

Australia's Strategic Culture and Evolving Threats in the Indo-Pacific

Written by Vaibhav Pramod Karajgikar

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VAIBHAV PRAMOD KARAJGIKAR, FEB 18 2025

Australia is facing a rapidly evolving strategic environment considering deepening geopolitical fault lines due to historical grievances, increasing ideological contestations, and expansion of efforts by global and regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region to increase maritime influence (Smith & Australian Government, 2023:5). In the past, Canberra has oscillated between three strategic subcultures that were 'forward defence', 'defence of Australia', and internationalism, and has not sufficiently committed to any of them to develop a more long-term vision (Burns & Eltham, 2014:7). As such, its strategic behaviour has at times demonstrated a misalignment with its strategic culture. The purpose of this essay is to present a snapshot of Australia's contemporary strategic culture, outline core principles that influence its outlook on geopolitics and the role of military force in statecraft, and discuss the suitability of its approach in managing the contemporary strategic environment.

To do so, this essay is divided into three sections. Section I defines the concept of 'strategic culture' and outlines how it shapes foreign and defence policies. Section II elucidates five core ideas that underpin Australia's strategic culture. First, Australia relies heavily on the support of a strong external ally, particularly the United States, for its security and defence needs. This alliance plays a critical role in Australia's strategic decision-making, providing both military and diplomatic support in times of crisis. Second, Australia's unique geographical characteristics play a significant role in shaping its strategic culture. Its location offers natural protection, making it difficult for potential adversaries to launch direct attacks. However, this geographic advantage also presents challenges. Being so far removed from its primary defence partners, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, makes coordination and rapid response to crises more complex. Put differently, Australia's distance from its allies creates a sense of vulnerability, as it is dependent on long-distance logistics and communication to maintain defence partnerships and respond to security threats.

Third, Australia's focus on technological superiority is central to overcoming the challenges posed by its vast geographic area and small population. With a landmass that is one of the largest in the world and a population that is relatively small, Australia faces significant difficulties in maintaining a robust defence posture. To counter these challenges, Australia invests heavily in advanced technologies to enhance its military capabilities. Technological superiority allows Australia to project power over large distances, maintain a strong deterrent, and respond to threats quickly despite its small population. Fourth, Australia faces anxieties due to its identity as an Anglo-American culture, particularly as it experiences relative economic decline compared to its fast-growing Asian neighbours. Historically aligned with Western powers, Australia now grapples with the rise of China, Japan, and India, which challenge its economic and strategic position. The growing influence of these Asian nations raises concerns about Australia's future relevance in the region. Lastly, Australia is focused on preserving the status quo by actively supporting and protecting the international liberal order in the Indo-Pacific region. This involves promoting the values of free trade, open markets, democracy, and the rule of law, which have been fundamental to regional stability and prosperity. By advocating for a rules-based international system, Australia seeks to prevent disruptions to the existing order, ensuring that all nations, regardless of power, are held accountable to shared norms and principles. In doing so, Australia aims to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, countering any attempts to challenge or undermine the established global order.

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Finally, section III offers a critical analysis of Australia's strategic culture, discusses its suitability in light of present and foreseeable challenges, and concludes as follows: Australia's contemporary strategic culture, while offering policy choices in the short run, is ill-suited to planning for long-term commitments due to two distinct yet overlapping reasons. Firstly, excessive dependency on the US presents significant supply chain vulnerabilities, limits operational autonomy, and could inadvertently draw Australia into a conflict. Secondly, without a robust domestic manufacturing base, Australia may struggle to develop and maintain the defence capabilities necessary for strategic autonomy. This could likely limit its ability to respond effectively to regional crises or conflicts in the near future.

Section I: Defining the concept of 'strategic culture'

In this essay, I use Ken Booth's interpretation of 'strategic culture' as the foundational definition. He defines strategic culture as "a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat and use of force" (Booth, 1990:121).

Any two nations faced with the same set of external circumstances are likely to react in different ways to address their concerns. What makes one nation choose a particular set of responses different from the other? The answer lies in the historical roots of its people and the ideas that resonate with its populations, which in turn highlight and cultivate particular policy choices available to the political elite (Lantis & Charlton, 2011:295). An in-depth analysis of the strategic culture of a nation is instrumental to interpret the role of military force in addressing issues of national security, primarily because the values and cultural beliefs of the people serve as a distinct national lens that grants certain policy choices preference over others (ibid.).

Strategic culture also influences perceptions of the people and political elite, thereby influencing the ways in which information is perceived and processed to develop appropriate responses (Bloomfield, 2011). Strategic culture underpins the assumptions of a particular society when it comes to questions such as the role of conflict in international affairs, which state or non-state actor is perceived as a threat and to what extent, and how effective would it be to resort to force under certain circumstances (O'Keefe, 2023). Crucially, strategic culture is shaped by external forces as well, chief among them being the geographical milieu and the nature of a state's relations with its neighbours (Lantis, 2015:173). In short, the strategic culture of a nation is what predisposes its leadership towards certain courses of action when it comes to the threat or use of military force.

