

CHINA, AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY CHOICES AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Contents

Executive summary	02
01 Introduction	03
02 Traditions of Australian strategic and defence policy: From 'forward defence' to 'Defence of Australia' and back again	06
2.1 The era of 'forward defence': From 1945 to 1968	08
2.2 From 'forward defence' to 'Defence of Australia': 1969 to 1987	10
2.3 The post-Cold War era: From DoA to 'forward defence 2.0' and nodal defence	12
03 Sino-Australian relations and Australia's China choices	21
3.1 The Abbott government and the emergence of 'nodal' security and defence cooperation	23
3.2 Doubling down on the US alliance: The 2016 Defence White Paper	24
04 Navigating Australia's new China consensus	27
4.1 Alliances: Encouraging deep US enmeshment in the Indo-Pacific	28
4.2 Countering PRC interference	30
4.3 Avoiding dependency traps	31
4.4 The PRC's growing regional footprint	31
05 The shortcomings of Australia's current strategic and defence policy	34
5.1 Locating Australia's China choice	35
5.2 Preparing for a balance of power world	37
06 A way forward for Australian strategic policy	39
Acknowledgements	44
About the authors	45
References	46

Executive summary

This paper assesses Australia's current security and defence policy trajectory and examines what strategies Australia might pursue to serve its interests in the fractured and complex regional order emerging in the Indo-Pacific strategic space.

In making this assessment, the paper traces the Sino-Australian relationship, identifying the main rationales for Canberra's decision to pivot away from the hedge posture it pursued under prime ministers John Howard through to Tony Abbott.

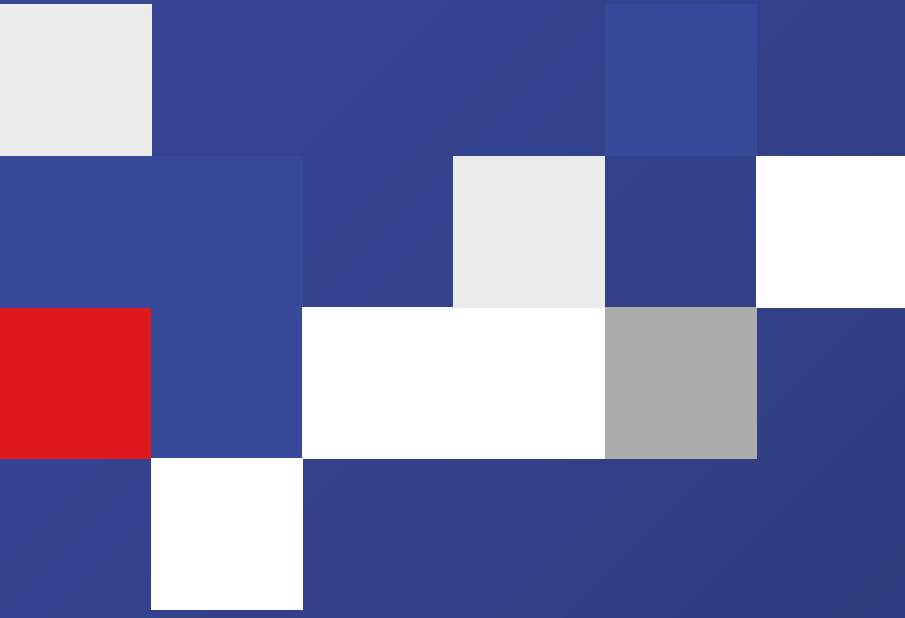
The paper then re-examines Australia's past defence and security policy postures, focusing especially on notions of 'forward defence' and the 'Defence of Australia', but also incorporating newer attempts at regional coalition-building such as networked security and middle power diplomacy.

The paper argues that Australia's current strategic policy – as encapsulated by the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update – has resulted in a confused approach, both in conceptual and capability terms, to achieve deterrence as the central objective of Australia's defence posture. This poses two puzzles for Australia's strategic and defence policy:

- First, there is a disconnect between adopting an Australian forward defence posture without the uncontested primacy of the US that enabled such an approach in Asia during the post-Cold War era, and the assurance that US military-security commitments to the Indo-Pacific will continue. In effect, Australia is making a risky bet in embracing a strategy that is contingent on factors well beyond its control including exogenous developments in the US- People's Republic of China (PRC) relationship as well as American domestic politics.

- Second, while the Morrison government endorsed US strategic aims in the context of an ambitious Indo-Pacific security landscape, Australian capabilities for the foreseeable future will be incapable of providing anything other than general support to its main security ally. Hence any claims about an Australian contribution to deterrence – either by denial or punishment – are only credible if those contributions are actually useful to the United States in the first place.

To resolve these puzzles, this paper identifies a hybrid Australian approach combining the most useful aspects of the Defence of Australia tradition alongside its past emphasis on regional engagement and integration. Such an approach leaves Australia less vulnerable to either entrapment or isolation and provides it with significant deterrent capabilities in its immediate region. Fundamentally this approach will also make Australia a more useful ally to the United States because it facilitates realistic burden-sharing, rather than demonstrations of Australian commitment to US strategic goals that may be more symbolic than militarily valuable.



01

Introduction

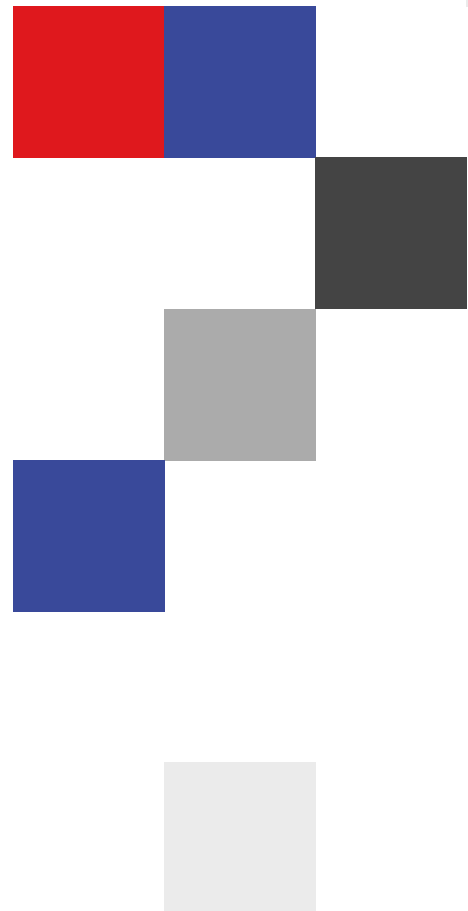
It is axiomatic that Australia's debates over its security and defence policy have traditionally differed over details rather than the root causes of the challenges Australia has faced.¹ The question of how Australia should seek to navigate great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is no exception, and played only a small part in the lead-up to the May 2022 federal election. Both major parties were comfortable with the position that an increasingly muscular People's Republic of China (PRC) was a threat to Australian interests, as well as to the normative order underpinned by decades of US hegemony.² What few differences there were between the two parties pertained mainly to scope and tone. Seeking to portray itself as the most trustworthy steward of Australian security and defence policy, the Morrison government stressed the importance of robust capacity-building in defence; deepening Australia's security ties with the United States to support its emerging Indo-Pacific security strategy; and leveraging minilateralism with likeminded partners via frameworks such as AUKUS, the Five Eyes network and the Quad. The Morrison government also indicated that it would have continued to vocally criticise PRC coercive behaviour if it had been returned to power.³ For its part, the Labor opposition of Anthony Albanese endorsed the broad policy approach of the Morrison platform, but with more emphasis on non-military levers such as diplomacy and aid.⁴ This included attempts to restore some civility to the Canberra-Beijing relationship, and a more concerted effort to engage with vulnerable actors in areas like the South Pacific in ways that were sympathetic to their security and development concerns.

In other words, both the Morrison government and Labor opposition – now the government under Albanese – have regarded competition with the PRC as largely inevitable, and US power as the primary vehicle for arresting PRC ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. But by itself that says little about the various policy pathways that might help achieve such a goal, especially as continued deep US engagement in the region is by no means assured. Since the future shape of regional security environments can be difficult to ascertain with accuracy, Australian policy must be as adaptable as possible to be able to respond to future unforeseen challenges.⁵ And given that, making the assumption that there are no alternatives to Australia committing to support US balancing efforts across the region reveals a potential entrapment dilemma.⁶ Put simply, American expectations that Australia will always contribute to its chosen policy path leave little room for Australia to manoeuvre should US strategy diverge from Australian interests. However, the more obvious alternatives are equally problematic. Charting a middle course may create a neutrality trap whereby Australia is effectively isolated by competing great powers. And acquiring the wrong type of military capabilities, such as those focused on force projection, might leave Australia vulnerable and without an effective deterrent if it is cut adrift from regional integration structures through its alliance choices.

Since the future shape of regional security environments can be difficult to ascertain with accuracy, Australian policy must be as adaptable as possible to be able to respond to future unforeseen challenges. And given that, making the assumption that there are no alternatives to Australia committing to support US balancing efforts across the region reveals a potential entrapment dilemma. Put simply, American expectations that Australia will always contribute to its chosen policy path leave little room for Australia to manoeuvre should US strategy diverge from Australian interests.

In this paper we assess Australia's current security and defence policy trajectory and attempt to identify whether there are other strategies Australia might pursue to serve its interests in the more fractured and complex regional order emerging in the Indo-Pacific strategic space. We do so in three parts. First, we re-examine Australia's defence and security policy positions from 1945 to 2013, focusing especially on the notions of 'forward defence' and the 'Defence of Australia', but also incorporating more recent attempts at regional coalition-building such as networked security and middle power diplomacy. Second, we survey the trajectory of the Sino-Australian relationship from 2013 to 2022, identifying the main rationales for Canberra's decision to pivot away from the hedge posture that it had previously pursued under the prime ministerships of John Howard, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. In examining how Australia's narrative of 'pushing back' against the PRC, set in place during the coalition governments of Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison, has been firmly located in the context of the US alliance, we ask whether this is in fact the only option Australia could pursue. Third, we identify a hybrid Australian approach that combines the most useful aspects of the Defence of Australia tradition alongside its past emphasis on regional engagement and integration. We conclude that such an approach leaves Australia less vulnerable to either entrapment or isolation, as well as providing it with significant deterrent capabilities in its immediate region. Fundamentally this will also make Australia a more useful ally to the United States, given that it facilitates realistic burden-sharing rather than a demonstration of Australian commitment to US strategic goals that may be more symbolic than militarily valuable.

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A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of squares in various shades of blue, white, and grey, with the number '02' in a large, white, outlined font to the right. The background is a solid dark blue.

02

Traditions of Australian strategic and defence policy: From ‘forward defence’ to ‘Defence of Australia’ and back again

A common feature of attempts to identify traditions in Australian strategic and defence policy encompasses specific assumptions about *what* type of international order Australia would like to see, *where* security threats to Australia emanate from, *what* contributions Australia can or should make to deter and respond to such challenges, and *which* allies and partners Australia should engage with. Put another way, Australian thinkers have focused on the ‘first order’ puzzle of how to maintain an international order in which the United States remains the dominant actor as well as ‘second order’ questions of how Australia can maximise its position in that order, and where threats to its security might come from.

