and technological advancements in military capabilities, the *NDS* outlines Australia's commitment to self-protection, regional dialogue, and sustaining diplomatic partnerships. It prioritizes a "strategy of denial," enhancing the Australian Defence Force's range and lethality to deter potential adversaries. The strategy calls for bolstered naval, army, air, space, and cyber capabilities, integrated to support deterrence through denial. The *NDS*, alongside the Integrated Investment Plan, aims to fortify Australia's maritime approaches and reinforce the global rules-based order, emphasizing collaboration with the United States and other allies to ensure collective security and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As a Royal Australian Air Force officer embedded as a Deputy Commander in the US Indo-Pacific Command's (INDOPACOM) Pacific Air Forces, I have been privileged to view Australia's engagement in the region from an allied perspective. All countries in this region have a role in sustaining stability and security. Australia's deft partnership-centered approach to its activities in the Indo-Pacific is consistent with other allied and partner nations. These partnerships are representative of a greater strategy that positions Australia to provide positive contributions with the United States and others to sustain a favorable strategic balance within the Pacific realm.

While having long made positive contributions to regional stability, Australia has recognized the deterioration in the strategic environment and has recently responded with the release of a comprehensive *National Defence Strategy (NDS)*. This strategy harnesses all elements of national power through a coordinated whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach to defend Australia and its interests. Coupled with an Integrated Investment Plan (IIP), the *NDS* provides a thorough outline of defense policy and resourcing, enabling Australia to meet the growing challenges of the security environment.

The Indo-Pacific region has gained growing significance for all nations, particularly Australia. Home to more than half of the world's population, 60 percent of global trade, and significant maritime routes through 15 of the world's busiest seaports, the region also hosts seven of the largest militaries. The future of the Indo-Pacific will have a global impact on governments and people everywhere. The new *NDS* recognizes that Australian security and prosperity are inextricably linked to the region's stability. As a maritime nation, Australia relies on such stability to ensure the free flow of goods and trade. For global, regional, and national interests, Australia must play a proactive role in reinforcing the international system and the rules and norms that benefit all nations.

Australia's *NDS* acknowledges that the Indo-Pacific region and the broader strategic environment are increasingly characterized by great-power competition. This rivalry, manifesting through both military and nonmilitary means, heightens uncertainty and tension. The risks of conflict or crisis are growing, as is the potential for geopolitical coercion through military force. Rapid military modernization, often lacking transparency of strategic intent, further complicates these dynamics. The introduction of new technologies, including artificial intelligence, autonomy, and quantum developments, transforms military capabilities and increases risks.

Amid this strategic environment, the Australian *NDS* is clear: Australia must protect itself, deny any adversary's attempt to project force through its northern approaches, and safeguard its economic connections to the world. Regional dialogue and diplomatic partnerships remain central to Australia's strategy for contributing to peace and stability. The *NDS* emphasizes the need to deepen ties with its closest ally, the United States, and other key partners across Southeast Asia, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and North Asia. Australia will seek mutual opportunities to expand relationships with nations that value a free and open Indo-Pacific, ensuring interactions across all domains are lawfully managed within a rules-based global order.

Sustaining this rules-based order requires a united and robust approach to deter aggression, coercion, and conflict. It requires like-minded nations, equipped with capabilities across all elements of their national power, to operate seamlessly across the tyranny of distance in increasingly contested environments.

Australia must demonstrate both resolve and capability. Credible and effective diplomatic and military strength are essential to preserve and advance Australia's interests. Possessing flexible response options and maintaining a regional presence with strong partnerships increases the cost calculus, deterring any actor from using force to destabilize the collaborative and open rules-based order, preventing it from devolving into a zero-sum game.

Accordingly, Australia's *NDS* and its associated IIP will focus Australian Defence Force (ADF) capabilities to enable a strategy of denial. This approach aims to deter conflict, coercion, or direct action against Australia and its interests by enhancing the range and lethality of ADF response options, significantly increasing the risk calculus for any potential adversary. The *NDS* prioritizes capabilities that safeguard Australia's immediate maritime approaches, encompassing the north-eastern Indian Ocean through Southeast Asia and into the Pacific. Protecting these maritime approaches requires integrating and optimizing all military capabilities across land, sea, air, space, and cyber to support deterrence through denial.

An integrated and optimized ADF will include a larger, more lethal Navy capable of projecting and sustaining a greater presence; an Army capable of littoral operations in Australia's North with long-range strike capabilities; and an Air Force ready to rapidly project airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), air defense, and strike capabilities as needed. Space and cyber capabilities will be bolstered and integrated into the joint force, including improved network protection, enhanced cyber and electronic warfare effects, and new space-based situational awareness and communications capabilities.

To improve its ability to deny and respond, the ADF will increase, harden, strengthen, and lift its workforce, command-and-control capabilities, infrastructure, logistics systems, defense industry, and supply chain. These efforts are essential for improving the ADF's resilience and enabling sustained operations in the face of potential attacks.

The integrated and hardened capabilities outlined in the *NDS* and IIP will create a credible military force, bolstering the ADF's capacity to defend and deter any adversary's attempts to project power against Australia and protect its economic connections to the region. Lastly, these enhanced capabilities will force-multiply with those of other partner nations, ensuring the collective security of the Indo-Pacific and maintaining the global rules-based order.

The ADF and US military have already achieved an impressive level of interoperability, effectively working together with integrated high-end capabilities. In PACAF, I witness this repeatedly as our respective air combat, mobility, airborne ISR, and airbase teams collaborate in exercises like Red Flag Alaska and Cope North. Through our combined exercise and engagement program, RAAF and USAF elements continue to enhance our ability to operate seamlessly as one team, achieving mission outcomes. This integration will only strengthen as Australian capabilities and its operations, activities, and investments progress. INDOPACOM and the ADF are rightly increasing collaboration to enhance security capacity, improving integration between our forces, and advancing from being highly interoperable to possessing fully interchangeable capabilities.

This level of integration stands on the shoulders of deliberate efforts across decades of our countries operating side-by-side. Our two nations have developed a deep network of exchange and embedded positions, leveraging our most important capability: our people. Together, we work as a true part of each other's organizations, from the highest levels of our respective defense enterprise leadership to the workforce on the flightlines, in the field, in the sky, and on our vessels at sea. The US and Australian militaries have members who are readily interchangeable, providing each other with the benefit of diverse perspectives and whose vast and varied experiences and knowledge increase the collective capability of our respective forces.

Not only are ADF and US personnel able to operate together seamlessly, but our nations' respective weapons systems are also improving in their ability to integrate and are becoming increasingly interchangeable. Logistics systems are being modified to streamline the sharing of common spares and equipment. Information sharing, mission planning, and infrastructure systems are being designed to enhance interchangeability.

Interchangeability of personnel, weapon systems, and expanded information sharing provides both Australia and the United States with improved sovereign choices for response options, enhancing the efficiencies and effectiveness of our respective militaries' warfighting edge. Our nations' collective capabilities strengthen deterrence against those that might consider using military force to advance their interests at the expense of our own. If deterrence fails, we are continuing to build formidable capabilities for sustained combat operations to deny any adversary.

Relationships are the key to success. Australia and the ADF are not only strengthening ties with the United States but are also increasingly building relationships and partnering in bilateral and multilateral activities with other like-minded countries across the region and globally. Australia continues to deepen engagement with long-standing partners, while forging new relationships for the benefit of Australian security and security in the region. These partnerships are crucial for preserving stability and maintaining balance in the region. By enhancing interoperability through multilateral operations, the ADF bolsters regional security and benefits from the cultural, positional, and capability advantages of other partners.

The challenges within the Indo-Pacific are substantial, and the strategic outlook highlights increasing risks. In response, Australia's strategy of denial postures the ADF and broader tools of national power to deter conflict, coercion, or direct action against its interests. The *NDS* outlines a coherent plan that, combined with investments in credible, integrated, and focused military capabilities and strengthened engagement with allies and partners, positions Australia to defend itself and its interests and to make a substantial contribution to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific. ✪

AVM Carl Newman, RAAF

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During his distinguished flying career, AVM Newman has served in numerous operations, including the liberation of Kuwait in 1990, the UN Advanced Mission Cambodia in 1991, Unified Task Force Somalia in 1993, Australian Defence Force East Timor operations in 1999, and Australian Defence Force Middle East operations in 2003. He also participated in numerous humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations supporting affected personnel within Australia, Southeast Asia, and the Southwest Pacific.

In 2004, AVM Newman attended the US Air Force's Air Command and Staff College, receiving a master's degree in military operational art and science. He is also a graduate of the Australian Defence Strategic Studies Course in 2019. He has had key staff tours, including leading the RAAF's Plan Jericho, as the J3 Deputy Chief of Operations Plans at US Central Command Tampa, Florida, and as the RAAF's Air Mobility Group Chief of Staff. Air Vice-Marshal Newman has commanded the RAAF's Air Mobility Training and Development Unit, Number 84 Wing and its Air Mobility Group.

Australia's Grand Strategies and the Royal Australian Air Force

DR. PETER LAYTON

Abstract

China's military build-up and its wolf warrior diplomacy are reshaping Australian foreign and defense policies. In response, Australia has conceived grand strategies of balancing and engagement and embraced a new defense approach. However, this rethinking has somewhat neglected air power, focusing instead on land and naval forces. The Royal Australian Air Force is modern and well-trained but limited in scale and with sustainment concerns. These characteristics pose challenges given that the two grand strategies have different requirements and undertaking both simultaneously creates real issues. There are multiple implications for the air force's force structure, basing, readiness, and mobilization. Moreover, the new defense approach considers the possibility of major power regional conflict but fails to address that such conflict might be protracted.

The world is once again a dangerous place. A very real war is underway in Europe, with Russia using significant armed force and threatening nuclear attacks as it fights to capture Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific, China is rapidly building up its arms, its political leaders are making aggressive statements, gray-zone actions are frequent, and some fear a military attack on Taiwan this decade. In response, many governments are doing some hard thinking and crafting grand strategies. Australia is one of these.

The term *grand strategy* may perplex, but many states employ this technique even if not naming it as such.¹ Most—perhaps all—governments seek to build and then apply their national power to establish desired relationships with other states. Such grand strategies are whole-of-government efforts, involving diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power. They are especially useful for states with limited power that need to focus scarce resources on their most important concerns.²

Australian foreign and defense policies are currently being reshaped to meet the demands arising from deepening geopolitical tensions. Grand strategies of balancing and engagement have been conceived, and a new defense approach has been embraced. However, this rethinking has arguably neglected airpower, focusing

¹ Peter Layton, "Defining Grand Strategy," *Strategy Bridge*, 17 August 2020, <https://thestrategybridge.org/>.

² Peter Layton, *Grand Strategy* (Brisbane: self-published, 2018), 9–36.

instead on naval and land forces. This is partly because the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) has nearly completed a long-term modernization program that began in the early 2000s. Consequently, the national government's interest and funding have now swung mainly toward the other services and their needs.

Such inattention is perhaps unwise. While the RAAF may have relatively new equipment, the geostrategic context and technological environment have significantly changed since much of this equipment was first contracted for acquisition.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a notable exemplar. The war has revealed that great powers may now try to conquer smaller countries using military might. It has also highlighted the significant changes in warfare brought about by the large-scale use of uncrewed air vehicles, contemporary ground-based air defenses, long-range cruise missiles, and accurate ballistic missiles. In this emerging era of rising tensions, large wars, and technical innovation, it is arguably ill-advised to perceive the RAAF as a set-and-forget military force.

This article aims to refocus attention on Australian airpower in the context of the two adopted grand strategies. It begins by examining these grand strategies, followed by a discussion of current and planned Australian airpower. The third section raises concerns about this airpower given the two grand strategies, and the final section notes implications for force structure, basing, readiness, and mobilization. The conclusion addresses future uncertainties. The principal focus is on the RAAF's place in Australian airpower.

Two Grand Strategies

Balance of Power

Australia is developing a balance-of-power grand strategy designed to be of a scale "sufficient . . . to deter aggression and coercion" and generate "a strategic equilibrium."³ This strategy aims to preserve national independence by creating a rough equilibrium of power that prevents any single state from becoming so dominant as to control the international system.⁴ States employ diplomacy, defensive alliances, and domestic military and economic mobilization to maintain a

³ Penny Wong, "National Press Club Address, Australian interests in a regional balance of power" (speech, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 17 April 2023), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>.

⁴ William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 11.

favorable balance of power.⁵ This approach requires an activist stance and constant vigilance regarding power shifts.

Australia's balance-of-power grand strategy is clearly focused on the great power level, implicitly targeting China. Recognizing that it cannot balance such a power alone, Australia emphasizes collective defense. Unsurprisingly, Australia's foreign minister declares, "America is central to [Australia's] balancing."⁶ Australia is steadily implementing its balance-of-power grand strategy.

Diplomatically, Australia is deepening its US alliance and historical bond with the UK through the new Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership, while intensifying its defense relationship with Japan.⁷ Domestically, Australia is enhancing societal resilience by criminalizing foreign political interference, blocking specific foreign telecom firms, toughening foreign investment laws, strengthening critical infrastructure regulations, and countering hostile disinformation activities. Militarily, Australia is acquiring new long-range strike missiles, commissioning 11 new warships, upgrading northern defense bases, and developing offensive cyber capabilities.

To build the requisite national power, Australia is making several focused investments, including the new Future Made in Australia package and the National Reconstruction Fund, which target defense capability, advanced manufacturing, and critical technologies. Further investment is also directed toward local defense industries and reskilling the civilian workforce to meet defense manufacturing, repair, and maintenance needs.⁸

Today's grand strategy is unlike that during the Cold War (1947-1991). At that time America was focused on the Soviet Union; other countries were important mainly depending on whether they could help or hinder US ambitions. Unlike European nations, Australia was too distant to be useful and also lacked large armed forces. Reflecting this, Australian overtures to be involved in NATO-like strategic

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 156–57.

⁶ Wong, "National Press Club Address."

⁷ Ashley Townshend, "The AUKUS Submarine Deal Highlights a Tectonic Shift in the U.S.-Australia Alliance," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 27 March 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>; and Euan Graham, "Is Australia-Japan defence cooperation about to be throttled up?," *The Strategist*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

⁸ "Investing in a Future Made in Australia," *Budget 2024-25*, 2024, <https://budget.gov.au/>.

level planning with the US were ignored, including while the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was still active.⁹

In contrast, today's grand strategy envisions Australian military forces meaningfully contributing to the regional balance of power, participating in strategic-level planning with America and its allies, recognizing the Indo-Pacific as the new central front, and acknowledging Australia's special geographic importance. Throughout this, Australia's alliance with the US is prominent.

In 1951, Australia had hoped for a treaty with the United States that provided a strong guarantee of Australian security, akin to the NATO treaty, with a firm obligation on all parties to act in concert to meet common dangers.¹⁰ However, Australia was disappointed. Its alliance lacked NATO's stronger treaty wording; permanent multinational headquarters at the strategic, operational, and component levels; logistics bodies; and common funding contributions.

Instead, US support for Australia was situational, dependent on Washington's assessment of its interests at the time. When US global interests were not engaged or did not align with Australia's, the alliance proved less helpful. This reality fostered in Australia a strong fear of abandonment by the United States in times of crisis and war.¹¹

Consequently, Australia adopted a strategy of assisting the United States in its times of need, hoping to cultivate a reciprocal obligation for future Australian needs.¹² Since the alliance was signed, Australia has joined the United States in military activities in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf region, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Today, the alliance is described as one of "trust, respect, friendship and shared sacrifice."¹³

⁹ "United States Minutes of the Second Meeting, ANZUS Council: Fourth Session, Washington, September 10, 1953," Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, Document 121, <https://history.state.gov/>; and Damien Fenton, "SEATO and the defence of Southeast Asia 1955-1965" (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2006).

¹⁰ David Lowe, "Percy Spender's quest," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 2 (2001), 194-97, <https://doi.org/>.

¹¹ Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*, (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2021).

¹² John Howard, Prime Minister, "Australian Foreign Policy," *Sydney Papers* 15, no. 2, (March 2003), 88-89, <https://search.informit.org/>.

¹³ Anthony Albanese and Joe Biden, "An alliance for our times" (joint statement, Prime Minister of Australia, 20 May 2023), <https://www.pm.gov.au/>.

Regional Engagement

Looking beyond the great powers, Australia has devised an engagement grand strategy focused on the Indo-Pacific's middle and smaller powers. This strategy involves collaborating with these countries to achieve common goals. Unlike the strongly statist approach of the balance-of-power grand strategy, engagement takes a bottom-up approach, working with governments, state bureaucracies, business groups, nongovernmental organizations, academics, and communities across countries. Cooperation is key, motivating participants to seek absolute gains irrespective of their distribution. In contrast, a balance-of-power grand strategy seeks relative gains to maintain a favorable balance among those involved.¹⁴

Australia's engagement grand strategy involves working with Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific countries: "to enhance our collective security and prosperity."¹⁵ The underlying intent is to improve participant nations' circumstances by keeping all connected and working together. This grand strategy is well underway.

In recent years, numerous regional economic agreements have been reached, including the 11-nation Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the 15-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, the 10-nation Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus, the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, and the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement.¹⁶ To capitalize on these agreements, a new national strategy for greater trade and investment between Australia and Southeast Asia is now being implemented.

Ties between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia are deepening with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and its associated Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative. This initiative includes financing smart cities, digitization, technology innovation, digital skills training, and a scholarship program focused on maritime matters, connectivity, economic development, and sustainable development.¹⁷

Organizationally, an Office of the Pacific has been created within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to coordinate the numerous departmental

¹⁴ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Liberal Approaches," in *Making Sense of International Relations Theory*, ed. Jennifer Sterling-Folker (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 55–56; and Brian C. Rathbun, "Is Anybody Not an (International Relations) Liberal?," *Security Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010), 6–10, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁵ Wong, "National Press Club Address."

¹⁶ "Australia's free trade agreements (FTAs)" (fact sheet, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

¹⁷ "The ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership – a year of progress," Australian Mission to ASEAN, 2024, <https://asean.mission.gov.au/>.

initiatives underway. This office is complemented by the new Australia Pacific Security College established at the Australian National University in Canberra.¹⁸

There are echoes of earlier times in this engagement grand strategy, particularly with the Hawke–Keating (1983–1996) government’s regional “enmeshment” and “comprehensive engagement.”¹⁹ However, today’s context is different: decolonization is long completed, the relative economic weights of Australia and the larger regional states have shifted dramatically, urbanization and industrialization have surged across the region, a well-institutionalized regional political system is in operation, and China has become an economic giant.

From a military standpoint, engagement involves maintaining an Australian presence in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific, and fostering regional partnerships and friendships. This interaction is guided by the annually produced Defence International Engagement Plan. The plan encompasses military-to-military talks, such as chief-to-chief meetings, large multinational air exercises like Exercise Pitch Black—which may include aircraft from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea—and unit-level interactions, such as air mobility training between the RAAF and the Republic of Singapore Air Force at RAAF Base Richmond near Sydney.

Several defense-associated collaboration programs are also underway. The Pacific Maritime Security Program supports regional surveillance capabilities and is providing 21 *Guardian*-class patrol boats to 12 Pacific island countries and Timor-Lesté. The Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) works with partners to address common security challenges and build strong people-to-people links, with the largest DCP involvements in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Timor-Lesté, the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia. The defense infrastructure partnerships involve significant joint projects with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands, including 12 wharf modernizations. Lastly, the Cyber and Critical Tech Cooperation Program collaborates with Pacific island countries on cyber resilience, including cooperation on cybersecurity and combating cybercrime.

Importantly, the two grand strategies are not alternatives but “mutually reinforcing.”²⁰ Working with regional states to enhance their resilience to external

¹⁸ “Office of the Pacific,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>; and “Australia Pacific Security College strengthens Pacific security,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

¹⁹ David Epstein, “Bob Hawke’s Asia legacy,” *The Interpreter*, 24 May 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>; and James Curran, “Australia’s endless rediscovery of engagement with Asia,” *Australian Financial Review*, 17 September 2023, <https://www.afr.com/>.

²⁰ Richard Marles MP, Deputy Prime Minister, “Address to the Sydney Institute Annual Dinner Lecture” (speech, Department of Defence, 14 November 2022), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>.

pressures aligns with the balance-of-power grand strategy. Employing different strategies to achieve different outcomes is crucial.

No single grand strategy can achieve all a state's objectives. For Australia, being within and working with a prosperous and secure region is an important national goal, regardless of global geostrategic considerations. Moreover, the engagement grand strategy could become the principal strategy if collective defense falters. Regional engagement is as much an enduring Australian concern as the fear of great-power abandonment.

Attempting to combine the two grand strategies would likely prove unsuccessful; trying to counter others while working with them is inherently incoherent. During the 1933–1939 period, Britain's combined balance-of-power and engagement grand strategy allowed Nazi Germany to exploit the differences between the approaches to its advantage, becoming militarily stronger and a much more dangerous foe.²¹

Australian Airpower

Defence Strategy

Informed by the two grand strategies, Australia's defense policies and the long-term development plans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are undergoing a significant overhaul. As part of this effort, the government recently unveiled Australia's first *National Defence Strategy (NDS)* alongside an Integrated Investment Plan (IIP).²²

In a policy sense, the *NDS* is an innovation as it will be revised every two years, replacing the erratic issuing of Defence White Papers used previously to guide the Department of Defence. The *NDS* is also considerably more expansive than the White Papers were in looking beyond the Department to take a national approach, across both the whole-of-government and the whole-of-nation, and to integrate all the instruments of national power.

The *NDS* asserts that addressing Australia's strategic challenges necessitates a strategy of denial to prevent adversaries from projecting power against Australia from the seas to its north. This aligns with the government's concept of "impactful projection," leveraging military power to exert influence at a significant distance from Australia. Early in his term, the defence minister declared the then-new government would "make the investment necessary to increase the range and le-

²¹ Peter Layton, "To Engage China, or Balance It?: Lessons From a Failed Grand Strategic Exercise," *War on the Rocks*, 20 July 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

²² *2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

thality of the Australian Defence Force so that it is able to hold a potential adversary—forces and infrastructure—at risk further from Australia.”²³ The incoming prime minister reinforced this sentiment, stating, “in general, we need more weaponry that can actually make a difference.”²⁴

The *NDS* presents carefully balanced, nuanced judgments and is restrained in its approach. In contrast, the *IIP* sharply delineates funding allocations for new long-term equipment acquisitions for the ADF, quantitatively revealing priorities among capabilities. Areas of significant concern receive ample funding, those deemed less pressing receive less, and those considered irrelevant are omitted entirely.

Over the next ten years, approximately USD 220 billion will be allocated, with the largest single-project budgetary outlay directed toward the acquisition of nuclear attack submarines, estimated to cost between USD 35 billion to USD 42 billion. This initiative, known as AUKUS Pillar 1, involves Australia acquiring two second-hand and nine new nuclear submarines in a complex plan spanning several decades, with construction taking place in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. The scale and nature of this acquisition project holds substantial political significance, with the government describing it as “a whole-of-nation undertaking that will see around 20,000 jobs created across Australia.”²⁵ This workforce number is noteworthy given the ADF only has some 55,000 uniformed personnel.

The second-largest top-tier expenditure focuses on building six *Hunter*-class frigates, estimated between USD 15 billion to USD 21 billion. These substantial funding allocations for both the nuclear submarine and frigate projects underscore the dominant maritime focus of the denial strategy.

Importantly, the next tier of megaprojects aims to bolster the near-term warfighting readiness of the ADF. These include acquiring stocks of naval strike and air defense missiles such as Tomahawk, SM-6, and Naval Strike Missiles (USD 8 billion to USD 10 billion); enhancing Australia’s capability to manufacture guided weapons (USD 11 billion to USD 14 billion); and expanding logistics centers and capacity (USD 7 billion to USD 10 billion).

Below this USD 7-billion-plus tier, numerous smaller projects are associated with ongoing modernization efforts. Among these, several are focused on transforming

²³ Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister, “Address: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)” (speech, Department of Defence, 12 July 2022), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>.

²⁴ Prime Minister quoted in: Greg Sheridan, “Anthony Albanese flags Defence shake-up with drones and missiles,” *The Australian*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/>.

²⁵ Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister, “Australian industry and jobs front and centre of AUKUS submarines” (press release, Department of Defence, 22 March 2024), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>.

the Army to maneuver in littoral environments, aligning with concepts akin to the US Marine Corps Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.

Worryingly, the IIP's emphasis on the Navy, and to a lesser extent the Army, overlooks the crucial ongoing recapitalization needs of the Air Force over the next decade. While the Air Force has received new aircraft in recent years, it will require replacement capabilities starting in the late 2030s, when the costs of acquiring nuclear submarines are expected to consume approximately 10 percent of the total Defence budget.²⁶

RAAF Airpower

ADF doctrine takes an expansive view of *airpower*, defining it as “the total strength of a nation's capability to conduct and influence activities in, through and from the air to achieve its objectives.”²⁷ Australian airpower extends beyond the RAAF's operational framework to encompass the Army's and Navy's helicopter fleets, uncrewed air vehicle (UAV) capabilities, and the diverse civil aviation sector. While primarily oriented toward air transport, the civil aviation sector also includes specialized capabilities such as maritime surveillance and search and rescue.

Airpower plays a crucial role within today's integrated and joint ADF by providing air superiority; air strike; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); air mobility; air command and control; airbase operations; and technical support for airpower. Despite attempts to neatly categorize airpower, Australian capabilities rely on multirole aircraft and helicopters capable of performing multiple missions effectively. Table 1 outlines Australia's primary airpower assets, principally operated by the RAAF.

²⁶ Marcus Hellyer, “The 2024 Defence investment plan's key changes – or ‘The Subs that ate the ADF,’” *Strategic Analysis Australia*, 9 May 2024, <https://strategicanalysis.org/>.

²⁷ *ADF Air Power, Edition 1*, Australian Defence Force Integration Doctrine (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), 1, <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/>.

Table 1. Major Australian airpower capabilities

Major Australian Airpower Capabilities		
Role	Weapon Systems	Notes
Air Defence	72 F-35A Lightning II	Nine F-35A in US awaiting Block 4 upgrades.
	6 E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control	-
	3 Jindalee Over-The-Horizon-Radars	-
	National Advanced Surface to Air Missile (NASAM)	Army assets. Acquisition underway.
	SM-2/ SM-6 Standard Missile system	Navy assets. Fitted to 3 Aegis-equipped DDGs.
	Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile Block II	Navy assets. Fitted to 8 ANZAC FFGs.
Land and Maritime Strike	24 F/A-18F Super Hornet	Undergoing Spiral Upgrade Program.
	22 Tiger ARH	Army assets. Being replaced by 29 AH-64E Apache.
	42 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems	Army assets. Being acquired. In medium-term to be fitted with Precision Strike Missile.
Electronic Surveillance and Attack	12 EA-18G Growler 4 MC-55 Peregrine	-
Maritime Patrol	14 P-8A Poseidon 4 MQ-4C Triton	-
	23 MH-60R Seahawk	Navy assets. 13 additional MH-60Rs being delivered.
Space Domain Awareness	C-Band Space Surveillance Radar Space Surveillance Telescope	Deep-space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) from 2026.
Air Mobility	7 KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport 8 C-17A Globemaster III 10 C-27J Spartan	-
	12 C-130J Hercules	Being replaced by 20 C-130Js.
	10 CH-47F Chinook	Army assets.
	40 UH-60M Black Hawk	Army assets. Beginning delivery.

As part of the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF is adopting agile air operations.²⁸ This concept aims to leverage Australia's strategic depth by enabling sustained distributed air operations from austere and remote locations across a network of military airbases and civilian airfields in northern Australia. Recent agility exercises have demonstrated fast jet operations from airfields with reduced

²⁸ *ADF Air Power*, 81–87.

pavement strengths, utilizing shorter runway lengths than usual and civil-grade fuels.²⁹ The RAAF has also introduced tailored support concepts featuring reduced maintenance footprints, incorporating reach-back diagnostics and rapid response teams to ensure aircraft reliability during deployments away from main operating bases.