Australia's strategic culture is shaped by the historical and cultural experiences of its people, who shape public opinion, and the political orientations of the elite, who shape foreign and defence policies. In the next section, we look at five factors that strongly influence and mould Australia's strategic culture.

Section II: Factors that underpin Australia's contemporary strategic culture

Alliance with the US

The ANZUS Treaty and a close defence partnership with the United States has been, and continues to be, central to Australia's security strategy (Dean et al, 2024), reflecting a perpetuation of reliance on allied support for its defence requirements. The AUKUS Partnership, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and trilateral partnership with the US and Japan are further proof that Australia is moving into closer military cooperation with its principal ally to address the evolving strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region (Smith & Australian Government, 2023:8). Despite several decades of 'self-reliance' woven into its strategic DNA, Australia has not been able to achieve a force structure that can defend its territory and core interests autonomously (Shoebridge, 2021). Thus, dependency on principle allies has increased as the balance of power has shifted in the Indo-Pacific region.

The deepening channels of defence collaboration with the US contribute to Australia's national security in a number of ways. Firstly, the American 'nuclear umbrella' that evolved in the wake of the ANZUS Treaty continues to act as a deterrent against potential major power aggressors in the region, especially the nuclear armed states (Fruhling & O'Neil, 2020). Furthermore, for decades, the strategic security provided by the nuclear umbrella has enabled

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Australia to focus its resources on developing conventional warfighting capabilities.

Secondly, mechanisms such as the AUKUS Partnership are conducive to technological and industrial coordination with allies (Jackett, 2024) in the realm of cutting-edge technology that can go a long way in Australia re-acquiring its capabilities-edge that it has seen slipping away in recent years as a number of other players in the region have undergone military modernization at an accelerated pace (Carr, 2019). Emerging geopolitical challenges in the region require cooperation among allies on an unprecedented scale to develop and successfully deploy new technologies. The aim is to ensure that the force structure developed in conjunction with allies is more than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, it ensures that there are continuous and coordinated investments in defence requirements. On the other hand, lack of sufficient transparency has affected buy-in from the Australian public (Karp, 2023; Neelam, 2024).

Thirdly, access to US intelligence greatly enhances Australia's situational awareness and facilitates a thorough assessment of regional and global threats in real time (United States Studies Centre, 2021). Intelligence-sharing mechanisms between the allies is instrumental for Canberra to make informed strategic decisions regarding defence policy, military commitments, and diplomatic engagement going forward. Australia's middle power status has historically emphasized diplomacy and multilateralism.

However, as we'll discuss in section III below, there are some reservations regarding excessive dependence on allies for defence needs.

Geographical factors

Australia is a continental-sized island nation that has a natural 'moat' around it, which creates a sea-air gap that proves to be a significant deterrent for any force looking to impinge upon its core geographical interests (Dibb, 1986:38). Since Paul Dibb's articulation of the 'Defence of Australia' concept in the 1987 Defence White Paper, the concepts of deterrence by denial and layered defence have gained prominence and continue to feature in various forms in successive defence policy documents.

Over the years, Australian leaders have formulated strategic policies based on an understanding of defence interests that radiate out from the continental mainland in concentric circles (Rimmer and Ward, 2016:59). These encompass areas of direct military interest (ADMI) covering the earth's surface from the Eastern Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia and the 'arc of instability' such as Fiji and Solomon Islands, to Papua New Guinea and the broader Western Pacific region, and an area of primary strategic interest (APSI) that extends beyond the ADMI to encompass the broader Indo-Pacific region (Cheeseman, 1991:437).

A strategy of denial refers to the capacity to deter any potential adversary from intrusion or violation of sovereign rights in critical areas of national interest. This is achieved through layered defence, which entails a sequence of "interlocking barriers" (Dibb, 1986:51) across the spectrum of ISR capabilities, such as the JORN over-the-horizon radar network, air force, navy components that can defend and destroy any incursions from the air-sea gap to the north, and quick-reaction ground forces to defend infrastructure and secure population centres in the country.

Hence, geographical factors have played a significant role in designing the ADF's force structure over the last two decades and continue to figure prominently in recent defence publications such as the Defence Strategic Review 2023 and the National Defence Strategy 2024 (Australia Department of Defence, 2024). The recent push to move from a general-purpose force to a more specific force design is indicative of the focus on geographical realities to inform defence policy. Australia's location makes it an important player in the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the southern stretches to Antarctica.

