

# We need to talk about ‘strategic competition’

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January 24 2024

Note: This article appeared in *The Interpreter* on January 24 2024.

‘Strategic competition’ has become the leitmotif of contemporary Australian national security policy and discourse. It has been regularly invoked by politicians, [bureaucrats](#) and [commentators](#), while also becoming embedded in official strategic and defence policy documents.

For a term that has become ubiquitous, its content remains elusive. There are at least two common usages of the term – as a description of the (perceived) condition of Australia’s current external environment and as shorthand for an approach to statecraft.

Some may dismiss a search for the concrete meaning of this term as mere pedantry. But doing so ignores the fact that failing to clearly define this term runs the risk of embedding both conceptual confusion and, more importantly, permitting a contestable description of the condition of the strategic environment to determine policy prescription.

If ‘strategic competition’ is a description of the condition of Australia’s current external environment, we must ask *how* this designation tells us anything substantive about that environment? This would require that the parameters of ‘strategic competition’ be clearly defined.

Recent examples of this type of usage have, however, been bereft of such precision. The Morrison government’s [2020 Defence Strategic Update](#) (DSU), for example, deployed ‘strategic competition’ as a descriptor of the condition of Australia’s strategic environment on several occasions. The preface of that document, for example, states simply that, ‘The Indo-Pacific is at the centre of greater strategic competition, making the region more contested and apprehensive’, before noting elsewhere that ‘strategic competition’ between the United States and China would be ‘the principal driver of strategic dynamics in our region’. The Albanese government’s [2023 Defence Strategic Review](#) (DSR), in turn, treads an identical path noting that ‘strategic competition between major powers’ will be one major characteristic of ‘Australia’s contemporary regional security situation’.

This tells us little about what sets the supposed era of ‘strategic competition’ apart – as a condition of Australia’s strategic environment – from previous eras in our history. The use of ‘strategic competition’ in both the DSU and DSR appears primarily intended to signal that international politics is becoming more adversarial. But international politics takes place (and always has) on a spectrum encompassing cooperation, competition and conflict. Reifying ‘competition’ by placing ‘strategic’ in front of it provides no conceptual clarity or analytical insight. Rather, ‘strategic competition’ in this usage amounts to an ‘empty signifier’ that [permits](#) the audience ‘to project their own personal meaning on it’, at once validating pre-existing preferences or perceptions, consolidating in-group thinking and justifying particular courses of action.

As such, it becomes a political instrument.

This dynamic can be seen in Albanese government statements around the DSR. Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, for example, [noted](#) in parliament prior to the release of the DSR that ‘large military build-ups rivalling any in the post-war period’, expanding ‘cyber and grey zone activities ... blurring the line between peace and conflict’, and nuclear weapon arsenals ‘expanding without transparency’ made it imperative that Australia and its allies and partners ‘deter and respond to those that seek to use power and might to reshape the world around them’. The identity of the state that Marles was referring to was, of course, China.

Such a framing, as former diplomat David Livingstone has [argued](#), served to embed the argument that ‘China represents an existential military threat to Australia’ as a consensus position with the ‘authority of canon law’ that cannot be challenged without the challenger being ‘marginalised’.

Emphasising ‘strategic competition’ as the defining condition of Australia’s environment, in turn, risks turning description into prescription. If ‘strategic competition’ defines our times, then, it follows that it is imperative that we develop and deploy ‘competitive’ strategies to protect our interests. But, as academic analyst Van Jackson has recently [argued](#), ‘relating to other actors in a competitive way’ not only ‘leads you to focus on a narrow band of choices’ but also obscures the ‘circumstances and conditions that give rise to the competitive impulse, and that frame competitive choices’ in the first place.

Elevating ‘competition’ above other frameworks, as Australian national security discourse has done in recent times, thus closes off rather than expands the range of policy options available to us. Indeed, the DSR (along with AUKUS) has effectively locked Australia into [position](#) as a secure support base for US power projection into the Indo-Pacific, whose own military capability would be sufficient to undertake defence of the continent’s northern approaches and provide operational support to US forces in missions beyond Australia’s immediate environment. Here, Australia returns to its role as a ‘[suitable piece of real estate](#)’ from which to support American power projection in Asia.

While such a posture is consistent with the [evolution](#) of Australian strategic and defence policy and may be defensible from a geopolitical perspective, it rests to a significant degree upon a largely undefined characterisation of our external environment as conditioned by ‘strategic competition’.

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