Additionally, the RAAF is exploring emerging technologies tailored for agile air operations. The Air Force Jericho team has developed concepts for unmanned and autonomous systems, including the indigenous “Camel Train” capability, aimed at providing autonomous logistics support across Northern Australia. According to the Chief of the Air Force, “It is a tangible demonstration of latent capacity within our national support base. Nurturing this capability, building a national ecosystem that can rapidly scale production of uncrewed systems, offers substantial potential to strengthen our readiness and resilience.”³⁰

Under the engagement grand strategy, the RAAF is deeply engaged in the new Defence Pacific Air Program, which comprises two notable strands. The first involves assisting the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) in reconstituting its air wing by providing two New Zealand-built PAC-750XL light transport aircraft, training aircrew and maintenance personnel, and funding airfield facility upgrades. This initiative also includes establishing a sister squadron arrangement between RAAF’s 35 Squadron and the PNGDF’s Air Training Wing.³¹

The second initiative involves regular six-week rotational deployments of RAAF C-27J Spartan transport aircraft through Papua New Guinea and Fiji, initiated in 2023. In Papua New Guinea, the C-27J detachments meet PNGDF airlift requests, undertake disaster-relief missions when required, conduct mountainous-terrain flying training, and facilitate the integration of PNGDF elements into air mobility deployments.³² In Fiji, the C-27Js participate in joint operations with the Republic of Fiji Military Force, aiming to enhance interoperability between forces. Activities include conducting search-and-rescue exercises and providing training in disaster relief operations.³³

²⁹ An example was during the 2023 Exercise Arnhem Thunder. “RAAF fast jets to land at Kununurra Airport, Western Australia,” *Air Force*, 2023, <https://www.airforce.gov.au/>.

³⁰ Chief of Air Force, “Building Readiness and Resilience in National Air and Space Power across the Spectrum of Competition” (speech, Air Force, 8 May 2024), <https://www.airforce.gov.au/>.

³¹ Tastri Murdoch, “The perfect gift for PNG,” *Defence*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; and Clarice Hurren, “Squadron’s family expanded,” *Defence*, 2 August 2021, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2021-08-02/squadrons-family-expanded>.

³² Marjorie Finkeo, “Aircraft completes rotation in PNG,” *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 15 April 2024, <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/>.

³³ Imogen Lunny, “Spartan helps fortify Pacific ties,” *Defence*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

Looking ahead to the RAAF's future and the government's ambition for impactful projection, several airpower projects relevant to the balance-of-power grand strategy are underway. Over the next few years, the Super Hornet and P-8 fleet will be equipped with the AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile. Subsequently, the Super Hornets will receive the AGM-158B Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile–Extended Range. Concurrent upgrades to the Growler aircraft include the installation of the Next-Generation Jammer and the Advanced Anti-Radiation Guided Missile–Extended Range. Integration of these stand-off missiles, along with the in-development Joint Strike Missile, into the F-35 fleet hinges on progress with the aircraft's protracted Block 4 upgrade program.

In the RAAF's development pipeline are hypersonic missiles and UAVs. The hypersonic missile ambitions reflect extensive research collaboration between Australia and the United States, now under AUKUS Pillar II. The Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment is a joint effort aimed at developing an air-breathing scramjet-powered, Mach 5 precision-guided missile capable of deployment from tactical fighter aircraft. This initiative also contributes to the USAF's Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile (HACM) program.³⁴ RAAF Super Hornets will test fire HACMs at Australia's Woomera range beginning in late 2024.

The UAV effort focuses on the Boeing Australia MQ-28A Ghost Bat system. These autonomous drones are designed to collaborate with each other or with manned aircraft, performing high-risk ISR and combat missions. Currently, 13 Ghost Bats have been manufactured, with a final assembly facility for UAV production established at Wellcamp in Queensland.³⁵

Over the next decade, more than USD 2.7 billion will be invested in the Ghost Bat program, including the development of a Block 2 variant with enhanced capabilities.³⁶ In 2025, Ghost Bats will undergo operational trials to evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing the survivability and combat capabilities of RAAF air operations.³⁷ Engagement with the United States continues under the Combat Collaborative Aircraft Project Arrangement.

³⁴ Courtney Albon, "US, Australia eye joint hypersonics experiments in 2024," *CAISRNET*, 4 December 2023, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/>.

³⁵ "MQ-28A Ghost Bat Unmanned Aircraft, Australia," *Airforce Technology*, 22 June 2023, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/>.

³⁶ *2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program*, 63.

³⁷ Chief of Air Force, "Building Readiness and Resilience."

Airpower Concerns

Different Grand Strategy Needs

A significant challenge arises from having a force structure optimized for the balance of power grand strategy, which may not align well with engagement objectives. The balance-of-power strategy prioritizes military readiness and includes advanced long-range sensors, sophisticated missile systems, complex communication networks, space-based assets, and dispersed maritime air operations. Much of this technology is highly classified and typically shared only with close allies.

In contrast, engagement strategies emphasize peacetime operations aimed at fostering partnerships and enhancing regional capabilities. These activities involve collaboration with various military forces, coast guards, and civilian organizations across the region. Engagement efforts encompass humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search-and-rescue operations, fisheries patrols, counterpiracy missions, and emergency response initiatives.

High-end air assets pose challenges for these roles because they are overly sophisticated for the tasks being undertaken and difficult for foreign personnel to fly on as observers. For instance, the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, designed for advanced antisubmarine warfare, can perform fisheries patrols but is costly to operate and exceeds the requirements for such missions. Instead, the RAAF employs the C-27J Spartan transport aircraft for periodic fisheries patrols within the exclusive economic zones of small island nations in the Western Pacific.³⁸

However, the use of the C-27J underscores the inherent tensions in maintaining a single force structure that serves both grand strategies. While the C-27J proves valuable for engagement tasks, the RAAF may replace it with larger C-130J aircraft well-suited for balance-of-power objectives but less optimal for engagement activities, especially in Papua New Guinea and the smaller islands of the Southwest Pacific. Moreover, such roles demand different skill sets from personnel. Engaging with local communities over extended periods and cultivating relationships contrasts with the traditional fly-in, fly-out mentality typical of air transport operations.

Resource Constraints

To simultaneously pursue both the balance-of-power and engagement grand strategies effectively, a mixed force structure with dedicated aircraft types for each strategy would be ideal, rather than the RAAF's current multi-role approach.

³⁸ Peter Nugent, "Trained eyes scan the big blue," *Defence*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

However, like most defense forces, the RAAF operates under a constrained budget and must prioritize its expenditures. These funding limitations are expected to become more pressing over time.

The substantial resource demands of the nuclear submarine project, both in terms of finances and personnel, will necessitate a rebalancing within the ADF. This reallocation is likely to affect the RAAF's capacity to support the engagement grand strategy, as maintaining high-end warfighting capabilities is often deemed more critical than fostering regional friendships.

In this decade, a worsening workforce shortfall will further exacerbate the challenge of simultaneously pursuing both grand strategies. The ADF is currently short by approximately 4,400 personnel, which is about 8 percent of its uniformed workforce, while the RAAF specifically is short by about 700 personnel—around 4 percent of its workforce. Addressing this shortfall in the near term is challenging due to the significant time required to recruit and train individuals to operate the RAAF's sophisticated equipment. Adding to this workforce problem is the RAAF's plan to recruit more than 2,100 additional personnel by mid-2028 to manage new capabilities being acquired. Given the current circumstances, this workforce expansion plan appears unrealistic.³⁹

Protracted War

Under the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF could find itself involved in a major conflict and as in Ukraine today, this may be protracted. Unlike the recent Middle Eastern wars, where the RAAF's participation was a matter of choice and based on available force structures, a major conflict would be a war of necessity. It would engage all RAAF elements from the outset, have an indefinite duration, and potentially result in high attrition of aircraft and units.

To effectively deter potential aggressors, it is essential for them to believe that Australia possesses not only an air force capable of the initial combat engagements but also the capacity to expand and sustain its air force until the peace is won. Current defense plans have yet to address the critical issue of wartime mobilization. For a small air force dependent on overseas supplies, this is particularly challenging.

In a major conflict, it is conceivable that many of the RAAF's major combat aviation assets could be lost or damaged beyond repair. Replacing these assets during a war could prove difficult if traditional supply sources are cut off, unable to provide timely assistance, or are prioritizing their own air forces.

³⁹ *Defence Portfolio*, Portfolio Budget Statements 2024-25: Budget Related Paper No. 1.4A, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia 2024), 18-22.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine offers valuable insights. Ukraine has demonstrated that UAVs of various types and sizes can be developed rapidly to provide some limited air capabilities sustainably. Preparing for high attrition through prior planning and action in peacetime could mitigate some of the challenges a major war might pose.

Gray Zone

Beyond resourcing matters, the two grand strategies alone do not address all defense concerns. China's persistent gray-zone actions are now a permanent feature of Indo-Pacific security. While pushbacks by another country might cause a temporary Chinese retreat, China consistently returns, often more aggressively.⁴⁰ Beijing learns from these short-term reversals and introduces new tactics, as is currently happening to the Philippines in the West Philippine Sea.

China's particular gray-zone model is a perpetual drain on other nations' defense and security resources. Worse, gray-zone actions are steadily increasing and becoming more serious. Responding is becoming nondiscretionary, necessitating specific types of equipment, skills, and tactics.⁴¹ Australia's grand strategies so far are neglecting the problem.

The balance-of-power grand strategy, in which China looms large, offers limited utility for countering gray-zone actions. By design, these actions occur below the threshold of armed conflict and are not situations where military forces want to reveal their high-end warfighting capabilities to a potential adversary. Conversely, the engagement grand strategy focuses on collaboration, not on thwarting another nation's aggressive gray-zone actions.

Emerging Technology

Over the past several years, nations have increasingly prioritized technological innovation to build the national industrial power their grand strategies require. China has led this approach, with others, including the United States and United Kingdom, progressively following suit.⁴²

China's latest phase involves re-engineering its national innovation chain to better generate disruptive technological breakthroughs. This effort includes forming

⁴⁰ Peter Layton, *China's Enduring Grey Zone Challenge* (Canberra: Air and Space Power Centre, 2021), 11–42, <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/>.

⁴¹ Peter Layton, *Grey zone challenges and Australia–Japan defence cooperation* (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, 2022), 13–22, <https://www.griffith.edu.au/>.

⁴² *Vision for Competitiveness: Mid-Decade Opportunities for Strategic Victory* (Washington: Special Competitive Studies Project, May 2024), <https://www.scsp.ai/>.

consortia that integrate research, development, and production entities.⁴³ In the military domain, this re-engineering aims to develop “new quality combat power” in areas such as maritime situational awareness, cyber defense, artificial intelligence, space management, and uncrewed combat forces.⁴⁴

Similarly, the Australian Department of Defence is pursuing enhanced innovation through reorganization. The principal initiative is the Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator (ASCA), which will integrate the diverse parts of Australia’s defense innovation process to accelerate the transition of innovative technology into in-service military capabilities.

The ASCA is focusing on exploiting emerging technology initially developed for commercial purposes rather than bringing breakthrough technology into ADF service.⁴⁵ This approach suggests that while the RAAF may keep pace with strategic competitors in terms of technology, it is unlikely to maintain a sustained edge.⁴⁶ This is concerning, given that China aims to develop “new quality combat power” in areas like uncrewed combat forces, which are particularly important to the RAAF.

Implications for Airpower

Force Structure

To support the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF is integrating various long-range missiles onto its Super Hornets, Growlers, and F-35s. This is proving to be a protracted process, with the ADF’s Chief of Joint Operations, General Gregory Bilton, expressing frustration at the lengthy time involved during the RAAF’s 2024 airpower conference. The result is that the RAAF cannot respond as swiftly as it would like to the ongoing changes in the regional balance of power.

The lengthy time required to upgrade modern aircraft is a well-known issue with significant real-world implications. The rise of uncrewed systems now offers an alternative. These can be fielded much quicker as they do not require the same demanding safety and certification standards as crewed aircraft. In this regard, the

⁴³ Arthur R. Kroeber, “Unleashing ‘new quality productive forces’: China’s strategy for technology-led growth,” *Brookings Institution*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁴⁴ Xi Jinping, “Strengthen mission responsibility, deepen reform and innovation, and comprehensively enhance strategic capabilities in emerging fields” (speech, Xi Jinping’s Important Speeches Database, 8 March 2024), <http://jhsjk.people.cn/>.

⁴⁵ Peter Layton, “Evolution not Revolution: Australia’s Defence AI Pathway,” in *The Very Long Game: 25 Case Studies on the Global State of Defense AI*, ed. Reiko Borchert, Torben Schutz, and Joseph Verbovzsky (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), 507, 512.

⁴⁶ George Henneke, “Defence innovation: a view from Indo-Pacific 2023,” *The Strategist*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.aspirategist.org.au/>.

Ghost Bat UAV will enter RAAF service before the F-35 Block 4 upgrade makes the aircraft long-range missile capable. However, Ghost Bat is not a low-cost system. In May 2022, the government announced the acquisition of seven Block 1 variants for USD 314.9 million, to enter service with the RAAF in 2024–2025.⁴⁷

In early 2023, the RAAF Chief highlighted the need to reduce the cost of advanced combat drones before they can be widely used by the Air Force: “the price point, and where it really looks interesting to us, is if we can get it to about a tenth of the cost of a manned fighter. So if we get to 10 per cent, then I can start to build the mass and survivability of not just manned platforms, but the entire air combat system.”⁴⁸

The RAAF’s capability to execute the balance of power grand strategy would significantly benefit from acquiring affordable UAVs useful across a variety of roles. While the RAAF’s new Triton UAVs provide impressive capabilities, each air vehicle costs more than USD 100 million, limiting the number that can be fielded and making any losses nearly untenable.

The current RAAF projects involving UAVs arguably focus on acquiring advanced rather than cutting-edge technology. The USAF’s shift toward iterative development of short-lifespan, UAVs under its Collaborative Combat Aircraft program suggests an alternative approach that the RAAF might adopt.⁴⁹ This fast-to-field but short-in-service-life approach, combined with emerging technology, could enable the RAAF to obtain the affordable uncrewed air vehicles it seeks. The new ASCA program could potentially be restructured to support this ambition.

Perhaps less obviously, UAVs may also have applications within the engagement grand strategy. Emerging cargo UAVs could be deployed in the Southwest Pacific, where many airstrips are relatively short, less than 3,000 feet. A network could be envisioned where medium-sized communities on various islands are connected via large cargo drones. From these communities, small cargo drones could distribute goods to numerous smaller villages across the islands.

In developing and operating such a network, the RAAF, with its extensive experience in regional air transport, could play a valuable role. This involvement could utilize either full-time regular force personnel or part-time reservists.⁵⁰ Additionally, the camel-train autonomous logistics support system mentioned earlier may

⁴⁷ MQ-28A Ghost Bat Unmanned Aircraft, Australia,” *Airforce Technology*.

⁴⁸ Ben Packham, “Air Force names its price for drones,” *The Australian*, 3 March 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/>.

⁴⁹ Joseph Trevithick, “Top Air Force Officer Doubles Down On Aerial Combat Drones With Short Life Spans,” *The War Zone*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.twz.com/>.

⁵⁰ Peter Layton, *Australia's New Regional Context: Pacific Island Futures and Air Power Possibilities* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2020), 63–68.

have broader regional applications. Participating in a drone cargo network could allow the RAAF to continue contributing to the engagement grand strategy, particularly if the C-27Js are withdrawn from service. This transition could ensure ongoing support to regional communities and facilitate humanitarian missions, aligning with broader strategic objectives in the Southwest Pacific.

AUKUS

The AUKUS nuclear submarine program will eventually provide Australia with a survivable antiship capability able to operate at long range for extended periods. In the interim, crucial for the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF is maintaining a highly competent maritime strike capability using standoff weapons and cruise missiles. These capabilities will require recapitalization in the late 2030s but might diminish in priority as the nuclear submarine fleet enters service. This suggests a potential reevaluation of the RAAF's long-historical role in maritime strike.

However, several factors argue against such a shift. Airpower can respond more swiftly than submarines to evolving operational needs; for instance, combat aircraft can swiftly redirect their focus geographically. Additionally, unlike submarines, aircraft can be rapidly reloaded and returned to combat within hours rather than weeks. Finally, while Australia's nuclear submarine fleet will be limited in number, their strategic employment will require careful management and conservative use due to the significant impact of any potential loss. The RAAF's airpower, while also constrained, is considerably less sensitive to attrition.

AUKUS, however, encompasses more than the acquisition of nuclear submarines. AUKUS Pillar II involves multinational collaboration to advance military capabilities using emerging technologies such as quantum computing, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and electronic warfare.⁵¹ For the RAAF, AUKUS Pillar II could synergistically complement ASCA and potentially provide strategic advantages through the deployment of innovative technology. Ensuring this advantage may necessitate active RAAF participation in AUKUS Pillar II, despite the potential workforce challenges this might pose.

Gray Zone

China's gray-zone activities in the East and South China Sea have persisted for over a decade and are anticipated to continue indefinitely. These actions destabilize

⁵¹ John Christianson, Sean Monaghan, and Di Cooke, "AUKUS Pillar Two: Advancing the Capabilities of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies Briefs*, 10 July 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

the region and constantly pose risks of escalation into armed conflict. The RAAF could play a role within a broader ADF and regional initiative aimed at both curbing China's expansion of gray-zone activities and reducing the likelihood of accidental escalation to war.

RAAF involvement could encompass operational and capability development aspects. Operationally, a sustained campaign strategy might be devised focusing on influencing Chinese decision makers across various command levels. This strategy could involve responses designed to sow concern, induce confusion, and employ deception, leveraging the theatrical nature of Chinese gray-zone actions.⁵² Specific operational measures might include RAAF contributions to regional air policing efforts, utilizing the new Triton unmanned air vehicles for maritime surveillance of China's gray-zone activities, and exploring the establishment of a crisis hotline under the auspices of the multinational Five Power Defence Arrangement.⁵³

Longer term, the RAAF could collaborate with the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force to adapt the MQ-28 Ghost Bat for air policing missions that include gathering imagery of Chinese military aircraft engaged in gray-zone activities.⁵⁴ Employing UAVs for this purpose would decrease reliance on expensive and limited-life crewed aircraft, thereby shifting more of the cost burden of gray-zone activities onto China.

Defending Air Bases

The RAAF has adopted agile combat employment concepts and regularly conducts dispersed air operations across northern Australia. Such maneuvers, according to the RAAF's Air Commander, involve deploying squadrons across various "bases and places," making it challenging for hostile forces to target RAAF air assets effectively. Nevertheless, targeting is not impossible, especially if the squadrons are deployed to islands offshore where dispersion is probably only feasible around the airbase and not to different airfields. Moreover, the necessary fuel stores and maintenance support facilities at the various air bases may be much less agile, or even fixed, making them vulnerable to attack.

Currently, the ADF can provide only limited airbase air defense, although efforts are underway to improve this capability. The RAAF possesses fighters capable of air defense, and the Army is getting some NASAMS units, with the 2024 IIP funding modern integrated air and missile defense command-and-control systems,

⁵² Peter Layton, "China's Gray Zone Air Power," *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 26 March 2024, <https://irregularwarfare.org/>.

⁵³ Layton, *China's Enduring Grey-Zone Challenge*, 78–84.

⁵⁴ Layton, *Grey Zone Challenges and Australia-Japan Defence Cooperation*, 22.

sensors, and passive defense measures. While these capabilities may suffice against limited-scale attacks involving drones, cruise missiles, and bombers, there remains a gap in defending against ballistic missiles, which alongside cruise missiles, pose the most likely threat to RAAF bases in Australia or offshore.⁵⁵

The conflict in Ukraine has underscored the effectiveness of medium-range surface-to-air missiles (SAM) in countering such threats, particularly in major conflicts envisioned by the balance-of-power grand strategy. Consequently, it is crucial for the RAAF not only to enhance its mobility between airbases and airfields but also to bolster defenses against ballistic and cruise missile attacks. Acquiring a medium-range SAM capability for airbase defense is imperative.

Readiness

To keep its aircraft flying, the RAAF relies on timely maintenance resupply from global companies, primarily located in the distant United States and Europe. Given the demands of the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF must prepare for the possibility of disruptions in its aircraft maintenance supply chains. In a major conflict scenario, traditional suppliers may prioritize their own military needs, face physical or cyberattacks on their manufacturing plants, or see supply routes to Australia severed by hostile actions.

The complexity of aircraft support items often necessitates their importation, as economies of scale discourage Australia from establishing local production lines for these high-cost items. Moreover, manufacturers typically prefer to retain production of these in-house. Therefore, Australia needs to maintain appropriately sized stockpiles of critical items essential for keeping the RAAF's aircraft combat-ready. A buffer of 6–12 months would help mitigate the initial impact of a major disruption, allowing time to establish alternative supply chains.

Mobilization

In the balance-of-power grand strategy, the RAAF is placing considerable emphasis on long-range missiles. These missiles are costly to procure and store, potentially diverting funds from other force structure priorities. However, in a major conflict, current missile stockpiles may prove inadequate. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights that the availability of guided weapons and explosive ordnance can dictate the pace of conflict.

⁵⁵ Peter Layton, "Australia's Chinese ballistic missile problem," *The Interpreter*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

This situation underscores the importance for nations to develop their own sovereign missile production capabilities. Australia is initially responding by domestically manufacturing M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System's (HIMARS) Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) rockets, starting in 2025. While this improves supply chain resilience for GMLRS rockets, it does not directly address the RAAF's missile needs.

The missiles employed by the RAAF are more complex than GMLRS rockets, making local manufacturing in Australia unlikely, though final assembly of imported components remains a possibility. Yet, this approach relies on lengthy supply chains that could be vulnerable during wartime. Therefore, alternative options need to be considered.

Firstly, the design of some missiles intended for use by the RAAF could be significantly simplified, particularly by employing less sophisticated electronics that are more readily available, even if this results in a loss of performance. Russia's ability to continue missile production despite extensive sanctions illustrates this possibility. Russian missiles utilize outdated chip technology found in consumer goods such as "dishwashers and refrigerators."⁵⁶ Using such components and other easily sourced dual-use items has made Russian missile manufacture considerably more robust than a comparable Western manufacturing capability would be. In a war, having access to somewhat primitive missiles is preferable to having none at all.

Secondly, Russia has optimized the effectiveness of its limited missile stocks and production capacity. They are employing Iranian-designed Shahed drones as armed decoys to divert and deplete Ukrainian air defenses. This strategy enables Russian missiles, which individually possess greater destructive capability than the Shaheds, to penetrate defenses more effectively. Russia is even establishing a production line for Shahed drones within Russia, streamlining their design to dramatically reduce production costs. The concept of enhancing the effectiveness of each missile fired, whether through using armed decoy drones like the Russians or employing active electronic warfare support, holds considerable merit. The Ghost Bat UAV might play a future role in such electronic warfare support operations.

Conclusion

Australia's two grand strategies outline clear operational paths, force structure requirements, and necessary force postures for the RAAF. However, as always,

⁵⁶ US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, *quoted in*: Steven Feldstein and Fiona Brauer, "Why Russia Has Been So Resilient to Western Export Controls," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 March 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

resources are scarce, requiring prudent allocation and wise utilization. The ongoing personnel shortfall poses a significant challenge, already impacting RAAF capabilities and unlikely to be easily resolved.

Looking ahead, the issue of force structure recapitalization will grow increasingly pressing. Today, the RAAF is equipped relatively well for a middle-power air force, a result of past funding commitments that enabled the acquisition and integration of current capabilities. However, Australia's recent acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines introduces new funding uncertainties that may affect the RAAF's future in the next decade.

Workforce dynamics and funding priorities can be managed as these are within Australia's control. Externally, however, there are potential challenges that could undermine the viability of the balance-of-power grand strategy, particularly related to the nation's ability to build and sustain the national power required for success.

Firstly, this grand strategy implicitly targets China, Australia's largest trading partner by a significant margin. Trade with China supports the ADF, including the RAAF's advanced but costly force structure. However, this economic relationship could be jeopardized by political decisions by the Chinese government, economic downturns, internal instability within China, or even a major conflict, exposing a vulnerability in the RAAF's future funding.

Secondly, perhaps even more critical, there is growing skepticism within a major political party in the United States, reflective of broader sentiments among Americans, regarding America's alliance commitments. Australia's balance-of-power grand strategy hinges on continued strong US engagement in collective defense in the region. Any shift in US commitment could trigger Australia's historical concerns about abandonment, reminiscent of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the region in the late 1960s to focus on European affairs.

If the United States were to significantly withdraw from the Western Pacific, Australia would likely intensify its focus on the regional engagement grand strategy, notably expanding its diplomatic, economic, and informational tools of national power. Conversely, the military component would likely pivot to prioritize the defense of Australia, its island territories, and the Southwest Pacific.⁵⁷ Sustaining a regional collective defense posture capable of balancing against a great power would be impractical without substantial and assured US participation.

When the United Kingdom withdrew from the region previously, Australia began to emphasize its alliance with the United States more prominently. Consequently, the RAAF gradually transitioned to a force structure influenced by the

⁵⁷ A revamped RAAF might focus on air defence; this is considered in Peter Layton, *Contested skies: Our uncertain air superiority future* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute 2018), 13–15.

United States, replacing British Canberra bombers with F-111s and French Mirage fighters with F/A-18s. If the United States were to similarly withdraw from the region in the future, a comparable shift could occur once again, this time toward other nations with perceived enduring interests in Australia and its surroundings.

France's geographic proximity to Australia through its overseas territory of New Caledonia, makes it a potential partner of strategic importance. Additionally, the United Kingdom maintains strong historical ties with Australia and is increasingly engaged with Japan on military matters, including collaborative efforts in developing a sixth-generation fighter.

The two concerns associated with the balance of power grand strategy are speculative possibilities that may not materialize, potentially allowing this strategy to endure as a stable foundation guiding the RAAF's future. However, the inherent uncertainties underscore the importance of not neglecting the engagement grand strategy. It would be prudent for the RAAF to carefully maintain its involvement in this grand strategy. For Australia and the RAAF, maintaining both grand strategies appears to be a strategic and shrewd approach. ♣

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Dr. Layton has extensive military and defense experience over more than 35 years. He has a doctorate from the University of New South Wales on grand strategy and has taught on the topic at the Eisenhower College, US National Defense University. For his academic work he was awarded a Fellowship to the European University Institute in Italy. For his work at the Pentagon, he was awarded the US Secretary of Defense's Exceptional Public Service Medal. In 2020, he became a RUSI (UK) Associate Fellow. His research interests include grand strategy, including national security strategies; strategic/security studies particularly as relates to middle powers; international relations theory; Australian defense policy; alternative futures development including for the Pacific Islands; and Pacific Island defense, security and aviation issues.

Constructing Like-mindedness

Australia's Contribution to the ANZUS Alliance through Narrative-based Coalition Building

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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, Australia stood as a steadfast ally of the United States and other liberal democracies, actively engaging in major conflicts and bolstering the global liberal order. Since 2008, faced with China's growing assertiveness, Australia has shifted from a supporting ally of the United States to assuming a more proactive, ideational leadership role. This role, often overshadowed by calls for increased material contributions, deserves greater recognition. Canberra's influence extends beyond traditional security measures to significant ideational contributions. By promoting a narrative of a "rules-based" order, Australia cultivates a sense of solidarity among regional partners, enhancing coalition building. This approach underscores Australia's pivotal role in shaping the regional order. Building on existing scholarship, this article evaluates how Canberra's narrative complements traditional burden-sharing, highlighting its multifaceted contributions to regional stability and security.

Throughout the twentieth century, Australia stood as a close ally of the United States and other liberal democracies. Actively participating in both World Wars and various regional conflicts during the Cold War, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Australia made significant contributions to the alliances of the Liberal Powers. Since 2001, Canberra has also been a key player in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and currently supports liberal democracies in the Ukrainian War against Russian aggression. These actions underscore Australia's unwavering commitment to the US-led liberal global order.

However, since 2008, China's growing power and assertiveness have prompted Australia to evolve from a mere supporter of the U.S. and the rules-based liberal order to a proactive leader in upholding and promoting these liberal values. By actively engaging in coalition-building and fostering ideational affinity among allies, Australia has taken on a more dynamic role.

This article illustrates this process by examining how and when Australia contributes to the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) military alliance through ideational means. The article is structured as follows: the upcoming section investigates Australia's pivotal contributions to its alliances with the

liberal powers since 1914. This examination highlights Australia's material and political support for liberal democracies during wartime and its steadfast ideological commitment during periods of peace, particularly in the face of rising Chinese influence in the Pacific since 2008.