Significant contributions to the literature on Australian foreign policy that have grappled with these issues have utilised the notion of traditions or cognates (‘currents of thought’, for instance) as a heuristic device to explain the particularities of the Australian case⁷ and to explain Australian foreign policy through a tripartite division between ‘traditionalist’, ‘seclusionist’ and ‘internationalist’ themes.⁸ There have also been attempts to map specific Australian Labor Party (ALP) and Liberal Party foreign and security policy ‘traditions’.⁹ These various contributions are also consistent with what might be called cultural approaches to foreign and defence policy that posit an interconnected set of values and beliefs among political elites, guiding and shaping their conception of national interests and of national security threats or challenges.¹⁰

Across both sides of the political divide, what Kevin Rudd once called the ‘bedrock’ assumption of post-1945 Australian strategic and defence policy has been that major strategic threats to national security could ‘arise as a consequence of distant

disruption of the global balance of power’ thus placing a premium on alliances with ‘great and powerful friends’.¹¹ Only by ‘choosing to work with more powerful allies to help ensure a satisfactory global balance’, this perspective contended, could Australia serve its own national security interests.¹² Unsurprisingly, this reliance on great power allies has produced not only debate about the dependency of Australia for security on its great power protector but also reveals a consistent theme in which Australian thinkers have linked questions of national security to the health of the international system itself.¹³

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The connection between Australian security and the health of the international order has led some to suggest a broad ‘realist’ tradition in Australian strategic thinking that exhibits three major traits: a preoccupation with the peculiarities of the country’s ‘international position’ (for example size, isolation, wealth, population, culture); a ‘systemic pessimism’ about the longevity of global stability; and strategic, economic and political pragmatism.¹⁴ The realist tradition has often, but not always, been shared by both major political parties. Indeed, the endurance of support for



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the US alliance, as security analyst Rod Lyon has argued, has been because it appeared to resolve both the ‘first order puzzle’ of ‘what sort of world order we would most like to see’ and the ‘second order puzzles’ of ‘how to maximise Australian influence’ and stave off ‘proximate threats’ to the country’s security.¹⁵

Hence while there has been a large degree of consensus on the first order puzzle – Australia’s desire to see the continuation of an international order in which the United States remains the most influential if not the predominant actor – there has been considerably more debate regarding the second order puzzles. This is where key distinctions between Australian strategic and defence policy traditions can be found, and are most relevant to the current environment in which an assertive PRC is increasingly challenging the US for primacy. On the first order question of what type of international order Australia would like to see, each of the traditions has shared the objective of seeking a global and regional power balance that favoured the United States. Each, however, has sought distinct approaches to the second order challenges of maximising Australian influence on that balance and distinct perceptions as to the ‘proximate threats’ to Australian security.

2.1 The era of ‘forward defence’: From 1945 to 1968

Defence and intelligence analyst Hugh White notes that the ‘catch-22’ of Australian post-1945 strategic and defence policy has been the recognition that while ‘we could not defend ourselves’ and therefore ‘must depend on our great allies’, ‘we could not depend on our great allies, so we must try to defend ourselves’.¹⁶ The first effort to square this circle was that of ‘forward defence’, an approach that rested on the assumption that the prospects for Australian security would be determined at the *global* level. This was informed by the perceived lessons of the Second World War – the fall of Singapore in 1942 in particular – for Australian security. The failure of Britain’s ‘Singapore strategy’ upon which Australian security had rested compelled Canberra to think more deeply about what ‘we could do for ourselves until help arrived’ from our ‘great and powerful friends’.¹⁷ Indeed, the fall of Singapore, as John Curtin’s biographer David Day noted, meant that successive Australian governments’ strategy of ‘defending Australia from forward islands’ was now ‘bankrupt in the face of surprisingly formidable Japanese power’ and that henceforth ‘Australia itself was the only strategic base’ from which ‘an eventual offensive to push them back from whence they came’ could be mustered.¹⁸

This imperative emerged again after 1945 as Britain decided to devolve responsibility for ‘empire defence’ on a regional basis to Commonwealth dominions. It was in this context that the ALP government of Prime Minister Ben Chifley (1945–1949) attempted to ‘construct a post-war Australian defence policy in which the role of the Australian Defence Force was to be the defence of Australia’s own *region*’.¹⁹ How this was to be achieved, however, remained a dilemma. Due to realities of geography and relative power, Australia, as an assessment of the country’s strategic position by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in February 1946 put it, was ‘unable to defend itself unaided against a major power’.²⁰ To defend Australia entailed not only that its forces ‘cooperate with those of other nations’ but that their employment would ‘be governed by considerations wider than those of a purely regional nature’.²¹

The intensification of the Cold War, and the electoral victory of the Liberal Party of Robert Menzies in the December 1949 federal election, provided a further spur to the logic of what would become ‘forward defence’. The perceived deterioration of the global and regional security environment by 1950, with the establishment of the PRC in October 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25 1950, reinforced for Canberra the connection between global and Australian security. This was clearly expressed in a June 1950 report of the Defence Committee that stated that ‘Soviet policy and aims are a threat to all free nations’ and that Moscow might choose to ‘engage in land war at any time’. In such an event, the report noted, the ‘fate of Australia would depend on the result of conflicts’ well beyond Australia’s immediate region and make the ‘correct balance between the requirements of local defence and the contribution to decisive overseas theatres, on which the security of Australia depends’ essential.²²

Throughout the remainder of the 1950s Beijing was often portrayed as ‘the principal collaborator of the leaders of world communism’. In the words of the 1953 *A Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy*, Beijing was bent on ‘pursuing aggressive policies, designed to eliminate Western influence’ throughout Southeast Asia and ‘to bring the whole area under communist control’.²³ With the outbreak of a global war it was expected that ‘Communist China’ would over-run Southeast Asia, particularly ‘Indo-China’ as a means of outflanking

the United States’ ‘island chain (Japan, Formosa and the Philippines) and tie up Allied Forces both there and in Australia’.²⁴ Southeast Asia was therefore identified as both Australia’s ‘primary’ area of strategic priority, and the area in which the country could make the maximum possible contribution to US and British efforts to prevent such an outcome.²⁵

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s three ‘lines’ of defence were therefore envisaged by Canberra: ‘(1) support for the defence of the Indo-Chinese mainland; (2) should this fail, the implementation of contingency plans to defend Malaya; and (3) consideration for the immediate defence of the Northwest approaches to Australia’.²⁶ Canberra’s commitment to such a posture was as much driven by the desire to keep *both* the UK and the US engaged in Southeast Asia as it was by apprehensions about the spread of communist influence throughout the region.²⁷

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However, by the early 1960s, with the intensification of Indonesia’s *Konfrantasi* with Malaya, the deepening American commitment to Vietnam and Australia’s own concerns about Sukarno’s potential designs on New Guinea, the limitations of Canberra’s defence posture became more obvious. Put simply, forward defence commitments to combat communist infiltration in Southeast Asia were arguably less pressing than the more immediate possibility of conflict with Indonesia.²⁸ Each of these challenges presented alliance management dilemmas for Canberra, with both major allies’ preferences not only at odds with each other but also with Australia’s. Britain focused on Indonesia and what it believed was its ‘Hitler-like expansionist dictator’, Sukarno, while avoiding involvement in US efforts in Vietnam. The US, meanwhile, encouraged Canberra ‘to apply only the minimum degree of force in Confrontation ...

to avoid driving Sukarno further into the hands of the Chinese, while calling for Australia's support in what the United States saw as the crucial theatre of operations, Vietnam'.²⁹ Nonetheless, Australia attempted to accommodate both allies, committing military forces (along with New Zealand and Britain) to the Federation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1966 and in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972.³⁰

2.2 From 'forward defence' to 'Defence of Australia': 1969 to 1987

The era of forward defence endured until the early 1970s when strategic policy shifted to be increasingly framed by the concept of 'self-reliance' and the doctrine of 'Defence of Australia' (DoA). The DoA concept, as Hugh White notes, was premised on the assumption that 'the principal function' of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and 'the core basis for choosing its capabilities' was 'the defence of the Australian continent from direct military attack, and in particular the ability to do so against any credible level of attack *without* relying on the combat forces of our allies'.³¹ Although this shift was not embedded in defence planning and strategy until the 1986 Dibb Report, the thinking behind it was visible as early as the 1968 'Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy' paper, which had recognised that Australia would soon have to

prepare for developments 'which directly threaten our territorial interests and which we could not reasonably rely on receiving help from our allies'.³²

The need for such a shift was reinforced by both domestic and external developments, punctuated by Britain's announcement of the retreat of its defence commitments from 'East of Suez' in 1968, and President Richard Nixon's enunciation of the Guam Doctrine in 1969. These developments indicated that Australia could expect a declining appetite on the part of its two major allies – and in Britain's case, the declining capability – to shoulder the burden of forward defence in Southeast Asia.³³ Given these changed circumstances, the 'basic concern of Australian policy makers was that in disputes which did not directly involve US interests' Canberra could not be assured of American assistance.³⁴

These developments indicated that Australia could expect a declining appetite on the part of its two major allies – and in Britain's case, the declining capability – to shoulder the burden of forward defence in Southeast Asia.



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The election of the first ALP federal government since Chifley's under Gough Whitlam in 1972 also provided further impetus to the re-evaluation of strategic and defence policy. As leader of the opposition, Whitlam had exhorted the government of Prime Minister Harold Holt in 1968 to 'welcome the opportunity and accept the responsibility to cast its own plans to accord with the circumstances' that had followed Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez commitments.³⁵ Whitlam's perception of the 'circumstances' that confronted Australia included an appreciation that the PRC was emerging as an influential and rising power in Asia – a position reinforced by Nixon's rapprochement with Beijing in 1972 and the gradual engagement of the PRC with the international system and its institutions.³⁶

The Sino-US rapprochement, coupled with the overthrow in 1967 of Sukarno's 'neutralist' regime by General Suharto and the consolidation of his US-aligned 'New Order' regime, significantly reduced the perceived strategic risks confronting Australia by the early 1970s. This theme was evident in the 'Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy' paper of June 1973 which asserted that the core factors that had given rise to forward defence, such as the threat of overt or covert 'communist' subversion of states in Southeast Asia, had now receded.³⁷ Moreover, pointing to the US pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union and the opening to the PRC, the paper stated that there was now 'no specific requirement for Australia to develop military forces for a direct contribution to the global balance between the major powers' as the 'operation and maintenance' of that balance was 'essentially a matter for the Great Powers themselves'.³⁸

In essence, the relatively benign strategic circumstances in which Australia found itself in by the mid-1970s – characterised by continued American primacy in Asia and the attenuation of the PRC's revolutionary behaviour – permitted successive governments during the 1980s to restructure strategic and defence policy towards a more self-reliant posture. The Fraser government's 1976 Defence White Paper, for instance, while noting with concern the potential impact of the 'massive build-up undertaken by the USSR in both its nuclear and conventional armaments' on the global balance, nonetheless stated that for 'practical purposes... the requirements and scope for Australian defence

activity are limited essentially' to 'our adjacent maritime areas; the South West Pacific countries and territories; Papua New Guinea; Indonesia; and the South East Asian region'. The paper not only judged that the 'primary requirement' in the emerging strategic environment was for 'increased self-reliance' but that 'we no longer base our policy on the expectation that Australia's Navy or Army or Air Force will be sent abroad to fight as part of some other nation's force, supported by it'.³⁹

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The White Paper had three important effects on how self-reliance was translated into policy.⁴⁰ First, by the late 1970s, the only strategic risk Australia needed to prepare for was a 'low-level contingency' emanating from Indonesia.⁴¹ Second, a benign strategic environment also assisted Australia in remaining a valued US ally, with access to US intelligence and technology, 'despite offering so little in return' in terms of direct military contributions to alliance military operations.⁴² This was something that arguably made the governments of Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-1991) sensitive to the need for Australia to maintain support for the early-warning and detection role played by the defence and intelligence joint facilities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.⁴³ As defence and security expert Des Ball noted, this meant the 'importance of the US alliance derived from entirely different grounds' than in the past, namely 'that only the United States could provide Australia with the intelligence, defence technology and professional military expertise which would enable Australia to independently handle regional threats'.⁴⁴ The third key effect was that 'self-reliance' recognised that benign strategic circumstances could change

if an Asian power developed power projection capabilities to directly threaten Australia. This provided a ‘rationale for maintaining some capabilities... that were more potent than required for low-level contingencies’ potentially emanating from Indonesia.⁴⁵

