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Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security in the event of a post US alliance era

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ABSTRACT
The rise of China combined with a growing “America First” approach to US foreign policy has generated a debate in Australia about the status of the alliance with the United States. This article contributes to this debate by exploring what a Plan B, for Australian security outside the alliance, might look like. It assesses existing scholarship on the subject, highlighting how recent arguments that Australia can “go it alone” are fundamentally flawed as they fail to address requirements to protect the economic and human security of Australians. The article goes on to examine why it is still necessary to consider a Plan B, and what Australia’s core national interests are. It emphasises the importance of protecting the lives and livelihoods of Australians, as opposed to the pure focus on the territorial defence of Australia that has marked out much of the existing literature. This leads the article to conclude that, outside the US alliance, Australia would need to rely on a more holistic concept of security, and less on a military approach. It concludes by putting forward suggestions for how Australia could provide itself with security outside the US alliance, primarily through building resilience and adopting a form of neutrality.

KEYWORDS
Australia; United States; AUKUS; ANZUS; defence

Main text
This article explores what options would be available to Australian policymakers to provide the country with security in a world without the US alliance. Until relatively recently it has seemed implausible that an Australian government would ever seriously question the value of the US alliance, let alone have to consider a world without it. That has changed over the past decade, partly driven by a change in the global strategic environment, but primarily as a result of shifts in American domestic politics. There has, so far, been relatively little serious debate about what it would take for Australia to provide itself with security outside of the alliance, and exploring the issue has a number of benefits. Firstly, it would drive a deeper exploration of Australia’s strategic interests, forcing both advocates and critics of the alliance to move beyond some of the assumptions, and reflexive judgements that have marked out the discussion so far.
Secondly, as will be set out below, some of the foundations of the Australian-American relationship have been shaken in recent years, and there is the prospect of further earthquakes to come. This may well mean that the costs of the alliance increase, and at the same time, the confidence in its benefits declines. In order to continue to assess the value of the alliance in such circumstances it is vital to begin a debate on what Australian security could look like without it. Finally, such a debate illuminates options for policymakers if it becomes necessary to begin hedging against the risk of a major change in the Australian-American alliance. This article is not seeking to advocate for a Plan B—indeed, it will argue that moving away from the US alliance would be very difficult and extremely costly. It does, however, hope to open up a real debate, which would help inform better policy.

The article will start by exploring the recent literature that has suggested that Australia can defend itself independently in the face of a rising China. It will demonstrate why the arguments put forward within this are deeply flawed, and cannot form the basis of any Plan B. It will then go on to assess why, despite the challenges, it is still necessary to have this debate. The third section of the article will briefly outline what Australia’s core strategic interests are, and therefore, what it is that needs protecting. Within this it will suggest that, in line with a wider national security approach, it is necessary to focus on the human and economic security of Australians as well as the territorial defence of the country. This will facilitate a reimagining of how Australia provides itself with security, moving away from the near absolute focus on military means. The article will conclude with three potential avenues to pursue in order to provide Australia with security outside the US alliance: middle power alliances, security of supply and economic resilience, and neutrality. Given the confines of the article these are only briefly outlined, and there are obviously other alternatives. These are also not considered as approaches which could, individually, solve Australia’s strategic challenges; instead they are seen as potential ingredients in a wider policy. The aim is to begin a discussion not, conclude one.

The very hungry echidna

Debating the value of the American alliance has been one of, if not the, central themes of Australian international relations scholarship for over fifty years. Much of this has been focused on the issue of entrapment; the idea that Australia was losing its sovereignty and becoming drawn into American conflicts in far flung places. This scholarship tended to pay scant attention to the precise dynamics through which the alliance provided Australia with security, instead acknowledging the big picture benefits before going on to focus on the implications of the alliance on foreign policy. Even as recently as 2013 it was reasonable to describe the alliance’s security benefits in the broadest terms, helping Australia ‘to protect its vital interests and see off potential threats’ (Bisley 2013, 405). The reason for this is simple. There was no significant threat to Australian security (Dunley 2023). In the absence of a direct threat, the mechanisms through which American regional primacy flowed through into Australian security did not need to be examined closely.