Next, the article presents a thesis on the crucial role of ideational factors and the propagation of ideas in maintaining the strength and efficacy of security alliances like ANZUS. This perspective is essential in understanding Australia's subtle yet significant evolution into a leadership role within its alliances with liberal democracies, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

The article then explores pivotal historical moments when Australia spearheaded new ideological initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing and expanding ideological alignment by championing liberal values and rules-based concepts of security, peace, and global order in the twenty-first century. Finally, the article concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the findings, analysis, and implications of Australia's position vis-à-vis the United States, China, and other neighboring states in the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia's Participation in the Liberal Global Order: From Supporter to Leader

Australia has consistently aligned with liberal powers and democracies, playing a significant role in global and regional conflicts. Its strategic importance was evident when it joined the British Empire in World War I on 4 August 1914. Motivated by loyalty to Britain and a rejection of the illiberal Central Powers, Australia took on significant roles in military campaigns such as the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915 and major battles like the Somme, Ypres, and Passchendaele. Despite heavy human and material losses, Australia's participation underscored its unwavering commitment and staunch opposition to reactionary and expansionist values.¹

During World War II, Australia reaffirmed its stance against illiberal values on a global scale. Following Britain's declaration of war on Nazi Germany, Australia formally entered the conflict on 3 September 1939. Australian forces engaged in various theaters before Japan and the United States entered the war on 7 December 1941.² Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor led to the US declaration of war on the Axis Powers, solidifying the liberal Allies' military coalition against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy. Australian troops served in North

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of Australia's involvement in World War I and the multiple effects on Australia's society and economy, see Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia's War, 1914–18* (New York: Routledge, 2020). This book was first published in 1995 by Allen and Unwin.

² Anthony Macdougall, *Australia and the Second World War, 1939–1945* (London: Waverton Press, 2009).

Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe, participating in critical battles such as El Alamein and the Italian campaign.

The expansion of World War II to the Pacific shifted Australia's focus to this region, where its committed participation became vital. Australia made significant contributions to the Allied efforts in the Pacific theater, including the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Kokoda Track campaign, and the liberation of Papua New Guinea. These actions further demonstrated Australia's dedication to the liberal global order and its resilience in the face of authoritarian aggression.

Canberra's participation in World War II marked a significant shift in Australia's allegiance, moving from a loyal supporter of the British Empire to aligning with the United States and other liberal democracies. This decision reflected Australia's desire to play an independent role in global affairs and demonstrated confidence in its national identity.³ Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, Canberra actively supported the United Nations security system, the United States, and its liberal, anticommunist allies during various regional conflicts.

Notably, Australia was one of the first countries to send troops to the Korean War under the United Nations' command in response to North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Australian forces played pivotal roles in significant battles, such as the Battle of Kapyong and the Battle of Maryang San. This conflict solidified Australia's commitment to the UN's principle of collective security and its strategic partnership with the United States, as formalized by the ANZUS alliance treaty with the United States and New Zealand in 1951.⁴

During the Cold War, Australia participated in the Vietnam War to support the United States and contain Soviet communism globally.⁵ Australian troops were involved in various operations, including the well-known Battle of Long Tan in 1966. The war sparked significant controversy in Australia, leading to public protests and debates about conscription, the nation's role in the conflict, and the human and material costs involved. This domestic outcry and opposition prompted Australia to reflect on how and when the country would align with and defend the liberal values championed by the United States and other democratic partners.⁶

Since 1975, Australia's major foreign policy decisions have demonstrated an unwavering and independent commitment to its alliance responsibilities with the

³ Lachlan Grant, *Australian Soldiers in Asia-Pacific in World War II* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2014).

⁴ Thomas B. Millar, "Australia and the American Alliance." *Pacific Affairs* 37, no. 2 (Summer 1964): 148–60, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵ David McLean, "Australia in the Cold War: A Historiographical Review," *The International History Review* 23, no. 2 (June 2001), 299–321, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁶ Joseph M. Siracus and Glen St. John Barclay, "Australia, the United States, and the Cold War, 1945–51: From V-J Day to ANZUS," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 39–52, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

United States and ANZUS. This steadfast allegiance, coupled with a strong commitment to liberal economic and political values in the evolving global order since the late 1990s and early 2000s, has earned Canberra a reputation for trust and reliability in global affairs.

In this context, Australia has provided unequivocal material and ideational backing for the GWOT, efforts to counterbalance Chinese expansionism in the Pacific, and Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Australia invoked the ANZUS treaty for the first time and joined the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. Australian forces participated in combat operations, trained Afghan security forces, and contributed to reconstruction efforts. Additionally, Australia took part in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent operations, supporting the Coalition Provisional Authority and training Iraqi security forces. Australia's commitment extended to global counterterrorism efforts, including intelligence sharing and domestic security measures to prevent terrorism.⁷

Since 2008, in response to Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia has supported freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.⁸ Canberra has also condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and contributed to international efforts to support Kyiv's defense capabilities through nonlethal military aid, training, humanitarian aid, and economic sanctions against Russia.⁹ These actions underscore a significant shift in Australia's international stance, reflecting a proactive and multifaceted approach to regional and global security.

In East Asia, the relationship between China and Australia over the past sixteen years has woven a complex tapestry of economic cooperation, strategic competition, and evolving geopolitical dynamics.¹⁰ As of 2024, Australia emphasizes regional security and global geopolitical issues more than purely national and regional economic interests.

Prior to 2010, Beijing and Canberra enjoyed strong commercial relations. The two countries experienced a period of robust and harmonious interactions, marked by significant growth in bilateral trade. For example, China became Australia's

⁷ Isaac Kfir, *18 Years and Counting: Australian Counterterrorism, Threats and Responses* (Barton, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 2019), <http://www.jstor.org/>.

⁸ Rory Medcalf and James Brown, "Defence Challenges 2035: Securing Australia's Lifelines," *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, November 2014, 4–5, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

⁹ Tim Watts MP, "Two years on, Australia stands with Ukraine" (press release, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Canberra, Australia, 24 February 2024), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>.

¹⁰ Peter K. Lee and Andrew Carr, "Australia's Great-Power Threat Perceptions and Leadership Responses," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (October 2022), 77–99, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

largest trading partner in 2007,¹¹ and the signing of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) in 2015 further boosted their economic ties, particularly in agriculture, natural resources, and education.¹² As a result, China consistently ranked as the top destination for Australian exports and one of the leading sources of its imports.¹³

Additionally, despite a significant decrease since 2018, Chinese investments in Australia increased exponentially from 2007, focusing prominently on the mining, real estate, agriculture, and infrastructure sectors.¹⁴ Sino-Australian economic cooperation also extended to education and tourism. Chinese students constituted Australia's largest group of international students, contributing significantly to the Australian educational sector.¹⁵ Furthermore, there was a significant influx of Chinese tourists to Australia, which became a major source of revenue for the country's tourism industry. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted this sector after 2019.¹⁶

The significant influence of the Chinese economy on Australia's foreign policy decisions has led Canberra to implement policies cautiously to avoid upsetting one of its major economic partners. For example, in 2008, the Rudd government withdrew from the initial talks of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to position Australia as a mediator between Washington and Beijing.¹⁷ Australia aimed to balance its economic relationship with China and its security alliance with the United States.

As part of this strategy, Australia hosted the Marine Rotation Force at Darwin (MRF-Darwin), resulting from a 2011 agreement between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard. This security arrangement aimed to enhance defense cooperation between the United States and Australia.¹⁸ By taking a

¹¹ Australian Embassy China, "Australia-China Relationship Overview," n.d., <https://china.embassy.gov.au/>.

¹² "China-Australia Free Trade Agreement" (fact sheet, Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

¹³ "Australia," *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, 2024, <https://oec.world/>; and "Australia's trade in goods with China in 2020" (fact sheet, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 9 March 2020), 2024, <https://www.abs.gov.au/>.

¹⁴ Doug Ferguson et al., *Demystifying Chinese investment in Australia 2024*, 20th ed., (Sydney: The University of Sydney and KPMG, April 2024), <https://assets.kpmg.com/>.

¹⁵ Greg Navarro, "China-Australia Ties: Chinese Students in Australia Continue to Increase," *China Global Television Network*, 15 November 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/>.

¹⁶ Henry Belot, "Chinese Tourism to Australia Still in the Doldrums After Pandemic Travel Bans," *The Guardian*, 3 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

¹⁷ Indrani Bagchi, "Australia to pull out of 'quad' that excludes China," *Times of India*, 6 February 2008, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

¹⁸ "Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama Announce Force Posture Initiatives" (press release, The White House, 16 November 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

two-pronged approach, Australian officials sought to demonstrate that they could maintain solid commercial ties with China while sustaining a strong security alignment with the United States without having to choose between them. This strategic approach allowed Canberra to maintain a neutral position between the two countries throughout the early 2000s. Indeed, Australian officials remained convinced that choosing between their economic partner and security patron was unnecessary at that juncture.¹⁹

However, despite Australia's cautious efforts to pursue a moderate stand in its relations with China since 2008, Chinese assertiveness and the potential threat to regional security and peace have increasingly moved Australia to adopt a sterner position vis-à-vis Beijing's aggressive military and political designs in the Indo-Pacific. For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promoting extensive infrastructure investments in the region, has raised concerns in Australia about strategic implications and debt-trap diplomacy.²⁰ Consequently, China's actions prompted Australia to adopt several policies that placed both countries on a collision course.

Faced with the dangerous prospect of war and threats to its national security versus continued economic cooperation, Canberra has sought closer strategic alignment with the United States, taking a more active role in the relaunched Quad initiative. This policy has increased tension with China. Compounding this strain, Australia's stance on the South China Sea disputes, advocating for freedom of navigation and overflight, exacerbated its diplomatic friction with Beijing. Ultimately, Australians appear to be tilting toward securing themselves and the region instead of overlooking the potential Chinese threat in exchange for purely economic benefits and interests.

Following Australia's decision to counter Chinese assertiveness, even at the expense of economic gains, Canberra has adopted a bolder foreign policy. First, it accused China of cyberespionage targeting its government and private sector entities, straining bilateral ties.²¹ Second, Australian decision makers have raised allegations of Chinese interference in Australian politics and academia, further complicating their relationship.²² These assertions have further complicated their

¹⁹ Katherine Lee and Elad Bruhl, "The Deterioration of Australia-China Relations: What Went Wrong?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2024): 326–47, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, and Jonathan Pryke, "Ocean of debt?: Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific," Lowry Institute, 21 October 2019, <https://www.lowryinstitute.org/>.

²¹ Max Mason and Andrew Tillet, "Leaked Documents Reveal Australia Targeted by Chinese Hackers," *Financial Review*, 26 March 2024, <https://www.afr.com/>; and Paul Mozur et al., "Leaked Files Show the Secret World of China's Hackers for Hire," *New York Times*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

²² Amy Searight, "Countering China's Influence Operations: Lessons from Australia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8 May 2020, <https://www.csis.org/>.

relations. Third, in the diplomatic arena, Canberra introduced laws aimed at countering foreign interference, widely perceived in Beijing as targeting China, leading to additional diplomatic tensions. Lastly, Australia's call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 in 2020 in Chinese laboratories met with strong opposition from China, resulting in trade sanctions on Australian goods.²³

Despite the shift from relatively friendly relations to increased tension and confrontation, Canberra and Beijing have maintained high-level diplomatic engagements.²⁴ Policy makers in both capitals have expressed a willingness to overcome their differences and cooperate on global issues such as climate change and regional peace and stability.²⁵ Additionally, China and Australia actively participate in regional fora such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), allowing for continued dialogue despite their profoundly differing strategic objectives. Through their participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), both countries have found common economic grounds despite broader geopolitical and strategic tensions.

Thus, contemporary Sino-Australian relations since 2008 reveal a dynamic interplay of economic cooperation against growing strategic and diplomatic strains. As regional and global security scenarios evolve, Sino-Australian relations will continue to oscillate along the cooperation-and-conflict continuum. Their actions and decisions will be crucial for regional security, peace, stability, and prosperity. Ultimately, Australia will prioritize security and peace over purely economic objectives. Australia's track record since 1914 indicates that even at high economic costs, its grand strategic position is to remain close to like-minded states that support and strengthen a regional and global liberal economic and political order.

The Chinese case, along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has further solidified Australia's two-pronged involvement in global affairs. On the material side, Australia has moved swiftly to strengthen its military inventory and regional projection. It has increased its military budget and revamped many critical defense systems through domestic industries and external procurements, such as the September 2021 agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. As reported in March 2023, "Under the Aukus pact, Australia is to get its first nuclear-powered subs—at least three—from

²³ Jeffrey Wilson, "Australia Shows the World What Decoupling from China Looks Like," *Foreign Policy*, 9 November 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

²⁴ Stephen R. Nagy, "Middle-Power Alignment in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Securing Agency through Neo-Middle-Power Diplomacy," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (July 2022), 161–79, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²⁵ Kirsty Needham, "China, Australia Raise Climate Change, Security at Pacific Leaders' Summit," *Reuters*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

the U.S. The allies will also work to create a new fleet using cutting-edge technology, including UK-made Rolls-Royce reactors.”²⁶

The military and political engagements from 1914 to 2024 underscore Australia’s commitment to international alliances and its desire to contribute to global peace and security. Experiences in several wars and external threats have shaped Australia’s defense policies and its role on the world stage. While these actions demonstrate Canberra’s commitment to liberal ideals and notions of security and peace, a critical dimension often overlooked is Australia’s increasing leadership in fostering political affinity and constructing like-mindedness among its alliance partners and neighbors. Its involvement in maintaining a rules-based global order is vital to world affairs and its alliance with the United States.

This historical narrative illustrates Australia’s evolving role in world affairs, from following the British Empire and supporting the US-led liberal, anticommunist global order to becoming an actor increasingly asserting its leadership within the liberal world and its alliance responsibilities. This ideational component serves as the adhesive that maintains the affinity, integrity, and efficacy of coalitions, particularly long-running military alliances like NATO and ANZUS, during times of relative international peace. The crucial role of ideas, political affinity, and constructing like-mindedness among allies has been pivotal in the protracted operation of modern military alliances since the end of World War II.

Australia’s case provides valuable insights into the debate about burden-sharing and contributions among allies. While some focus solely on the material contributions to alliances, it is essential to consider the crucial role of ideas, political affinity, and the development of like-mindedness in maintaining alliance cohesion and effectiveness. Although Australia has not faced heavy criticism for burden-sharing compared to other allies, there have been calls for the country to increase its material contributions to its alliance with the United States, particularly in strengthening military capabilities to enhance deterrence.

However, Canberra’s role extends beyond conventional material security measures. For example, Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles highlight Australia’s valuable contributions through its geographical location, regional expertise, and soft-power

²⁶ Kathryn Armstrong, Frances Mao and Tom Housden, “Aukus deal: US, UK and Australia agree on nuclear submarine project,” *BBC*, 14 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/>; and Jeremy Feiler, “Embassy: Australia, U.S. Bolster Cooperation in Anti-terror War,” *Inside the Pentagon* 19, no. 2 (9 January 2003), 18–20. <http://www.jstor.org/>.

ability.²⁷ In addition to these contributions, Australia actively shapes regional order by promoting and using narratives of a rules-based order.

The research presented in this article indicates that Australia's role in shaping narratives of order constitutes a significant ideational contribution that complements traditional burden-sharing perspectives. This article assesses Australia's ideational impact on the US-led regional security framework and contends that Australia's narrative of order serves as a proactive strategy to foster coalition-building by cultivating a shared sense of like-mindedness among regional partners. The following sections outline the theoretical framework guiding our research and critically examine pivotal historical moments when Australia introduced new ideational initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, guiding the alliance toward embracing and expanding ideational affinity through the promotion of liberal values and rules-based concepts concerning security, peace, and global order in the twenty-first century.

The Power of Discourse in Contributing to US Alliances

US alliances remain essential pillars within the international system, providing collective defense, deterrence, and cooperation among allied states. Realist interpretations in international relations argue that these alliances function similarly to other defensive military pacts, enhancing the security of member states and amplifying their combined strength.²⁸ By pooling resources and capabilities, allied states foster interoperability and readiness, ensuring a unified response to existing and emerging threats.²⁹ From this perspective, alliances emerge as crucial mechanisms through which states unite to deter adversaries and safeguard against potential aggressions.³⁰

In the post-Cold War era, states confront a significant shift in the nature of threats. US alliances have adapted to this evolving international security landscape by assuming broader and more diverse responsibilities.³¹ However, the resurgence of great power competition has refocused the efforts of US alliances on confront-

²⁷ Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, "Burden-Sharing: The US, Australia and New Zealand Alliances in the Pacific Islands," *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July 2021), 1045–65, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁸ Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

²⁹ Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

³⁰ Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

³¹ Nikoloz G. Esitashvili and Félix E. Martín, "NATO's Internal Deepening, Endurance, and Expansion: Economic Incentives and Gains as an Explanatory Complement to Realist Alliance Theory," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 3 (2020): 17–45, <https://doi.org/>; and John S. Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 5 (Winter 1994–1995): 763–87, <https://doi.org/>.

ing the complex challenges posed by states seeking to revise the prevailing international order.³² These revisionist states aim to challenge the existing US-led global order and employ assertive tactics to subtly alter the status quo. As competition intensifies between the United States and its allies on one side and revisionist powers on the other, tensions have arisen regarding the equitable distribution of responsibilities and contributions among allies.

Following the realist tradition, the discussions in international relations have primarily focused on material power-balancing dynamics. This viewpoint emphasizes that allies must augment their financial, logistical, and military capabilities to bolster the collective power of US alliances, enhancing their ability to deter and defend against threats. Nonetheless, these discussions often neglect the intangible contributions of alliances. Beyond material inputs, allies can also enhance and consolidate the collective power of their alliances through various intangible means. Power extends beyond tangible resources to encompass nuanced social attributes that defy easy quantification.³³

Among these social dimensions, the capacity to shape knowledge through discourse emerges as a potent yet frequently overlooked source of power.³⁴ This discursive dimension of power, strategically wielded through distinct speech acts and discourse practices, constitutes an intriguing facet of power dynamics deserving deeper exploration. It is closely intertwined with the framing and control of narratives and the promotion of meticulously crafted norms.³⁵

The active role of allies in wielding language and communication as instruments of power becomes apparent when examining the historical engagement of US alliances. These alliances are not passive entities but actively strive to uphold the existing liberal international order and counter challenges from other influential nations. Through language and communication strategies, allies actively promote narratives that reinforce their envisioned world order, leveraging intangible sources of influence to bolster their alliances and operations. As Andrew Hurrell contends, the “capacity to produce and project proposals, conceptions, and theories of order

³² Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine, “Tracing the Modes of China’s Revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: A Comparison with Pre-1941 Shōwa Japan,” *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 51, no. 1 (March 2021): 83–99, <https://doi.org/>.

³³ Peter Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2010); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³⁴ Peter Digeser, “The Fourth Face of Power,” *Journal of Politics* 54, no. 4 (1992): 977–1007.

³⁵ Karl Gustafsson, “Is China’s Discursive Power Increasing?” The ‘Power of the Past’ in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 3 (July–September 2014), 412, <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, 8.

is a central part of the practice of power.”³⁶ Therefore, employing power through discourses of order represents a significant way allies contribute intangibly to the order-sustaining goals of their alliances.

Beyond their tangible contributions in terms of hard power, allies actively participate in constructing and perpetuating the established order through discursive means. In essence, they strategically deploy their ontological and discursive power to advance the alliance’s objectives in maintaining order. As Brittany Morreale notes, *ontological power* entails “the ability to influence the behaviors of others to align with or reinforce a nation’s desired worldview. It centers on the creation of a ‘brand’ that communicates an existential world order, value system, and collective identity to partners.”³⁷ Similarly, *discursive power* involves “the production of effects through the mobilization of particular discourses.”³⁸ Allies harness these forms of power by mobilizing distinct concepts of order, disseminating narratives that articulate what a legitimate order should encompass and how it should function. Such discursive contributions assume heightened significance given the multifaceted competition faced by the United States and its allies across their regional domains of influence. As analysts have observed, regional rivalries in areas like the Indo-Pacific have evolved into a “battle of narratives.”³⁹

Within this domain of geopolitical competition, allies like Australia assume a pivotal role in mobilizing and disseminating ideas of order through strategic narratives.⁴⁰ These narratives serve as *mechanisms of reiteration*, perpetuating and institutionalizing discourses that define what constitutes a natural, commonsense, legitimate, and collectively beneficial world order. Through this process, such narratives propagate a distinct vision of global order that has the potential to shape perceptions, inspire alignment, and build legitimacy.⁴¹

Accordingly, these narratives, categorized by Alister Miskimmon and his colleagues as *international system narratives*, also function as proactive *mechanisms for coalition-building*, producing an overlapping sense of like-mindedness among re-

³⁶ Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.

³⁷ Brittany L. Morreale, “Ontological Power: Narrative in a New Era of Competition,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 3 (May–June 2022): 25–40, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

³⁸ Gustafsson, “Is China’s Discursive Power Increasing?,” 412.

³⁹ Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2020).

⁴⁰ Alice Dell’Era and Félix E. Martín, “Mobilizing Ideas of Order: Burden-sharing in the US–Japan and ANZUS Alliances,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 16, no. 2 (April 2024): 191–208, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>.

⁴¹ Morreale, “Ontological Power,” 26.

gional partners.⁴² In doing so, they become valuable in coalition-building efforts, influencing the environment within which more tangible and practical forms of contribution are situated. Indeed, these narratives are instrumental in framing actions and reinforcing the ideological framework that supports them.⁴³

In essence, contributions to US alliances extend beyond material resources to encompass complex webs of discourse and narrative construction. While hard power remains crucial, the intangible dimensions of power wielded through discourse emerge as equally essential assets in navigating the intricate dynamics of contemporary geopolitical competition. The following section explores how Australia actively contributes to these evolving trends.

Australia and the Mobilization of the Rules-Based Order

While not a primary target of extensive burden-sharing criticisms like other allies, Australia has encountered calls to augment its material contributions to its alliance with the United States. Like other US allies, these calls emphasize the need for Canberra to strengthen its military capabilities to bolster the alliance's overall deterrence capabilities. Despite Australia's identity and role as a global *middle power*, Canberra's capacity to sustain its alliance with the United States through conventional measures of material power is constrained.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this does not diminish Australia's role as a *pivotal power* capable of influencing the geopolitical, strategic, and economic dynamics of a region undergoing transition.⁴⁵

Ranked only sixth in comprehensive power in the Asian region, Canberra is acknowledged for wielding more influence than typically attributed to states with similar resource limitations.⁴⁶ Middle powers like Australia can shape the international environment through avenues beyond pure hard power. While there is no

⁴² Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013); and Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

⁴³ Dell'Era and Martín, "Mobilizing Ideas of Order."

⁴⁴ Andrew Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?: A Systemic Impact Approach," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁵ Anthony Bergin, "Time for Australia to Stop Calling Itself a 'Middle Power'," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 8 January 2019, <http://www.aspi.org.au/>.

⁴⁶ Lowy Institute, "Australia," *Asia Power Index 2023*, 2024, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.

consensus on the exact criteria defining *middle powers*,⁴⁷ many recognize their capacity to exert influence through niche diplomacy and norm entrepreneurship.⁴⁸

In alignment with this perspective, Gareth Evans, Australian Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996, articulated during a speech in Santiago that:

the characteristic method of middle power diplomacy is coalition building with 'like-minded' countries. It usually also involves "niche diplomacy", which means concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field. Countries which are not powerful enough in most circumstances to impose their will may be persuasive enough to have like-minded others see their point of view, and to act accordingly.⁴⁹

Considering the above points, it can be argued that Australia's role in advancing the objectives of its alliance with Washington extends beyond traditional material security measures. Instead, it encompasses a diverse array of tools more characteristic of how middle powers wield influence. For instance, Wallis and Powles underscore Canberra's significant contributions through its geographical positioning, regional expertise, and soft power.⁵⁰

Moreover, Australia actively shapes regional dynamics by mobilizing and advocating for narratives of a rules-based order (RBO). As further discussed below, the mobilization of RBO discourses by middle-power allies, such as Australia, represents a crucial yet often overlooked method for allies to advance alliance objectives and contribute to practices that maintain international order.⁵¹

The phrase *rules-based order* gained prominence in the early 2010s as an alternative to the prevailing concept of a *liberal international order*. It generally refers to a framework of norms, values, rules, and institutions that formed the foundation of the postwar global order. In essence, a RBO aligns closely with the principles of the liberal international order, seeking to uphold a system of global governance rooted

⁴⁷ Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?"; Jeffrey Robertson, "Middle-Power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355–70, <https://doi.org/>; and Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al., *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁸ Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo, "Regional Security Strategies of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 185–216, <https://doi.org/>; Andrew F. Cooper, ed., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Andrew Carr and Daniel Baldino, "An Indo-Pacific Norm Entrepreneur?: Australia and Defence Diplomacy," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (2015): 30–47, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁹ Gareth Evans, "Middle Power Diplomacy" (speech, Santiago, Chile, 29 June 2011), <https://www.gevans.org/>.

⁵⁰ Wallis and Powles, "Burden-Sharing."

⁵¹ Dell'Era and Martin, "Mobilizing Ideas of Order."

in democratic principles, human rights, free trade, and the rule of law. However, unlike the more clearly defined liberal international order, the concept of a RBO is often perceived as more ambiguous and subject to varying interpretations.⁵²

References to the RBO have become prevalent in the foreign policy and diplomatic discourse of various international actors, with Australia emerging as an early advocate of this linguistic shift. As early as 2008, the RBO began to feature prominently in speeches and statements by key Australian officials. For instance, in the 2008 National Security Statement, then–Prime Minister Kevin Rudd identified the RBO as a foundational principle guiding Australia’s national security strategy.⁵³ Under his leadership, the concept of the RBO gained traction within Australian security discourse. While not explicitly using this specific term, the *2009 Defence White Paper* articulated a distinct set of principles that laid the groundwork for the RBO narrative.⁵⁴

Subsequently, the discourse surrounding the RBO has continued to evolve within Canberra’s strategic frameworks and the pronouncements of senior officials. It was prominently featured in subsequent strategic documents, including the *2013 National Security Strategy* and the *Defence White Paper* during the Gillard government.⁵⁵ The concept has since been consistently integrated into successive strategic publications, including the *2016 Defence White Paper*, the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, and most recently, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, and the latest *2024 National Defence Strategy*.⁵⁶

⁵² Ben Scott, “Rules-Based Order: What’s in a Name?,” *The Interpreter*, 30 June 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>; and Peter Beinart, “The Vacuous Phrase at the Core of Biden’s Foreign Policy,” *New York Times*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁵³ “The First National Security Statement to the Parliament Address by the Prime Minister of Australia The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP” (press release, 12 April 2008), <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/>.

⁵⁴ Nick Bisley and Benjamin Schreer, “Australia and the Rules-Based Order in Asia: Of Principles and Pragmatism,” *Asian Survey* 58, no. 2 (2018): 302–19, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵⁵ *2013 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; and *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security* (Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013), <https://apo.org.au/>.

⁵⁶ *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>; *Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; *Defence Strategic Review* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; and *National Defence Strategy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

Australia's discourses and rhetoric surrounding the rules-based order (RBO) have coalesced into a structured "three-step narrative," encompassing key elements that shape its foreign policy stance:⁵⁷

1. **Identification of an International Order Based on Rules:** Australian officials emphasize the essential features of what they perceive as the established international order. They assert that order hinges on adherence to rules, promoting open, transparent, and cooperative interactions grounded in the rule of law.⁵⁸
2. **Articulation of Threats to the RBO:** This narrative highlights actions that contravene established rules as destabilizing forces challenging the current order. Early formulations of this view were evident in Prime Minister Rudd's 2008 speech, where he juxtaposed China's concept of a "harmonious world" with the notion of being a "responsible stakeholder," arguing that adherence to rules is fundamental to global harmony. Over time, the perception of threats to the RBO has intensified, particularly as revisionist states increasingly challenge the rules and norms underpinning it.⁵⁹
3. **Perception of Adverse Effects of Undermining the RBO:** Australian strategic documents, such as the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, explicitly identify threats to the RBO, such as China's actions in the South China Sea.⁶⁰ Such behaviors are seen as jeopardizing the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, which directly impacts Australia's national interests. This narrative underscores the distinction between an order based on rules versus one based on might, asserting that only the former can safeguard the rights and security of all states, regardless of size or power.⁶¹

As part of this narrative, Canberra has committed itself to protecting the RBO, viewing it as essential to its core strategic interests. This commitment has become a foundational aspect of Australia's comprehensive foreign policy and security

⁵⁷ Melissa Conley Tyler, Allan Gyngell, and Bryce Wakefield, eds., *Australia and the Rules-Based International Order* (Deakin, Australia: The Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2021).