In combination, these factors contributed to the eventual implementation of the DoA strategy in the mid-to-late 1980s. The 1986 Dobb Report, and the subsequent 1987 Defence White Paper informed by it, was structured around a ‘strategy of denial’ through which ‘Australia would aim to prevent hostile forces reaching our shores by intercepting them’ in the Air-Sea gap that surrounds the continent.⁴⁶ The 1987 Defence White Paper thus definitively shifted Australian strategic and defence strategy away from the post-1945 emphasis on force projection to support great power interests in distant regions toward ‘preventing an enemy projecting power against us’.⁴⁷ Significantly, parallel to this reenvisioned approach to defence strategy, the ALP governments of prime ministers Bob Hawke (1983-1991) and Paul Keating (1991-1996) oversaw a greater emphasis in Australian foreign policy on regional engagement with Asian neighbours. Here, Australia demonstrated a greater willingness to engage with, and adopt a leadership role in, various regional multilateral forums as means of finding security *in* Asia rather than *from* it.⁴⁸

2.3 The post-Cold War era: From DoA to ‘forward defence 2.0’ and nodal defence

The end of the Cold War presented the DoA concept with a range of challenges. While the end of superpower confrontation undoubtedly improved Australia’s security environment, it also removed the strategic logic that Asia’s great power relations had been structured around. A classified update to Australia’s strategic policy, endorsed by the federal government in 1989, had already noted that ‘change in the familiar global order will mean greater strategic uncertainty elsewhere, including in Australia’s region. A generally safer world does not necessarily mean a more tranquil region’.⁴⁹

“ The end of the Cold War presented the DoA concept with a range of challenges. While the end of superpower confrontation undoubtedly improved Australia’s security environment, it also removed the strategic logic that Asia’s great power relations had been structured around. ”

Two sources of uncertainty arose during this time. The first concerned the potential for domestic instability in Australia’s region, while the second was the emerging shape of great power relations.⁵⁰ It was the PRC’s trajectory that ultimately appeared to be the key to Asia’s future order. Kim Beazley, Minister for Defence under Hawke, remarked in 1988 that although the PRC was not yet capable of challenging US predominance in Asia, even the continued modest success of its economic reinvigoration would ‘change the balance of power among the states of Asia’.⁵¹

Canberra attempted to respond to both of these over-the-horizon challenges. In the early 1990s Australia deployed the ADF in a range of non-combat related commitments such as the UN Transition Assistance Group in Namibia, the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia and the American-led Unified Task Force in Somalia.⁵² This involvement raised questions about ‘whether its [ADF’s] capability priorities should be influenced by the operations it was actually undertaking’ rather than for the type of scenario that had been envisaged as the *raison d’être* for the DoA.⁵³ The prospect that an Asian power might translate economic growth and development into sufficient military capabilities to challenge American primacy in the region also challenged the underlying assumptions of the DoA on two counts. First, the DoA assumed a benign strategic environment in which the US remained the dominant power. Second, the ‘self-reliant’ posture of the DoA assumed the continued ability of Australia to maintain a technological edge, largely through access to US capabilities, over potential Asian military adversaries.⁵⁴

As the post-Cold War strategic landscape took shape, the Keating government increasingly paid more attention to the future of major power relations. Its view was framed by the Department of Defence's December 1993 Strategic Review, which noted that while 'traditional defence considerations such as military power, geography and threat perceptions' remained important, in the emergent order in the Asia-Pacific, 'economic relationships will provide foundations for security relationships'.⁵⁵ The document asserted that although 'China has the potential to emerge in the long term as a strategic rival' of the US through continued economic growth and investment in PLA modernisation and power projection capabilities, the 'likelihood that economic tensions and divergent growth patterns will spill over into military confrontation is not high' as 'complex trade and investment interdependencies that prompt tensions also prompt growth, and therefore create a mutual interest in ensuring that tensions are contained'.⁵⁶ Australia nonetheless needed to sustain the alliance relationship with the US via demonstrating its continued value to Washington through greater consideration of 'burden sharing' activities which, in turn, would 'maintain US strategic links with this part of the world' and contribute to regional stability.⁵⁷

These themes were revisited in the 1994 Defence White Paper. It began with the straightforward judgement that 'the likelihood of armed attack on Australia will depend on strategic developments in Asia and the Pacific, and particularly in Asia itself'.⁵⁸ However, it pointedly noted that the PRC's trajectory, and regional responses to it, would define the strategic environment as Beijing is 'likely to be the most powerful new influence on the strategic affairs of our wider region' over the next fifteen years. This was due to the fact that by that time its economy 'will become the largest in Asia and the second largest in the world'.⁵⁹ As with the previous year's Strategic Review, the White Paper underscored that continued economic growth would allow Beijing 'to increase its military capabilities' and enable it to more readily 'pursue its strategic objectives'.⁶⁰ Doubts about the PRC's intentions for the use of such capabilities could be mitigated not only through the 'sense of shared strategic and security interests' amongst the major powers of the Asia-Pacific, generated by the economic and trade focused regionalism, such as the multilateralism of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), but also by continued US engagement and forward presence in the region.⁶¹



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“ The Keating government’s relative optimism about the strategic, economic and security benefits of regional economic integration was thus balanced by a clear belief in the continued operation of the ‘American pacifier’.”

The Keating government's relative optimism about the strategic, economic and security benefits of regional economic integration was thus balanced by a clear belief in the continued operation of the 'American pacifier'.⁶² Australia thus welcomed the Nye Report of 1995 that committed to halting reductions in US forward-based forces at 100,000 personnel and signalled an enduring US commitment to security in Asia.⁶³ This reliance on the US alliance as an ultimate hedge against the future deterioration of Australia's strategic environment would remain the *sine qua non* of Australian strategic and defence policy well into the 21st century.

After John Howard's victory in the March 1996 federal election, the new Coalition government demonstrated some continuity with the strategic assessments of its predecessor. In April, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, in one of his first major addresses, noted that while 'the Australian government does not see any direct security threat to Australia', much would depend on how the relationships between the regions' great powers evolved.⁶⁴ Downer also indicated that these relationships could be shaped by the 'spill over' of long-standing regional disputes such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea as well as the new dynamics of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation and international terrorism. Downer reaffirmed the necessity of the US presence for regional security, asserting that the US was an 'overwhelmingly a positive force for regional stability' through its extensive security relationships and economic engagement throughout the region.⁶⁵

The following year, however, the Howard government's Strategic Review and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) White Paper 'quietly introduced a new way of seeing Australia's strategic interests and objectives'.⁶⁶ The 'Strategic Review' defined the Asia-Pacific as the region in which Australia's 'principal strategic interests' were concentrated. This was contrasted to the secondary place of Asia in Australia's Cold War strategic calculations whereby Australia 'defined its region of primary strategic interest as Southeast Asia and the South Pacific' and 'strategic events in Asia beyond that closer region affected our security only through their consequences for the global balance'.⁶⁷ This was also contrasted with the more truncated version of Australia's 'primary area of strategic interests' defined in the 1987 Defence White Paper that enshrined DoA. Australia's post-Cold War strategic interests, the Strategic Review maintained, 'are *directly engaged throughout the wider Asia-Pacific region*, because events beyond our nearer neighbourhood could have direct effects within it. This means that with the end of the Cold War our strategic interests are more focused on our region, but our strategic focus has expanded to cover the whole Asia-Pacific'.⁶⁸ The DFAT White Paper, meanwhile, asserted that the US would remain the 'world's single most powerful country' and 'continue to be an indispensable element in any configuration for peace, security and economic growth in the world'.⁶⁹

From the Howard government's perspective, the ANZUS alliance was crucial to ensure strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific. 'For both parties', the Strategic Review noted, 'the regional aspect has become *more* significant in recent years, as the US-Australia alliance has come to be seen by both sides as an important element in the post-Cold War strategic architecture in the Asia-Pacific region, helping to sustain US strategic engagement in the Western Pacific'.⁷⁰ Yet Australia's subsequent intervention in East Timor in 1999 demonstrated both the 'limits of US assistance in regional contingencies' and the Howard government's greater appetite to lead interventions in what it judged to be in Australia's direct neighbourhood.⁷¹ Indeed, the East Timor intervention, in part justified on humanitarian grounds, suggested to some a 'forward defence 2.0' concept based on a 'global-regional' conception of security in which Australia would seek a strategic posture and defence capabilities that could enable Australia to intervene *before* threats could directly threaten the continent.⁷²

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The events of 9/11 and the Howard government's enthusiastic embrace of the 'global war on terrorism' (GWOT) – including the 'coalition of the willing' invasion of Iraq – flowed easily from this global-regional conception of security. Certainly, much of the Howard government's rhetoric after 9/11 stressed that 'Australia's geopolitical identity' as 'a trade dependent maritime state in the Anglo-American tradition' meant that 'Australia's destiny' lay in its 'history as a liberal democracy and in the web of cultural and trading links that give Australia both its national identity and international purpose'.⁷³ Howard therefore emphasised not only



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interest- and strategy-based arguments for the intensification of Australia's post-9/11 alignment with the US, but coupled them with assertions 'often couched in the emotionally infused language of a special relationship, protecting shared values and a way of life, and loyally helping a friend in need'.⁷⁴ Each of these commitments was driven by the convergence of a number of enduring themes in Australian strategic policy: the linkages drawn between global and Australian security, and payment of alliance costs in pursuit of maintaining trust and credibility in the eyes of the US.⁷⁵

Yet the centrality of the US alliance in the Howard government's strategic and defence policy has tended to obscure the growing emphasis in his government's final years in office on emerging security-oriented 'minilateralism' in Asia. This, in part, was driven by a 'cumulative sense of disappointment and the growing sense of the salience of existing divisions' within broader Asian regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).⁷⁶ Of particular note here is Australia's participation with Japan and the US in the Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD). Originally begun in 2003 as a consultative group to deal with the challenges of North Korea's nuclearisation, by 2006 it had been upgraded to a ministerial group

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which focused unabashedly on the PRC at its first meeting in Sydney in March 2006.⁷⁷ Although the George W. Bush administration had originally viewed the TSD as a means of encouraging 'greater involvement from its regional allies to help fight the 'war on terror' and stem nuclear proliferation', Australia and Japan, unsurprisingly, saw TSD as a means to encourage continued US regional strategic involvement.⁷⁸

This objective was consistent with the trajectory of Australian strategic and defence policy after the end of the Cold War. But it also suggested the emergence of a potential new approach of 'nodal defence' to Australian strategic and defence policy. Under the traditional 'hub-and-spokes'

model of the US alliance system in Asia, functional specialisation revolved around different threats. Because each member of the alliance system disagreed over which threat deserved priority, each bilateral alliance making up the system tended to focus on different threats. Nodal defence, in contrast, represented a hybrid approach as ‘some, but not all, regional partners agree on which threat matters most’ and to ‘address different threats, they organize themselves pragmatically through various configurations (i.e., bilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral) and specific functional roles (i.e., security guarantors, regional hubs, local hubs, and niche specialists)’.⁷⁹ This approach, as we note below, gathered even greater steam in the post-Howard period.