However, Australia's geographical circumstances are also a source of insecurity for Canberra. Being distant from its closest allies and having an Anglo-Saxon culture in Asia at times creates fears of isolation, and thus Canberra has consistently felt the need to find ways to keep its allies engaged in the region (Dobell, 2024). A fear of abandonment drives policy choices at times, thereby compounding fears of indefensibility if left unaided.

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Dependence on technology

The vast size of the continent and compact size of its population have been a source of anxiety for Canberra for decades. Canberra continues to grapple with the question of how to protect such a vast area with a small population (Bisley, 2016). A comparative analysis lays the issue bare as the stark contrast with the troop sizes of its Asian peers furthermore serves to highlight the demographic limitations of Australian defence (Lowy Institute, 2024).

Thus, Australia's strategic culture has imbibed a course of maintaining a technological edge over its neighbours for many decades to defend its vast territory and vital interests. Australia's dependence on cutting-edge technology is multifaceted, involving various aspects that enhance military capabilities and operational effectiveness, such as ISR capabilities, cyber capabilities, research and development of new platforms, and enhancing interoperability with allies, among others.

The technology-sharing commitments under AUKUS Pillar II especially in areas of AI, quantum, undersea capabilities, and cyber capabilities (Henneke & Stephens, 2024) are geared towards maintaining the capabilities edge over potential adversaries. However, as noted earlier, Australia has seen its technological edge decline in recent years due to persistent underinvestment in the ADF during the years of the 'peace dividend' while other regional and global powers have undergone significant military modernization (Carr, 2019). As we will discuss in Section III below, Australia's dependence on technology is hampered primarily by the limitations of its domestic industrial capacity.

National culture, middle power, and relative economic decline

While there has been a significant shift away from the 'White Australia' policy and the nation has undergone important changes to its immigration policies as well as developed a more inclusive national culture, it remains a predominantly Anglo-American culture and shall remain so for the foreseeable future. In other words, Australia represents an Anglo-American culture situated geographically in Asia. Its Asian neighbours are diverse and have different sets of values and norms. As such, Australia's strategic culture views its neighbourhood as the 'Asian other' thereby carrying the risk of exaggerating its threat perceptions in the context of regional developments (Sobocinska, 2024). Thus, Canberra is drawn into deeper strategic cooperation with the US to balance against Chinese efforts to spread its values and increase its influence as great power competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia's position is made more precarious when we consider the relative decline of Australia's economy compared to other Asian countries in the coming decades. China's GDP has increased from 1.4 times that of Australia's in the 1970s to more than 7 times in recent years (Carr, 2019). ASEAN countries' combined GDP has increased from 0.6 the size of Australia's economy to nearly double its size in the same period. Indonesia could likely attain the 4th largest economy in the coming decades while Australia slips to 28th position (ibid.:11). Economic growth in these countries has been accompanied by corresponding modernization of their armed forces, instilling a sense of anxiety and urgency in Australia's strategic circles in recent years as Canberra has a much more limited 'warning time' to recalibrate force structure to meet emerging challenges even as its resource base declines.

Viewing itself as culturally different from its neighbours has also resulted in flip-flopping on important issues based on assessments of immediate concerns rather than long-term commitments to foster regional cooperation on critical non-conventional challenges such as climate change (Moore, 2024). Australia has faced a decline in credibility among its Pacific neighbours, some of whom find China to be a more accommodating and receptive partner when it comes to climate change, which poses an existential threat to these island nations. Moreover, Australia continues to make large investments in Western economies while its foreign investments in Pacific and Asian neighbours lag far behind, further popularizing the opinion that its immediate neighbourhood does not feature prominently in its foreign investment priorities (Westcott, 2024). Therefore, several regional players doubt Australia's commitments and ability to be a regional leader.

Preserving the international liberal order in the Indo-Pacific region

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Australia has benefitted immensely from freedom of maritime movement and trade in the Indo-Pacific, and thus, its strategic culture is oriented towards preserving the status quo in the region (Heiduk, 2020). Its geographical separation from its key trading partners and markets makes it vital for Australia to maintain the capacity to uphold the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy and secure its sea lanes of communication by force if necessary. The FOIP strategy is essential for Australia as it enhances regional security, supports vital economic interests, strengthens alliances between likeminded allies, promotes democratic values, and positions Australia as a leader in the Indo-Pacific. By embracing, advocating, and acquiring capabilities to support the FOIP policy, Australia aims to contribute to a stable and prosperous region while safeguarding its national interests and security (Brewster, 2018).