⁵⁸ Kevin Rudd, "The Australia-US Alliance and Emerging Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region, The Brookings Institution, Washington" (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 31 March 2008), <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/>; Julie Bishop, "Indo-Pacific Oration II" (speech, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 18 July 2017), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>; and Frances Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific: Australia's Perspective" (speech, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 29 April 2019), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

⁵⁹ Rudd, "The Australia-US Alliance and Emerging Challenges."

⁶⁰ Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific"; *National Defence Strategy*, 6; and *Defence Strategic Review*, 23.

⁶¹ Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific"; Scott Morrison, "Address to Asialink 'Where We Live,'" (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 25 June 2019), <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/>.

practices. Consequently, the RBO narrative shapes Australia's broader vision for global security and informs its interactions with regional and international stakeholders.⁶²

In short, Australia's deployment of the RBO narrative serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it acts as a mechanism for reiteration within official foreign policy and security rhetoric, seeking to legitimize and garner consensus around the desirable attributes of the established order. Secondly, it operates as a normative tool, promoting a rules-based approach to maintaining global order, which is crucial amidst evolving geopolitical challenges.⁶³

In alignment with this stance, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* unequivocally affirmed that "Australia will continue to be an active and vocal advocate for a rules-based international order."⁶⁴ This commitment was echoed by then-Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, who emphasized Canberra's imperative to "define a new rules-based order and encourage very strongly all major state actors to accord with these rules."⁶⁵

Accordingly, the integration of RBO discourses into Australia's official rhetoric signifies its active engagement in shaping and reinforcing US-led ordering practices.⁶⁶ By employing the RBO narrative, Australia actively contributes to advocacy efforts that uphold the prevailing conception of international order.⁶⁷ This role positions Australia not merely as an observer but as a proactive influencer in the ideational framework within which it operates.

Secondly, the RBO narrative serves as a framework for framing Canberra's policies and engagements with like-minded partners. It operates as a *mechanism for coalition-building*, facilitating closer external relations underpinned by shared commitments to an RBO.⁶⁸ Australia's adeptness in forging defense networks and diplomatic ties has consistently earned it favorable rankings in categories such as the Asia Power Index.⁶⁹ These relations are frequently framed around the mutual pursuit of an RBO, underscoring Canberra's efforts to foster cooperation across a spectrum of initiatives.

⁶² Bisley and Schreer, "Australia and the Rules-Based Order in Asia."

⁶³ Rebecca Strating, "Norm Contestation, Statecraft and the South China Sea: Defending Maritime Order," *Pacific Review* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1–31, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶⁴ *Defence Strategic Update*, 24.

⁶⁵ Ben Scott, "Why Australia Hasn't given up on a Rules-Based World Order," *Australian Financial Review*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.afr.com/>.

⁶⁶ Alexandra Homolar and Oliver Turner, "Narrative Alliances: The Discursive Foundations of International Order," *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (January 2024): 203–20, <https://doi.org/>.

⁶⁷ Carr and Baldino, "An Indo-Pacific Norm Entrepreneur?"; Strating, "Norm Contestation, Statecraft and the South China Sea"; and Homolar and Turner, "Narrative Alliances."

⁶⁸ *National Defence Strategy*, 50.

⁶⁹ "Australia," *Asia Power Index 2023*.

References to the RBO are routinely integrated into Australian officials' discourse concerning a wide array of cooperative endeavors. These include bilateral engagements, such as those with Japan and the United States; trilateral partnerships involving Japan and India, India and France, India and Indonesia, as well as quadrilateral arrangements with the United States, Japan, and India, and the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. These cooperative frameworks exemplify Australia's commitment to leveraging the RBO narrative to strengthen partnerships and promote shared strategic objectives on the global stage.

For instance, Australian officials have frequently emphasized that their shared commitment to upholding the RBO forms the foundation of Canberra's close partnership with Japan, another key US ally in the Indo-Pacific region.⁷⁰ This mutual interest underpins a web of initiatives through which Canberra and Tokyo collaborate, all justified and framed in the context of advancing a regional and international order based on rules. Canberra's RBO narrative has been instrumental in linking Australia to Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Commentators have noted Canberra's proactive role in shaping the Indo-Pacific construct, which aligns closely with the principles of the RBO.⁷¹

While Australia has not independently issued its own FOIP vision or strategy, it frames its increasing diplomatic and military engagements in the region within the broader narrative of safeguarding the RBO.⁷² This reliance on the RBO narrative legitimizes Australia's cooperative efforts with regional partners as essential for building and maintaining regional order.⁷³ The RBO narrative also serves as a signaling mechanism to the United States and other allies, facilitating coordination and alignment on shared strategic objectives.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Julie Bishop, "Japan National Press Club" (speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 15 October 2013, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>); and Julie Bishop, "Address to Australia New Zealand Chamber of Commerce in Japan (Anzccj), Tokyo" (speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 February 2016, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>).

⁷¹ Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*.

⁷² Lavina Lee, "Australia and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Strategy for the Defence of a 'Rules-Based Order,'" in *The Indo-Pacific Theatre: Strategic Visions and Frameworks*, ed. Srabani Roy Choudhury (London: Routledge India, 2022), 50–72.

⁷³ Ryosuke Hanada, "The Role of U.S.-Japan-Australia-India Cooperation, or the 'Quad' in FOIP: A Policy Coordination Mechanism for a Rules-Based Order," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, <https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

⁷⁴ In this respect, Natalie Klein argues that the use of the RBO discourse should be complemented with a rhetoric more narrowly emphasizing international law, given the inherent distinction between rules-based order and international law. See: Natalie Klein, "Australia's Maritime Security Challenges: Juggling International Law and Informal Agreements in an International Rules-Based Order," *International Law Studies* 99, no. 1 (2022): 375–407, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.

Interestingly, the RBO narrative has also been employed to contextualize AUKUS, the trilateral partnership between Canberra, London, and Washington announced in September 2021. This partnership gained attention for its historic decision by the United Kingdom and the United States to transfer nuclear-powered submarine technology to a third party for the first time since the 1950s. In their initial joint statement announcing the initiative, the three members emphasized that they were “guided by our enduring ideals and shared commitment to the international rules-based order.”⁷⁵

However, as noted by Jamal Barnes and Samuel Makinda, the launch of AUKUS coincided with actions perceived as challenging the RBO it aimed to protect.⁷⁶ Despite initial tensions between France and Australia over the canceled submarine agreement, Australia has managed to avoid significant negative backlash. In fact, relations with France, while not restored to their pre-AUKUS closeness, have been advanced under the banner of promoting “an international order based on the rule of law and agreed norms.”⁷⁷ This approach resulted in the issuance of a New Agenda for Bilateral Cooperation and the initiation of discussions for a Reciprocal Access Agreement.

In our view, Australia’s strategic framing of AUKUS through the RBO narrative played a crucial role in mitigating negative repercussions and shielding the initiative from domestic criticism and skepticism. By presenting the partnership as a necessary step to uphold an RBO under strain, Canberra positioned itself as a proactive defender of international norms and stability.⁷⁸

Overall, as a mechanism for reinforcing and fostering coalitions, the RBO narrative serves as a conduit to cultivate a shared sense of like-mindedness between Canberra and its partners, thereby legitimizing deeper cooperation. While the notion that the United States and its allies and partners uphold similar values and principles is not new and has frequently been emphasized in their relationships, the characterization of these entities as *like-minded* has gained traction as they adopt discourses centered around the RBO. *Like-mindedness* is often cited as a fundamental quality for building coalitions against revisionist powers seeking to disrupt the

⁷⁵ “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS” (press release, The White House, 15 September 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁷⁶ Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda, “Testing the Limits of International Society?: Trust, AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security,” *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (July 2022): 1307–25, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷⁷ “Australia-France Roadmap – A New Agenda for Bilateral Cooperation” (fact sheet, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

⁷⁸ Criticism in Australia covered different areas: concerns over the lack of domestic consultations, concerns over the potential for nuclear nonproliferation, as well as concerns over increased dependency on the United States. See: Patricia O’Brien, “2 Years On, AUKUS Continues to Raise Questions,” *The Diplomat*, 15 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>; and Shirley Scott, “The Strategic Interplay between AUKUS, the NPT, and the Rules-Based International Order,” *Security & Defence Plus*, 21 October 2022, <https://securityanddefenceplus.plusalliance.org/>.

status quo.⁷⁹ However, the exact definition of *like-mindedness* remains elusive, with some attributing it to shared values while others highlight shared interests.⁸⁰

Australia has also embraced the concept of like-mindedness, although, according to Melissa Conley Tyler and Megan Vu, senior officials have exercised caution in its use compared to foreign policy analysts and think tanks.⁸¹ The authors suggest that Australian officials tend to avoid framing relations in ways that suggest rigid divisions into exclusive blocs, particularly the portrayal of a “West” versus “the rest” dichotomy.⁸² To understand Australia’s interpretation of *like-mindedness*, one can examine the language employed by former Foreign Minister Evans:

The concept of “like-mindedness” has been changing in interesting ways. In the past the countries in whose company Australia certainly felt most comfortable were those sharing the abiding values of Western liberal democracy, the living standards of advanced industrial societies, and preferably speaking English as well: Britain, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and occasionally the Scandinavians and some other West Europeans. And other countries – I would assume the Latin Americans for a start – had their equivalent comfort groupings. But for all of us these days, the term “like-minded” much more often describes those who, whatever their prevailing value systems, share specific interests and are prepared to work together to do something about them.⁸³

This suggests that Australia has shifted away from linking like-mindedness exclusively with the West and instead views it as an issue-based dimension. In this context, Australia’s deployment of the RBO narrative allows it to foster a broadly resonant perception of like-mindedness. For Canberra, like-minded partners encompass those actors, whether major, middle, or smaller powers, with whom it can collaborate to uphold an RBO. Collaboration with such actors is normalized as they all seek to protect themselves and navigate potential challenges from more powerful states.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Andreas B. Forsby, “How ‘Like-Mindedness’ Became the Key Attribute of the China Containment Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, 9 February 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸⁰ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, “Navigating the Narratives of Indo-Pacific: ‘Rules,’ ‘Like-Mindedness,’ and ‘De-Risking’ in the Eyes of Southeast Asia,” *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 9 (2023): 51–56, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/>.

⁸¹ Melissa Conley Tyler and Megan Vu, “The Translator: ‘Like-Minded Countries,’” *The Interpreter*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

⁸² Conley Tyler and Vu. “The Translator.”

⁸³ Evans, “Middle Power Diplomacy.”

⁸⁴ Malcolm Turnbull, “Doorstop—Hong Kong” (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 12 November 2017), <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/>.

Given Australia's engagement with a diverse array of global actors, many of whom do not fit the traditional mold of like-minded partners, the RBO narrative acts as a catalyst for a more inclusive concept of like-mindedness centered on an interest in a stable and rules-based international environment. This approach resonates more broadly across a larger group of actors and helps mitigate the often-polarizing rhetoric of its American ally, which tends to focus more on the "democracy vs autocracy" dichotomy.⁸⁵

In essence, Australia's strategic use of the RBO narrative significantly contributes to reshaping the discourse on order and like-mindedness at the global level. Australia broadens the range of potential partners by adopting a more issue-oriented interpretation of like-mindedness. It fosters a broader coalition committed to maintaining the stability of the existing global order. By influencing the ideational framework within which the US–Australia alliance operates, Canberra actively supports a critical aspect of the alliance's overarching mission to establish order. This reliance on discursive strategies demonstrates Australia's deployment of ontological and discursive forms of power. Such strategies go beyond mere rhetoric, catalyzing substantial cooperation and collective coordination in an increasingly intricate and uncertain global landscape.

Conclusion

Australia's commitment and engagement in the international system and the Indo-Pacific are grounded in a fundamental principle that guides its foreign policy: safeguarding national security and promoting regional peace, stability, and prosperity. As extensively discussed earlier, Australia has consistently opposed authoritarianism, revisionism, expansionism, militarism, and aggression against sovereign states. Since 1914, it has steadfastly aligned itself with liberal international principles and norms that counter these destabilizing forces, aiming to uphold global and regional security, peace, and prosperity.

From the late-2000s onward, Canberra has expanded its role within its alliance with the United States and in the broader international community. The rise of China and its increasing assertiveness, coupled with perceptions of potential US decline and disengagement from global affairs, have compelled Australia to evolve from a supporting ally of the United States in maintaining and securing the rules-based liberal order to assuming a more proactive, ideational leadership role. During this period, Canberra has emerged as a proactive advocate and promoter

⁸⁵ Nicole Gaouette, "Biden Says US Faces Battle to 'Prove Democracy Works'," *CNN*, 26 March 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

of international order by actively deploying and mobilizing discourses and narratives centered on an RBO.

As highlighted earlier, Australia's reliance on the RBO narrative reflects its use of ontological and discursive power to advance the alliance's strategic objectives. Firstly, this narrative allows Canberra to articulate and shape a distinct vision of order that aligns closely with that of its alliance partners. Secondly, by consistently relying on such narratives, Australia moves beyond mere rhetoric to foster broader alignment with a diverse range of like-minded regional and global partners. In doing so, Australia plays a pivotal role in shaping the ideational landscape within which more practical forms of cooperation can be realized, thereby contributing significantly to coalition-building efforts based on shared values and principles.

This approach presents several limitations and challenges. Firstly, the narrative relies on a vague and ambiguous interpretation of rules and the rule of law, which exposes it to criticism regarding clarity and consistency.⁸⁶ Secondly, while Australia strongly advocates for the RBO, the narrative can be perceived as selective and inconsistent, as evidenced by the AUKUS case. Thirdly, and significantly, the narrative risks exacerbating Australia's already strained relations with Beijing. While not explicitly directed at China, Australia's emphasis on a rules-based narrative revolves around norms that China is frequently accused of violating, inadvertently contributing to a covert, indirect securitization process.⁸⁷

Moreover, Australia's enduring economic reliance on China poses a formidable challenge. Despite discussions about diversifying away from China, Beijing remains Australia's primary trading partner. Even as Canberra seeks to broaden its economic ties, China's substantial economic role complicates Australia's ability to robustly confront perceived Chinese actions contrary to the RBO. While Australia can leverage its RBO narrative in foreign policy and security discourse, it exercises caution to avoid potential retaliatory measures. Striking a balance between these competing priorities remains a nuanced and delicate challenge for Australian policy makers.

Despite these limitations, mobilizing narratives of an RBO remains a crucial component of Canberra's dual strategy toward China. On one hand, Australia has intensified its security commitments within ANZUS by reaffirming traditional liberal principles, bolstering its leadership and dedication to the alliance both

⁸⁶ Scott, "Rules-Based Order"; Ben Scott, "But What Does 'Rules-Based Order' Mean?," *The Interpreter*, 2 November 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>; Stefan Talmon, "Rules-Based Order v. International Law?," *German Practice in International Law*, 20 January 2019, <https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/>; and Stewart Patrick, "World Order: What, Exactly, Are the Rules?," *Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2016): 7–27, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸⁷ Alice Dell'Era, "Securitizing Beijing through the Maritime Commons: The 'China Threat' and Japan's Security Discourse in the Abe Era," *Pacific Review* 37, no. 1 (January 2024), 147–80, <https://doi.org/>.

ideationally and materially through enhancing coalition deterrent capabilities and defending the rules-based global order. On the other hand, Australia has actively sought to engage politically and economically with its Indo-Pacific neighbors while managing its relationship with China.

Central to Australia's concerns are China's assertive actions across the Strait of Taiwan, the Philippines, and the wider Indo-Pacific region, which Canberra perceives as undermining the RBO. If China's economic growth were not coupled with aggressive military expansionism and threats to Australia's national security and regional stability, Canberra might continue to pursue a robust economic and political relationship with China while upholding its liberal economic and political principles at regional and global levels.

In navigating these complexities, Australia finds itself in a challenging position. It must balance bolstering its military and deterrent capabilities and leadership within ANZUS and among regional partners, with the imperative to engage economically and politically with China without appearing to endorse or enable behavior that undermines regional stability and the RBO. Australia aims to avoid a policy of containment, akin to the British appeasement policy toward Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, while also refraining from outright appeasement that might embolden China's expansionist tendencies.

Therefore, Australia continues to pursue a prudent policy that emphasizes soft-power dimensions and avoids either extreme of confrontation or appeasement toward China, seeking instead to maintain stability and uphold the RBO in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌐

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Between Scylla and Charybdis

Hedging and Australia's Foreign Policy Amid Intensifying US-China Rivalry

DR. ALEXANDER KOROLEV

Abstract

For more than two decades, Australia successfully balanced its economic ties with China, its most significant economic partner, and its security alliance with the United States, its core ally. That era has ended. As US–China tensions escalate, Canberra faces difficult choices between the two great powers. The signing of the AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States) security pact in 2021 and other measures perceived as anti-China alignments signal that Canberra has abandoned its hedging strategy, siding with Washington against Beijing. This article critically examines this foreign policy shift from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. By placing Australia's situation in a comparative context, it argues that for a middle power, unequivocally siding with one great power against another is a risky geopolitical move that could further intensify great-power rivalry.

What an intending ally trusts to is not the goodwill of those who ask his aid, but a decided superiority of power for action.

—Thucydides

“The Melian Dialogue”

History of the Peloponnesian War

While being a close ally of the United States, Australia has significantly enhanced its cooperation with China, which became its largest trade partner in 2007. Despite the complexities of its geopolitical position between the established power (the United States) and the rising power (China), Canberra advanced a nuanced and pragmatic policy aimed at reducing US–China tensions. It navigated these tensions without excessively antagonizing either great power, effectively hedging its bets between them.

However, as US–China rivalry intensified, maintaining this hedging strategy became increasingly difficult. The era of low-cost diplomacy has ended. With great-power competition on the rise and China adopting a more aggressive stance, Australia's 2021 decision to join the AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States) security pact marks a significant shift. The pact, which aims to help Australia build and deploy longer-range nuclear-powered submarines to counter a perceived growing threat from China, indicates that after more than 20 years of

balancing relations with both China and the United States, Canberra has unequivocally sided with Washington. In other words, Australia has abandoned its hedging strategy and opted to consolidate its alliance with the United States.

This article employs a qualitative methodology to critically assess this foreign policy shift. It asks two questions: (1) What prompted Canberra to adopt an explicitly anti-China stance despite the significant benefits of Australia–China economic cooperation?; and (2) What are the implications of this behavioral change for Australia and US–China relations? The article examines Australia through the lens of hedging theories and further asks why a key middle power decided to abandon its hedging policy between two great powers and join the established great power in balancing against the rising power. What is the impact of a middle power’s transition from hedging to balancing on great-power relations?

The existing literature on hedging has primarily focused on identifying, categorizing, and explaining different patterns of hedging, while neglecting *why* a state might abandon its hedging behavior and *how* the shift from hedging to balancing affects regional and global geopolitics. This article argues that the end of hedging in Australia’s relationships with China and the United States results from the disappearance of structural uncertainty and systemic permissiveness, which are the foundations of hedging for smaller powers. It further contends that Australia’s transition from hedging to balancing will likely exacerbate the US–China rivalry.

To support these arguments and highlight the risks of transitioning from hedging to balancing, the analysis presents comparative evidence from other regions experiencing intensifying great-power rivalry, such as Ukraine and Georgia.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section defines the conceptual framework and examines the impact of hedging versus balancing on great-power rivalry. Section two applies this framework to the case of Australia, exploring Canberra’s shift from hedging to balancing and its impact on US–China rivalry. Section three extends the analysis beyond Australia, testing the article’s arguments with comparative evidence from Ukraine and Georgia.

The End of Hedging and Its Implications: A Theoretical Discussion

The term *hedging* is widely used in international relations literature, primarily to describe the behavior of small and middle powers. Hedging goes beyond simple nonalignment, involving proactive multivector engagements to maintain diplomatic flexibility and secure advantageous strategic positions. Often not the result of well-calculated long-term plans, hedging is a risk-management approach necessitated

by the need for smaller states to survive under conditions of power asymmetry and strategic uncertainties.¹

Practically, hedging is characterized by three main principles:

1. **Relative Equidistancing and Simultaneity:** This requires not taking sides with competing great powers in a straightforward and all-encompassing way. Instead, it involves pursuing a dual-track, proportional, and, where possible, equidistant engagement to avoid overreliance on one power.²
2. **Opposing and Counteracting Measures:** This entails pursuing mixed “engage-and-resist” strategies toward competing powers to keep strategic options open in a worst-case scenario. For example, Malaysia simultaneously forges defense partnerships with both the United States and China to offset the twin risks of uncertain US commitment and uncertain Chinese intentions.³
3. **Diversification of Stakes and Policy Options:** This involves “not putting all eggs in one basket” by trying to pursue multiple policy options.

These attributes are interrelated and can be present in varying degrees in the hedging behavior of smaller states. Hedging can also combine defense, diplomatic, legal, or economic means.

Successful hedging enables smaller powers to navigate intensifying great-power rivalry and protect their national interests. Conversely, unsuccessful hedging can compromise smaller states’ strategic autonomy, economic well-being, and territorial integrity. It can lead to subservience, abandonment when stakes are too high, economic insecurity, entrapment in potential great-power conflicts, erosion of domestic authority, and even loss of territory and sovereignty.

In contrast, balancing aims to check and block an “aggressor.” Balancing is a “countervailing policy designed to improve abilities to prosecute military missions

¹ Jürgen Haacke, “The concept of hedging and its application to Southeast Asia: A critique and a proposal for a modified conceptual and methodological framework,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 375–417, <https://doi.org/>; and Alexander Korolev, “Shrinking room for hedging: system-unit dynamics and behavior of smaller powers,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 419–52, <https://doi.org/>.

² Van Jackson, “Power, trust, and network complexity: three logics of hedging in Asian security,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 3 (2014): 331–56, <https://doi.org/>; Korolev, “Shrinking room for hedging”; John D. Ciorciari, “The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 523–55, <https://doi.org/>; and Darren J. Lim, and Zack Cooper, “Reassessing hedging: The logic of alignment in East Asia,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696–727, <https://doi.org/>.

³ Yew Meng Lai, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Structural sources of Malaysia’s South China Sea policy: power uncertainties and small-state hedging,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 3 (2021): 277–304, <https://doi.org/>.

in order to deter and/or defeat another state.”⁴ Whether external or internal, balancing “involves blocking the ambitions of the other side, taking actions to prevent it from achieving its goals of dominance.”⁵ The middle position characteristic of hedging, which avoids choosing one side at the obvious expense of another, does not constitute balancing because it does not straightforwardly check, block, or otherwise detract from the power of the rising challenger.

Despite the popularity of hedging and balancing among international relations scholars, there has been little systematic work on why hedging strategies might fail or why a state might switch from hedging to balancing. Moreover, there has been scant attention paid to the implications of such a switch for great-power relations.⁶ Hedging has typically been viewed as premised on *structural uncertainty* and *systemic permissiveness*.⁷ Smaller states hedge when future developments in great power competition are uncertain—specifically, when the distribution of power among great powers is uncertain or unfixed, the source of imminent threats is unclear, and there is no intense balance-of-power competition between great powers, or it is unclear how this competition will unfold and affect smaller states.⁸ These conditions are associated with the permissiveness of the geopolitical environment within which smaller states operate.⁹

Therefore, it can be inferred that smaller states will be less incentivized to hedge when structural uncertainty is low—when the power distribution among major great powers is certain or nearly certain, when the sources of threat are clear, when there is intense balance-of-power competition and high levels of enmity between the major great powers, and when it is clear how their competition is likely to unfold, whether trending toward greater cooperation or competition. In other words, states are less likely to hedge when the geopolitical environment within which they operate becomes less permissive.

⁴ Colin Elman, “Introduction: Appraising Balance of Power Theory,” in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, edited by John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 8.

⁵ John A. Vasquez, “The New Debate of Balancing Power: A Reply to My Critics,” in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, edited by John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 91.

⁶ Some rare exceptions trying to tackle this question indirectly are Ciorciari, “The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies”; Korolev, “Shrinking room for hedging”; and Nicholas Ross Smith, “When hedging goes wrong: Lessons from Ukraine’s failed hedge of the EU and Russia,” *Global Policy* 11, no. 5 (2020): 588–97, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷ Jackson, “Power, trust, and network complexity”; Ciorciari, “The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies”; Haacke, “The concept of hedging”; and Smith, “When hedging goes wrong.”

⁸ Korolev, “Shrinking room for hedging.”

⁹ Smith, “When hedging goes wrong,” 590.

Emphasizing the role of structural uncertainty in explaining the foreign policy shift away from hedging does not deny the influence of domestic political factors. In Australia's case, domestic developments in the late 2010s, particularly within the security establishment and the rise of anti-China sentiment in public and political spheres, contributed to advocating for a firmer stance on China. However, this article considers structural conditions as the primary causal variable. Domestic political factors may have facilitated reaching the inflection point in foreign policy decision making, but they were not the primary causal driver. The growing domestic concerns about China are not unrelated to structural factors but are driven by them, especially as great-power rivalry intensifies.

The relative weight of systemic and domestic-level factors in explaining state behavior varies depending on whether the external environment is more threatening, insistent, and immediate.¹⁰ China began to be seen as more threatening due to its continuous rise and changing structural position, accompanied by shifts in external behavior. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the role of domestic political factors in moving away from hedging depends on the condition of the international structure and affects the degree of change rather than the change itself, as neoclassical realists suggest.¹¹

At the same time, there has been limited attention given to how the shift in behavior from hedging to balancing by smaller powers affects great power relations—a topic relevant to the broader discourse on middle powers' agency and their potential impact on great power dynamics. In this discussion, smaller states are not seen merely as powerless actors but as entities with the agency to shape their external environments, or at least certain aspects of it.¹² They can manipulate great-power competition to their ends.¹³ They can develop horizontal cooperation with other smaller states or take a diplomatic lead on important issues that serve their interests.¹⁴ They can also exercise niche diplomacy, mediation, bridge building, and innovative practices.¹⁵ Additionally, they can pursue solutions to international

¹⁰ Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Norrin M Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: A small-state perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021), 308, <https://doi.org/>.

¹³ Ksenia Efremova, "Small States in Great Power Politics: Understanding the 'Buffer Effect'," *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019), 104, <https://cejiss.org/>.

¹⁴ Enrico Fels, *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific: The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 213.

¹⁵ Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific: Potential Pacifiers Guaranteeing Stability in the Indo-Pacific?," *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 2 (2019), 192–94, <https://doi.org/>.

problems through multilateral channels or institution building, thereby positioning themselves as responsible international actors.¹⁶

Middle powers are adept at the “game of skill” and “the art of the indirect,” utilizing nonmaterial means to act as catalysts, facilitators, or managers in navigating between great powers.¹⁷ Thus, smaller powers can either foster cooperation or exacerbate tensions between major powers.¹⁸ In the Indo-Pacific region, for example, middle powers can leverage the rivalry between China and the United States to incentivize cooperation if it aligns with their strategic interests.¹⁹

From this perspective, hedging is likely to mitigate great power rivalry, whereas balancing tends to exacerbate it. Hedging strategies aim to manage structural uncertainty and influence great power behavior in ways that reduce their rivalry.²⁰ States practicing hedging seek to benefit from both competing great powers, preferring that their rivalry does not escalate into open hostility. For instance, Vietnam has demonstrated a preference for maintaining a balanced China–US relationship to avoid being drawn into intensifying great-power competition.²¹ Similarly, Indonesia and Malaysia have taken cautious approaches or expressed reservations about alignments such as AUKUS, which are seen as potentially exacerbating regional polarization and escalating tensions among great powers.²²

Because it is easier to hedge between friendly great powers, smaller Asian states are concerned about the potential for China–US rivalry to escalate into a hegemonic war. They strive to mitigate Chinese concerns while urging the United States to adopt a constructive approach toward China, possibly sharing power and leadership.²³ By maintaining a balanced approach without aligning decisively with either China or the United States, middle powers in Asia can significantly influence regional geopolitics. On one hand, they can prevent the solidification of the alternative system that China advocates, which would occur if they leaned toward China and bolstered its regional leadership. On the other hand, they avoid isolating China, a scenario that could arise if they unequivocally aligned with the United States.