For the Howard government, then, the seemingly unchallenged position of the US at the top of the international pecking order appeared to confirm the view that the rise of the PRC could effectively be ‘managed’. Symbolic of this desire to balance the centrality of the US for Australia’s security and strategic interests with the emerging centrality of the PRC as a result of its economic prosperity were the almost simultaneous visits of presidents George W. Bush and Hu Jintao to Australia in 2003, addressing joint sittings of the federal parliament within days of one other.⁸⁰ Indeed, Howard was to state in August 2004 that while Australia was Washington’s most reliable ally, this would not prevent the development of what he termed an ‘economic strategic partnership’ with Beijing. For Howard, the PRC provided a great opportunity for Australia to become a ‘reliable supplier of commodities that would fuel the PRC’s future economic modernisation and growth’.⁸¹

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This ‘partnership’, as Howard often stated, was predicated on Beijing accepting Australia’s enduring commitment to the ANZUS alliance.⁸² It also seemed to be supported by the non-adversarial approach to Beijing that the Bush Jnr administration had pivoted to after 9/11, which paid short-term dividends when Beijing acquiesced to US military intervention in neighbouring Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, while still cooperating on the Six Party Talks regarding North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.⁸³ This rapprochement of sorts was in both Washington’s and Beijing’s immediate interests. The US certainly did not need – or want – confrontational relations with the PRC, given that it remained strategically and militarily preoccupied in the Middle East. The PRC, for its part, was still several decades away from being able to pose any genuine military challenge to the US.⁸⁴

“ The Howard government’s interest in minilaterals such as the TSD was therefore also broadly consistent with its prevailing approach to the ‘China challenge’. In sum, it sought to balance the economic benefits accruing to Australia from the PRC’s rise against the potential risks of Chinese assertiveness through a deeply engaged US presence and cooperation with other US allies.”

The Howard government’s interest in minilaterals such as the TSD was therefore also broadly consistent with its prevailing approach to the ‘China challenge’. In sum, it sought to balance the economic benefits accruing to Australia from the PRC’s rise against the potential risks of Chinese assertiveness through a deeply engaged US presence and cooperation with other US allies. The TSD was thus emblematic of a contingent form of allied cooperation given that the potential Chinese rival to the three allies was ‘not yet so threatening as to preclude confidence-building and other forms of cooperative security behaviour developing between the triad and strategic rivals’ and that Australia and Japan were ‘still able to

exercise sufficient independence from their hegemonic guardian to attempt defusing security dilemmas without risking alliance defection'.⁸⁵ As such it is difficult to disagree with Hugh White's assessment of the Howard's government's attempt to balance Australian reliance on the US alliance in the strategic and security domains with increasing economic interdependence with the PRC: 'Howard's approach [...] worked very well during his period in office because at that time the strategic rivalry between America and the PRC remained largely latent'.⁸⁶

Despite embracing many of the 'liberal internationalist' themes of previous ALP governments, the Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard governments (2007 to 2013) exhibited a much sharper edge when it came to strategic policy, especially in relation to potential shifts in Asia's geopolitical landscape. This focus was driven by Australian concerns about America's perceived decline, especially given the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC) on the US economy. These had also gained traction as the PRC began to invest heavily in a major military modernisation program and demonstrated growing confidence in asserting its claims over maritime territory in Southeast and Northeast Asia.

This new focus was clearly evident in Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper which saw stable great power relations in Asia as the key to Australia's future security prospects. It was a hybrid formulation, drawing on previous iterations of both forward defence and DoA. While the White Paper restated Canberra's enduring linkage of global and regional balances of power to Australia's national security, it expressed doubts about American staying power that had been absent from Australian official policy documents for decades. It also featured some direct language about the potential strategic and security challenges from the PRC – referring to the PRC's lack of transparency as a potential trigger for regional instability – as well as a robust commitment to building up Australia's long-range maritime strike and intelligence collection capabilities including the slated construction of eleven new submarines.⁸⁷ Importantly, these commitments were also based on a judgement about the future of US primacy. As the White Paper put it, Australia's strategic outlook would be characterised by 'changed strategic power

relativities and an increasingly 'multipolar' global order, driven by changing patterns of underlying economic power and political influence'.⁸⁸

While the document noted that 'no other power will have the military, economic or strategic capacity to challenge US global primacy over the period covered by this White Paper' (that is, to 2030), it acknowledged:

... the United States might find itself preoccupied and stretched in some parts of the world such that its ability to shift attention and project power into other regions, when it needs to, is constrained. This is likely to cause the United States to seek active assistance from regional allies and partners, including Australia, in crises, or more generally in the maintenance of stable regional security arrangements.⁸⁹

In contrast, the White Paper noted, the PRC would be 'likely to be able to continue to afford its foreshadowed core military modernisation' as it looked on-track 'to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy around 2020'. Over the longer term, this 'could affect the strategic reach and global postures of the major powers'. Here, the major departure of the 2009 White Paper from that of its immediate predecessor was that although it did not explicitly forecast 'China's likely future geostrategic behaviour', its identification of 'the importance of the Sino-US relationship to the strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific' implied that 'Sino-US conflict could not be ruled out as the cause of future regional instability'.⁹⁰ Indeed, as the document pointed out, 'any future that might see a potential contraction of US strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region would adversely affect Australian interests, regional stability and global security'.⁹¹ Thus, Australia's anxiety about the PRC's future geostrategic behaviour was heightened by uncertainty about the shifting relativities of power between its main alliance partner and its leading trading partner.



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In terms of Australia's core strategic interests, the White Paper bluntly noted that Australia's ability to defend itself from armed attack was explicitly linked to 'the stability of the wider Asia-Pacific region, which stretches from North Asia to the Eastern Indian Ocean'.⁹² This constituted a geographically-determined hierarchy of strategic interests that reflected 'both relative priorities for action from a defence planning perspective, and our realistic capacity for influence through the employment of military power'.⁹³ These objectives were 'interlocking' as 'a stable rules-based global security order increases the likelihood of strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region, which in turn makes more likely the maintenance of a secure immediate neighbourhood and ultimately a secure Australia'.⁹⁴

In reaffirming Canberra's commitment to its alliance with the US, the Rudd government also deepened the 'nodal defence' aspects of Australian strategic and defence policy,⁹⁵ encouraging greater spoke-to-spoke cooperation amongst US allies.⁹⁶ In this respect, the 2009 White Paper explicitly asserted that the stability of the Asia-Pacific was best served by the continued US forward presence and the web of US alliances and security partnerships with Japan, South Korea, India and Australia.⁹⁷

In terms of Australia's traditions of strategic and defence policy, the hierarchy of interests in the 2009 Defence White Paper suggested a return to the more stringent prioritisation of the DoA. Yet the document also contained statements that demonstrated an unwillingness to make a clean break from the 'forward defence 2.0' position of the Howard government. In the paragraph immediately after outlining Australia's strategic interests, the White Paper stated, '[t]his geographical approach to our strategic interests recognises that in military terms we have to be prepared to both act decisively close to home, while being ready *where necessary* to contribute further away from our shores', without detailing the criteria by which such decisions to do so might be made.⁹⁸

Taken as whole, the White Paper demonstrated clear continuities with Australia's long-standing predilection for risk minimisation strategies. It combined the centrality of the US alliance with a recognition that the posture of the post-9/11 years was ill-suited for a future defined by overt great power contestation between the US and the PRC in Asia. But beyond noting that the PRC *could* pose a future challenge to Australia's hierarchy of strategic interests and proposing a boost to Australia's maritime capabilities through the acquisition of new submarines, there 'was no explanation of the *military* strategy that justified these additional forces'.⁹⁹ And despite the focus on the likely future need to develop defence capabilities with which to deter the PRC, the White Paper nonetheless asserted the need for a 'balanced force, capable of meeting every contingency the Australian Defence Force may be required to meet in the coming two decades'.¹⁰⁰ This not only ran

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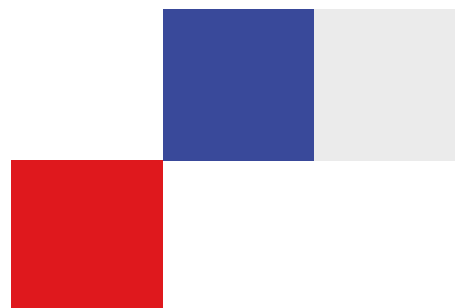


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counter to the heavy focus on the PRC, but also appeared to be remarkably ambitious. Effectively it suggested, as Victoria University of Wellington Professor of Strategic Studies Rob Ayson put it, that either Australia could ‘build a defence force unlike any other we have known, which can deal with anything that might conceivably be thrown at it’ or ‘Australia’s defence planners are omniscient’ and ‘have a very clear sense of exactly the range of contingencies that could come Australia’s way in the next 20 years’.¹⁰¹

Following Rudd’s removal as ALP leader by Julia Gillard in June 2010, Australian strategic and defence policy was indelibly shaped by global and regional strategic currents. President Barack Obama’s announcement during his speech to the Australian parliament on November 17 2011 of the US ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ to Asia formed a crucial backdrop to the Gillard government’s approach.¹⁰² The US ‘pivot’ amounted to a reorientation of American strategic attention away from the Middle East as the Obama administration sought to extricate itself from Afghanistan and Iraq, and focus on Asia, where the US would now ‘play a larger and long-term role’ in shaping the region and its future.

The central theme of the ‘pivot’ clearly informed the Gillard government’s *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper of October 2012 and its May 2013 Defence White Paper. The first of these documents illustrated a tendency to conceive of Australia’s interests in Asia and relations with major states therein ‘as largely matters of economics’.¹⁰³ As such, *Australia in the Asian Century* predominantly sought to convey the extent and scope of economic dynamism in the region and the steps necessary for Australia to effectively harness it in pursuit of national prosperity.¹⁰⁴



The 2013 Defence White Paper, in turn, attempted to deal with the push and pull of both Beijing and Washington by demonstrating a clear alignment with the strategic goals of Obama's 'pivot' with more accommodationist signals to Beijing. It was notable that in contrast to its predecessor, the 2013 White Paper took pains to assert that 'Australia welcomes China's rise' and 'does not approach China as an adversary'.¹⁰⁵ It also noted that Sino-US relations would be 'the single most influential force' shaping the strategic environment and foresaw not inevitable confrontation but 'a constructive relationship encompassing both cooperation and competition'.¹⁰⁶ Optimistically, the paper maintained that Australia did not have to choose between the US or the PRC.

Such accommodationist tones were perhaps an almost inevitable by-product of the burgeoning bilateral trade relationship primarily fuelled by the PRC's seemingly insatiable desire for Australian coal and iron ore. Trade with the PRC had grown at an average rate of 20 percent between 2008 and 2012, reaching a total value of \$128 billion in 2012, constituting around 20 percent of Australian trade.¹⁰⁷ During her official visit to Beijing in April 2013, Gillard also secured something that her Mandarin-speaking predecessor, Kevin Rudd, could not: agreement to make the bilateral relationship a 'strategic partnership', including institutionalising annual leadership meetings and 'strategic economic dialogue'.¹⁰⁸ These 'accommodationist' moves (for example the strategic partnership with Beijing) were offset by steps such as the enthusiastic embrace of new US commitments to bilateral defence cooperation, such as US Marine rotations through Darwin, that demonstrated a continued Australian desire to ensure that deepening economic ties with China did not slide either into outright accommodation of the PRC's pre-eminence or the diminishment of the US role in the region.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, Australian efforts to achieve that dual ambition were arguably becoming more difficult.