Over the past decade that situation has changed radically. The rise of China and the perceived relative decline of the United States has brought forth a new debate on the US alliance. The concern is no longer focused primarily on the risk that the United States might drag Australia into foreign wars, instead there is, for some at least, the far more
worrying prospect that the United States may no longer be willing or able to defend Australia. Whereas previous debates tended to focus on whether the costs of the alliance were too great, the new generation raises the spectre that the benefits provided by the alliance might be illusory. In doing so this new debate has focused in on questions of how the US alliance has facilitated Australian security, and more recently whether Australia could branch out on its own. Hugh White, the leading figure in this scholarship, has attacked the current bipartisan consensus on the US alliance, suggesting that it boils down to an acceptance ‘that we can, and must, rely on America to fix our China problem for us’. In White’s view, Australian leaders ‘shy away from the alternative—that America might fail’. By contrast, he believes that ‘our ally will probably fail us …. Sooner or later, they will step back from the region and leave us to make our own way with China as best we can.’ (White 2022, 3–4)

Concerns about the rise of China and the belief that the United States will walk away from Asia has led White and others to argue that Australia can, and perhaps should, seek to provide its own security, independent of the US alliance (White 2018b). The most extreme example of this argument comes from Sam Roggeveen, who suggests that such a step would, in contrast to common wisdom, be ‘achievable and affordable for Australia’ (Roggeveen 2023). White, Roggeveen and others who have proffered similar arguments including Al Palazzo, answer the question of how Australia could seek to provide itself with security independent of the US alliance by proposing a radically different force structure and posture for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) (Palazzo 2018). They also propose other steps, such as closer relations with Indonesia, but fundamentally they view the challenge of defending Australia independently as one that can be solved by military means (White 2018a, 2018b; Roggeveen 2023, 102–115). They disagree on the cost of such an endeavour, with Roggeveen believing that it could be achieved within current budget, whilst White foresees it as requiring a very substantial increase of the defence budget to 3-4% of GDP. Critically, however, both believe that it is possible, and indeed that stepping away from the US alliance, or at least the ability to do so, is now desirable for Australia.

This new scholarship has, in the words of Malcolm Turnbull, provided ‘regular doses of realpolitik [that] are invigorating’ to the wider discussion, and there has certainly been an active debate on White’s central argument about there being a power shift from the United States to China (Turnbull 2022, 72). The discussion of White and Roggeveen’s arguments regarding Australia defending itself independently has had an equally high profile, but far less depth. Put simply few in the academic and strategic policy community consider the ideas to be plausible. As the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) stated bluntly, ‘Australia does not have effective defence capabilities relative to higher threat levels. In the present strategic circumstances, this can only be achieved by Australia working with the United States and other key partners’ (DSR 2023, p. 37). This tendency to disregard the arguments that Australia should seek to defend itself independently is understandable. As a number of critics have pointed out, the desire of White, Roggeveen and others to present a plausible case in which Australia can defend itself independently drives them to frame what is meant by defending Australia in such a narrow way as to be effectively meaningless (Kilcullen 2019). Peter Jennings described How to Defend Australia as ‘a party trick: engagingly clever, but not realistic’, a criticism that has frequently been directed at White (Jennings 2019; Medcalf 2022, 104–105).
At the heart of this issue is a question of the role of geography in Australian strategy. Roggeveen has regularly argued that ‘distance is Australia’s best defence asset’, whilst Hugh White has long advocated a policy of concentric rings of national interests, become less vital the further away you get from Australia. These arguments are, at first glance, very attractive. Furthermore, they have been given a veneer of credence by recent history, when American regional hegemony has allowed Australian policymakers to assume that the country’s interests outside the immediate region will be protected. They are, however, fundamentally misguided. Australia’s geographic isolation has always been a double-edged sword in strategic terms, placing the country a long way from potential adversaries, but also a long way from its allies, and sources of vital supply. This geography shapes the nature of Australia’s key military challenges. These are the defence of Australian territory, and the protection of the country’s supply and communication lifelines across the seas. These two elements have been at the core of Australian security since colonisation and remain so today, forming the central part of the ADF’s missions as set out in the government’s response to the DSR. Geography defines what is required to meet these challenges, and ‘the first point to remember about the Australian island-continent is not that it is a continent, but that it is an island’ (Millar 1965, 30). This fact, combined with the distances involved in any operation to attack Australian territory mean that defending Australian territory is a comparatively easy task. Indeed, it is very difficult to imagine a scenario in which a power that is capable of developing sufficient control of the seas around Australia in order to mount and sustain an invasion, would conclude that there was enough to be gained to be worth the risk. After all, economic coercion would enable them to achieve all except the most unlimited of ends. By contrast, that same geography which makes defending Australian territory comparatively simple, ensures that defending Australia’s lifelines to the rest of the world is extremely challenging. These are long, extending far beyond Australia’s coasts, and are thus highly exposed to a major maritime power.