¹⁶ Andrew Fenton Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, vol. 6. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁷ Mark Beeson and Richard Higgott, “The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia’s middle power moment?,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 2 (2014): 215–37, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁸ Woosang Kim, “Rising China, pivotal middle power South Korea, and alliance transition theory,” *International Area Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (2015): 251–65, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁹ Struye de Swielande, “Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific,” 203–04.

²⁰ Efremova, “Small States in Great Power Politics,” 100.

²¹ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s foreign policy in an era of rising Sino-US competition and increasing domestic political influence,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 183–99, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Kuik, “Getting hedging right,” 305.

²³ Struye de Swielande, “Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific,” 200–02.

Therefore, hedging strengthens middle-power diplomacy and, amid structural uncertainty, is likely to mitigate great-power rivalry.

The same cannot be said for balancing, which entails clear alignment with one great power against another.²⁴ Transitioning to balancing accelerates the elimination of uncertainty about great power relations and poses risks to regional stability. Abandoning hedging and aligning with one power against another intensifies “us-versus-them” polarization, potentially leading to premature confrontation and hegemonic conflicts. Establishing or reinforcing an alliance with one great power that explicitly targets the other exacerbates tensions between great powers and dissatisfaction with the existing status quo. The shift from hedging to balancing in middle-power behavior signals a concentration of power rather than diffusion, reflecting a shift where perceived risks associated with uncertain great-power relations, previously managed through hedging, now pose immediate security threats demanding direct responses.

From “We Don’t Have to Pick a Side!” to Balancing against China

Being an ally of a competing great power does not automatically preclude hedging, provided the relationship avoids open confrontation. Alongside Australia, existing studies commonly identify other US treaty allies such as Japan, New Zealand, Canada, and Thailand as practitioners of hedging between China and the United States.²⁵

Moreover, until recently, Australia did not consistently mirror the United States’ stance during episodes of US–China tensions. There were periods when US–China relations deteriorated while Australia–China relations improved, notably from 2016 to mid-2021, when tensions between Beijing and Canberra were effectively managed. The presence of an alliance with a great power significantly influences the dynamics of hedging, particularly how and when hedging transitions. A clear alliance presence heightens the likelihood that, when structural pressures mount, the smaller

²⁴ Ciorciari, “The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies,” 531.

²⁵ Alan Bloomfield, “To balance or to bandwagon? Adjusting to China’s rise during Australia’s Rudd–Gillard era,” *Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 259–82, <https://doi.org/>; Lai-Ha Chan, “Australia’s Strategic Hedging in the Indo-Pacific: A ‘Third Way’ Beyond Either China or the US,” *Australia–China Relations Institute Policy Paper*, 2019, <https://www.australiachinarelations.org/>; Roy McDowall, “The Strategic Depiction of China in Howard Government Policy from 1996–2006,” *Security Challenges* 5, no. 1 (2009): 85–102, <https://www.jstor.org/>; Jaebeom Kwon, “When the Kangaroo Encounters the Flying Dragon: The Growth of Balancing Elements in Australia’s China Policy,” *Pacific Focus* 35, no. 3 (2020): 491–529, <https://doi.org/>; Kei Koga, “The concept of ‘hedging’ revisited: the case of Japan’s foreign policy strategy in East Asia’s power shift,” *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018): 633–60, <https://doi.org/>; and Kai He and Huiyun Feng, *After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States Between the US and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

state will begin balancing alongside its larger ally against another great power. This readiness stems from the availability of protective options and the expectations of larger powers that their smaller allies will play more active roles in alliance strategies. In contrast, without assured allied protection, smaller states may lean toward bandwagoning with a threatening great power out of fear of isolation or coercion.

The situation becomes more complex when smaller states are uncertain about the reliability of their protective options—when defense assurances are ambiguous or lack concrete commitments. In such cases, smaller states may misjudge their strategic environment, assuming protective options exist when they do not. Under conditions of escalating great power rivalry, moving away from hedging can be particularly risky. Australia exemplifies the former scenario: its longstanding US alliance and history of strategic cooperation make bandwagoning with China less likely, favoring instead a posture of balancing alongside the United States against China.²⁶

Canberra historically hedged by deepening economic ties with China while strengthening its alliance with the United States. During the Howard government (1996–2007), Australia pursued economic opportunities tied to China’s rise while simultaneously engaging in the Trilateral Security Dialogue with Japan and the United States.²⁷ The Rudd–Gillard governments (2007–2013) maintained friendly relations with China while reaffirming the importance of the US alliance. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s decision in 2007 to withdraw from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) signaled Canberra’s caution about aligning too closely with Washington in its approach to China.²⁸

Substantial Chinese investments flowed into Australia during this period. The Gillard government (2010–2013) continued to cultivate bilateral relations with Beijing. By 2012–2013, China had solidified its position as Australia’s primary trading partner, accounting for about 32 percent (AUD 78.1 billion) of Australian exports and 18.8 percent (AUD 44.5 billion) of imports.²⁹ This economic relationship prompted the upgrade of Australia–China relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014.³⁰ The following year, Australia made the strategic decision to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member, marking a milestone in bilateral cooperation. Simultaneously, Canberra and

²⁶ For more on different scenarios of transition from hedging to other forms of behavior, see Korolev “Shrinking room for hedging” and He and Feng, *After Hedging*.

²⁷ Bloomfield, “To Balance or to Bandwagon?”; and McDowall, “The Strategic Depiction of China.”

²⁸ Michael D. Cohen, “Political Parties, Australia and the US Alliance: 1976–2016,” *Asian Security* 16, no. 3 (2020), 335, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁹ Derek McDougall, “Australian strategies in response to China’s rise: The relevance of the United States,” *Asian Survey* 54, no. 2 (March–April 2014): 319–42, <https://doi.org/>.

³⁰ Phillip Coorey, “New partnership with China,” *Financial Review*, 18 November 2014, <https://www.afr.com/>.

Beijing finalized negotiations for the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA).³¹ These developments fostered a degree of economic interdependence that allowed Canberra to navigate the intensifying US–China rivalry with discretion, avoiding a consistent alignment with the United States’ more confrontational approach.

Australia’s hedging strategy was articulated in high-level statements affirming Canberra’s stance of not aligning exclusively with either the US or China amid their rivalry. Prime Minister Julia Gillard emphasized, “For Australia this is not an either-or question . . . Australia can maintain a close strategic alliance with the US while also enhancing its friendship with China, despite Beijing’s growing military and economic clout in the Asia-Pacific.”³² Former Australian Defence Minister David Johnston similarly noted, “we see the there is a balance between our relationship with China and sustaining our strong alliance with the United States.”³³

Meanwhile, Australia’s military cooperation with the United States was deliberately designed not to provoke China. While Canberra acknowledged the South China Sea (SCS) as a significant regional issue, it underscored its status as a non-claimant state and refrained from taking sides in the disputes among claimants.³⁴ Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop reiterated Canberra’s neutral stance during the China–US trade conflict, advocating for WTO mechanisms to resolve disputes rather than choosing sides, thereby maintaining a distance from US policy on China-related matters.³⁵

In 2018, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull claimed that “it is a mistake to assume that China will assume vis-à-vis the United States the role of the Soviet Union in the Cold War” and that “we look forward to working with China on Belt and Road Initiative projects.”³⁶ Economically intertwined with China and strategically aligned with the United States, Australia navigated a delicate balance, reluctant to adopt an explicitly anti-China posture while deepening its strategic cooperation with the United States. This approach was shaped by conditions of structural uncertainty surrounding the evolving US–China rivalry and its implications for future

³¹ Zongyou Wei, “Australia’s Strategic Perceptions of China: Hedging or Balancing,” *China International Studies*, 28 September 2015, <https://www.ciis.org.cn/>.

³² Mathew Franklin and Michael Sainsbury, “Julia Gillard’s US-China balancing act,” *The Australian*, 6 April 2011, <https://amp.theaustralian.com.au/>.

³³ Sam Roggeveen, “What the new defence white paper will say about China,” *The Interpreter*, 23 September 2013, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

³⁴ *Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

³⁵ Simone van Nieuwenhuizen, “Australian and People’s Republic of China government conceptions of the international order,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (2019): 181–97, <https://doi.org/>.

³⁶ Kristy Needham, “China not a cold war Russia, Turnbull says in conciliatory speech,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/>.

global order and strategic challenges, guiding Canberra's cautious approach to avoiding overt antagonism toward China.

It is challenging to empirically discern the precise impact of Australia's hedging strategy on the US–China relationship, given the multitude of factors influencing this dynamic where Canberra's actions are not paramount. However, there are instances illustrating Australia's efforts to mitigate tensions between the great powers and encourage a constructive approach between China and the United States. In 2014, Australia successfully organized the annual trilateral Kowari military exercises in North Queensland, leveraging its bureaucratic and military resources to enhance regional influence and foster measures aimed at reducing US–China rivalry. Despite escalating regional tensions, Australia hosted these trilateral exercises six times between 2014 and 2019, focusing on building confidence, trust, and effective communication among all three nations.

According to then–Australian Chief of Army Lieutenant General Rick Burr, “By holding exercises such as KOWARI, we promote friendship and cooperation between Australia, the US and China, enhancing the security of our region.”³⁷ Participation in Kowari compelled both China and the United States to demonstrate their commitment to engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. This initiative was deemed crucial in mitigating tensions because, as former US Department of Defense official Drew Thompson stated, it was “antithetical to the United States and its partners in the region,” highlighting that US involvement is a gesture of loyalty and respect toward Australia.³⁸ Nevertheless, as some experts emphasise, “KOWARI exercise conveys the basic point that China is not Australia's enemy” and, hence, is not a threat to the US–Australia alliance or the Indo-Pacific more broadly.³⁹

Australia's hedging began to wither away and morph into anti-China balancing with the United States as structural uncertainties, foundational to hedging, diminished. With China's ascent challenging US dominance, the global power dynamics shifted, fostering more assertive foreign policies and contentious environments in the Indo-Pacific involving both China and the United States.

Canberra's perception of China underwent a transformation. The *2016 Australian Defence White Paper* explicitly stated that “Australia opposes the use of artificial structures in the South China Sea for military purposes. Australia also opposes the assertion of associated territorial claims and maritime rights which

³⁷ “Australia, China and US military forces begin Exercise KOWARI 2019,” *Army Technology*, 29 August 2019, <https://www.army-technology.com/>.

³⁸ Katie Howe, “A Quiet Kowari: US, Australia, and China Trilateral Military Exercise,” *The Diplomat*, 30 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³⁹ Howe, “A Quiet Kowari.”

are not in accordance with international law, including the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea.”⁴⁰ The same White Paper also underscored a heightened strategic risk environment requiring increased preparedness.

In line with this shift, the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* highlighted that “Australia is particularly concerned by the unprecedented pace and scale of China’s land reclamation activities.”⁴¹ This reflected a growing view of China as a state pursuing power maximization potentially leading to conflict, rather than a security-seeking actor.

These shifts occurred amidst escalating US–China rivalry, drawing Australia inevitably into the fray. In 2017, Australian Prime Minister Turnbull asserted that the United States and its allies in Asia should thwart China’s ambitions to dominate the region, advocating for the preservation of the US-led regional order.⁴² During his keynote address at the June 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Turnbull stated that “some fear that China will seek to impose a latter-day Monroe Doctrine on this hemisphere in order to dominate the region, marginalising the role and contribution of other nations, in particular the US.”⁴³

Then–Foreign Minister Julie Bishop echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that the “United States must play an even greater role as the indispensable strategic power in the Indo-Pacific.” She also called on China to “embrace democracy to seek economic prosperity and social stability.”⁴⁴ Concurrently, in 2017, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) raised alarms about the Chinese Communist Party’s influence on Australia’s political system.

In 2018, the Australian government took further steps by banning Chinese tech giant Huawei from participating in Australia’s 5G telecommunications network, citing security concerns. Turnbull continued to critique China’s actions in the SCS, characterizing them as provocative and suggesting that Australia needed to consider a more balanced approach toward China.⁴⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated US–China rivalry and accelerated the deterioration of Australia–China relations. On 22 April 2020, following a phone call with US President Donald Trump, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison

⁴⁰ *Defense White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defense, 2016), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁴¹ *Foreign Policy White Paper*, 46.

⁴² Hugh White, “America or China? Australia is fooling itself that it doesn’t have to choose,” *The Guardian*, 27 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

⁴³ Elena Collinson, “Australia’s tilt on China,” *Australia-China Relations Institute*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.australiachinarelations.org/>.

⁴⁴ Julie Bishop, “Change and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic challenges and opportunities” (speech, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 13 March 2017), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>.

⁴⁵ Kwon, “When the Kangaroo Encounters the Flying Dragon,” 505.

initiated an independent international inquiry into the virus' origin—a move China vehemently opposed.⁴⁶ In response, Beijing criticised Canberra for “political manoeuvring,” severed ministerial-level diplomatic and trade dialogue with Canberra, and imposed significant restrictions on trade and people-to-people exchanges with Australia. The rapid downturn in relations led some observers to argue that Australia appeared more willing than its allies such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand to confront China despite substantial economic ties.⁴⁷

These COVID-related foreign policy decisions were influenced by Australia's domestic politics, particularly the Morrison government's effort to leverage growing anti-China sentiments. However, Morrison also emphasized that “our region . . . is the focus of the dominant global contest of our age” in which “the institutions of patterns of cooperation that have benefited our prosperity and security for decades are now under increasing—and I would suggest almost irreversible—strain,” indicating the impact of external structural changes on Australia's strategic outlook.⁴⁸ Moreover, the return of Labour leaders to power in May 2022 did not lead to a significant shift in Australia's China policy, especially concerning military-strategic cooperation with the United States. This underscores that while domestic politics play a role, they do not fully explain Canberra's shift from hedging to balancing in its foreign policy.

Canberra's shift to balancing was not merely diplomatic and rhetorical but also involved active participation in anti-China strategic partnerships. In April 2020, the Australian warship HMAS *Parramatta* conducted exercises with three US Navy ships in the South China Sea, described as a response to China's intensified activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁹ In October of the same year, Australia re-joined the Malabar exercise, reversing its previous stance of avoiding military involvement in the Quad, which aims to establish an “Arc of Democracy” around China with the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.⁵⁰

On 1 July 2020, Australia released a new *Strategic Defence Update*, which signaled a departure from its 2016 *Defence White Paper* by acknowledging a rapidly changing external geopolitical environment. It announced a significant increase in the defence

⁴⁶ Guangyi Pan and Alexander Korolev, “The struggle for certainty: Ontological security, the rise of nationalism, and Australia-China tensions after COVID-19,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26, no. 1 (2021), 128, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴⁷ Pan and Korolev, “The struggle for certainty,” 116.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Ben Scott, “But what does ‘rules-based order’ mean?,” *The Interpreter*, 2 November 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

⁴⁹ “Vietnam protests Beijing's expansion in disputed South China Sea as world remains occupied with coronavirus,” *ABC News* (Australia), 20 April 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

⁵⁰ Pan and Korolev, “The struggle for certainty,” 116.

budget, up to 2 percent of Australia's GDP (equivalent to AUD 200 billion) over the next decade, to enhance the Australian Defence Force's capabilities in cybersecurity, high-tech weapons, and long-range antiship missiles.⁵¹ This move demonstrated Australia's explicit shift toward balancing against China. The United States welcomed Australia's heightened balancing efforts, with President Joe Biden describing the US–Australia alliance as one of Washington's "greatest strategic assets."⁵²

The most significant manifestation of Australia's shift toward balancing against China occurred with the signing of the AUKUS pact in September 2021, involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. AUKUS provides Australia access to advanced American military technology, enabling Canberra to deploy and develop high-capacity nuclear-powered submarines. While the announcement of AUKUS did not explicitly mention China, the security pact has been widely interpreted as a direct response aimed at countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Nuclear-powered submarines are considered crucial for operations far from Australia's shores, potentially including areas near China, and are not typically required solely for defensive purposes. Conventional diesel-electric submarines are generally more cost-effective for defensive tasks against enemy ships. Therefore, Australia's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines underlines its intent to operate in coordination with the US Navy in more distant and potentially contentious maritime regions.⁵³ Indeed, President Biden highlighted that AUKUS aims to ensure peace and stability in the entire Indo-Pacific, addressing the "current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve."⁵⁴

AUKUS and Australia's enhanced security commitments to Washington mark a pivotal shift in Canberra's foreign policy, signaling the end of its hedging strategy. Australia has prioritized strengthening its alliance with the United States over maintaining constructive relations with China amid the escalating US–China rivalry.

China's rapid ascent and increased assertiveness in the SCS and beyond have significantly prompted a stronger balancing response from the US and its allies.

⁵¹ Jade Macmillan and Andrew Greene, "Australia to spend \$270b building larger military to prepare for 'poorer, more dangerous' world and rise of China," *ABC News* (Australia), 30 June 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

⁵² Jacob Greber, "Biden puts Australia and allies at centre of China strategy," *Financial Review*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.afr.com/>.

⁵³ Hugh White, "From the Submarine to the Ridiculous," *Saturday Paper*, 18 September 2021, <https://chinamatters.org.au/>.

⁵⁴ "Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS" (press release, The White House, 15 September 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

The narrowing gap in material capabilities between China and the United States has expanded Beijing's range of actions and emboldened it to pursue more assertive foreign policies. China's emergence as a global economic power has necessitated the protection of vital sea lanes such as those in the SCS, leading to the development of a robust deep-sea navy.

As China's capabilities and ambitions have grown, particularly perceived threats to its national security, the US has increasingly been viewed by Chinese officials, particularly within the security establishment, as its foremost security challenge and a power resistant to China's rise.⁵⁵ This perception has fueled a more nationalistic and aggressive posture from China toward its neighbors, prompting a necessary response in the form of strategic balancing.⁵⁶ From this perspective, the United States' efforts to solidify alliances in the Indo-Pacific region are not just predictable but essential in countering China's challenge to the existing liberal international order.

However, while the structural imperatives driving US anti-China balancing are clear, the AUKUS pact may not automatically align with Australia's national interests. The implications of this move are profound, impacting not only Australia-China relations but also US-China dynamics. AUKUS has exacerbated tensions with China, drawing criticism from prominent Australian international relations experts who argue that it risks entangling Canberra in a potential US-China conflict, which Australia has no interest in fighting.⁵⁷

Canberra's explicit alignment with what is perceived as a US-led anti-China coalition not only enhances Australia's role as a force multiplier for the United States in its competition with China but also raises expectations of Australian participation in any potential conflict involving the United States and China. The acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS significantly extends the Australian Navy's operational range across the Indo-Pacific, enhancing its strategic capabilities. These submarines could become a critical asset for the United States in a hypothetical conflict with China, bolstering Australia's integration into US military strategy against China. As the rivalry between the US and China intensifies, there is a possibility that Washington may request Australia to deploy these new capabilities in support of US objectives against its perceived "enemy."

⁵⁵ Kenneth Lieberthal and Jisi Wang, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2012), <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁵⁶ David Shambaugh, "Coping with a conflicted China" *Washington Quarterly* 34 no.1 (2011): 7-27, <https://doi.org/>; and Thomas J. Christensen, "The advantages of an assertive China: Responding to Beijing's abrasive diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March-April 2011): 54-67, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁵⁷ White, "From the Submarine to the Ridiculous."

As the former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating lamented: “We [Australia] are now part of a [US] containment policy against China.”⁵⁸

In China’s eyes, this shift not only marks the end of Australia’s middle-power diplomacy but also contributes to a starker binary division in regional power dynamics between the United States and China. AUKUS is viewed in Beijing as a “US-led bid to constrain the rising Asian superpower [China]” and a “part of US grand strategy in its intensified rivalry with China,” and even as a “critical step by the US to construct an Asia-Pacific NATO.”⁵⁹ Similar comparisons between AUKUS and NATO, and the broader geopolitical challenges involving China and Russia, are frequently discussed within the Chinese expert community. These comparisons underscore rising concerns about escalating military tensions between China and the United States.⁶⁰

Adding to the complexity is the deepening ideological confrontation. According to the Joint Leaders Statement, beyond maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS aims to assist allies “protect” their “shared values,” a stance that is seen as a direct critique of China, especially under Xi Jinping’s increasingly authoritarian leadership.⁶¹

The Anthony Albanese government moderated its China-related rhetoric and attempted to repair the damaged relationship by visiting China from 4 to 7 November 2023. However, these actions do not reverse Australia’s shift toward balancing. Despite Beijing’s negative reaction, the Albanese government supported and began implementing the AUKUS nuclear submarines deal—the Morrison government’s most significant balancing initiative toward China.

Moreover, Canberra facilitated the United States’ long-term plans for a greater presence in Australia as it confronts China’s power in ways that go beyond AUKUS and defy the somewhat more friendly rhetoric. In October 2022, Canberra confirmed the deployment of US nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to the Tindal Air Base in the Northern Territory—another earlier agreement the new Labour government did not reverse. Experts view it as a provocative move aimed squarely at China and indicative of a “new urgency in Australian attempts to counter China’s growing military might.”⁶² Beijing deemed it “escalating regional tensions” and

⁵⁸ ABC News (Australia) “Paul Keating’s blistering assault on AUKUS nuclear submarine deal,” *YouTube*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

⁵⁹ Jian Zhang, “China and AUKUS: Growing Tensions Ahead,” *Australian Institution of International Affairs*, 17 November 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/>.

⁶⁰ Zhang, “China and AUKUS.”

⁶¹ “Remarks by President Biden.”

⁶² Corey Lee Bell and Elena Collinson, “Housing B-52s: Ramifications for Australia-China Relations,” *Australian Outlook*, 2 November 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/>.

“seriously damaging peace and stability in the region.”⁶³ A few months later, in April 2023, the Albanese government unveiled the public version of Australia’s *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, focusing on the China threat and calling for closer security integration with the United States. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles hailed the document as “the most important shift in Australia’s defence posture in decades.”⁶⁴

The complexity of the changes unfolding in Australia–China relations is further highlighted by the Chinese sonar pulse incident on 18 November 2023, which injured Australian navy divers. China defended its navy and called Australia’s complaint over the incident “vague and one-sided.”⁶⁵ Moreover, the Chinese government-controlled tabloid, the *Global Times*, quoted naval analyst Zhang Junshe, claiming the incident occurred not in Japan’s exclusive economic zone, as Australia asserts, but well within China’s national boundaries.⁶⁶ Happening immediately after Albanese’s seemingly successful visit to China, the incident indicates that in the context of intensifying US–China rivalry, Canberra’s attempts to fix the economic relationship with China do not mitigate the deeply entrenched balancing dynamics between the two countries.

The Risks Associated with the End of Hedging: Comparative Evidence

The implications of Australia’s shift away from hedging in its China policy are complex and not easily assessed. However, examining cases such as Georgia and Ukraine suggests that abandoning hedging could pose significant geopolitical risks for smaller powers.

The cases of Georgia and Ukraine differ significantly from Australia, making these parallels questionable in a strict comparative analysis. Ukraine’s and Georgia’s geopolitical positions are more precarious, exposed, and challenging due to the higher intensity of the Russia–West confrontation. These two post-Soviet states are under immense pressure in their efforts to navigate the great-power rivalry that engulfs them. Conversely, Australia operates in a less intense and uncompromisingly polarized environment. China’s regional objectives are more ambiguous than Russia’s, which somewhat mitigates the intensity of China–US rivalry. Consequently,

⁶³ Bell and Collinson, “Housing B-52s.”

⁶⁴ Paul Fraioli, “Australia’s 2023 Defence Strategic Review,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/>.

⁶⁵ Jamie Seidel, “China’s ridiculous denial over dangerous sonar incident,” *News.Com.Au*, 20 November 2023, <https://www.news.com.au/>.

⁶⁶ Seidel, “China’s ridiculous denial over dangerous sonar incident.”

while China is viewed as a strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific, there is no consensus on where that threat is most pressing.

Simultaneously, Quad and AUKUS differ fundamentally from NATO: they do not include collective defense commitments and are based on existing US-led alliances, which are not the result of multiple rounds of expansion into China's strategic interests. Additionally, Australia's geographical isolation from China and its robust alliance with the United States provide it with significant geopolitical flexibility in dealing with China.

Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that US–China competition has been visibly intensifying over the past decade, placing considerable pressure on smaller states in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia. Therefore, while Georgia and Ukraine may not directly compare to Australia, they offer cautionary parallels regarding the shift from hedging to balancing against assertive major powers.

In the Georgian context, President Mikheil Saakashvili initially pursued a hedging strategy upon assuming office in 2004. He sought to strengthen ties with the US to reduce dependence on Moscow. While engaging with Washington, Saakashvili also endeavored to improve relations with Russia, advocating for a new bilateral friendship treaty and emphasizing Georgia's need for Russia as a “powerful partner.”⁶⁷ He also worked on signing a new bilateral friendship treaty with Russia. Similar to Australia's earlier “we don't have to pick a side” stance toward China and the United States during the Kowari exercises, Saakashvili rejected the notion of a binary choice between Russia and the West. He argued that the dichotomy of “Russia or the West?” was outdated and impractical, aiming instead to achieve “the convergence of the American, Russian, and Georgian interests.”⁶⁸

As long as Saakashvili pursued a hedging strategy, his relationship with Russia remained manageable. Moscow even agreed to withdraw four Russian military bases from Georgian territory, which Russia had the legal right to retain under previous agreements.⁶⁹ Additionally, Moscow played a constructive role in Georgia's political transition by leveraging its political influence and connections to facilitate the peaceful resignation of Saakashvili's predecessor and political rival, Eduard Shevardnadze, following the Rose Revolution that brought Saakashvili to

⁶⁷ Michael Saakashvili, “Inauguration Speech,” *Daily News Online*, 24 January 2004, <https://old.civil.ge/>; and S. Neil MacFarlane, “Georgia's security predicament,” in *25 Years of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects*, edited by Ghia Nodia (Tbilisi: Ilia State University Press, 2016), 208–36.

⁶⁸ Jean-Christophe Peuch, “Georgia: Saakashvili in Moscow, Looking to start ties with a clean slate,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 February 2004, <https://www.rferl.org/>.

⁶⁹ Nikolai Sokov, “The Withdrawal of Russian Military Bases from Georgia: Not Solving Anything,” *PO-NARS Policy Memo 363*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2005, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/>.

power.⁷⁰ Consequently, Georgia's *National Security Concept (NSC)* of 2005, akin to Australian government documents of the early 2000s and 2010s concerning China, did not view Russia as a significant security risk or a serious military threat.⁷¹

However, Georgia decided to abandon hedging and fully commit to closer military alignment with the United States ahead of the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, which declared Georgia's inevitable accession to the alliance. Georgia aligned itself with the United States' most contentious foreign policies by deploying more than 2,000 Georgian soldiers in Iraq and signing a transit agreement permitting NATO to transport troops and equipment through Georgian airspace, ports, and territory.⁷² Crucially, Georgia embraced the role of a "beacon of liberty," challenging Russia in the Caucasus region—similar to how Australia began framing its stance against China in terms of "values."⁷³ These actions, particularly the aspiration to join NATO, precipitated an irreversible deterioration in Russia–Georgia relations and culminated in Russia's military invasion on 8 August 2008. In the aftermath, Georgia, lacking formal security guarantees from the United States or other NATO members, lost significant portions of its territory, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A strikingly similar pattern is observed in Ukraine, where then-President Viktor Yanukovich, during his tenure from 2010 to 2014, sought to hedge between Russia and the West. He asserted that Ukraine did not need to choose between the great powers, stating, "I intend to establish a stable, strong partnership with the European Union, Russia and the USA" and that "Russia is not preventing us" from achieving this goal⁷⁴— a sentiment akin to the claims made by Gillard and Johnston regarding Australia's stance between China and the United States. This diplomatic approach enabled Yanukovich to navigate the escalating confrontation between Russia and the West and to derive benefits from both sides.

However, similar to Georgia's experience discussed earlier, Ukraine encountered significant difficulties with Russia once the new regime in Kyiv, which had ousted Yanukovich, pursued an unequivocal shift toward the West. This shift included economic and military integration into Western institutions but lacked accompanying

⁷⁰ MacFarlane, "Georgia's security predicament."

⁷¹ Gela Merabishvili and Annamária Kiss, "The Perception of National Security in Georgia," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 14, no. 1 (2016): 159–77, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷² Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "No way to treat our friends: recasting recent US–Georgian relations," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 27–41, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷³ Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 65.