03



Sino-Australian relations and Australia's China choices

The difficulty of walking the tightrope between accommodating the PRC's rise and maintaining a strong US security tie was demonstrated in a variety of ways throughout the Coalition prime ministerships of Tony Abbott (2013-2015), Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018) and Scott Morrison (2018-2022). In broad terms, these governments followed the trajectory established in the Rudd-Gillard years whereby Australian strategic and defence policy perceived growing strategic risk in the PRC's rise and attempted to address that risk via greater efforts to deepen Australia-US defence/security cooperation. The most notable aspect of these attempts has been the manner in which Australian governments have appeared to abandon the vestiges of 'self-reliance' embedded in DoA, in favour of an approach that is much more dependent on the US than any time in the recent past. This has been evident in the major strategic and defence policy documents of the 2014 to 2022 period (including the 2016 Defence Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update) and major defence capability announcements such as the nuclear submarines component of the AUKUS trilateral partnership.

In parallel with this shift there has also been a sharpening of Australian rhetoric regarding the PRC. Defence Minister Peter Dutton's warning on

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April 25 2022, for example, that Australians must ‘prepare for war’¹¹⁰ provided a clear indication of just how far Australian pronouncements on the PRC had shifted within the space of a few short years. Dutton's comments came just days after Prime Minister Morrison had warned of an ‘arc of autocracy’ challenging liberal democratic values in the region, stating flatly that the establishment of a PRC military facility in the Solomon Islands would be a ‘red line’ for both Australia and the United States.¹¹¹ Later, in an address at the National Press Club on May 11 2022, Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce even suggested that Australia faced the prospect of being ‘encircled’ by the PRC.¹¹² How this shift came about is examined in more detail below.



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3.1 The Abbott government and the emergence of 'nodal' security and defence cooperation

Tony Abbott's prime ministership – which ushered in a near decade of Coalition ascendancy at the federal level of Australian politics – began with relatively positive developments in Sino-Australian relations. In 2014, in an address to the Australian Parliament, Xi Jinping proclaimed a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' between the two nations,¹¹³ while in June 2015, at the signing of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (CHAFTA), Prime Minister Abbott described the deal as 'history making', claiming it would 'change our region for the better ... change our world for the better'.¹¹⁴

Of particular note here was the Abbott government's emphasis on the further development of 'spoke-to-spoke' cooperation with other US regional allies typical of 'nodal defence'.

In terms of strategic and defence policy, Abbott's tenure saw broad continuity with the directions established under Howard, Rudd and Gillard. Of particular note here was the Abbott government's emphasis on the further development of 'spoke-to-spoke' cooperation with other US regional allies typical of 'nodal defence'. Abbott also moved quickly to reaffirm the centrality of alliance links with the US and focused attention on upgrading ties with South Korea and Japan. In her 2014 address in Washington, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop reiterated what had become a consistent theme in Australian post-Cold War strategic policy: that 'the US presence has been the essential stabiliser for regional security ... and 63 years on, the Australia-US alliance remains the cornerstone of our national security'.¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, Bishop emphasised the central role of the US in facilitating the Five Eyes intelligence and defence sharing arrangements between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.¹¹⁶

More consequential, though, was the Abbott government's subsequent defence-related acquisitions and announcements. These included the April 2014 announcement that the government had approved the acquisition of a further 58

F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter aircraft – in addition to the fourteen approved in 2009 – and the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement which formalised ‘existing plans to increase the rotation of US Marine Corps troops through Darwin, and to embark on trilateral military exercises in Southeast Asia’.¹¹⁷ Additionally, as the Barack Obama White House subsequently made clear, the US was also exploring ‘opportunities to expand cooperation on ballistic missile defense, including working together to identify potential Australian contributions to ballistic missile defense in the Asia-Pacific region’ as part of the agreement.¹¹⁸

Japan emerged as the Abbott government’s prime focus for ‘spoke-to-spoke’ defence cooperation. Prime Minister Abbott asserted late in 2013 that Japan was Australia’s ‘closest friend in Asia’ and identified Tokyo as key partner in grappling with the rise of the PRC.¹¹⁹ Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s visit to Canberra in July 2014 saw concrete steps to make good on this with the signing of an Australia-Japan free trade agreement (FTA) and a defence cooperation agreement.¹²⁰ Prime Minister Abe, with reference to defence cooperation, pointedly remarked to the Australian parliament that ‘[t]here are many things Japan and Australia can do together by each of us joining hands with the United States’. Some saw this as the emergence of new trilateral relationship.¹²¹ While this development was broadly consistent with the thrust of the Australian strategic objective to bolster American presence in Asia, some observers considered it as potentially creating greater strategic risk for Australia rather than reducing it. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, for instance, argued that formalising closer Australia-Japan defence ‘would make it much harder, if not impossible, for us to avoid being involved in any conflict between the PRC and Japan’.¹²²

3.2 Doubling down on the US alliance: The 2016 Defence White Paper

Key to the challenges confronting Australia’s Coalition prime ministers has been the realisation that the ‘we don’t have to choose between the US and China’ principle was increasingly untenable.¹²³ This perception formed a critical backdrop for the increasingly polarised views on Australian strategic and defence policy as it pertains to the PRC over the past five years. One predominant view – which is reflected in the trajectory of strategic and defence policy under the Coalition governments – is ‘that Canberra needs to ‘double down’ on the American alliance going forward with a view to seeing off the Chinese challenge to the US-led security order in Asia’.¹²⁴ Another view, more in keeping with earlier periods of Australia policy, contends that ‘Canberra needs to establish a greater degree of autonomy from Washington in a manner carefully calibrated to align with Asia’s changing power dynamics’.¹²⁵

Both positions carry clear risks for Australia. At the very least, ‘doubling down’ on the alliance raises the possibility of entrapment in a future Sino-US conflict. This would mark a departure in the long-term evolution of the ANZUS alliance since 1952 whereby Canberra has often been anxious about potential *abandonment* by the US rather than fearing entrapment.¹²⁶ Such anxiety often served to encourage Australian leaders to bear the costs and risks of military/strategic commitments beyond the country’s immediate region – for example, commitments to Korea, Vietnam and Iraq – to maintain Canberra’s credibility as an ally in US

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eyes. The fact that ‘fear of entrapment’ may replace Australia’s ‘fear of abandonment’ is noteworthy as it suggests an appreciation that the balance of power in Australia’s region is shifting. To date, however, such an appreciation has not resulted in a fundamental reassessment of Australia’s strategic policy. Rather, as the terms of the Turnbull and Morrison governments have demonstrated, the tendency has been to emphasise balancing against the perceived risks of greater dependence on the PRC through ‘doubling down’ on the US alliance.

The Turnbull government’s 2016 Defence White Paper is instructive here. It asserted that the ‘United States will *remain* the pre-eminent global military power over the *next two decades*’ and that the ‘global strategic and economic weight of the United States will be essential to the continued stability of the rules-based global order on which Australia relies for our security and prosperity’.¹²⁷ With respect to the PRC, the 2016 White Paper, in turn, noted that while ‘Australia welcomes China’s continued economic growth and the opportunities this is bringing for Australia and other countries in the Indo-Pacific’, its growing ‘national power, including its military modernisation’ meant that

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Chinese behaviour ‘will have a major impact on the stability of the Indo-Pacific to 2035’.¹²⁸ Despite this, the document confidently stated that ‘China *will not* match the global strategic weight of the United States’ in the period up to 2035 encompassed by its assessment. This assertion sat uncomfortably with the White Paper’s emphasis on the rapidity of the PRC’s military modernisation, most notably that the PLA-Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) were now the largest navy and air force in Asia, and recognition of Chinese investments in new military technologies.¹²⁹

In terms of Australia's strategic interests, the 2016 White Paper offered a significant modification to the geographically-determined tripartite hierarchy of the 2009 version. The new hierarchy was now identified as: (1) a 'secure, resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication'; (2) a 'secure nearer region, encompassing maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific'; and (3) a 'stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order'.¹³⁰ While this new hierarchy had clear resonance with the connections between global and Australian security long made by Australian policy-makers, the modifiers 'secure' and 'stable' gave an indication of government perception of the core challenges and the potential source of them. Thus, instead of the 2009 version's 'most basic strategic interest' being prevention of an attack on Australia itself, the 2016 White Paper offered the caveat that this could only be achieved by securing the country's 'northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication'. Similarly, the broadest strategic interest of 2009 – the 'stability of the wider Asia-Pacific region' – was replaced by the amorphous label of 'Indo-Pacific', conditioned by the desire that this region should be part of a stable 'global ruled based order'.

Given the regional rather than purely global focus, the emphasis on protection of sea lanes of communication and the necessity of a 'rules-based global order', the PRC was the obvious candidate the government foresaw as constituting a threat at each of these levels. Additionally, the 2016 White Paper's section on Australia's interest in the 'rules-based global order' also suggested that the emphasis had shifted back toward a forward defence approach. It asserted that a 'stable rules-based global order *serves to deal with threats before they become existential threats to Australia*, and enables our unfettered access to trading routes, secure communications and transport to support Australia's economic development'.¹³¹ The logic behind this appeared to be that the challenges to the 'prevailing set of global rules are so significant that they require Australia to adhere itself firmly to coalition responses to keep these rules intact' and that the 'obvious point of adherence' was the United States as it 'underwrites these rules on the global stage and in the wider region of which Australia is a part'.¹³²

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Navigating Australia's new China consensus

Although the fracturing of PRC–Australia relations occurred under the leadership of Malcolm Turnbull, who promised in December 2017 to ‘stand up’¹³³ to the PRC, his successor Scott Morrison firmly integrated it into Australian strategic policy. There have been several reasons suggested for the fracturing of the relationship since the Turnbull government, all involving related themes: Australian strategic pathologies around alliances; concerns about PRC interference in Australia’s domestic political, social and economic affairs; a desire to avoid dependency traps stemming from both the trade relationship with the PRC as well as its dominance of regional supply chains; and concerns promoted by an expanding PRC investment and security footprint in the region, especially in the South Pacific. The upshot has been a frosty relationship that shows little sign of thawing, even under the new Albanese Labor government.

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4.1 Alliances: Encouraging deep US enmeshment in the Indo-Pacific

Although it rarely voiced its concerns publicly, the Morrison government identified a potential US withdrawal to an offshore balancing posture as a significant threat to Australian security interests. It therefore invested much in attempting to anchor Washington firmly to the region. Reflecting what former Director-General of the Office of National Assessments and foreign policy expert Alan Gyngell referred to as Australia’s ‘[f]ear of abandonment’,¹³⁴ the concern was that Australia would for the first time in its history be left without a major partner underwriting its national security against threats emanating from *within* its region. And while this fear grew during the chaotic Donald Trump administration, with its transactional approach to allies and security partnerships, such an eventuality remains a live option in internal American policy debates in spite of the Biden administration’s stated desire to vigorously contest the PRC’s rise in the Indo-Pacific via ‘integrated deterrence’.¹³⁵ With a Democratic victory in the 2024 Presidential election by no means a foregone conclusion, and the possibility of a second Trump term in the White House, the potential for a US drawdown in the Indo-Pacific remains an acutely sensitive topic in Australian national security circles.¹³⁶

The perceived imperative that the US must be kept regionally engaged was behind a slew of defence and security initiatives by the Morrison government, the most notable of which was the AUKUS agreement of September 2021 with the US and the UK, under which Australia committed to the purchase of a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). In addition to opening up technology transfer agreements, the submarine deal moved forward via a scoping study overseen by Vice Admiral Jonathan Mead, with a final recommendation on the design to come down to an assessment of the relative utility for Australia of either the American *Virginia* class SSN, or the British *Vanguard* platform.¹³⁷ Much has been made of the injury caused to the relationship between Australia and France, since the AUKUS agreement saw Australia withdraw from its partnership with the French Naval Group (formerly DCNS) to build twelve *Attack*-class diesel-electric submarines. The withdrawal came at the cost of

over AU\$5 billion and an impressive diplomatic scolding from France, with French President Emmanuel Macron going so far as to say he ‘didn’t think’, but that he ‘knew’ Prime Minister Morrison had lied to him over the deal.¹³⁸

“ The perceived imperative that the US must be kept regionally engaged was behind a slew of defence and security initiatives by the Morrison government, the most notable of which was the AUKUS agreement of September 2021 with the US and the UK, under which Australia committed to the purchase of a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). ”

Yet Australia’s planned acquisition of SSNs will have no short- or medium-term effect on its ability to deter aggression by the PRC, which is one of the core pillars of the ‘Shape-Deter-Respond’ framework outlined by the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU).¹³⁹ This is because the first Australian

SSN will not be launched until the mid-2030s at the earliest. This highlights an interesting development – which we assess in more detail later in this paper – related to Australian conceptions of deterrence. In particular, it reflects tension between ‘deterrence by punishment’ and ‘deterrence by denial’ given that the main benefits of Australian SSNs, in terms of vastly improved range and flexibility over the *Collins* class submarines, mean that they would be most useful as forward-deployed assets formally integrated into the US warfighting posture in the Indo-Pacific.

