

Australian Strategic Policy in the Asian Century

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ABSTRACT: Crafting Australia's strategic policy involves difficult choices between imperfect outcomes. Though Australia is an island continent blessed with formidable geographic defences, it is also a maritime trading nation with significant interests and vulnerabilities extending far beyond its shores. Generally speaking, Australia's approach to security falls into two traditions: an 'expeditionary' posture that commits national power to extra-regional contingencies such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a more regionally oriented 'fortress Australia' tradition that focuses primarily on the Asia-Pacific system we inhabit. Both approaches contain strengths and have ably served Australian security imperatives at different times in the past. During periods of national imperilment, such as the Second World War and a turbulent Southeast Asia in the 1950s-1960s, Australian strategic policy fixated on developments close afield. Today emerging US-China strategic competition heralds the return of great power politics in Asia and portends to regional instability. Accordingly Australia can ill afford to diffuse its national power across multiple strategic systems over the globe. Against a backdrop of relatively declining Western power in Asia, Australia must once more return to a regionally focused strategic policy and eschew commitments to extra-regional contingencies.

Throughout Australian history two broad schools of strategic thought have emerged on how best to assure national security: an 'expeditionary' tradition advocating extra-regional military deployments around the globe, and a more regionally focused 'fortress Australia' tradition (Smith 1997, 13). Australian political decision-makers face a dilemmatic trade-off between which strategic approach to prioritise in search of national security. Understanding Australia's shifting strategic environment is crucial to making informed and judicious decisions on the allocation of scarce resources. Despite geographic location lowering the risk of a conventional military attack, Australia faces formidable security threats close to home. This paper argues for a regionally focused strategic policy to counteract rising local security crises and looming regional instability which will be the greatest threats to Australian strategic interests over the coming decades. A relative decline in Australian and American strategic weight within the Asia-Pacific system means

that the current diffusion of national power across disparate strategic systems is no longer a viable option to effectively protect Australia's national security