⁷⁴ Emmanuelle Armandon, "Ukraine-European Union Relations since the election of Viktor Yanukovich," *European Issues* 214 (26 September 2011): 1–6, <https://old.robert-schuman.eu/>.

security commitments from the West. Positioned at the epicenter of Russia–West great-power rivalry, Ukraine suffered severe consequences. Moscow interpreted Ukraine’s pivot as an immediate security threat demanding a swift response, which manifested in the annexation of Crimea, the fueling of separatist movements in Ukraine’s Donbas region, and ultimately, a large-scale military invasion by Russia.

The cases of Georgia and Ukraine underscore the critical need for small and middle powers to exercise caution amid intensifying great-power rivalries. While Australia’s alliance with the United States is longstanding, recent developments such as AUKUS and other indications of closer alignment with Washington have significantly deepened Australia’s ties to the United States’ military strategy against China. This alignment raises the prospect that Australia may be called upon to defend “liberal values” against perceived threats from China, particularly in a scenario of heightened US–China military confrontation.

From Beijing’s perspective, Australia’s shift in foreign policy signals the end of its middle-power diplomacy and contributes to a more polarized regional power dynamic, perceived as the United States versus China. This perception reinforces Beijing’s view of Australia as a strategic platform for US influence in countering China, thereby heightening the risk of conflict.

Conclusion

The analysis of Australia’s shift from hedging to balancing suggests that as great-power competition intensifies and their confrontations become more overt, the space for middle powers to hedge diminishes. In response to escalating rivalry among major powers, middle powers often transition from hedging to explicit balancing by aligning themselves with one great power against another. However, this shift tends to exacerbate great-power competition by signaling alignment with specific camps, thereby prompting perceived threats and corresponding responses from the opposing side.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 exacerbated the divide between the political West and the “non-West,” intensifying the rivalry between China and the United States. This geopolitical polarization places significant systemic pressure on smaller powers, demanding careful navigation and often requiring diplomatic finesse. When confronted with stark choices, the risks of miscalculation increase, and the flexibility of hedging diminishes. Unlike Australia, many middle powers lack the protective option of a robust defense alliance with the United States. For these countries, abandoning hedging could entail severe consequences such as vulnerability to external pressures, economic instability, entrapment in great-power conflicts, erosion of domestic authority, and even territorial or sovereign losses. 🌐

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The Role of Deterrence in Australian Strategic Thought

Implications for ANZUS

DR. CHRIS RAHMAN

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the expanding role of deterrence in Australian strategic thought and defense policy, particularly since 2009. It explores how Australia has transitioned from a focus on territorial defense to adopting deterrence by denial as a central element of its national defense strategy. The authors assert that although Australia has rhetorically embraced deterrence, substantial gaps remain in strategy development and force capabilities, undermining the credibility of its deterrence posture. The article argues that there is a risk in viewing planned capabilities, such as nuclear submarines, as inherently deterrent without sufficient strategic rationale. The article also examines the compatibility of Australia's deterrence approach with the US concept of *integrated deterrence*. The authors conclude that while Australian and US deterrence thinking are broadly aligned, both nations must address strategic deficiencies to bolster the credibility and effectiveness of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Throughout the Cold War, deterrence was central to Western strategic thought, whether as a concept, policy, or strategy. The importance of deterrence arose from the nuclear reality, where its failure could have resulted in Armageddon. Australia's interest in deterrence during this period relied almost entirely on the extended deterrence provided by its American ally against nuclear attack. Beyond the logic of Cold War nuclear deterrence, Australian strategic policy showed little interest in the subject until the *2009 Defence White Paper*, which publicly acknowledged the growing China threat for the first time. Since then, deterrence has played an increasingly significant role in Australia's strategic thought.

However, the new emphasis on deterrence in defense policy raises several unanswered questions about defense strategy and the posture of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). It also has implications for alliance strategy, which include considerations such as Australia's role in coalition deterrence thinking for the western Pacific and US expectations of the ADF's contribution to an alliance deterrent posture. This article argues that the mechanics of deterrence as a political-strategic relationship between competitive states may not be fully understood in Canberra. Instead,

certain ADF capabilities are seen as “the” deterrent, with an expectation that a relevant arsenal will, somehow, as if by an almost alchemical process, existentially deliver the desired deterrent effect. The planned AUKUS nuclear submarines, in particular, seem to fit within that paradigm.

Second, the article contends that the symbiotic relationship between deterrence and defense lacks clear strategic guidance for potential ADF employment. Without an evident strategy backed by clear political intent, the potential effectiveness of deterrence is highly questionable. Third, Canberra’s statements about independently deterring attacks on the country or its national interests within vaguely defined “northern approaches” raise concerns about whether Australian policy intent and planned ADF developments align with US and other allied strategic interests in deterring regional aggression. Finally, the article assesses the compatibility of Australian deterrence thinking with the US concept of *integrated deterrence*.

In developing these interrelated arguments, the article begins by briefly explaining the idea of *deterrence* in both theory and practice, then outlines the application of explicit deterrence logic in recent Australian government policy. It questions the apparent absence of strategy and the strategic rationale behind promoting the idea of an independent Australian deterrent. We argue that strategy is the essential link between deterrence and defense. We conclude by suggesting that a potential disconnect between Australian and US deterrence thinking is likely illusory, with the alliance remaining robust. However, both parties must address the ongoing strategy deficit.

Deterrence in Theory and Practice

Deterrence has been defined as the “threat to use force in response as a way of preventing the first use of force by someone else.”¹ Effective deterrence, however, requires more than mere military power; it depends on a comprehensive national posture that dissuades potential adversaries by threatening to impose costs that outweigh any prospective gains.² Admittedly, deterrence is a complex process, necessitating the fulfillment of various conditions on both sides for success. These conditions include effectively communicating the deterrent effects and the circumstances that would trigger them, the subject of deterrence calculating anticipated costs and benefits, the decision to desist, and the implementation of that decision.³

¹ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983), 11.

² Glenn Herald Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 3.

³ Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-first Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), 17–18.

Essentially, effective deterrence arises from a combination of capability, communication, and credibility.

In discussing the diplomacy of violence, Thomas Schelling highlighted the multiple facets that need to be integrated within a deterrence strategy: “To exploit a capacity for hurting and inflicting damage one needs to know what an adversary treasures and what scares him and one needs the adversary to understand what behavior of his will cause the violence to be inflicted and what will cause it to be withheld.”⁴

Thus, deterrence can be classified in multiple ways, distinguished by the nature of the threats intended to be deterred and the manner in which deterrent effects are applied.

Direct vs. Extended Deterrence

Direct deterrence seeks to employ national capabilities to protect or defend one’s own interests, whereas extended deterrence involves the ability to protect an ally from aggression.⁵ Extended deterrence is particularly relevant in the Australian context, as the United States serves as the principal guarantor of its security against nuclear attack. As the 2024 *National Defence Strategy* states, “Australia’s best protection against the increasing risk of nuclear escalation is US extended nuclear deterrence, and the pursuit of new avenues of arms control.”⁶ *Extended deterrence* can apply to a specific instance or generally over a longer period, as intended with US alliance guarantees.

General vs. Immediate Deterrence

General deterrence refers to ongoing and sustained efforts to dissuade actions against one’s interests in the absence of any crisis or specific and identifiable threats.⁷ Conversely, *immediate deterrence* applies to urgent situations involving a specific and imminent threat from an identifiable foe.⁸ The concepts of “narrow” and “broad” deterrence are similar. *Broad deterrence* aims to prevent conflict itself, while *narrow deterrence* focuses on dissuading the use of a specific form of warfare, such as a weapon of mass destruction, within an ongoing conflict.⁹

⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1966), 3–4.

⁵ Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984), 496.

⁶ *National Defence Strategy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), 14. This statement is copied almost verbatim from the earlier report to government: *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), 37.

⁷ Morgan, *Deterrence*, 30 & 42–44.

⁸ Morgan, *Deterrence*, 30 & 35–38.

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 32–34.

Deterrence by Denial vs. Deterrence by Punishment

Deterrence by denial seeks to degrade the adversary's likelihood of success or at least influence their estimate of it sufficiently to dissuade action. On the other hand, *deterrence by punishment* aims to impose high costs on the adversary for their actions without influencing the probability of success calculus.¹⁰ As Glenn Snyder, the originator of this distinction elaborated: "In military affairs deterrence by denial is accomplished by having military forces which can block the enemy's military forces from making territorial gains. Deterrence by punishment grants him the gain but deters by posing the prospect of war costs greater than the value of the gain."¹¹

By adopting a denial strategy, a state seeks to assert its dominance over a situation or area, creating doubts in the adversary's mind about the costs of contesting such dominance. Punishment, on the other hand, deters by demonstrating a credible capability to inflict unacceptable pain on the aggressor.¹² Deterrence by denial is now the preferred strategy for the United States and its allies, including Australia,¹³ as punishment is likely to be ineffective in the current balance of power where revisionist powers like China rely on *fait accompli* strategies to alter strategic realities in their favor.¹⁴

While the distinctions between different forms of deterrence are important, the tools that serve them are generally similar, though not necessarily identical. Thus, a state's military capabilities and preparedness dictate the effectiveness of general deterrence and become relevant when an immediate threat emerges. The military means developed to punish an adversary's aggression may closely align with those that seek to deny any gains initially. However, this point may not hold true in all cases. For example, in any conflict in the western Pacific, a Western deterrence-by-denial strategy will demand a strong focus on directly countering aggression against Taiwan launched by People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval and other maritime forces to prevent China from achieving its political objectives. A force optimized for deterrence by punishment, while also requiring substantive counter-naval and counter-maritime capability, would likely place much greater emphasis on the ability to conduct large-scale strikes against strategically or economically important targets on the Chinese mainland.

¹⁰ Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, 15.

¹¹ Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence and Power," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 2 (June 1960), 163.

¹² Freedman, *Deterrence*, 37.

¹³ *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 27 October 2022), 8; and *National Defense Strategy*, 21–22.

¹⁴ Former Congressman and Marine Corps intelligence officer Mike Gallagher refers to China's considerable antiaccess, area-denial capabilities that would allow it to defend territory seized in a rapid act of aggression. See Gallagher, "State of (Deterrence by) Denial," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019), 32.

While distinctions between various types of deterrence often pertain more to the stage of the conflict or confrontation to which they are applied or the geographical scope of deterrent effects than the actual means of their application, the specific character of individual threats and geographical theaters of operation must nevertheless heavily inform military force development for particular deterrence strategies.

The Growing Role of Deterrence in Australian Policy

Conventional deterrence has become the focus of Australian defense policy, a significant shift from its traditional stance. Historically, deterrence primarily referred to the importance of US extended nuclear deterrence against the threat of nuclear attacks on Australia. From the late 1970s, and formalized during the 1980s, Australia's defense planning concentrated on the "defense of Australia doctrine." This doctrine emphasized defending the Australian continent from direct military attack, including the ability to deny an enemy access via the much-debated "air and sea gaps" running through the archipelagos to the north of Australia. These ideas found their most prominent expression in the *1987 Defence White Paper*.¹⁵

After the Cold War, Australia's defense policy gradually evolved from this narrow defense of Australia mind-set to recognizing the importance of regional interests and the national imperative to protect them.¹⁶ However, policy continued to emphasize defending Australia's territory and interests, with limited importance given to deterrence.¹⁷ This period was marked by ambiguity in the external strategic environment. The ADF, often in concert with the United States, engaged in several extra-regional interventions, such as the 1991 Gulf War, the post-9/11 campaign in Afghanistan, and the 2003 Iraq War. Additionally, Australia led regional missions in East Timor (INTERFET) and the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Contributing to alliance and coalition small wars and policing operations to restore stability to broken nations was the order of the day, with deterrence still absent from Australian strategic thought. Moreover, post-9/11 counterterrorism preparedness was never solely, or even primarily, a defense responsibility, and Islamist terror groups were not easily deterrable.

¹⁵ *The Defence of Australia: White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1987), 6; Hugh White, "Four Decades of the Defence of Australia: Reflections on Australian Defence Policy over the Past 40 Years," in *History as Policy: Framing the Debate on the Future of Australia's Defence Policy*, ed. Ron Huiskens and Meredith Thatcher (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 164.

¹⁶ See, for instance, *Australia's Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1997), 31–33.

¹⁷ The 1994 and 2000 Defence white papers made only symbolic references to deterrence in the context of ADF capabilities and US extended deterrence. See *Defending Australia: Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 1994); and *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force: White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2000).

However, the practice and demands of mounting expeditionary operations, both in Australia's near neighborhood and farther afield, began to diminish the status of the defense of Australia doctrine in the early 2000s. By 2009, the long-building Chinese challenge to regional order in East Asia was officially recognized in the seminal *Defence White Paper* of that year.¹⁸ This document marked the first time any major Australian policy acknowledged deterrence as a leading ADF task, though it was still constrained by the persistent defense of Australia dogma. The paper declared, "the principal task for the ADF is to deter and defeat armed attacks on Australia by conducting independent military operations without relying on the combat or combat support forces of other countries."¹⁹ Notwithstanding the narrow explicit objective of the ADF's deterrent task, the white paper committed to augmenting capability in a manner clearly designed to support deterrence as a central pillar of Australia's national security strategy.²⁰

By 2016, deterrence had become the centerpiece of defense policy. Importantly, it was no longer limited to the territorial defense of Australia but applied more broadly to "threats to Australia and its national interests and northern approaches."²¹ The *2020 Defence Strategic Update* required the ADF to "deliver credible deterrence," noting that maintaining a purely defensive force was inadequate for offering such credible deterrence.²² Instead, it emphasized that defense capabilities "must be able to hold potential adversaries' forces and infrastructure at risk from a greater distance, and therefore influence their calculus of costs involved in threatening Australian interests."²³

The 2023 report to the government, the *Defence Strategic Review*, highlighted the policy shift from the defense of Australia to a new concept termed "National Defence": an attempt at grand strategy to harness multiple forms of national power to influence a potential adversary. This concept encompassed "a focus on deterrence through denial, including the ability to hold an adversary at risk."²⁴ This idea was incorporated into the government's *2024 National Defence Strategy*, which made deterrence a truly national pursuit. The strategy explained *deterrence*

¹⁸ For analysis, see Jack McCaffrie and Chris Rahman, "Australia's 2009 Defense White Paper: A Maritime Focus for Uncertain Times," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 61–76, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.

¹⁹ *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030. White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), 53.

²⁰ See McCaffrie and Rahman, "Australia's 2009 Defense White Paper," 72.

²¹ *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), 68.

²² *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020), 7 & 27.

²³ *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, 27.

²⁴ *National Defence Strategy*, 32.

as “the use of the military and other elements of national power to discourage or restrain a potential adversary from taking unwanted actions. It involves having in place measures and responses that change a potential adversary’s risk assessment and therefore decision-making calculus.”²⁵ It explicitly adopted a strategy of denial to achieve deterrent effect. The strategy is

Designed to deter a potential adversary from taking actions that would be inimical to Australia’s interests and regional stability. The Strategy of Denial involves working with the US and key partners to ensure no country attempts to achieve its regional objectives through military action. By signalling a credible ability to hold potential adversary forces at risk, this strategy also seeks to deter attempts to coerce Australia through force. Both objectives involve altering any potential adversary’s belief that it could achieve its ambitions with military force at an acceptable cost.²⁶

Australia’s new denial strategy has reshaped the prioritization of the three defense objectives initially outlined in the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*: shaping the country’s strategic environment, deterring threats against national interests, and responding with force as needed. While previously these objectives were equally emphasized, the *National Defence Strategy* has elevated deterrence to Australia’s “primary strategic objective.” Moreover, the strategy mandates that defense shaping activities and the “signalling of Australia’s response capabilities” must now be optimized to “more clearly support deterrence.”²⁷

Deterrence via a strategy of denial has, therefore, been explicitly adopted as the master concept of the policy, and grand strategy, of National Defence.²⁸ In a relatively short span since 2009, deterrence has emerged as perhaps the most critical pillar of Australian defense policy. However, achieving this policy objective requires situating deterrence within Australia’s unique geostrategic environment and developing a strategy that aligns with current or planned ADF capabilities, as well as with US alliance strategy. Harmonizing these highly evolved defense policy objectives with alliance goals, Australia’s own strategic development, and ADF force structure planning remains a central task awaiting clear direction from policy makers and strategists.

²⁵ *National Defence Strategy*, 23.

²⁶ *National Defence Strategy*, 22.

²⁷ *National Defence Strategy*, 22.

²⁸ “National Defence” may be yet another example of a phenomenon the military historian Hew Strachan has identified as a conflation between policy and strategy. See Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16–17.

Strategy: The Missing Link?

Two important, interrelated elements often overlooked in Australian defense debates pertain to the role of strategy. Firstly, with deterrence established as the primary concept in its National Defence policy, one might expect clear guidance on where and how the strategy of denial is to be applied, including specific tactical and operational objectives it aims to achieve. Secondly, the critical relationship between deterrence and defense appears more implicit in capability statements regarding planned force structures and posture developments than explicitly stated in policy. A corollary to this second point is that certain planned ADF capabilities are being treated, in and of themselves, as “the” deterrent.

Amid discussions on policy, forces, and posture, a persistent aspect of Australia’s new deterrence thrust is the apparent absence of a clearly articulated strategy despite the establishment of a “strategy of denial.” Instead, strategic intent is inferred primarily through planned enhancements in force capabilities. The *2024 National Defence Strategy*, akin to its American counterpart, the *2022 US National Defense Strategy*, translates into policy rather than strategy in practice. Both documents, particularly in their unclassified versions, lack insight into how military power is to be leveraged strategically to achieve the political objectives of deterrence, inviting skepticism.

As highlighted by a prominent Australian strategic thinker regarding US efforts to deter China from achieving hegemonic control in the western Pacific, there remains a notable absence of “a clear and agreed strategy for deterring and, if necessary, fighting and winning” such a conflict in Washington.²⁹ Similarly, leading proponents of a denial strategy in the United States, including those involved in drafting the *2018 National Defense Strategy*, offer limited clarity on the strategic methods or pathways through which denial is to be effectively realized.³⁰

These questions encapsulate the critical “how” of strategy. In the context of Australian deterrence, how can the strategy of denial be sufficiently robust and credible to deter potential threats from materializing into actual contingencies? What specific operational outcomes must the ADF demonstrate to effectively support the success of deterrence? Strategy serves as the metaphorical “bridge” that connects military capabilities, along with other instruments of national power, to

²⁹ Ross Babbage, *The Next Major War: Can the US and Its Allies Win against China?* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2023), 96–97.

³⁰ Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

policy objectives.³¹ Without a clear strategy, there is no systematic approach to harnessing national resources toward achieving policy goals. In this case, the overarching policy goal is deterring Chinese threats to Australia or its interests in regional stability.

While warfare and the competitive statecraft that represents war preparation in strategically momentous periods, such as those we are doubtless now experiencing in the western Pacific, are inherently uncertain and subject to chance, a lack of coherent strategy only exacerbates these uncertainties.³² States cannot eliminate uncertainty or chance when pursuing deterrence objectives, given the political-psychological dynamics between deterrer and intended “deteree.”³³ Deterrence without a well-defined strategy suggests a defense policy that may not be taken seriously or considered competent. Such a policy is highly unlikely to be perceived as credible by potential adversaries.

In Canberra’s case, the situation appears potentially more challenging than in the United States, with the *National Defence Strategy* implicitly acknowledging a deficit in strategy by emphasizing the need for strategic reform. This reform process will necessitate the “transformation of the core elements of Defence that deliver effects to achieve the Strategy of Denial.” It underscores the imperative for transforming strategy, force structure, posture, and preparedness to effectively deliver the desired strategic effects.³⁴

The nexus between deterrence and defense forms the bedrock of effective deterrence practices. For Australia, positioned as a middle power with limited current resources, the ambition of achieving broad deterrence across all international security interests in a rapidly deteriorating global strategic climate, marked by conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, is unrealistic. Instead, Australia must pursue a form of deterrence that is immediate—targeting a clear and identifiable near-term adversary—and direct, focusing on deterring threats against Australia itself and its explicitly articulated interests.

The immediate threat, notably from China, is palpable, despite Canberra’s diplomatic and economic caution in discussing it. This approach, while prudent, inhibits necessary open discussions on strategy. Moreover, Australia tends to be ambiguous or vague when articulating its broader regional security concerns, aside

³¹ This is the central argument of Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 29–31.

³² See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, 1976; first pub. [in German] 1832), 85 & 104.

³³ See Colin S. Gray, “Deterrence and Regional Conflict: Hopes, Fallacies, and ‘Fixes,’” *Comparative Strategy* 17, no. 1 (January–March 1998), 55.

³⁴ *National Defence Strategy*, 71.

from its emphasis on maritime trade. Presumably, the objectives of the denial strategy laid out in the *National Defence Strategy*, such as preserving regional stability and deterring military actions that alter the status quo, should encompass safeguarding partners like Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan—the primary target of Beijing’s aggressive intentions. However, Australian policy and government statements lack clarity in this regard.

Another critical aspect is understanding what actually deters in specific deterrence scenarios. In Australia’s case, this entails contributing to both immediate and direct deterrence against Chinese aggression toward Australia or its regional interests. Effective deterrence cannot rely solely on governmental declarations or wishful thinking; it necessitates substantive military capabilities to influence an adversary’s risk calculation positively. As previously argued, the strategic framework underpinning these military capabilities is notably deficient. Furthermore, the current military means lack the capacity to deliver the requisite deterrent effect.

In the realm of conventional deterrence (non-nuclear), the late Colin S. Gray, drawing on historical evidence, convincingly argued that it often proves unreliable against assertive and resolute aggressors—categories that aptly describe China today.³⁵

Gray further posited that while conventional deterrence historically tends towards failure, it remains a fundamental axiom that a “good defense should function as a potent deterrent” if anything can.³⁶ However, Australia faces immediate challenges in generating sufficient joint combat power to effectively deter or significantly contribute to alliance deterrence objectives in the distant theaters of the western Pacific. This limitation is underscored by the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, which candidly acknowledged Australia’s current defense capabilities and force structure are “not fit for purpose for our current strategic circumstances.”³⁷ The government concurred with these assessments, outlining in the *National Defence Strategy* a road map for reform. Yet, even with full and timely implementation, the envisaged Future Integrated Force—a capability fit for purpose—is not projected to materialize until after 2031.³⁸

That future force will notably prioritize joint, integrated long-range strike capabilities, enhancing the ADF’s mobility and capacity for operations beyond Australia’s immediate vicinity. This includes enhancing the army’s ability for littoral maneuver and the air force’s capability for expeditionary air operations.³⁹ The

³⁵ Gray, “Deterrence and Regional Conflict,” 56.

³⁶ Gray, “Deterrence and Regional Conflict,” 58.

³⁷ *National Defence*, 53.

³⁸ *National Defence Strategy*, 28.

³⁹ See *Integrated Investment Program* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), esp. 43–45, 54, & 61–65.

most notable new capability for the future force, however, is the previously announced nuclear attack submarines (SSN) under AUKUS Pillar I. There remains a concern that amid developing these diverse capabilities for the Future Integrated Force, there could be a tendency to view the capabilities themselves as “the” deterrent.⁴⁰ This perception risks equating possession of particular capabilities, such as the AUKUS submarines, with deterrence effectiveness, as if by mere possession alone a particular capability will be able to deter.

There is more than an inkling that that is a view held within Australia’s defense establishment. For example, a Defence Department document outlines the roles of SSNs as including conventional deterrence and enhancing regional security by “increasing deterrence.”⁴¹ This portrayal of deterrence as a measurable, concrete element of capability suggests a view that contrasts with the nuanced and often unpredictable psychological dynamics between adversarial states and their leadership. Setting aside debates on whether nuclear deterrence holds existential weight, and mindful of Gray’s caution regarding the reliability of conventional deterrence, no conventional capability can reasonably be expected to deter a resolute adversary solely by its mere existence.

An Independent Capability?

A separate, pertinent issue stemming from defense policy is whether Australia intends its deterrence posture to function autonomously or as part of a broader collective defense effort involving the United States and other partners. In this regard, policy exhibits ambiguity. For example, the *National Defence Strategy* outlines five primary tasks for the ADF. These include defending Australia and “our immediate region”—or “our primary area of military interest,” which spans from “the Northeast Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific.” However, it also asserts the necessity for the ADF to deter any adversary’s attempts to project power against Australia through “our northern approaches.” The exact geographical boundaries of Australia’s “northern approaches” remain somewhat unclear, despite the document indicating that Australia’s immediate region “includes our northern approaches.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Kennedy administration National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy developed the idea of *existential deterrence* to describe a claimed chastening effect of the mutual balance of nuclear terror during the height of the Cold War. See the discussion in Keith B. Payne, “The Great Divide in US Deterrence Thought,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 19–20, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁴¹ *The AUKUS Nuclear-Powered Submarine Pathway: A Partnership for the Future* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), 16.

⁴² *National Defence Strategy*, 21 & 25.

Whether the “immediate region” is exactly coterminous with the “northern approaches” is murky, although that is probably the intent. If the intent is to be less geographically expansive—say, limited to the Indonesian and Papua New Guinea archipelagoes and the area south of Indonesia—the ADF would struggle to counter a PLA threat to the continent prior to missile launch. In that situation, therefore, deterrence would be undermined. Additionally, complications arising from Indonesia’s likely neutrality in a conflict could further constrain ADF responses, especially in the Indonesian archipelago.

Conversely, another task assigned to the ADF is safeguarding Australian trade and economic connections. Given the strategic significance of Australia’s trade relationships with Japan and South Korea, and the potential for aggression originating from mainland China against Australia or its interests via these approaches, it logically extends the concept of northern approaches to encompass all of littoral Northeast Asia. This suggests a need to enhance collective defense arrangements to allocate geographical responsibilities for trade protection during crises or wartime, akin to an expanded version of the US Navy–Royal Australian Navy Radford/Collins Agreement.⁴³

Perhaps the bigger concern revolves around whether the revised defense policy merely perpetuates a mind-set focused on defending Australia, albeit with an ADF capable of operating at significantly greater distances from the continent than envisioned in the 1980s. This perspective is bolstered by another closely related concept from the 1970s–1980s era of defense thinking: “defense self-reliance,” which has proven challenging to overcome intellectually.⁴⁴ These ideas continue to exert considerable influence in Australian strategic thought, particularly among veterans of uniformed or civilian defense roles from that period.⁴⁵

Conversely, policy consistently emphasizes the need to enhance interoperability with allies and partners, as well as collective resolve and “collective deterrence.”⁴⁶ Developments within the ANZUS alliance, such as force posture initiatives in Australia and efforts to promote not just interoperability but also “interchangeability,” are expected to contribute significantly to collective deterrence.⁴⁷ Such statements

⁴³ For the early, declassified versions of the agreement, see *Australian Maritime Issues 2006: SPC-A Annual*, ed. Andrew Forbes and Michelle Lovi, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs no. 19 (Canberra: Sea Power Centre–Australia, 2007), 47–67.

⁴⁴ See *National Defence Strategy*, 17.

⁴⁵ As a prime example, see the views of former senior Department of Defence official, Michael Pezzullo, “The Long Arc of Australian Defence Strategy,” *The Strategist*, 11 May 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

⁴⁶ *National Defence Strategy*, 21, 23, 45–46, & 50–51.

⁴⁷ See Department of Defence, “United States Force Posture Initiatives,” <https://www.defence.gov.au/>; and *National Defence Strategy*, 46 & 51.

suggest an expanded regional interpretation of defense policy intent towards collective defense. This broader approach is further underscored by the Future Integrated Force's plans for longer-range, more potent capabilities.

To ensure military effectiveness and operational viability in practice, the Future Integrated Force is envisioned as an ADF capable of projecting offensive combat power tactically and operationally over much greater distances than currently possible. This capability is crucial for countering China's air- and sea-based missile platforms north of the Indonesian and Papua New Guinea archipelagoes before they can launch weapons against Australia, its allies, or partners. Central to this military-strategic objective are the AUKUS SSNs, which will play a pivotal role. Additionally, the force will integrate other critical components such as sea-launched Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles, including the Maritime Strike Tomahawk variant, as well as air-launched long-range anti-ship missiles (LRASM), joint air-to-surface standoff missiles—extended range (JASSM-ER), and an army capable of littoral maneuver with medium and heavy landing craft, along with longer-range rocket artillery and missiles.⁴⁸

The Future Integrated Force will need to develop new tactics and operational concepts to bridge the strategy deficit, and thus improve the credibility of the intended deterrence-by-denial policy. Tactics pose primarily technical and technological challenges rather than political-strategic ones. These challenges necessitate collaborative development, particularly with the US military, which also grapples with similar complexities in deploying new, longer-range weapons to project adequate combat power across the expansive distances of the western Pacific.