The theme of integration and interoperability with US forces is, however, much broader than Australia acquiring SSNs. Part of the AUKUS agreement lays the groundwork for the US and UK to utilise future submarine basing in Australia for replenishment and resupply, as well as potentially for joint force coordination. This is in addition to other separate agreements designed to enhance the US military presence in Australia, including increasing the size of the Marine Rotational Force (MRF) at Robertson Barracks in the Northern Territory, building the Boeing MQ-28 Ghost Bat UAV in Australia, and co-development with the US of hypersonic long-range strike missiles. As part of the ‘capability alternatives’ to address the gap between the



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Collins class submarines and new SSNs, Australia's aspirational 'sovereign missile' project also includes acquiring US Tomahawk cruise missiles, which will require approval from Congress, as well as the air-launched AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) and the AGM-158B Joint Air to Surface Strike Missile (JASSM).¹⁴⁰

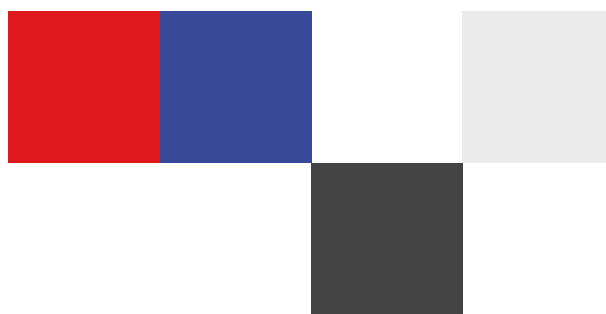
4.2 Countering PRC interference

A second reason for the Morrison government's decision to move away from the PRC has been legitimate concerns over PRC political and social interference in Australia. One aspect of this has been in the form of cyberattacks on Australian government agencies such as the Bureau of Meteorology in 2016,¹⁴¹ as well as breaches of email servers at the Australian Parliament and management systems at universities, such as the Australian National University, conducting high-end technological and dual-use research.¹⁴² Concerns about foreign interference in tertiary education led to the establishment of the University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT) in 2019, as well as the Department of Defence being tasked with oversight over sensitive research, and sizeable investments into capacity building in the Department of Home Affairs.¹⁴³ The use of social media to promote positive images of the PRC and its government using platforms like WeChat has also been an area of concern and has been flagged as a medium often employed in Australia's large Chinese diaspora by the United Front Work Department.¹⁴⁴

Most public attention, however, has been focused on the arenas of potential political interference and influence, leading to efforts to regulate the conduct of officials and lobbyists with access to elites via the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) that commenced in December 2018.¹⁴⁵ Even so, revelations about PRC influence have continued, including the report in 2019 that the New South Wales branch of the ALP had accepted a cash donation of \$100,000 in a supermarket carry bag from the Chinese businessman Huang Xiangmo.¹⁴⁶ This followed the news that the former ALP Senator Sam Dastyari had been operating as a de facto lobbyist for the PRC government after his legal bills were paid by Chinese business figures.¹⁴⁷ After the 2019 federal election campaign, it was revealed

that the new Liberal MP Gladys Liu had failed to declare her membership in numerous business and friendship groups linked to the Communist Party of China (CPC), such as the United Chinese Commerce Association of Australia, the Australian Jiangmen General Commercial Association and the Guangdong Overseas Exchange Association.¹⁴⁸

The Morrison government's efforts to curtail foreign interference also resulted in the arrest in November 2020 of Di Sanh Duong, a Chinese community leader and fundraiser who had been a member of the Liberal Party.¹⁴⁹ Although there has been much cooperation between the Countering Foreign Interference (CFI) taskforce, the Australian Federal Police and various partner organisations in Five Eyes nations, there have been relatively few uses of coercive legal power under the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act. This led some commentators, especially at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), to call in 2021 for the legislation to be amended so that it was no longer 'country agnostic', and more focused on the activities of Chinese-Australians.¹⁵⁰ There was some support for that proposal from Liberal Senator James Paterson, the chair of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, when former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who had also served as a consulting trade envoy to the UK government, was asked to register for FITS following his address to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).¹⁵¹ Eventually the Morrison government decided – probably sensibly, given that Australia is home to more than one million people of Chinese ancestry – to preserve the original 2018 legislation.



4.3 Avoiding dependency traps

Australia's turn away from the PRC has also been driven by concerns that economic dependency permits Beijing to exercise significant economic leverage over Australia. This challenge has been visible for some time and a chief reason behind the toughening of Australian foreign investment regulations under the Turnbull government and the appointment of the former Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) head David Irvine to chair the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) in 2017.¹⁵² Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Morrison government unsuccessfully attempted in 2020 to adopt a leadership role in calling for an enquiry into the origins of the pandemic and the autonomy of the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁵³ But its main focus was on the risks of relying on PRC-dominated regional supply chains, prompting calls from more hawkish Australian commentators for Canberra to 'decouple' from Beijing by encouraging onshoring in the form of stimulating domestic manufacturing as well as helping to facilitate alternative regional hubs for the transit of goods.¹⁵⁴

That said, arguments in favour of decoupling have not progressed especially far. As the Labor MP Tim Watts put it in 2020, such a decision would be an 'unprecedented act of national self-sabotage'¹⁵⁵ given that the PRC was Australia's largest trading partner, and pre-pandemic, was also its largest source of tourism and foreign students. This stance has been backed by members of the Coalition as well, with the (now former) Liberal MP and past diplomat Dave Sharma observing in a paper prepared for policy institute China Matters in 2020 that decoupling was not a serious proposition and that Australia needed to resist policies and rhetoric that could be interpreted as an attempt at the economic containment of the PRC.¹⁵⁶

Arguments in favour of decoupling have not progressed especially far.

The effects of Australia's decision to 'stand up' to the PRC have obviously led to debate over the merits of such a stance. This was especially the case given the number of punitive actions taken against Canberra by Beijing beginning in 2020. The PRC's campaign of coercive economic diplomacy, which included Beijing indefinitely suspending the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue in May 2021, was evidently designed to make an example of Australia.¹⁵⁷ The list of measures taken by the PRC include the impositions of anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties on Australian barley; crackdowns on imports of Australian sugar, wood, and lobster; tariffs of between 100 and 212 percent on Australian wine; and the banning of Australian coal imports.¹⁵⁸ Requests for meetings from Australian trade negotiators and diplomats went unanswered, and Australia's Ambassador in Beijing was denied access to the trials of Chinese-Australian writer, Yang Hengjun, and Cheng Lei, an Australian journalist, being prosecuted on dubious charges concerning the leaking of state secrets, in May 2021 and April 2022 respectively.¹⁵⁹

4.4 The PRC's growing regional footprint

A fourth area of concern has been the PRC's growing military-security footprint in the Indo-Pacific, coupled to trade and investment under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and how these translate into political influence. The potential for the establishment of Chinese military bases to be a major challenge for the ADF was explicitly identified in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update.¹⁶⁰ Whereas the earlier 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper made no mention of the PRC at all in its chapter on the South Pacific,¹⁶¹ the extent to which Beijing has sought investment opportunities in the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea has long been a topic of discussion among security policy professionals and the broader commentariat comprising think tanks, the media and academics. The Morrison government's announcement in 2018 that it would take the 'Pacific Step-up'¹⁶² to a new level of cooperation was directly linked to an awareness that investment in the sub-region by the PRC threatened to displace Australia as a premier development and security partner of its closest neighbours.



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Australia’s interest in the Pacific has also resulted in frequent warnings revolving around the now-discredited notion of ‘debt-trap diplomacy’.¹⁶³ This argument attempted to overlay the apparent Sri Lankan experience from Chinese investment in the port of Hambantota onto the fate that may befall unsuspecting Pacific nations eager for Chinese investment.¹⁶⁴ The main focus here has been on the potential for Beijing to extract security rents from relatively weak actors in the region for whom aid and development funding would facilitate a significant boost to their economic fortunes. For instance, the PRC’s willingness to fund projects such as casinos, port infrastructure and gold mining¹⁶⁵ in the Solomon Islands has regularly been identified as an important aspect of the increasing closeness of the relationship between Beijing and the government of Manasseh Sogavare in Honiara. Indeed, the leaking of the draft security deal between the PRC and the Solomon Islands in April 2022¹⁶⁶ was widely seen as a stepping-stone to the establishment of a future PLAN presence in the region. The agreement stated that Beijing would be able to deploy forces to ‘protect the safety of Chinese personnel and

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major projects in the Solomon Islands’, that the Solomon Islands may ‘request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces’, and that the agreement permits the PRC to ‘make ship visits, to carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transit’.¹⁶⁷ The Morrison government reacted by sending ASIS head Paul Symon as well as Office of National Intelligence (ONI) Director-General Andrew Shearer to meet Sogavare.

Despite assuring them that Australia remained the Solomons' 'partner of choice', Sogavare gave no hint that he was intending to walk back the deal with Beijing and it was subsequently signed on April 20 2022.

The deal has strategic, political and reputational implications for Australia. PRC military facilities in the Solomons would have a number of capabilities in Australia's immediate geopolitical environment, including extended signals intelligence gathering, the ability to make it more difficult for US naval forces to move closer to the PRC, and the potential capacity to stage hybrid fleets. The deal even prompted the commander of the US Pacific Fleet to note that it significantly enhanced the likelihood of military hostilities in the Indo-Pacific, and resulted in the Biden administration sending National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to meet with Sogavare in Honiara.¹⁶⁸ Although Canberra has made much of its 'Pacific Step-Up' and notions of a 'Pacific family', a number of commentators across the ideological spectrum have argued that Australia has ignored the region for decades and that as a result, diplomatic relations with regional governments have stagnated. The former head of ASPI, Peter Jennings, for instance, has claimed that Australia does 'not have a close or privileged relationship' with most nations in the South Pacific. Noting that Australia is the Solomon Islands' thirteenth-largest trading partner – the PRC coming first – Jennings argued for much deeper Australian strategic investment in addition to higher defence spending.¹⁶⁹ Others, such as academics Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, have agreed with the notion that Australian policy could be characterised as one of 'benign neglect', but suggest a more proactive approach where Australia talks 'to' Pacific Island nations rather than 'at' them.¹⁷⁰

The current debate about Australian strategic and defence policy vis-à-vis the PRC therefore appears to have been decided. The PRC's increased power and ambitions coupled with its 'neo-totalitarian' turn at home under Xi Jinping means that Australia *must* balance against the PRC through a doubling-down on the US alliance and cooperating with other US allies in Asia. This stance has been reflected in recent policy decisions such as the AUKUS agreement, enhanced technology and intelligence sharing between Canberra, London and Washington, and minilateral cooperation such as the Quad. It has also been reflected in how Australia has reacted to the challenges of growing Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, Australia's perceived vulnerability to trade dependence, and concerns about the longevity of US security commitments in the region. Taken together, for proponents of this view, a balancing posture in which Australia seeks to deepen its relationship with the US is in fact the *only* prudent choice available.