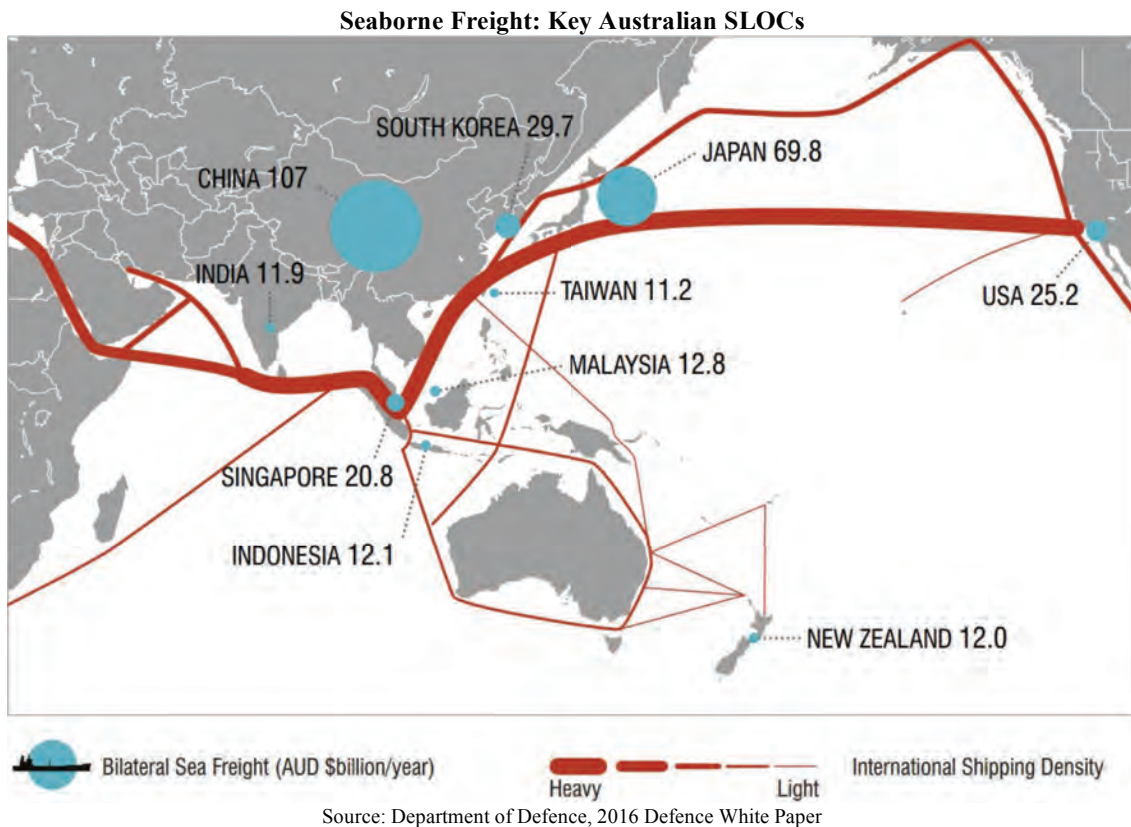
Strategic Interests & Objectives

Geography confers Australia considerable strategic advantages. As an island-nation the country is shielded from a major land-based attack. Armies cannot attack overland so they must transit oceans and seas to reach Australia. Maritime power projection presents significant administrative and technical hurdles, in addition to an immense economic cost (Till 2013, 279). These barriers to entry exclude most of Australia's regional neighbours from acquiring the types of military capabilities necessary to launch an attack upon the mainland. Furthermore, Australia's remote location at Asia's edge has historically insulated the country from armed conflict. Australia is not an overland corridor between strategic systems that foreign militaries traverse in their campaigns – unlike Poland or Ukraine for example. Moreover Australia is not a frontline buffer state between competing great powers, like North Korea or Afghanistan. Occupations, proxy wars and other forms of destabilising great power competition have never taken place directly on Australian soil.

Notwithstanding these upsides, Australia is not an unassailable fortress and does face serious challenges and drawbacks. Australia has a vast continental interior, extensive coastlines and thousands of islands, a small number of which are located hundreds of kilometres from the mainland. The Australian population is the 51st largest globally and 15th in the Asia-Pacific (United Nations 2015, 13–17). A population of 24 million must defend the 6th largest state in the world against potential adversarial states with populations exceeding hundreds of millions (C.I.A Factbook). Australia lacks sufficient manpower to assemble land forces that could reliably defend these possessions against attack from world's more populous states.

Strategic vulnerabilities also lie beyond Australia's territorial boundaries. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) must control or deny sweeping air and sea approaches across Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, operating from bases in northern Australia; an area sparsely populated and lacking significant infrastructure. The absence of overland trading routes, a small work force and limited domestic manufacturing output renders Australian living standards highly dependent upon seaborne trade. Agricultural

and mining products are exported to afford access to energy imports, final goods and capital investment. Goods transit sea lines of communication (SLOC) across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and through Southeast Asian chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. Limited human and economic resources prevents Australia developing maritime forces to independently defend these far-reaching and highly exposed SLOCs.



The foregoing overview reveals that Australia’s primary strategic interests are in defending its territory and keeping its sea lines of communication open. These core strategic interests inform three strategic objectives: a secure Australia; security in the immediate Southeast Asian and South Pacific regions; and stability in the wider Asia-Pacific system (Aus. Dep’t Def. 2016, 68). This may appear straightforward, however as Clausewitz noted, the simplest things in war are exceptionally difficult (Clausewitz 1976, 119). As noted above, Australia’s sprawling geography and small demographic base determines a relative weakness in land power, which impels us towards maritime power. Australia’s naval and air forces possess surveillance and precision strike capabilities that can impose high costs sufficient to deter most would-be adversaries. The ADF cannot,

however independently deter a major conventional attack or nuclear attack from a great power state. Therefore, Australia has always and continues to seek its security through alliances with a great and powerful friend.

Extra-Regional Objectives

Australia has always sought a great power alliance to guarantee its security. In payment for the so-called security 'insurance policy,' the Australian government has regularly committed to extra-regional deployments in a variety of conflicts – the Second Boer War, both world wars, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to this 'alliance management' aspect, expeditionary deployments have also sought to reduce the burden upon Australia's security guarantor and help preserve a favourable global balance of power (Evans 2005, 29). Modern defence parlance euphemistically describes such balancing actions as 'maintaining a rules-based global order' (Aus. Dep't Def. 2016, 76). By entrenching our security guarantor's power through extra-regional deployments afar from home, we enhance their ability to directly intervene in our region should crisis surface. With extra-regional deployments, Australia may indirectly obtain a measure of security closer to home. British strategic withdrawal during the Second World War (WWII), and again in 1971, suggests this hypothesis requires continuous evaluation as regional strategic circumstances evolve over time.

Deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan did not directly support the strategic objectives outlined in the 2013 and 2016 defence white papers. They did not secure Australian territory from major conventional attack, nor did they protect SLOCs across Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, or directly contribute to the wider stability of the Asia-Pacific. The principal goals of these campaigns – alliance management and balancing actions – were to incentivise American strategic engagement in Asia and to provide wider support to the US-dominated global order. While these extra-regional goals might indirectly enhance Australian security, it must be asked whether a regionally focused approach would be more effective.

Australia made niche contributions to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This included offering greatly appreciated political support to the United States, but not operationally significant amounts of forces. In Afghanistan Australian forces 'relied on

enabling capabilities supplied by America or other NATO forces (such as battlefield airlift, air strike and indirect fire support)' (Davies, et al. 2014, 13). At the outset of the Iraq War Australia contributed approximately 2,000 ADF personnel, two AP-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, three C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, fourteen F/A-18 Hornet fighters and three warships to the initial invasion (Aus. Dep't Def. 2006). The United States by comparison contributed almost 200,000 troops while the United Kingdom deployed 45,000.

American relative strength in maritime and air power quickly crushed conventional military opposition in Iraq and Afghanistan. Incidentally Australian air power came to the fore only after the Americans had effectively destroyed Iraq's air defence system (Davies, et al. 2014, 16). The United States' relative weakness was in assembling sufficient land forces to provide security for the occupied countries. Counter-insurgency campaigns also revealed the acute need for non-military capabilities such as humanitarian aid, economic development and civilian-led institutional reconstruction.

Australia's contribution did little to match America's relative weaknesses in its Middle Eastern campaigns. In order to avoid mass casualties, the Australian government committed a proportionately small land force component and restricted ADF operations to relatively low-risk areas within Iraq and Afghanistan. Australia's commitment was focused on military support, with little provision of non-military resources such as reconstruction specialists, humanitarian aid, civilian police and diplomats. This stands in stark contrast to the whole-of-government approach in deploying extensive military and non-military capabilities to regional contingencies in the Solomon Islands, 2003–2013, and East Timor, 1999–2000.

The main contribution to Iraq and Afghanistan was not military it was political support. This enhanced America's legitimacy but did not purchase substantive leverage within the ANZUS alliance. If Australia withdrew at any point during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the US possessed sufficient resources to cover the exposed area of operations. Threatening to withdraw could not be used to extract greater alliance benefits. As Peter Edwards observes, from the Korean War onwards Australia would 'talk a good war but limit the commitment' (Edwards 2015, 10). It is clear that such limited commitments

will not incentivise the United States to protect Australia above and beyond its own strategic interest in dominating the Asia-Pacific. The alliance management value of supporting extra-regional contingencies is therefore practically negligible.

Symbolic commitments to extra-regional contingencies have also had limited strategic impact and done little to preserve an American-dominated balance of power – regionally or globally – that could serve Australian security interests. The present situation in Iraq attests to this. Since the Coalition’s withdrawal in 2011, civil war has effectively fractured the Iraqi state into three nations. The resulting conflagration across Syria and Iraq has created an unstable power vacuum and fuelled a regional geopolitical contest. Iraq and Syria now play host to intense strategic competition between regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and external powers in the United States and Russia. The US may lose Iraq entirely should it become an ungovernable failed state or enter a strategic alliance with Iran and align against American interests in the Middle East. America may also see its chief Middle Eastern partner – Saudi Arabia – weakened in the emerging cold war between itself and Iran. It is far from certain this unstable geopolitical battleground will re-order to American advantage. It is clear however that Australia’s extra-regional deployments to the Middle East have had trivial effect on enhancing American regional influence, let alone the United States’ position in the global balance of power. It is doubtful then that the United States’ ability to intervene in regional contingencies threatening Australia security has been improved.

Lastly another argument for supporting extra-regional contingencies is to fight terrorism at its source, in distant theatres, to prevent it spreading to our region. The empirical record of the past approximate fifteen years has raised serious doubts on this policy’s efficacy. Over a decade of supporting the ‘War on Terror’ has had minimal impact on eradicating terrorism from Iraq and Afghanistan, or in ameliorating transnational terrorism. If anything the level of terrorist activity in Iraq has dramatically *increased* after the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Western Middle Eastern campaigns have destabilised the region and created fertile breeding grounds and safe havens for transnational terrorism organisations such as ISIS. This example demonstrates the tremendous difficulty in extracting counter-terrorism (CT) benefits from a destabilised region consumed by intense geopolitical strategic competition. Australia is simply unable

to field the capabilities and resources necessary to stabilise the region, which is a necessary precondition for effective CT operations. Without regional stability CT efforts will deliver only ephemeral benefits. On the other hand, regionally focused counter-terrorist initiatives have yielded exceptional results for Australia. Intelligence sharing between the Australian Intelligence Community (AIC) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) with Indonesia's security apparatus has brought 'years of victory' and 'resounding success' against Jemaah Islamiyah, but it remains an ongoing challenge (Cloyne 2016).