It is in this context that one must view the decision by White and Roggeveen to focus very narrowly on the territorial defence of Australia. Through a degree of smoke and mirrors both seek to present defending the Australian landmass as being equivalent to defending Australia. In this, they are helped by the common, but misguided, association of their ideas with the Defence of Australia (DoA) policy of the late twentieth century. This policy was framed as providing self-reliance within an alliance context and was focused on lower-level threats. As the 1987 Defence White Paper (DWP) made clear, this enabled Australia to focus on the territorial defence of its landmass, safe in the knowledge that if a major power threatened its critical lifelines it would be able to rely upon American support (DWP 1987, 27–28). This would not be the case in the scenarios envisaged by White and Roggeveen.

The reasoning for the explicit focus on the territorial defence of Australia is self-evident. Both White and Roggeveen wish to present Australia shifting away from relying on the US alliance as not merely possible, but desirable, and the difficulty of defending Australia’s maritime connections undermines such an argument. Thus, it is easier to simply wish it away. This analysis is hardly new. James Goldrick repeatedly took White to task on this issue, and others have raised similar concerns (Goldrick
Indeed, in a revelation of quite how thin this argument is, White has openly conceded that outside of the US alliance, Australia’s seaborne trade is ‘essential but undefendable’ (White 2021). What he consistently refuses to do is address what that means for the rest of his argument.

To be fair to Roggeveen, he does address this issue in a section of his book looking at the potential for China to mount a blockade of Australia (Roggeveen 2023, 77–81). In contrast to everyone else in the debate, including White, he believes that Australia is relatively immune to this type of economic warfare. The logic behind this argument is, however, misplaced. Roggeveen suggests that the Chinese would ‘station ships or submarines off every major Australian port to stop ships from entering or leaving’. On this basis, he concludes that the demands on the People’s Liberation Army Navy would be too much to be worthwhile. He goes on to suggest that even if the Chinese did sink significant amounts of Australian trade, some would still make it through. This argument is based on a misunderstanding of how a regional maritime hegemon would seek to employ economic warfare, and seemingly presupposes some form of Napoleonic era close blockade. In reality, the Chinese would be able to use Australia’s geography against it. A critical Australian vulnerability ‘is that shipping in the Indian and Pacific Oceans can be identified from some distance away as being bound only for Australia or New Zealand’, resulting in the so-called Sandison Line (Menhinick 2003, 11–12; Australian Maritime Doctrine 2010). This would facilitate China to establish a maritime exclusion zone, and using military, diplomatic, economic, and commercial pressure to isolate the country. Other basic questions, such as why any ship owner would be willing to commit their vessel to such a risky endeavour, or why any crew would be willing to man it, are neatly swept under the carpet. Recent experience with the Houthis in the Red Sea highlights just how vulnerable trade flows are, demonstrating the impact a relatively minor force can have on shipping routes and insurance, even when ships are defended by a coalition of major navies (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024). The Japanese experience in 1944–1945 clearly reveals how relying upon maritime trade to flow across waters where you cannot exert sea control is a sure-fire recipe for disaster (Graham 2006). Roggeveen’s assertion that Australia could rely heavily on air freight to compensate for such a maritime blockade is equally problematic. The legal framework for blockade applies to aircraft as well as to ships, so there are limited advantages to this approach. Furthermore, the carrying capacity of aircraft is obviously a fraction of that of ships. Perhaps most significantly, Roggeveen forgets the fact that Australia would lack the aviation gas necessary to refuel these aircraft on arrival, making it a one-way trip. Assuming that trade will just keep on flowing, and therefore Australia need not worry too much about protecting it, makes for a much simpler argument about how to defend the country. Sadly, however, if we want to be serious in considering what it would take to move away from the US alliance, we must consider the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.