“ The current debate about Australian strategic and defence policy vis-à-vis the PRC therefore appears to have been decided. The PRC's increased power and ambitions coupled with its 'neo-totalitarian' turn at home under Xi Jinping means that Australia *must* balance against the PRC through a doubling-down on the US alliance and cooperating with other US allies in Asia. ”



The shortcomings of Australia's current strategic and defence policy

The history of Australia's post-1945 strategic and defence policy detailed in the first section of this paper suggests that, as with Australian foreign policy more broadly, there are also several 'traditions' of strategic and defence policy that provide us with a number of distinct approaches through which to structure our response to the challenges posed by the PRC's growing power and ambition. In this regard we identified three broad – and temporally consecutive – traditions of strategic and defence policy in the post-1945 period: forward defence; Defence of Australia (DoA); and nodal defence.

5.1 Locating Australia's China choice

While we noted that each of these traditions continues to have resonance in current Australian strategic and defence policy, the trajectory established by both the Turnbull and Morrison governments suggested a level of anxiety not seen for decades. For instance, as noted in the previous section, the 2016 Defence White Paper demonstrated much continuity with nearly every major strategic and defence policy document in the post-Cold War era. Repeated references to the 'rules-based global order', however, in concert with the expression of an almost faith-based confidence in the continued American commitment to Asia and its continued military pre-eminence, as well as heightened concern about the PRC's growing national power and capabilities, suggested much greater levels of anxiety. This anxiety was not simply driven by the PRC's rise – which as we have seen had been forecast since the early 1970s – but rather how that rise may affect the operative assumptions underpinning each tradition of strategic and defence policy.

While we noted that each of these traditions continues to have resonance in current Australian strategic and defence policy, the trajectory established by both the Turnbull and Morrison governments suggested a level of anxiety not seen for decades.

In the past, Australia's changing strategic circumstances have also affected transitions between each of its traditions in strategic and defence policy. The chief assumption of forward defence, in its initial iteration in the first decade of the Cold War, was that prospects for Australian security would be determined at the global level. This in turn entailed a second assumption: that the best way for Australia to ensure its security was to provide military contributions to expeditionary efforts by allies – the UK and/or the US – to halt threats before they became proximate to Australia. Under forward defence the importance of Australia's alliances with the UK and the US derived from the fact that each was viewed as the keys to ensuring potential threats did not become proximate to Australia and as sources of advanced military capabilities with which to arm the Australian military.

In the past, Australia's changing strategic circumstances have also affected transitions between each of its traditions in strategic and defence policy.

The core assumption of what came to be known as DoA was that the relatively benign strategic environment Australia found itself in from the early 1970s onward permitted a more restricted concept of continental defence premised on a self-reliant capability to deter or defeat potential adversaries in the 'air-sea gap'. Given the more restricted concept of continental defence it was also assumed that Australia would not likely receive direct military assistance from the United States in such a scenario.

The post-Cold War period, as we have detailed, encompassed a gradual transition from DoA toward a re-envisioned form of forward defence ('forward defence 2.0') that, like the original iteration, assumed a clear and direct linkage between strategic dynamics at the global level and Australian security. Prior to 9/11, this resulted in an expanded conception of Australia's strategic interests to encompass the Asia-Pacific and a perception that much of the global balance would in fact likely be determined in what was now conceived of as Australia's *own* region.



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A corollary of this was also an expansion in the role of Australian defence capabilities to enable Australia to intervene in a variety of scenarios *before* threats could directly threaten either the stability of the region or Australia's security itself. In this context, the importance of the US alliance for Australia derived not only from its role as a facilitator of access to advanced military technology and intelligence but for the broader stabilising role that it was viewed as playing in the region. Post 9/11, these trends were in effect transposed from a purely regional – that is, Asia-Pacific – to the global level, with the Howard government adopting an overtly expeditionary posture wherein Australian defence capabilities would make direct contributions to allied, mainly US-led endeavours to defeat global terrorism far from Australian shores.

Finally, in the wake of the 9/11 decade, Australian strategic and defence policy developed something of a hybrid personality, combining elements from forward defence and DoA with emerging trends toward spoke-to-spoke or nodal defence cooperation with other US allies in Asia. This transition can be seen in the Howard

government's participation in the first TSD with the US and Japan in March 2006 and in the TSD leaders' summit in September 2007, as well as the subsequent development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) between Australia, Japan, India and the US.¹⁷¹ The objectives of this nodal defence approach from the Australian perspective has been – until quite recently – twofold: to assist in the bolstering of the US role in the region as provider of security public goods and as a means through which to 'channel and shape' the trajectory of the PRC's rise in a manner consistent with Australian and US interests.¹⁷²

In the context of this long view of Australian strategic and defence policy where, then, may we locate current policy settings? The AUKUS agreement, and the decision as part of that arrangement to seek the acquisition of SSN capabilities, combined with the recent tenor of the Morrison government's public signalling, suggests a firm rejection of the Howard-era 'we don't have to choose' position in favour of a clear choice of alignment with the US (and other US allies in Asia) against the PRC. This, it must be noted, was a view shared by the then Labor opposition.¹⁷³

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This particular ‘China choice’ is entirely understandable given the clear security benefits Australia has reaped from post-1945 American predominance in Asia. But the choice presents a clear problem: ‘doubling down’ on American primacy may no longer be practical given both the PRC’s power and assertiveness and doubts about American commitment and staying power. More immediately, however, a default choice to support American primacy maintenance would indicate that Australia cares more about power than order as Washington’s various responses to the PRC from Trump’s ‘trade war’ to Biden’s ‘Strategic Competition Act’ demonstrate that the United States is arguably ‘less concerned about upholding an order which could peacefully incorporate the PRC as a superpower, and more preoccupied with reasserting its place as a regional hegemon’.¹⁷⁴ Yet this reality contradicts *repeated* assertions by Canberra (for instance in the 2016 Defence White Paper) of Australia’s preference for the upholding of the ‘rules based global order’.

5.2 Preparing for a balance of power world

The ‘China choice’ made not only by the Morrison government but also by the new Albanese government emerges then as a choice *for* a balance of power world. Balance of power systems are ultimately not about avoiding war but rather avoiding hegemony, if necessary at the cost of war.¹⁷⁵ Seen in this light, the AUKUS agreement – and associated capability acquisitions and technology sharing and cooperation – makes sense. SSNs, for instance, would provide Australia with a long-range deterrent and/or strike capability to augment US and other allied capabilities in future potential conflict scenarios with the PRC such as in the South China Sea or over Taiwan.¹⁷⁶

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This trend has been reinforced by the thrust of the 2020 *Defence Strategic Update* (DSU). The ‘Indo-Pacific’, according to the DSU, is now characterised by a number of major drivers such as great power competition, accelerating military modernisation, utilisation of ‘grey zone’ activities, and emerging and disruptive technologies that not only make Australia’s strategic environment more uncertain but ‘mean Australia can no longer rely on a timely warning ahead of conflict occurring’ as in the past.¹⁷⁷ Under this scenario, ‘defence plans can no longer assume Australia will have time to gradually adjust military capability and preparedness in response to emerging challenges’ and the country must invest in rapid defence modernisation programme.¹⁷⁸

The proposed investment of \$575 billion identified in the DSU is primarily to be directed to long-range precision guided munitions (including hypersonic missiles), unmanned systems, and intelligence platforms.¹⁷⁹ The objective here is to develop ‘more potent capabilities to hold adversary forces and infrastructure at risk *further* from Australia’.¹⁸⁰ How far, then, from Australia does the DSU envisage holding adversaries’ ‘infrastructure at risk’? Defence planning, the document states, ‘will focus on Australia’s immediate region: ranging from the

north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland Southeast Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific'.¹⁸¹ This region, the DSU argues, 'is Australia's area of most direct strategic interest' and Australia 'must be capable of building and exercising influence in support of shared regional security interests' as 'access through it is critical for Australia's security and trade'.¹⁸² It is therefore in this region that 'we should be most capable of military cooperation with the United States'.¹⁸³

This approach has deep roots in Australian strategic and defence policy. The 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update suggest a return to a core theme of the era of forward defence: that Australian security can only be achieved through coordination and integration of Australian capabilities with allied efforts *beyond* the country's immediate environs. Indeed, one analyst in 2019 advocated for a strategy he described as 'forward defence in depth' that bears similarities to the Morrison government's direction.¹⁸⁴ Forward defence in depth was based on the ADF having the capabilities to play 'a far more visible and regular role throughout maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific' and to undertake 'more far-flung operations in support of a global rules-based order'. This would 'extend our defence in depth far forward, rather than basing the defence of Australia task on being able to defend the comparatively narrow strategic moat that is the sea-air gap'.¹⁸⁵

The 2020 DSU also simultaneously returns to a core theme of DoA: self-reliance. The Morrison government's intention for the force modernisation flagged in the DSU was that it would enable Australia to 'take greater responsibility for our own security' by growing the ADF's 'self-reliant ability to deliver deterrent effects'.¹⁸⁶ This, combined with recent capability announcements such as the future acquisition of SSNs, begs the question as to whether Australia's strategic and defence policy is now framed by the objective of what we might term, somewhat clumsily, 'self-reliant forward defence'. While continuing publicly to place faith in the long-term capability and political will of the United States to maintain its role in Asia, the trajectory of recent strategic and defence policy, as embodied in the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, appears, in part, to be hedging against the possible dilution of American capabilities and commitments to the region.

While continuing publicly to place faith in the long-term capability and political will of the United States to maintain its role in Asia, the trajectory of recent strategic and defence policy, as embodied in the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, appears, in part, to be hedging against the possible dilution of American capabilities and commitments to the region.



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A way forward for Australian strategic policy

While such hedging is sensible – and arguably overdue – it nonetheless poses a number of challenges for Australia’s current strategic and defence policy. Most immediately, as Van Jackson notes, the 2020 DSU suggests a shift in Australia’s ‘strategic wager’ – that is, the equation of ‘if you do X, you expect Y to occur because of Z’ – to something like, ‘If we invest in longer-range precision-guided missiles and unmanned systems (X), the result will be no Chinese aggression in Australia’s immediate region (Y) because (Z)’.¹⁸⁷ As such the ‘Z’ or the *how* of Australia’s new strategic wager is not specified. That is, how do we believe that the capabilities envisaged by the DSU and the AUKUS agreement will achieve the objective of deterring Chinese challenges to Australian interests in our region or threats to Australian security *independent* of the United States?