Emerging Trends – Local Security Concerns

Ongoing security concerns in Australia's neighbourhood are a more immediate threat to Australia than extra-regional contingencies in far flung locales such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Across the South Pacific and the southern edge of Southeast Asia lies an island chain forming a natural defensive barrier between Australia and Asia. An obvious military strategy for a hostile adversary would be to gain a military foothold somewhere within this island chain to be in a position to launch strikes, blockades, invasions or to otherwise coerce Australia. The Japanese did exactly this in WWII (Evans 2005, 34, 79). Regarding Indonesia – which constitutes the western and central portions of the island chain – this risk is low because the country is relatively stable and has a large land force to defend its territory. It is the multitude of small, impoverished, unstable island nations dotting the eastern portion that present the major risk.

From the early 1990s onwards many of these fragile states experienced increasing political instability and localised security crises. Defence expert Paul Dibb termed this security concern the 'Arc of Instability' and flagged the likelihood of Australia intervening in major contingencies close to its doorstep (1999, 18). Fiji has undergone four coups over the past two decades and periodic crises that have required the Australian navy to dispatch warships for potential evacuation of Australian nationals.

The Arc of Instability



Source: Karl Claxton, *Securing the South Pacific: Making the most of Australia's renewed regional focus*

Papua New Guinea (PNG) – Australia’s largest pacific neighbour – is arguably the biggest worry. Due to its relatively large population, compared to other fragile neighbours, ADF resources would be considerably strained in a prospective deployment. The Bougainville Civil War, 1988–1998, destabilised PNG and almost culminated in a military coup in 1997. Maintaining PNG’s stability and managing the risks stemming from ‘insecurity, weak governance and corruption’ remains an ongoing concern for the Australian government (Aus. Dep’t Foreign Affairs 2015, 3). Australia provides significant aid, \$519.4 million in 2013–14 — PNG’s largest donor, and service delivery in a variety of PNG public sector domains including governance, education, health, law and justice (Aus. Dep’t Foreign Affairs 2015, 2). Stabilisation campaigns in East Timor, 1999–2000, and the Solomon Islands, 2003–2013, are other examples of serious challenges faced by countries within the arc. In 2007 these issues prompted a sobering assessment from then opposition leader and now former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd:

across East Timor, Papua New Guinea (PNG), through Melanesia... over the last 10 years, that concept [the Arc of Instability] has become a reality (ABC Lateline 2007).

If Australia is to effectively 'play a leadership role in our immediate neighbourhood spanning Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries' then resources for expeditionary campaigns must be allocated preponderantly to *regional* contingencies (Aus. Dep't Def. 2016, 33).

Emerging Trends – Regional Power Shift

Following the Second World War for approximately three decades, the Australian economy was predominant within the Asia-Pacific. With the exception of Japan, Asia's most populous states were largely agrarian economies. On top of this, the 1950s and 1960s were a turbulent period in Southeast Asia. Decolonisation, wars of national liberation and communist insurgencies destabilised and impoverished many Asian states. It was during this period that Australian diplomatic clout and military power within Asia reached its apogee. Following this peak, Australia's relative economic position and military capability edge has declined and will continue to do so.

The past four decades has witnessed extraordinary stability and economic development across Asia, especially in rising great powers China and India. At present the Australian economy is ranked 19th largest in the world, and is projected to fall to 23rd largest by 2030 and 28th by 2050 (PWC 2014, 3). Similarly, in the Asia-Pacific the Australian economy is 7th largest but is forecasted to 9th place by 2030 and 13th by 2050 (PWC 2014, 3). Meanwhile China, India and Indonesia – all of whom have already surpassed Australia – will come to occupy three of the four largest economies in the world by 2050. A significant number of 'middle powers' including Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines are also set to overtake Australia. Although forecasting decades into the future does entail significant uncertainty the long-term regional trends are systemic and unlikely to cease. In what is termed the 'great convergence' Asia is industrialising and closing the productivity gap with the West (Grinin, et al. 2015). Increases in Australian defence budgets will not be able to match soaring military expenditures across Asia, which now eclipses Europe.