Operational concepts, on the other hand, present more politically contentious but absolutely necessary approaches to conducting operations that achieve strategic effects. The ADF must thoroughly consider how and where the Future Integrated Force will effectively deter or engage in conflict. However, a government inclined towards diplomatic euphemism may obscure clarity in strategic policy and consequently undermine deterrence credibility.

Moreover, the full realization of the Future Integrated Force is not anticipated until the 2030–2040 timeframe, presenting the ADF with the interim challenge of devising less ambitious concepts to accommodate its current limited combat capabilities. This limitation significantly restricts its ability to deter effectively in the short term.

⁴⁸ For details, see *Integrated Investment Program*.

Compatibility with the US Integrated Deterrence Framework

Therefore, as a steadfast ally of the United States committed to deterring threats across the Indo-Pacific, Australia's deterrence policy closely aligns with the Biden administration's integrated deterrence framework on multiple levels.⁴⁹ This comprehensive strategy exemplifies grand strategy in action, blending military and nonmilitary elements alongside allied and partner capabilities. It emphasizes deterrence by denial, by "cost imposition" (i.e., punishment) and by "resilience."⁵⁰ Despite its grand strategic approach in defense policy, however, the framework lacks clear articulation on how the US military will specifically contribute to deterrence through strategy or force posture.⁵¹

The AUKUS partnership stands as a tangible embodiment of integrated deterrence, aiming to bolster collective deterrence by jointly developing critical capabilities, including SSNs.⁵² While beset with numerous obstacles, the successful implementation of the AUKUS plan could potentially amplify deterrent effects collectively, surpassing those achievable individually by member countries.⁵³ Nonetheless, AUKUS alone cannot singularly provide deterrence; its effectiveness hinges on addressing the aforementioned strategy deficit, advancing new operational concepts and tactics, and explicitly signaling political intentions.

Just as the US integrated deterrence framework seeks to integrate deterrence across military and non-military domains, Australia's approach similarly embeds deterrence within its broader whole-of-government national defense framework, leveraging all elements of national power.⁵⁴ While both countries articulate these concepts more aptly within national security (grand) strategies rather than mere defense policies, it is evident that both Australia and the United States perceive effective deterrence as an outcome of comprehensive national efforts spanning military and nonmilitary spheres.

The economic dimension of Australia's national deterrence strategy, particularly the use of trade as a tool of coercion and punishment, holds significant relevance. Beijing's imposition of trade sanctions in response to Australia's national security

⁴⁹ On integrated deterrence, see *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 8–10.

⁵⁰ *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 8–10.

⁵¹ For an alternative critical view, see Van Jackson, "What Is Integrated Deterrence?: A Gap between US and Australian Strategic Thought," *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 263–74, <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

⁵² See Richard Marles, "AUKUS Defense Ministers Meeting Joint Statement" (press release, Ministry of Defence, Australia, 2 December 2023), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>.

⁵³ Michael J. Green and Peter J. Dean, "AUKUS' Strategic Deterrence Good for the Nation and Region," *The Australian*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/>.

⁵⁴ *Defence Strategic Review*, 38.

measures, including laws against political interference and advocacy for a Covid-19 origin inquiry, notably failed to achieve their intended outcomes. Australian companies mitigated potential losses by diversifying their markets.⁵⁵ Moreover, sectors affected by the sanctions, aside from coal, constitute relatively minor segments of the Australian economy. While discussions often highlight Australia's trade dependence on China as a vulnerability, it is noteworthy that China did not restrict imports of crucial commodities such as iron ore, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and wool, which are vital to its own economy and lack viable alternative sources, especially iron ore. Restrictions on Australian coal imports ultimately inflicted more economic harm on China than Australia and were eventually reversed.

This underscores that disrupting international trade, particularly critical mineral flows, represents a significant vulnerability for China itself. The West can wield this vulnerability as a potent grand strategic tool of deterrence. In crisis periods preceding conflict, Australia and its allies may possess economic deterrent power comparable to, if not greater than, China's, especially considering their control over critical commodities essential for China's industrial base and economic stability.

In addition to the diplomatic, informational, and cyber domains, Australia needs to develop a coherent approach for deploying the economic facets of deterrence, particularly within an alliance context. Given the close collaboration between Australia and the United States in intelligence (ANZUS and Five Eyes), cybersecurity, and trade, there is significant potential to evolve a comprehensive deterrence framework that spans multiple policy sectors across allied and partner countries—a vision central to Australian policy on collective deterrence. Effective utilization of the information and cyber domains will be crucial for controlling leading narratives and ensuring that deterrence messages are communicated clearly and unambiguously to adversaries.

At the military level, the alliance is being strengthened with additional dimensions such as the enhanced rotational presence of US military forces in Australia and the collaborative development of advanced capabilities in areas like artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles, and quantum technologies.⁵⁶ The deployment of additional US military platforms, such as SSNs, watercraft, and

⁵⁵ China imposed trade restrictions on commodities such as coal, barley, wine, beef and cotton. See David Uren, "Why China's Coercion of Australia Failed," Australian Strategic Policy Institute *The Strategist*, 27 April 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

⁵⁶ "Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2022" (press release, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, 6 December, 2022), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

maritime reconnaissance aircraft to Australia, along with logistics support and prepositioning of stores through the Combined Logistics Sustainment and Maintenance Enterprise (CoLSME), underscores the recognition of the western Pacific as the primary region where deterrence is most needed.⁵⁷ It should be noted that denial is expected to be the preferred approach for collective deterrence within the alliance framework.

Australian Deterrence Policy: A Work in Progress

Australia's new policy of deterrence not only aligns with the integrated deterrence framework of the United States but also advances both ANZUS and broader collective deterrence efforts in the Indo-Pacific. While ambiguities remain regarding the precise objectives of Canberra's policy, the emphasis on collective deterrence—as an analog to collective defense—and the planned long-range, mobile, and tactically offensive capabilities for the ADF suggest a significant strategic shift from the old defense of Australia doctrine and defense self-reliance.

However, several critical challenges undermine the policy. The operational capabilities necessary for credible and reliable deterrence will not be in place for at least another decade, if not longer. If a contingency arises in the near term—a plausible scenario—not only does Australia lack adequate military means to respond, but deterrence would have obviously failed. Compounding this issue is the absence of clearly defined methods for applying force to deter or respond to a major western Pacific contingency, even within the alliance context. Collective deterrence risks becoming a hollow component of alliance policy if such a strategy deficit persists without urgent remediation. ✪

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⁵⁷ “Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2023” (press release, Ministry of Defence, Australia, 29 July, 2023), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>.

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South Pacific Nations' Absorptive Capacity for Air-advising Missions

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Abstract

In recent years, South Pacific leaders have advocated a “zone of peace” for the region, with their national security forces focusing on civil security to protect exclusive economic zones, conduct outreach, perform aeromedical evacuations, and deliver humanitarian aid. However, protecting a vast archipelago requires air capabilities that can reach remote islands quickly and are protected against threats. Developing a sovereign air capability depends on the country’s aviation industry, which can be technically restrictive. This article examines the absorptive capacity of South Pacific nations to develop sovereign air capabilities to shape actionable air-advising plans. The analysis is framed around three pillars essential for building such capabilities: infrastructure, capability, and a sustainable indigenous workforce. While capabilities and infrastructure can be quickly established, maturing a skilled domestic workforce hinges on the strength of the educational foundation in recipient nations. Thus, the success of air-advising efforts depends on the recipient nations’ educational attainment levels. We analyze demographic data to quantify workforce capacity for establishing a sovereign air force.

South Pacific leaders have consistently advocated for a “zone of peace” across the region, a concept that prioritizes regional security, maritime surveillance, rapid response for humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), and strong diplomatic partnerships.¹ Given the predominantly archipelagic nature of the South Pacific, with its small island nations dispersed across vast oceanic expanses, there is a pressing need to develop a sustainable and sovereign aviation capability. Such a capability must be able to reach remote islands in time-critical situations and be safeguarded against potential threats. A sovereign aviation enterprise is foundational for building an air defense capability or air force that supports civil security, maritime surveillance, and rapid HADR response.

¹ Patrick Kaiku and Faith Hope Boie, “A Pacific ‘zone of peace’—what will it entail?,” *The Interpreter*, 21 November 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

Developed countries with established military air capabilities, including air forces and aviation wings, can play a crucial role in supporting South Pacific nations in building their own air defense capabilities through air advising.² Joint training and exchanges between partner forces can provide intermittent boosts in capability. However, these efforts will not yield sustainable outcomes unless the recipient nation can absorb the knowledge and skills within their own aviation system. The experience of air advising between the United States and Afghanistan highlights the challenges of ensuring sustainable outcomes when the recipient nation lacks the capacity to independently implement new initiatives.³ Hence, it is essential to understand the fundamental factors of the recipient nation to ensure that air advisory missions are fruitful and enduring. This includes progressively adapting the air-advising lines of effort as the partner nation's capacity develops.

Building a sovereign air force, or any security air element, rests on three pillars: capability, infrastructure, and workforce. Capability encompasses systems and aircraft, while infrastructure includes air bases or airports and maintenance centers. The third pillar, an indigenous workforce, requires appropriate foundational education to participate materially in the technologically complex aviation enterprise and build sovereign capacity. While external providers or hybrid models can supplement the workforce, a foundational level of indigenous national capability is indispensable. A robust educational system, combined with opportunities to acquire advanced knowledge, skills, and competencies for aviation technical roles, provides the framework for a sovereign and self-reliant air force. Training for aviation-specific roles is time-consuming and costly due to the intensive practical and theoretical components. Therefore, to build a sovereign air force through an air-advising partnership, it is crucial to train an indigenous aviation-specific workforce that has already attained the necessary foundational education.

This article assesses the absorptive capacity of South Pacific nations to receive air-advising missions aimed at building sovereign air forces. For the purposes of this article, *air force* refers to military aviation capability, whether housed in a dedicated air force or another military branch, such as aviation wings. While some nations and territories in the region have some form of military air capability, often as part of the defense force or paramilitary/gendarmerie, or, in the case of

² Nicole S. Finch and Peter A. Garretson, "Air Advising: A Critical Component of Joint Engagement," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 34–39, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

³ Forrest L. Marion, *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005–2015* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018); and Matthew A. Douglas and Jonathan Ritschel, "Air Advising in Afghanistan: Building an Organization in Flight," *Air & Space Power Journal* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 85–91, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

French territories, provided through external training and support regimes, this article examines the potential to build military air capability from within. The absorptive capacity of a nation during an air-advising mission depends heavily on its available education and training systems, which are fundamental to technology transfer. To assess absorptive capacity, we analyze the educational systems and demographics of South Pacific nations. By understanding these critical factors, a tailored air-advising mission can incorporate foundational education courses and workforce capacity building to provide a lasting contribution to the recipient nation.

Requirements for Building Up an Air Force

An aviation-specific workforce is the third pillar, alongside infrastructure and capability, for establishing a sovereign air force. For the purposes of this paper, aviation-specific professions include pilots, air traffic controllers (ATC), command-and-control (C2) controllers (C2C), aircraft maintenance engineers (AME), and flight dispatchers. While entry into military-specific roles requires additional training, the basic skills needed for general aviation professions (commercial or professional roles) can serve as a benchmark, considering that South Pacific nations may not require kinetic airpower. Becoming a professional pilot or aircraft maintenance engineer necessitates distinct educational requirements. Conversely, training for ATC or C2C involves awards of ratings for specific duties, analogous to pilot and AME ratings for specific aircraft.

While various aviation-specific professions require specialized training, a secondary education is a shared prerequisite for entry into all these professions.⁴ Studies have shown that trainees with secondary or post-secondary education who have undergone US ATC training were more successful compared to those without secondary education.⁵ Additionally, the recency of attaining higher education has been identified as a significant contributor to success, often more so than the level of education itself.⁶ Hence, the fundamental requirement for South Pacific nations to develop a sovereign air force is an indigenous workforce that has at least completed secondary education, along with accessible aviation training infrastructure shortly thereafter.

⁴ Nancy Shane, "The Relationship of a Pilot's Educational Background, Aeronautical Experience and Recency of Experience to Performance In Initial Training at a Regional Airline" (dissertation, University of North Dakota, May 2016), <https://commons.und.edu/>; and Bart B. Cobb, Carol L. Young, and Barbara L. Rizzuti, *Education as a factor in the selection of air traffic controllers* (Washington: Federal Aviation Administration, June 1976), <https://www.faa.gov/>.

⁵ Janet S. Hansen and Clinton V. Oster, Jr., eds., *Taking Flight: Education and Training for Aviation Careers* (Washington: The National Academic Press, 1997).

⁶ Hansen and Oster, *Taking Flight*.

Using the completion of secondary education as a benchmark, the road map toward building an air force involves training the necessary workforce in aviation-specific professions. On average, it takes approximately four years to complete an aviation-specific technical qualification from the completion of secondary education. Similarly, the construction of necessary infrastructure and the acquisition of new assets can be scheduled to match this four-year lead time. While assets can be provided in a shorter timeframe, through assistance or donations, the lead time required to develop the necessary indigenous workforce cannot be shortened and must be taken into account. Other deviations from this model may include training an indigenous workforce elsewhere and repatriating them to their respective country to serve, or recruiting or temporarily embedding already-trained foreign nationals. In any case, building a sustainable and sovereign air force hinges on the training of an indigenous workforce as a major consideration.

Workforce for a Sovereign Air Force in the South Pacific

Completion of secondary education is not the sole consideration when building a workforce for a sovereign air force in the South Pacific. It is equally important to implement a standardized secondary education curriculum, particularly in subjects like mathematics and physics, which must align with the requirements for pursuing an aviation career in the air force. Our recent analysis of the mathematics and physics curricula in South Pacific nations assessed their coverage relative to the baseline Australian curricula.⁷ As a near neighbor with a well-advanced aviation industry, the Australian curriculum serves as a benchmark. Where the South Pacific curricula omit topics, sections, or elements from the baseline curriculum, secondary education completion does not provide the same level of foundational education, necessitating further training for indigenous workforce candidates to enter aviation technical professional training.

The coverage of South Pacific national curricula, weighted by relevance to derived aviation technical professional theory training prerequisites and aggregated for mathematics and physics, is shown in Supplementary Table 1.⁸ Nations that implement foreign curricula have been assessed based on the Australian curriculum for Nauru and the French curriculum for French territories of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. It is also important to note that Pitcairn Islands has a population of fewer than 50, and all secondary education is undertaken in

⁷ Paul Bowes, Victor Daria, and Cristian Birzer, "Human resource potential for a sovereign aviation enterprise in the South Pacific," *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 23 (January 2024): 101023, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸ Bowes, Daria, and Birzer, "Human resource potential for a sovereign aviation enterprise."

New Zealand, while secondary students in the Cook Islands also travel to New Zealand to complete their secondary education. The curricula for Kiribati, Palau, Tokelau, Tonga, and Tuvalu were excluded as their curricula were not available. The majority of mathematics curricula in the South Pacific surpass 80 percent of the comparative breadth and depth of the Australian curriculum. Conversely, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and the Northern Mariana Islands fall below 80 percent. For physics, the Federated States of Micronesia had the lowest coverage at 28 percent, while the Marshall Islands, Mariana Islands, and Solomon Islands also had coverage levels below 80 percent.

When the data for mathematics and physics curricula coverage are pooled, our analysis shows that the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and the Mariana Islands have insufficient curricula coverage (<80 percent), making it difficult for those completing secondary education in these nations to commence aviation technical professional training.⁹ Fiji, American Samoa, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea have incomplete coverage, but the gaps are smaller. Countries implementing foreign curricula or sending secondary students overseas are ranked high (100 percent) and have an indigenous workforce that can potentially pursue aviation technical training.

Since the goal of this work is to investigate the South Pacific nations' capacity for supporting a sovereign air force, the assessment of the mathematics and physics curriculum needs to be correlated with the number of people between the ages of 15 and 39 years. This age group is selected based on their trainability and potential to serve in the force after training.¹⁰ Figure 1 illustrates such correlation and capacity, in terms of educated human work years, based on census data compiled in our previous work.¹¹ The pie graphs in Figure 1 depict the fraction (dark green) of the population between the ages of 15 and 39 years who have acquired at least a secondary or Year 12 education. The diameter of the pie graph represents the size of the population within the age group, as indicated in the top left legend. The base color of the pie charts represents Year 12 curriculum readiness based on the data in Supplementary Table 1. The raw census data acquired within a particular year is shown in Supplementary Table 2.

From Figure 1, we observe that the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia have reasonably sized populations (>50,000) within the defined age group, with significantly higher secondary completion rates (>55 percent) and

⁹ Bowes, Daria, and Birzer, "Human resource potential for a sovereign aviation enterprise."

¹⁰ The age requirement to be an enlisted Airman in the US Air Force is between 17 and 42 years. See "Join the Air Force Active Duty," US Air Force, n.d., <https://www.airforce.com/>.

¹¹ Bowes, Daria, and Birzer, "Human resource potential for a sovereign aviation enterprise."

mathematics and physics curricula that meet the standards for pursuing an aviation-specific career. These territories have the highest potential for a successful air-advising mission. However, as French territories, New Caledonia and French Polynesia have defense capabilities provided by the French Armed Forces, with personnel deployed to the islands. This differentiates them from their neighbors. Nonetheless, the basis for developing home-grown capabilities is useful in informing possible futures for air forces in these territories.

It is important to note that Fiji has a much greater estimated capacity than Papua New Guinea, despite the latter having an overall population ten times larger. This disparity aligns with the significantly disproportionate secondary education completion rates between the two nations, which are 3.4 percent for Papua New Guinea and 40 percent for Fiji. Interventions to increase access and graduation rates in Papua New Guinea are likely to yield positive outcomes for a sovereign air force and, by extension, aid local development of other technologically complex industries and enhance the capability of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force. This is a critical factor for consideration, as Papua New Guinea has increased the size of its air wing over the past 20 years and is seeking to further increase personnel numbers and broaden the role of the air wing to undertake intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tasks.¹² While there are identified gaps in the curricula for these two countries, air-advising missions could consider avenues for supplementary training to address those gaps.

Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands have a lower probability of success due to their small populations between the ages of 15 and 39 years (~15,000) and relatively large gaps in mathematics and physics curricula. The lowest probability of success is for those with extended gaps in curriculum (Micronesia and Marshall Islands) and low population sizes, as is the case with Samoa, American Samoa, Cook Islands, Nauru, Niue, Pitcairn Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna.

¹² "Future Papua New Guinea Defence Force Air Capability," Air and Space Power Centre, 12 December 2022, <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/>.

South Pacific Nations' Absorptive Capacity for Air-advicing Missions

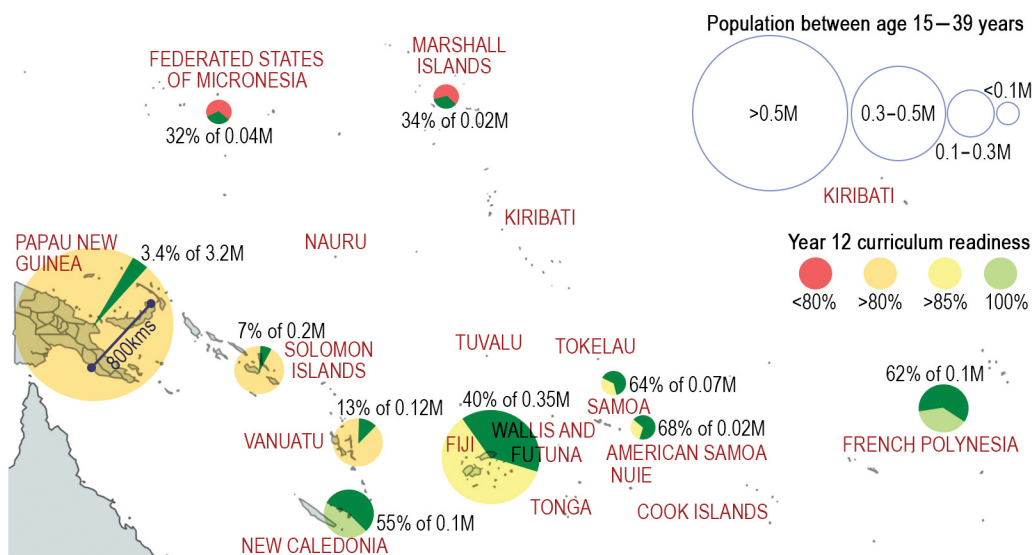


Figure 1. Absorptive capacity of South Pacific nations to build a sovereign air force via air-advicing missions. The pie charts show the relative size of the trainable workforce (diameter) between the age 15-39 years and the fraction (Green) that have completed secondary education (Year 12). The background color of the pie charts show the % readiness of their Year 12 Maths and Physics coverage. 100% (light green) represents a curriculum that is equivalent to the Australian Secondary School curricula, which corresponds with derived aviation technical professional theory training prerequisites (see Supplementary Table 1).

The Nexus Between Education and Air-advicing Success

Historical experience indicates that aligning the scope and objectives of air-advicing missions with the educational attainment levels and curricula of recipient nations is crucial for achieving positive outcomes. These outcomes manifest through material growth in the sovereign air capabilities of recipient nations in areas significant to them. For donor nations, success is measured by the contribution of air advising to collaboration and the reliability of the relationship with the recipient, as “presence requires access, access requires a relationship.”¹³

The recent and protracted example of aviation capacity building in Afghanistan provides many lessons, despite the mission’s focus on rapidly building sovereign combat airpower, in contrast to the comparatively peaceful objectives of capacity building among South Pacific nations. Low levels of literacy and numeracy constrained all aspects of the Afghanistan military advisor mission, particularly in

¹³ Kevin Ruddell, “SOCPAC Science and Technology” (presentation, Pacific Operational Science and Technology Conference, 8 March 2021), <https://ndia.dtic.mil/>.

aviation, where working levels of English are required.¹⁴ Beyond language, in the technologically complex discipline of aviation, literacy was often conflated with education.¹⁵ As English is the internationally mandated lingua franca of aviation, English language skills are a fundamental precursor to undertaking aviation technical professional training. In the Afghanistan example, a solution to address the education gap in mathematics and physics was to include foundational education in these subjects at the Afghan Air School in Kabul, delivered by mentors from the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM–A).

The glidepath to capability must consider both the broad educational attainment of the indigenous recruiting base and the effort required to upskill education toward the contemporary standards of a developed country. The Afghanistan air-advising effort was adversely affected by the transition to technologically complex Western systems from the legacy ex-Soviet systems that were more familiar to the Afghans, such as the Mi-17 Hip transport helicopter to the UH-60 Black Hawk. Compounding the challenge is the increased reliance on detailed technical manuals to correctly maintain and operate these complex machines compared to simpler platforms. A specific challenge for Afghanistan was that the original equipment manufacturers for aircraft would not convert their publications into Dari or Pashtu due to translation concerns with the nontechnical nature and limited vocabulary of these languages.¹⁶

Conversely, the post-World War I air-advising mission between France and Japan was initially successful in fostering a close relationship between the two nations.¹⁷ France aimed to develop an export partner, but Japan already possessed a sovereign aviation industry. Nonetheless, the highly educated and technically capable Japanese workforce quickly and adeptly mastered the contributions offered by the French. This rapid mastery eventually diminished the export potential for France, leading to Japan losing interest in further offerings.¹⁸

The lesson to be observed is that an air-advising mission to the Pacific must remain cognizant of the educational advancements and competencies among the sovereign workforce and recruiting base. It is crucial to pivot appropriately to new avenues of collaboration to ensure an enduring relationship that contributes positively to the overall international relationship.

¹⁴ Kenneth P. Moorefield et al., *Progress of U.S. and Coalition Efforts to Train, Advise, and Assist the Afghan Air Force* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 4 January 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁵ Marion, *Flight Risk*.

¹⁶ Moorefield et al., *Progress of U.S. and Coalition Efforts*.

¹⁷ Donald Stoker and Edward Westermann, eds., *Air Force Advising and Assistance: Developing Airpower in Client States* (Warwick, UK: Helion & Company Limited, 2018).

¹⁸ Stoker and Westermann, *Air Force Advising and Assistance*.

Education, Aviation, and the Strategic Context

As South Pacific nations gained independence, they recognized the importance of developing sovereign educational systems to produce educated graduates for governance and management.¹⁹ These systems needed to evolve, tailored to domestic needs. However, with limited industry and private sector opportunities, many graduates struggled to find employment, diminishing the incentive for youth to pursue education. This is evident in Vanuatu, where education is often perceived as low value due to the scarcity of professional jobs.²⁰ Poor educational outcomes and low attainment levels have been linked to instability, corruption, and governance failures.²¹

In 2018, Australia announced a Pacific Step-up policy and followed with a strengthened focus on bolstering Pacific relationships through local-led development, with an objective of a “free and prosperous Pacific.”²² The United States subsequently embraced Pacific development and preservation of free and open societies through the enhanced Pacific Islands Partnership announced in 2023.²³ In this context, stimulating commitment to and the development of local education capacity and quality is crucial. Strengthening these systems builds resilience against coercion, acceding to poorly informed foreign loan debt, and the erosion of democratic principles, which can be exploited by unscrupulous strategic competitors. While the connection to aviation might seem indirect, aviation—with its blend of prestige, romanticism, and utility—provides a unique opportunity for South Pacific nations. It not only offers direct employment in highly cognitive roles but also creates indirect opportunities requiring substantial technical expertise, breaking down barriers to global connections and opening doors to new possibilities. Technologically advanced development may offer a stimulus to nation populations to seek greater educational attainment and, in turn, create a reinforcing feedback loop driven by accompanying socioeconomic development.

¹⁹ Tupeni L. Baba, “Education in the Pacific Islands,” in *The Pacific Islands in the Year 2000*, edited by Robert C. Kiste and Richard A. Herr (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1985), 125–50, <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/>.

²⁰ Kylie Mullins, *Vanuatu Barriers to Education Study* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Team, September 2018), <https://education.gov.vu/>.

²¹ Eric M. Uslaner, “Inequality, Education, and Corruption,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Quality of Government*, ed. Andreas Bågenholm et al. (New York: Oxford Academic, 2021), <https://doi.org/>.

²² “Stepping Up Australia’s Engagement with Our Pacific Family” (fact sheet, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, September 2019), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>.

²³ “Enhancing the US Pacific Islands Partnership” (fact sheet, The White House, 25 September 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

Tailored Air Advising and Beyond

To succeed in air advisory missions, it is crucial to understand the requirements of the recipient nation. Additionally, recognizing the recipient nation's absorptive capacity is essential for them to sustain the capabilities independently. The defense priorities of South Pacific nations necessitate the development of a nonkinetic air force, which includes capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to monitor their borders and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), including fisheries. Furthermore, these nations require capabilities for HADR and rapid response to crises using airlift capabilities, medical support, and logistical aid. These capabilities provide critical supplies, evacuate victims, and restore essential services, exemplifying the role of the air force in alleviating human suffering and stabilizing affected South Pacific regions without engaging in combat.

An air force capable of providing HADR services requires assets such as cargo aircraft like the C-17/A Globemaster III and C-130 Hercules, which transport supplies and personnel. These large aircraft, particularly the C-17, require substantial air basing support and clear access, which are rarely available in the South Pacific. In the mountainous areas of Papua New Guinea, for example, small and fragile landing areas limit access to rotary-wing and smaller transport aircraft, such as the C-27J Spartan. This means that advisory teams must also be cognizant of the specific operating environment and infrastructure capacity. Helicopters, such as the HH-60 Pave Hawk, are also important for search and rescue operations. These assets enable rapid deployment, delivery of aid, and evacuation efforts in times of crisis. To operate these assets, a sovereign air force requires the aviation-specific professionals mentioned earlier, in addition to support personnel with aviation indoctrination, such as medical teams, search and rescue teams, logistics specialists, communications officers, and security personnel.