There appear to be two distinct and conflicting approaches to deterrence at play: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. The former works by convincing an adversary that any military operations it may contemplate will not succeed due to the strength of one’s own forces, while the latter works by convincing an adversary that any military action will be met by retaliation severe enough to outweigh the benefits it may hope to achieve from such action.¹⁸⁸ Australian strategic policy seems to be tilting further towards deterrence by punishment, especially in light of its stated intention of obtaining Tomahawk cruise missiles that can strike both ships as well as targets on the Chinese mainland itself.¹⁸⁹

A related aspect to this concerns the logic behind the desire to obtain SSNs, the primary utility of which pertains to expanded range. If the objective here is purely deterrence by denial, then an Australian SSN fleet makes little sense. However, if the goal is to threaten punishment, then an Australian SSN capability is more logical, although that also assumes that such assets would be fully integrated into US warfighting plans. While an Australian SSN capability that could undertake a deterrence by punishment mission would perform important alliance signalling functions, it further commits Australia to participate in any future scenario involving conflict with the PRC – including over Taiwan, for instance. And the upshot of Australia’s responses to great power competition at a time when the regional order is increasingly in flux is that past approaches, as well as its current

hybrid posture, seem to be ill-suited to respond adequately to the types of threats that Australia is likely to face.

While an Australian SSN capability that could undertake a deterrence by punishment mission would perform important alliance signalling functions, it further commits Australia to participate in any future scenario involving conflict with the PRC – including over Taiwan, for instance.

The challenge that the inadequacy of current strategic and defence policy approaches presents can be described in terms of two separate but related puzzles. The first puzzle is that there is a disconnect between adopting an Australian forward defence posture without the uncontested primacy of the US that enabled it in Asia during the post-Cold War era, and the assurance that US military–security commitments to the Indo-Pacific will continue. In effect, Australia is making a risky bet in embracing a strategy that is contingent on factors well beyond its control, including exogenous developments in the US-PRC relationship as well as American domestic politics. The second puzzle is that while the Morrison government effectively endorsed US strategic aims in the context of an ambitious Indo-Pacific security landscape as the main arena of Australian interest, Australian capabilities for the foreseeable future will be *incapable* of providing anything other than general support to its main security ally given the long lead time for the acquisition and entry into service of the SSN capability envisaged

Australia is making a risky bet in embracing a strategy that is contingent on factors well beyond its control, including exogenous developments in the US-PRC relationship as well as American domestic politics.



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under AUKUS. Hence any claims about an Australian contribution to deterrence – either by denial or punishment – are only plausible if those contributions are actually useful to the United States in the first place.

“ Australian capabilities for the foreseeable future will be *incapable* of providing anything other than general support to its main security ally given the long lead time for the acquisition and entry into service of the SSN capability envisaged under AUKUS. ”

Put simply, it ultimately matters little whether a Tomahawk missile is launched at a PLAN target by an American or an Australian SSN in the South China Sea. What would matter more is whether Australia could take on some of the alliance burden from the US in terms of maintaining order – or contesting a Chinese order – in a particular theatre that makes up the Indo-Pacific strategic space. Equally, an enmeshed Australian diplomatic and security presence with like-minded partners would help to underpin an important Australian role in the region and act to supplement US power.

So how should Australia respond to these puzzles?

“ Put simply, it ultimately matters little whether a Tomahawk missile is launched at a PLAN target by an American or an Australian SSN in the South China Sea. ”

We make the case here for a hybrid Australian approach that combines a Defence of Australia posture with the multi-nodal defence coalition building approach favoured by the Howard government. We argue that this would better serve Australian strategic priorities in three key respects. First, it provides a degree of insurance against future great power politics creating a negative environment for Australian interests – either through acute US-PRC competition or a US regional drawdown – without committing Australia to uphold what may become a security chimera. Second, it would facilitate a form of Australian deterrence by denial significantly more credible than deterrence by punishment. Third, such a posture would allow Australia to be potentially far more useful to the United States, taking on the order-maintenance role close to the Australian mainland, in the key sea lanes of communication on which Australia relies as a liberal maritime trading state, and building coalitions with regional actors that are also wary of the PRC’s intentions.

The capacity to defend Australia’s northern approaches will be critical to secure the resources that are the drivers of Australian economic prosperity. It is unlikely that Australia will seek to pivot away from a reliance on those resources – from iron ore to gas and minerals – in the foreseeable future. Indeed, both the Coalition and Labor have emphasised the importance of extractive technologies, as well as the development of new projects such as the Beetaloo basin in the Northern Territory. A forward defence posture does little to help secure this priority arena for nation-building, and in fact could be seen as directly harmful to it. If indeed the US seeks to reduce its presence in the Indo-Pacific, there will be little Australia can do to swiftly adapt to territorial defence, especially given that strategic warning is measured in decades rather than in years. Having the ability to secure the maritime space near to transshipment hubs from the Kimberley region to

Darwin will help to underwrite Australian security; the capacity to project power into the Malacca Strait will also bolster a littoral environment in which other energy trading stakeholders such as Singapore and Indonesia have firm national interests. Supplemented by a nodal spoke-to-spoke defence cooperation effort, a Defence of Australia approach therefore makes sense to provide both local defence as well as maritime Southeast Asian order maintenance via coalition-building.

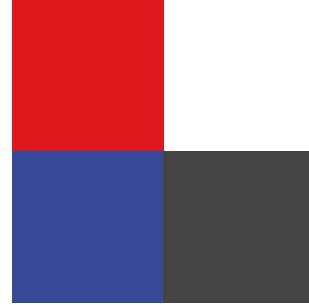
“ A forward defence posture does little to help secure this priority arena for nation-building, and in fact could be seen as directly harmful to it. If indeed the US seeks to reduce its presence in the Indo-Pacific, there will be little Australia can do to swiftly adapt to territorial defence, especially given that strategic warning is measured in decades rather than in years. ”

A Defence of Australia model is not only best suited to the types of strategic harms that Australia is most likely to face: indeed, it would provide a much more credible form of deterrence. As we have demonstrated, a deterrence-by-punishment approach is highly contingent on the US being prepared to wage war to maintain Indo-Pacific order, including future contests over Taiwan, which sits just 180 kilometres from the Chinese mainland. While the Biden administration has certainly demonstrated its willingness to arm Taipei, and has recently renovated its ‘One China’ policy to make commitments to Taiwan less ambiguous, it remains to be seen whether this will endure. If the strategic situation deteriorates due to (expected) continued PRC military capability development, the ability of the US to keep the PRC contained within the first island chain will become increasingly unviable. Hence an Australian defence posture which emphasises the costs to the PRC should it attempt to interfere with Australian sovereignty, rather than the broader and much more complex (and expensive) task of protecting the entire Indo-Pacific space, is arguably more realistic and achievable.

Finally, a strategic design that combines Defence of Australia with a multi-nodal defence posture would arguably be of more use to broader US power balancing efforts. Already in 2022 we have witnessed a major development in Australia’s immediate strategic environment, in the form of the security agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands. If Australia is to be taken seriously as a middle power capable of maintaining order in its own geopolitical space, its priority must be to develop the military capabilities and the diplomatic relationships necessary to facilitate that objective. In practice this development has more than just a military-security dimension. It means investing much more heavily in Australia’s Pacific neighbourhood, not only through aid and development, but also in the re-establishment of people-to-people ties, and the creation of favourable conditions for Australian investment in the Pacific. It is already the case that the US has looked to Australia to remain the premier security and development partner in the sub-region; recent PRC advances in courting Pacific nations suggests strongly that Australia has not been successful in doing so. Again, a Defence of Australia approach is well suited to such a task. Although this may represent a contraction in some of the loftier rhetoric about Australia as a regional player with global aspirations, providing security and strategic stability in its own immediate environment is something that a forward defence posture is unlikely to be able to deliver.

“ If the strategic situation deteriorates due to (expected) continued PRC military capability development, the ability of the US to keep the PRC contained within the first island chain will become increasingly unviable. Hence an Australian defence posture which emphasises the costs to the PRC should it attempt to interfere with Australian sovereignty, rather than the broader and much more complex (and expensive) task of protecting the entire Indo-Pacific space, is arguably more realistic and achievable. ”

Ultimately, then, a hybrid of the Defence of Australia posture and the nodal approach to coalition building is the most appropriate way forward for Australian security policy to serve its national interests. It is on the one hand flexible and adaptable given that it focuses on securing the drivers of future Australian prosperity. On the other hand, it bolsters Australian deterrence claims instead of making increasingly questionable claims about Australia's ability to inflict significant harm on an expansionist PRC. It also has the advantage of providing real benefit to the US under the framework of the existing alliance relationship. If Australia's great and powerful US tie is to remain the bedrock of its strategic policy, then the integrated strategic response advanced here will be much more useful in shoring up that foundation than Australia's current approach.



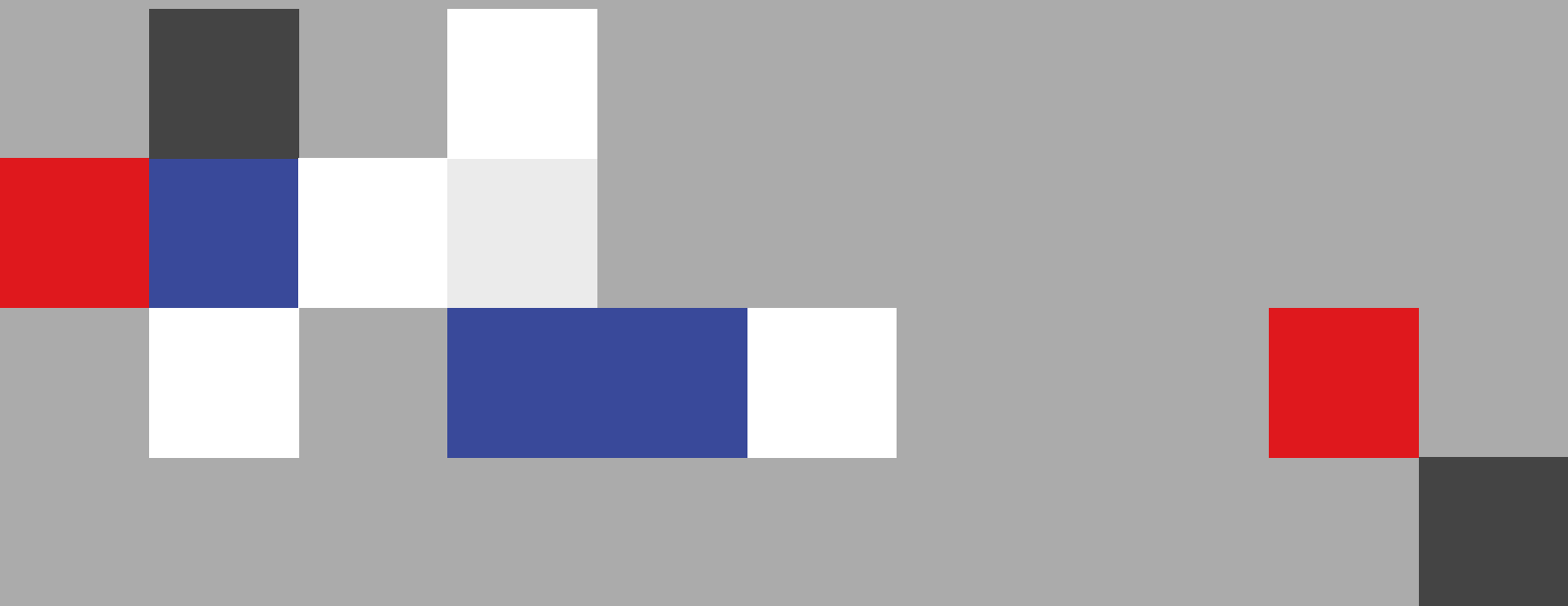
“ If Australia's great and powerful US tie is to remain the bedrock of its strategic policy, then the integrated strategic response advanced here will be much more useful in shoring up that foundation than Australia's current approach. ”



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