Rising Asian prosperity is underwriting widespread military modernisation, permitting various states to acquire military capabilities previously monopolised by only a handful of highly developed states (Mapp 2014, 17). Basic patrol vessels and training

aircraft are being replaced by advanced surface vessels, submarines and combat aircraft. A suite of surveillance platforms and precision-guided weapons, colloquially termed 'anti-access/area denial' (A2/AD), allows even modest military powers the ability to inflict deliver lethal damage against high-end surface vessels and aircraft operated by Australia and the United States. Hugh White observes that technological factors have fundamentally altered the balance in maritime warfare as finding and destroying ships has become incredibly easy and inexpensive (White 2015). Conversely the ability to project maritime power and assert command of the seas has become incredibly difficult and expensive.

The economic and military trends hold major implications for Australia. First, we can no longer take for granted Australia's technological edge and capability superiority over potential adversaries. The increasing military capabilities of our regional neighbours increases the risks and costs associated with diffusing national power across multiple strategic systems. Secondly we cannot expect the United States to maintain its previously unsurmountable military edge over a rising China that is modernising its military with potent A2/AD systems. The US will not be able to maintain *uncontested* strategic primacy based on maritime power projecting assets such as land bases, aircraft carriers and combat aircraft. These assets are increasingly vulnerable to Chinese precision strike capabilities. These developments do not necessarily foretell America's displacement from the Asia-Pacific, but it is certain that maintaining strategic primacy will no longer be the low cost proposition it has been ever since President Nixon and Henry Kissinger struck a grand bargain with Chairman Mao in 1972 (White 2012, 14). In that deal the Chinese acquiesced to American strategic primacy over the Asia-Pacific in exchange for integration into the international system and access to international markets, technology and capital. This quid-pro-quo arrangement aligned Chinese land power and American maritime power against the Soviet Union.

Since then the Soviet Union has collapsed and a rising China is seeking to revise the Asia-Pacific order. The United States has so far struggled to halt Chinese island reclamation activities, which contrasts sharply to the 1996 Taiwan Strait crises, where a carrier battle group was sufficient to intimidate the Chinese into backing down. With rising costs in maintaining strategic primacy in the Asia-Pacific, the United States will demand more

from its regional allies (Office Press Sec. 2015). It is imperative that Australia does all that it can to lower those costs and thus lower the risk of American strategic withdrawal.

Finally Australia cannot presume that Asia's relative stability over the past forty years will continue. Escalating strategic rivalry between China and the US is already a reality. In recent years China's newfound strategic weight has emboldened it to begin challenging the US led order in the Asia-Pacific and prosecute its disputed maritime claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea. China has adopted a so-called 'salami-slice strategy' that aims to 'slice off parts of the East Asian seas, bit by bit, until its neighbours have entirely accepted its naval power and influence' (Yon 2015, 46). At the forefront is a major island reclamation campaign that commenced in December 2013. The US government estimates that China has reclaimed '17 times more land in 20 months than the other claimants combined over the past 40 years' (US Dep't Def. 2015, 16). Many of these artificial island features have been militarised with bases, air strips, surface-to-air missile platforms and long-range radar systems.

In reply the US announced its strategic 'rebalance' and has begun responding to China's challenge with freedom of navigation operations. The rebalance illustrates America's expectations of its Asia-Pacific allies in the coming century: greater 'spoke-to-spoke linkages [between its bilateral allies] and allied interoperability' (Wainwright 2016). This regionally focused framework provides a guide for how Australia can maximise its standing within the ANZUS alliance, hedge the risk of our regional neighbour's rising military capabilities and manage looming regional instability.

Conclusion

The emergence of the Arc of Instability and changes in the Asia-Pacific's balance of power have increased security threats emanating from Australia's immediate region. The last time Australia faced such a threat – during the 1950s and 1960s – it adopted the regionally focused *forward defence* policy. In the Second World War, Australia brought its troops home to fight in the Pacific Campaign. Supporting extra-regional contingencies is only viable during times of relative stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Prevailing strategic trends means that Australia must undertake its own 'rebalance' and regionally concentrate its elements of national power to assure its national security.

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