China's incursions into the South China Sea (SCS), militarization of islands, increasing instances of violent confrontations at sea, and massive expansion of a blue water navy to rival that of the US make Australia's maritime capabilities all the more vital for strategic stability in the region. China's security partnership with the Solomon Islands significantly affects security calculations as it gives China the opportunity to establish a strategic foothold in Australia's 'inner circle' (Davis, 2022). It has thus become crucial for Canberra to reinvigorate, deepen, and reinforce alliances with its Pacific and Asian neighbours (Forrest, 2024) through diplomacy, statecraft, aid, and economic partnerships. While the deal to acquire nuclear-powered submarines as per AUKUS Pillar I does present numerous advantages in terms of capabilities and reach, there remain serious concerns regarding the huge gaps between intent and capacity in the immediate future considering the timeline for acquiring the assets (Briggs, 2023). Some other issues concerning AUKUS are discussed in Section III below.

Section III: Australia's strategic culture and its suitability for the contemporary strategic environment

Based on the discussion above, the critique this essay presents is as follows—there exists a gap between intent and capacity, i.e., Australia's ideational stance is not wholly supported by its material capacities. Under such circumstances, excessive dependence on any ally, even if it is as powerful as the US, presents significant challenges.

The AUKUS Partnership has brought Australia into closer orbit of the US. As such, there is criticism from various segments that closer ties with the US come at a heightened cost. AUKUS could be viewed as Washington's way of ensuring Australia's participation in any conflict against China, such as in the defence of Taiwan (Hurst, 2022). It is now much harder for Australia to opt out of any conflict even if its own strategic interests do not wholly align with those of its ally (Sussex & Tesch, 2024). In other words, it constrains the options available to Canberra, considering its threat perceptions are increasingly informed by US policies in the region. There appear to be risks of exaggerating the threats and miscalculations that commit Australia to an irreversible course of confrontation with China, which is its largest trading partner, in support of the US, which remains its closest strategic ally and guarantor of security. There does not appear to be much discussion in the public sphere regarding the deleterious impact on the Australian economy or avenues to redress the economic risks were such a conflict to take place. Furthermore, it is likely that in any future conflict in the region, the US itself will be involved, thereby raising concerns regarding the dependable supply of critical capabilities and firepower when Australia needs it the most (Jones, 2023).

Regarding technology and domestic capacity, while Australia has relied on technological progress for guaranteeing its national security, it has demonstrated policy "sluggishness", which has resulted in relative decline in its technological lead it had counted on earlier (Carr, 2019). While there are proactive measures taken under AUKUS Pillar II to build technological partnerships with the US and the UK, Australia's domestic policies appear misaligned and not sufficiently geared towards self-reliance in terms of building research and industrial capacities to develop, upscale, and deploy cutting-edge technologies for securing its economic and national security (Shepherd, 2023), thereby exacerbating a sense of vulnerability that drives further securitization of foreign policy and an excessive dependence on the role of military force in managing international relations.

Without a robust domestic manufacturing base, Australia will likely struggle to develop and maintain the defence capabilities necessary to exercise strategic autonomy (Fruhling & Dunk, 2023). This can limit its ability to respond effectively to escalations, considering a lack of indigenous production capacity can lead to gaps in capabilities, making it difficult for Australia to meet specific operational needs or adapt quickly to emerging threats. Furthermore,

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regarding access to critical technologies, Australia has an ecosystem dominated by foreign manufacturers with production establishments in the country. Such dependence on collaborations with foreign defence contractors limits access to intellectual property, restricting the ability to fully understand, modify, or upgrade systems (Dunk, 2017). This can hinder Australia's ability to innovate or customize systems according to its unique strategic requirements.

Lastly, from a grand strategy perspective, Australia can no longer afford to stretch itself thin by participating in distant conflicts. Its force posture, shaped by its strategic culture, needs to take into consideration emerging realities of the region. Its military endeavours in Iraq in support of its principal ally, coupled with its history of transactional approaches and lack of commitment on important non-conventional issues such as climate change, have dented its reputation and made its neighbours sceptical of its role as a regional leader. Australia's strategic culture is not sufficiently aligned with the 'all of government' approach to develop and nurture long-term partnerships that demonstrably improve the conditions of its neighbours.

Conclusion

Navigating the complex environment emerging due to increasing tensions in Sino-American relations is one of the greatest challenges Australia faces in the coming decades. Its policy decisions are informed by its strategic culture, which is shaped by a number of relevant factors. Its security alliance with the US, geographical realities and cartographic anxieties, its need to maintain a technological edge, its status as a middle power in relative economic decline, and its determination to preserve the status quo in the Indo-Pacific form the basis of its strategic culture. Inherent tensions within and between these various factors present some alarming risks that could threaten Australia's national security were a war to break out in the region. The chief concern remains that Australia lacks the industrial capacity to fight a protracted conflict and does not yet possess the means to defend its core geographical interests and vital sea lines of communication by its own forces. Development of robust indigenous industrial capabilities through systematic prioritization of investments, government interventions, and incentives for the development of specific sectors/industries important to national security are some key steps to improve Australia's ability to respond to its contemporary strategic environment.

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