Air advising must cater to the specific air capability requirements of South Pacific nations. Additional effort is needed for countries like Papua New Guinea and Fiji, where the level of mathematics and physics coverage in secondary schools needs to be uplifted as part of the air-advising mission. This can be achieved by including supplemental training to fill gaps in mathematics and physics coverage and promoting this educational need in broader development programs. It is important to note that some nations follow a 13-year secondary school model, such as the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, and Vanuatu.²⁴ In these nations, the additional year is generally regarded as preparation for university, which motivates students to undertake and complete the program.

²⁴ Bowes, Daria, and Birzer, "Human resource potential for a sovereign aviation enterprise."

As our study assessed curriculum readiness for all nations at Year 12, suggested supplemental training for aviation-specific careers could be incorporated into the additional year for those nations where this option is available.

Beyond air-advicing missions, improving the overall quality of life in South Pacific nations by enhancing basic education will contribute to these countries' absorptive capacity for a sovereign aviation capability. Educational aid programs in the South Pacific focus on improving access to quality education, enhancing educational infrastructure, and building local capacity. Australia invests close to 50 percent of its 2023–24 Official Development Assistance–Education budget in educating the youth in the South Pacific.²⁵ New Zealand invests 62 percent of its Partnerships for International Development fund to support educational projects that enhance teaching quality and learning outcomes in the South Pacific.²⁶ The United Nations Children's Fund Pacific Islands implements programs to improve early childhood education, access to primary education, and inclusive education for children with disabilities.²⁷ The Asian Development Bank funds projects to build and refurbish schools, provide learning materials, and integrate technology in classrooms.²⁸

Investment and educational programs for South Pacific nations could bolster secondary completion rates. In the cases of Papua New Guinea (3.4 percent) and Solomon Islands (7.1 percent), increasing the proportion of youth completing secondary education would not only increase the intake into aviation-specific professions or their respective defense forces but could also have a profound impact on their entire economy. It is also important to note that boosting primary school completion rates is a prerequisite to improving secondary completion rates. Another significant factor in providing quality education for South Pacific nations is the existence of well-trained teachers and an optimal teacher-student ratio. Developmental aid programs aiming to train teachers in the South Pacific should be pursued. Hence, investments in educational infrastructure and teacher training programs will improve access to education, ensure the availability of an indigenous workforce for a sovereign air force, and increase the absorptive capacity to receive air-advicing missions.

²⁵ "Education and Skills: Development Cooperation Factsheet" (fact sheet, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, 2023).

²⁶ Mark McGillivray et al., *Evaluation of the MFAT's Partnerships Fund* (Auckland: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs Trade, 12 March 2018), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/>.

²⁷ Simon J. Molendijk, Steven J. Coombs, and Madhumita Bhattacharya, "Bridging the Gap between Education Policy, Planning and Practice: Establishing and Effecting National Minimum Quality Service Standards for Effective Schools in Pacific Island Countries" UNICEF, 19 December 2017, <https://www.unicef.org/>.

²⁸ Kowsar P. Chowdhury, ed., *Better Learning, Better Future: Education and Training Sector Strategy in the Pacific* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2005).

The level of educational infrastructure is a reflection of the country's economy and political policies, which are also necessary to sustain a sovereign air capability and maintain operational readiness, secure funding, and ensure strategic consistency. Political stability enables clear defence policies, while economic stability provides necessary resources for training, equipment, and technological advancement.

Conclusion

A crucial element in building a sovereign air force is an indigenous workforce with the appropriate foundational education for pursuing aviation-specific careers. In this article, we assessed the absorptive capacity of South Pacific nations to acquire aviation-specialist knowledge via air-advising missions and sustain a sovereign air force. Our analysis shows that the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia have the highest potential for a successful air-advising mission. These territories have curricula that meet the standards for pursuing aviation-specific careers and maintain a reasonable-sized population (>50,000) within the age group (15–39 years) that could be trained and serve in the force.

While Papua New Guinea has the highest population among South Pacific nations, its secondary school completion rate is low at 3.4 percent, compared to Fiji's 40 percent. However, both countries have a reasonable-sized population (>100,000) within the same age group. These two countries have gaps in their curricula that could be addressed during air-advising missions. Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands have a lower probability of success due to their smaller populations in the same age group (~15,000) and larger gaps in curricula. The rest of the South Pacific nations have the least probability of success due to extended gaps in curricula and very low populations.

In conclusion, the success of air-advising missions in the South Pacific hinges on understanding the educational landscape and tailoring efforts to address specific gaps. By investing in foundational education and aligning air-advising missions with the unique needs of each nation, we can build sustainable and sovereign air forces that contribute to regional stability and security. 🌟

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are the authors' and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Defence nor the Australian government.

Supplementary Table 1. Scored coverage of reference curriculum (Australia) by nation (Bowes, Daria, & Birzer, 2024). Subjective rating scale: 3, all elements of reference curriculum topic are included; 2, majority of elements of reference curriculum are included; 1, some elements of reference curriculum are included; 0, no elements of reference curriculum are included. The last three columns sum up the ratings (for Maths, Physics and Maths & Physics combined) and normalized with the maximum score (%). Color code: Green >90%; Yellow 85-90%; Orange 80-85%; Red <80%.

Country	Maths									Physics						Maths (%)	Physics (%)	Combined Maths and Physics (%)
	Arithmetic	Rates, Ratios and Time	Algebra	Geometry	Coordinate Geometry	Trigonometry	Calculus	Vectors & Mechanics	Probability & Statistics	Units and Measurement	Mechanics & Kinematics	Oscillations, Waves, and Fluids	Thermodynamics	Electromagnetism	Optics			
Cook Islands	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
French Polynesia	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
Nauru	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
New Caledonia	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
Niue	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
Pitcairn Islands	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
Wallis and Futuna	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	100	100	100
American Samoa	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	1	2	96	83	91
Samoa	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	1	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	89	89	89
Fiji	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	85	89	87
Vanuatu	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	0	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	85	83	84
Solomon Islands	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	0	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	85	78	82
Papua New Guinea	3	3	3	3	2	2	0	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	74	89	80
Northern Mariana Islands	3	3	2	2	3	3	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	81	67	76

Supplementary Table 1 (continued)

Country	Maths									Physics						Maths (%)	Physics (%)	Combined Maths and Physics (%)
	Arithmetic	Rates, Ratios and Time	Algebra	Geometry	Coordinate Geometry	Trigonometry	Calculus	Vectors & Mechanics	Probability & Statistics	Units and Measurement	Mechanics & Kinematics	Oscillations, Waves, and Fluids	Thermodynamics	Electromagnetism	Optics			
Marshall Islands	3	2	3	2	3	2	1	0	2	2	3	3	0	2	1	67	61	64
Federated States of Micronesia	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	0	78	28	58
Kiribati	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Palau	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tokelau	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tonga	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tuvalu	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Supplementary Table 2. South Pacific nations' total (and portion of) population within training/working age ranging from 15–39 Years for the year when census was acquired. Demographic shows population with year-12 education.

Country	Total Population	Census year	Population of age group between 15-39 years	Population of same age group with Year 12 education	%Population of the same age group with Year 12 education
Papua New Guinea	7,254,441	2011	3,228,226	109,807	3.4%
Fiji	884,887	2017	350,980	139,624	39.8%
Solomon Islands	515,870	2009	210,048	14,865	7.1%
Vanuatu	300,019	2020	116,865	15,056	12.9%
French Polynesia	275,918	2017	107,466	66,271	61.7%
New Caledonia	271,407	2019	99,691	55,079	55.2%
Samoa	187,820	2011	69,834	44,489	63.7%
Kiribati	119,438	2020	48,546	8,512	17.5%
Federated States of Micronesia	102,843	2010	41,531	13,406	32.3%
Tonga	100,610	2016	37,531	21,621	57.6%
Marshall Islands	53,158	2011	21,923	7,598	34.7%
American Samoa	55,519	2010	20,622	13,975	67.8%
N Mariana Islands	53,883	2010	18,902	13,129	69.5%
Palau	17,614	2020	6,005	4,659	77.6%
Cook Islands	17,434	2016	5,846	1,259	21.5%
Nauru	11,450	2019	4,979	1,317	26.5%
Tuvalu	10,645	2017	4,164	2,853	68.5%
Wallis and Futuna	11,558	2018	3,514	1,196	34.0%
Tokelau	1,499	2016	554	189	34.1%
Niue	1,460	2017	467	160	34.3%
Pitcairn Islands	41	2019	6	6	100.0%

Changes and Implications of Australia's Foreign and Defense Policy

A View from Indonesia

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DR. ANAK AGUNG BANYU PERWITA

Abstract

Over the past three years, Australia has shifted its foreign and defense policy in the Indo-Pacific region from a liberal engagement approach to a more ambitious neorealist stance, significantly increasing its interaction with the United States. Despite these changes, Australia remains economically dependent on China. This article analyzes the evolution of Australian foreign and defense policies and forecasts future developments. It also explores the implications for Indonesia, Australia's closest neighbor and strategic partner, and offers policy recommendations for Indonesia to manage its bilateral security relations with Australia. Using qualitative research based on a literature review, the article argues that Australia's geostrategic circumstances and historical factors necessitate a refinement of Canberra's foreign and defense policy. Consequently, Australia is poised to emerge as a rising power, increasingly reliant on the United States while also strengthening partnerships with Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

Australia, Indonesia's closest neighbor and strategic partner, is undergoing a significant shift in its international profile, moving from a friendly posture to one marked by uncertainty. This transformation was starkly highlighted on 15 September 2021, when Australia signed the AUKUS cooperation agreement with the United Kingdom and the United States. Just days before, from 8–10 September 2021, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Peter Dutton visited Jakarta for a 2+2 bilateral meeting to discuss cooperation on terrorism, peacekeeping, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.¹

The formation of AUKUS has raised concerns among Indonesia and its regional neighbors. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its apprehension

¹ "Indonesia Tuan Rumah Pertemuan 2 + 2 RI-Australia ke-7" (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia, 8 September 2021), <https://kemlu.go.id/>.

and committed to closely monitoring AUKUS's progress.² In an official statement, the Ministry stressed the importance of Australia's adherence to nuclear nonproliferation and its commitment to regional peace, stability, and security under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Dialogue remains essential for Indonesia to support Australia and other countries in peacefully resolving disputes. The establishment of this trilateral military alliance, though not entirely surprising given historical Western military alliance patterns in Asia, signals a significant strategic shift.³

While scholars and the public focus on the potential security dilemmas and arms races resulting from AUKUS, they often overlook the broader implications. Australia's defense and foreign policy changes align with its strategic frameworks, making future predictions feasible. Key documents such as the *2016 Defence White Paper*, the *2020 National Defence Strategy*, the *2023 Strategic Review*, and the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* provide the foundation for these policy changes.

Many scholars debate Australia's approach in the Indo-Pacific, with most arguing that its foreign policy toward China remains ambiguous.⁴ However, few have examined the implications of Australia's shifting foreign and defense policies from the perspectives of its neighbors, such as Indonesia, its closest neighbor.

Foreign and defense policies aim to pursue national interests. Although these interests and goals are formulated through domestic political processes, they are also influenced by the external environment. This environment is dynamic and difficult to manage due to the prevalence of power politics in the anarchic international system.

In an anarchic international system, as outlined by Kenneth Waltz, no supreme authority exists to enforce norms and preserve order. As Mearsheimer argued, the international system is ruthless and will remain so. As a result, each state must rely on its own resources for survival and security. When all states seek security for their national interest, competition among them becomes unavoidable. States respond to changes made by other states through hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning.⁵

From a regional dynamics perspective, certain states can survive through coalitions and alliances. Forming coalitions and alliances can help maintain the balance of power and deter potential threats. However, neorealists argue that such collaborations have limitations and are often ineffective. Because each state is

² "Pernyataan mengenai Kapal Selam Nuklir Australia" (press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia, 17 September 2021), <https://kemlu.go.id/>.

³ Arif Havas Oegroseno, "Kita dan AUKUS," *Kompas.id*, 30 September 2021, <https://www.kompas.id/>.

⁴ Petrus K. Farneubun, "China's Rise and its Implications for Australian Foreign Policy," *Papua Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 2, no. 2 (2022), 142–62, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵ Gustav Meibauer, "Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history," *International Relations* 37, no. 2 (June 2023): 348–69, <https://doi.org/>.

different, neorealists believe that increasing security can lead to a security dilemma. Efforts to enhance security can be perceived as threats by other states, potentially escalating tensions.

This article employs qualitative research methods using an inductive approach. The analysis is based on empirical data collected from foreign and defense policy documents, official government records, and relevant literature.

The article is divided into three main sections. First, it examines how changes in Australian foreign and defense policies have occurred and might unfold in the near future. Second, it explores how these changes could affect Indonesia, Australia's closest neighbor and strategic partner. Third, it offers policy recommendations for Indonesia to manage its bilateral security relations with Australia.

Shifts from Forward Defense to Lean More to the United States

Australian foreign and defense policy manifests through its engagement with the external environment, contributing to regional security stability and demonstrating international engagement.

From around 1995 to 2007, Australian foreign policy was characterized by its role as a good state with benevolent intentions toward other countries, often acting as a donor nation. For example, Australia provided development and humanitarian assistance to various countries, including those in the Middle East. Notably, Australian aid to Palestine increased dramatically in 2007, with contributions rising from under AUD 20 million between 1995 and 2005 to nearly AUD 42 million in 2007–2008. From a constructivist perspective, Australia is seen as a country upholding international humanitarian norms.⁶

Recently, however, Australia has revealed a more aggressive identity. The development of the AUKUS trilateral cooperation with the United States and the United Kingdom has significantly impacted this perception. According to constructivist theory, Australia is developing a new identity as a strategic ally, with the potential to destabilize the regional status quo, undermine existing cooperation agreements, erode trust among longstanding partners, and provoke an arms race.⁷

Australia's foreign policy increasingly focuses on the Indo-Pacific, shaped by two primary factors: its traditional alliance with the US and China's economic and military dominance. These concerns have led Australia to adopt a policy stance

⁶ Irza Khurun'in, "Perspektif Konstruktivisme dalam Bantuan Luar Negeri Australia ke Otoritas Palestina," *Jurnal Transformasi Global* 2, no. 1 (2015), 111, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷ Johni R.V. Korwa and Meyland S.F. Wambrau, "A Constructivist Analysis of the Establishment of the AUKUS Security Pact and its Implications for Regional Stability in the Indo-Pacific," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 16, no. 1 (2023): 19–35, <https://doi.org/>.

based on three pillars: viewing the US as a close ally, perceiving China as a threat and competitor, and asserting itself as a middle power.⁸

In defense policy, Australia has recently shown a tendency to follow the approach of the Hawke government (1983–1996). During this period, Australia moved away from forward defense, which involved sending troops to fight adversaries abroad, and adopted a continental defense strategy, focusing on protecting its continent and surrounding areas without significant involvement in foreign wars. This shift indicates a drive toward greater independence while moving away from pure continental defense.

The government has introduced a strategy of “defense in depth” by advocating for “defense self-reliance within an alliance.” Concurrently, Australia has sought to strengthen its ties with the Southeast Asian region.⁹ This shift supports the claim that the forward defense doctrine has not enhanced Australia’s happiness or security. Furthermore, China presents a dilemma for Australia.

On one hand, China is a valuable trading partner. On the other, it poses a potential military threat to the United States, Australia’s ally. Australia will continue to hedge its bets and rely on US protection.¹⁰ Although Australia’s response to China’s rise may be uncertain, there is a significant struggle for geopolitical influence. As a traditional actor in the Pacific Islands, Australia faces stiff competition from China. The competition between Australia and China for geopolitical influence in the Pacific Islands will be striking, given Australia’s established presence and China’s growing ambitions in the region.¹¹

How have changes in Australian foreign and defense policies occurred? Does Australia still adhere to the doctrines of forward defense and continental defense? This article argues that the establishment of AUKUS justifies the changes in Australia’s foreign and defense policies. Australia is now primarily focused on continental defense, specifically defending its own territory. Consequently, Australia’s focus on increasing military power, including the development of nuclear submarines under AUKUS, is unsurprising.

Washington is content with Australia’s evolving policy, as it demonstrates increasing alignment between the two allies. The United States and Australia share a long history of cooperation in numerous conflicts, from World War I to the

⁸ Madhusudhan. B, “Australian Middle Power Ambitions and Dilemmas,” in *The New World Politics of the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Josukutty C.A. & Joyce Sabina Lobo (New York: Routledge, 2024), 148–64.

⁹ Stewart Firth, *Australia in International Politics: An Introduction to Australian Foreign Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁰ Farneubun, “China’s Rise and Its Implications.”

¹¹ Meg Keen and Alan Tidwell, “Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Playing for advantage,” Lowy Institute, 31 January 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

present. They share a wide range of common security interests, including the promotion of democratic values and the security challenges posed by terrorists. The freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is a mutual interest for both nations.¹² Despite its development as a rising power, Australia will continue to depend on the United States.

This article contends that in the near future, Australia will continue to lean more toward the United States while maintaining an ambivalent stance toward China. This does not imply weakness but rather reflects the influence of the international system on Australia's strategic choices. Given the anarchic international order, Australia will proactively create and sustain defense ties.

Following the Melbourne Declaration, Australia will engage more deeply in creating and maintaining defense links with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Signed on 6 March 2024, by ASEAN member states and Australia to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of ASEAN–China Dialogue Relations, the Declaration aims to strengthen cooperation in line with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). It underscores the importance of engaging in the Indo-Pacific through forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).¹³

Australia's current and near-future foreign and defense policies are likely to remain consistent. The metaphor "old wine in a new bottle" aptly illustrates Australia's policies. Australia will continue to align closely with the United States as a faithful ally and enhance cooperation with the United Kingdom under AUKUS.

According to the recent *2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS)* and the 2024 Integrated Investment Program (IIP), Australia's defense capability development focuses on long-range strike systems. The IIP includes investments in long-range strike capabilities for the Navy, Army, and Air Force. Key components of these systems are missile systems such as Tomahawk Cruise Missiles, AGM-158C Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (LRASM), and JASSM-ER (Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile-Extended Range), as well as submarine capabilities including nuclear-powered submarines, unmanned systems and drones, and air force enhancements with the introduction of the F-35A Lightning II and the acquisition of advanced bombers or long-range strike aircraft. Additionally, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities are a significant focus. This strategy reflects Australia's commitment to deterring potential threats and strengthening its strategic deterrence in the

¹² "The United States–Australia Relationship" (fact sheet, US Department of State, 27 July 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

¹³ "The Melbourne Declaration—a partnership for the future" (joint statement, Prime Minister of Australia, 6 March 2024), <https://www.pm.gov.au/>.

Indo-Pacific.¹⁴ It also demonstrates the continued importance of defense innovation, science, and technology in bolstering Australia's defense capabilities.¹⁵

Furthermore, Australia will expand its regional engagement to encompass the entire Indo-Pacific area, rather than focusing solely on Southeast Asia. In the past, the threat of global terrorism drove Australia to strengthen ties with its regional neighbors. Now, the impetus for engagement arises from the international system, leaving Australia with few alternatives.

Australia's old wine is its continental defense principle, while the new bottle represents its broader involvement and defense linkages through AUKUS and its engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Australia has never stood alone and will not do so in the foreseeable future.

Neorealists argue that AUKUS is a strategic response by Western countries to China's growing power and influence in the Indo-Pacific. This trilateral defense agreement embodies the concept of balance, with governments forming coalitions to counter perceived threats from rising powers. AUKUS enhances military cooperation and strengthens deterrence capabilities in a region characterized by rising tensions and power rivalry. Neorealists see this alliance as a rational choice by member states to protect their security interests against a common adversary, highlighting the importance of power dynamics and security considerations in Indo-Pacific international relations.

Constructivists, on the other hand, emphasize the role of social constructs, identities, principles, and norms in shaping state behavior. They would view AUKUS not only as a counterbalance to China but also as a representation of shared values and beliefs among the three Western democracies. The alliance prioritizes democratic ideals, common security concerns, and a commitment to preserving a rules-based regional international order. From this perspective, AUKUS represents a collective identity among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, shaped by shared ideologies. Constructivists might also examine how AUKUS could influence regional norms and views, encouraging collaboration among like-minded nations and promoting a security narrative that upholds democratic principles.

¹⁴ 2024 *National Defence Strategy* (Canberra: Ministry of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

¹⁵ 2024 *Integrated Investment Program* (Canberra: Ministry of Defence, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/>.

The Two Key Implications for Indonesia

Based on the present and immediate future of Australian foreign and defense policy, there are two key implications for Indonesia, Australia's closest neighbor and strategic partner.

The China Factor in the Australia's Hedging Policy

While Australia maintains an ambivalent stance toward China, this does not mean the China factor should be overlooked. Australia's uncertain position has led to unfriendly actions toward China, signaling anxiety and confusion not only to China but to the world at large.¹⁶

As a partner and neighbor, Indonesia should recognize the complex role of the China factor in Australia's hedging policy. Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy might lead it to cooperate with China without reservations, potentially creating the perception that Indonesia supports China in the context of the US–China rivalry. This misunderstanding should be avoided to ensure healthy Australia–Indonesia bilateral relations.

The ASEAN Factor in Australia's Regional Engagement

Australia's regional engagement, particularly with ASEAN, has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy. The partnership between ASEAN and Australia, established for more than 50 years, continues to thrive, driven by strong people-to-people ties, addressing common global concerns, ensuring long-term progress and prosperity, and maintaining peace and security.¹⁷ (Albanese, 2024). During the Melbourne meeting, Australia expressed solidarity with the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal and pledged strong cooperation with Hanoi, aiming for a comprehensive strategic partnership.

However, despite this longstanding relationship, ASEAN has not ranked Australia as its number-one partner. The United States and China remain ASEAN's closest partners. Meanwhile, Australia also does not prioritize ASEAN as its top partner, with China holding that position. Therefore, while Australia's economic influence in the region may be limited, it holds a significant advantage in defense capabilities.¹⁸

Australia and ASEAN's commitment to advancing the ASEAN connectivity agenda, as stated in the Melbourne Declaration, indicates a deeper level of regional

¹⁶ Farneubun, "China's Rise and Its Implications."

¹⁷ "Joint Statement ASEAN-Australia Leaders' Vision Statement—partners for peace and prosperity" (joint statement, Prime Minister of Australia, 6 March 2024), <https://www.pm.gov.au/>.

¹⁸ Anthony Milner and Ron Huisken "Australia's push for closer ties with ASEAN is good strategy but complicated," *The Strategist*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

engagement. This commitment could create opportunities for expanding Indonesia–Australia bilateral relations as trust between the two grows.

However, Australia and Indonesia, as middle powers, behave differently. According to government documents, Australia favors a status quo/Lockean attitude, while Indonesia favors reformism/Kantianism. Australia’s status quo/Lockean attitude is evident in its efforts to maintain regional stability through the US-led liberal rules-based international order, emphasizing alliance, balance, competition, and rivalry. Conversely, Indonesia seeks to transform the region through cooperation, soft power, multilateralism, interdependency, and diplomacy.¹⁹ (Harijanto, 2024). Given these differing approaches, it is critical to maintain an open forum for dialogue while also building trust between the two nations.

Policy Recommendation for Indonesia in Managing Bilateral Security Relations with Australia

Two major policy recommendations for Indonesia–Australia relations emerge from the study of the evolution of Australia’s defense and foreign policy.

Adapt to Australia’s Evolving Profile

As Australia’s profile shifts from a friendly to a more uncertain neighbor, Indonesia must assess the impact on bilateral relations. Continuous monitoring of AUKUS’s progress is essential to understand its effects on Indonesia–Australia relations. Enhancing dialogue will help mitigate misperceptions between the two nations, and strengthening bilateral relations is crucial to maintaining the regional balance of power. Examples of enhanced collaboration include:

- greater cooperative military exercises;
- intelligence sharing; and
- capacity-building programs.

Indonesia’s relationship with Australia should be demonstrated through cooperation to promote maritime security. The joint military exercises of Elang AUSINDO, initiated in 2023 between the Royal Australian Air Force and the Indonesian Air Force, serve as an excellent example of increasing confidence-building measures. Future bilateral military exercises should be more in-depth and comprehensive.

¹⁹ Christian Harijanto, “Middle-power behaviours: Australia’s status-quoist/Lockean and Indonesia’s reformist/Kantian approaches to crises of legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2024): 40–57, <https://doi.org/>.

Strengthen ASEAN–Australia Relations

Improving Indonesia's bilateral relations with Australia should be coupled with fostering constructive ASEAN–Australia relations. As ASEAN's leader, Indonesia plays a crucial role in guiding the expansion of cooperation between ASEAN and Australia. Indonesia must support Australia's role in regional development through the ASEAN–Australia Cooperation Framework. Enhanced connectivity and capacity-building efforts between ASEAN and Australia will likely promote regional stability. Collaborative strategies could include:

- cooperation with regional navies and coast guards to address maritime concerns such as illicit activities, maritime disputes, and piracy; and
- broadening economic relations with ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific countries, reducing the overreliance on economic ties with China.

By adopting these recommendations, Indonesia can help ensure a balanced and stable regional environment while fostering strong, cooperative ties with Australia.

Conclusion

Current changes in Australian foreign and defense policies have been identified, and it is likely these changes will persist. Australia's geostrategic circumstances and historical factors, particularly its partnership with the United States, necessitate a refinement of its foreign and defense policies. There has been a shift away from forward defense toward closer alignment with the United States.

Australia is on a path to becoming even stronger allies with the United States, reinforcing its position as a rising regional power. This is particularly evident with increased cooperation through AUKUS with the United States and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Australia will broaden its regional participation to include the Indo-Pacific, rather than focusing solely on Southeast Asia.

These changes in Australian foreign and defense policies have significant implications for Indonesia, its closest neighbor and strategic partner. The China factor in Australia's hedging policy and the ASEAN factor in Australia's regional engagement both require careful consideration. Addressing these implications is crucial to avoiding misperceptions in Indonesia–Australia bilateral ties.

In conclusion, the evolution of Australia's foreign and defense policies reflects its strategic necessity to adapt to a dynamic and often volatile international landscape. By aligning more closely with the United States and engaging comprehensively with the Indo-Pacific region, Australia is positioning itself as a formidable regional power. This strategic realignment, while beneficial for Australia's security, presents both challenges and opportunities for Indonesia.

For Indonesia, understanding the nuances of Australia's hedging policy toward China and its regional engagements through ASEAN is crucial. By proactively addressing potential misperceptions and fostering deeper bilateral cooperation, Indonesia can strengthen its strategic partnership with Australia. This will not only enhance regional stability but also promote mutual interests in maintaining a rules-based international order.

The policy recommendations outlined emphasize the need for continuous dialogue, enhanced military cooperation, and robust ASEAN–Australia relations. As both nations navigate the complexities of regional geopolitics, their collaboration will be vital in shaping a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific future. 🌐

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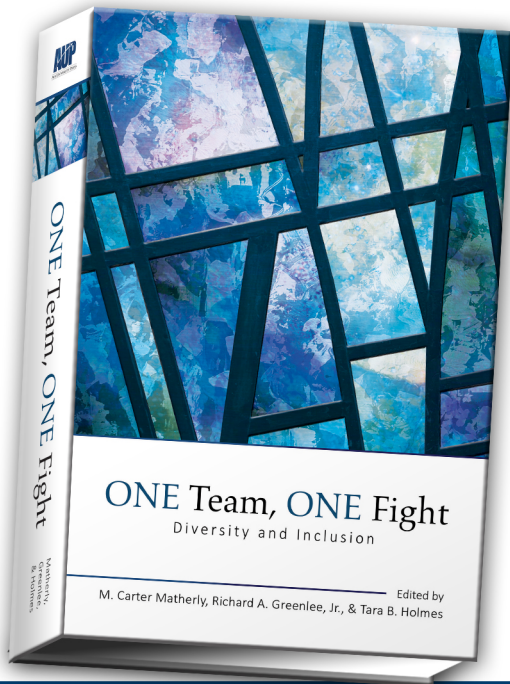
One Team, One Fight

In my view, it is diversity that makes America strong, and, indeed, the greatest country on earth. Likewise, the U.S. Air Force and Space Force are very diverse. . . . Today, virtually anyone who qualifies can join the U.S. military, which is both a strength and a challenge. The strength is more obvious; that is, we enjoy the talents and comradery of the best America has to offer. Not so obvious is the challenge of leading a force with various backgrounds, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. . . . I have never read a more comprehensive treatise on diversity, equity, and inclusion . . . [and] recommend [it] for all Airmen and Guardians.

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