Why does trade matter? The most commonly discussed issue is fuel. As of the end of 2023 Australia imported 88.6% of its refined fuel, with the majority coming from Korea, Singapore and Malaysia (Australian Petroleum Statistics 2023). There are now only two working oil refineries in Australia (Macmillan 2021). These imports are extremely vulnerable to interdiction far from Australian coasts. Much of the raw product originates in the Middle East, where it flows through maritime chokepoints such as the Straits of...
Hormuz. The major Asian refineries are far closer to Australia’s potential adversaries than they are to Australia. Perhaps most importantly, at every step of this process, from the original producers through the refineries, to the shipping and insurance, this supply chain is incredibly vulnerable to economic coercion by a major maritime and economic power. The implications of this on any effort to defend Australia independently are profound. The 24 conventionally powered submarines that are central to White’s sea denial philosophy would rapidly be rendered useless, as would the aircraft proposed by Roggeveen. More significantly, whilst Australia maybe largely self-sufficient in food (at least until the imported fertiliser runs out), without fuel, little of that would make it to the major eastern cities. Long term trends, notably electrification may serve to reduce Australia’s dependence on imported fuel, however this is not the simple solution sometimes suggested. Australia is even more dependent on imports for key renewable energy technologies than it is for fuel. For example, in 2022 Australia imported 100% of its lithium-ion batteries, and that is in spite of being a major producer of the key raw materials (CSIRO 2022).

Whilst fuel has been the focus of much of the attention, the same calculus can be run with any number of other essentials. Australia ranks 93rd out of 133 in the Harvard Economic Complexity Index, which measures a country’s ability to manufacture and export diverse and complex items and services (Harvard Complexity Index 2023). That placed it between Uganda and Pakistan. Cut off from overseas supply the Australian economy and society would rapidly cease to function effectively, deprived of basics including medicine, personal protective equipment (PPE), and all forms of equipment requiring microprocessors, including munitions (Dunley 2023, 321). This, of course, ignores the other aspect of Australia’s lifelines across the oceans, the cables that transport the data upon which so many of our everyday tasks depend. Australia, if it followed the prescription set out by White and Roggeveen, might be able to deter an invasion fleet, but it would be utterly incapable of preventing a powerful adversary from destroying the fabric of Australian life.

None of this comes as any surprise to those who have considered the longer history of Australian defence policy. In 1947, drawing off wartime experience, the Chief of Naval Staff told Cabinet that ‘the basic foundation of [Australia’s] defence problem was the protection of the merchant ship’ (Cooper 2008, 522). A generation later, T. B. Millar described it as ‘axiomatic’ that Australia must protect its lengthy sea lines of communication (SLOCs) given its reliance on overseas trade and supply. Millar went on to highlight another fundamental feature of Australian security policy;

It would take a very large navy to protect them [the SLOCs] against attack by a much smaller navy. Australia has a very small navy, and could not easily or quickly expand it to a size suitable to protect the sea routes.

It was this more than any other factor that has always made, and continues to make, Australia reliant upon alliances for its security (Millar 1965, 32–33). The relatively widespread acknowledgement of these central features of Australian defence policy has been an important factor driving many in the academic and policy debate to ignore the arguments put forward by White and Roggeveen, dismissing them as contrarian. Whilst this is in many respects understandable, it has meant that there has been remarkably little engagement with the basic question posed by White and Roggeveen; what would it take to defend Australia independently?
A post-American world?

Discussing Australian defence outside the US alliance seems to many a little hyperbolic, and to a degree it is. Recent years have seen a notable doubling down on the relationship and a clear acknowledgement from leaders on both sides of its significance. As the 2023 AUSMIN statement noted, 'the Alliance has never been stronger. Based on a bond of shared values, it remains a partnership of strategic interest—premised on a common determination to preserve stability, prosperity, and peace' (Joint Statement on Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations 2023). This is more than just words, there has been a remarkable ramping up of collaboration on defence matters in the past decade, led by, but not restricted to AUKUS. However, this period has also seen concerns over Australia’s reliance upon the US alliance grow dramatically, reaching something of a crescendo in early 2024. What has been particularly notable is the way such calls have gone from being largely restricted to those on the left politics who might have been seen as being traditionally opposed to the alliance, to now include establishment figures such as Kim Beazley (Beazley 2024).

A central driver in this concern is the looming prospect of a second presidential term for Donald Trump. Most scholars and diplomats agree that Trump did untold damage to US alliance relations in his first term, and the prospects for Trump 2.0 appear far worse. The former president’s recent statement that he would encourage Vladimir Putin to ‘do whatever the hell he likes’ to NATO members who don’t meet with Trump’s approval sent shockwaves through Europe, and shivers down the spines of all US allies (CNN 2024; The Guardian 2024). However, as the more optimistic among the Australian commentariat have highlighted, the Indo-Pacific is not Europe, and Trump’s bromance with Putin is not reflected in relations between Washington and Beijing (Buchanan 2024). Indeed, the national security figures who have sought to align themselves with Trump, including the likes of Elbridge Colby, are notably hawkish on China even as they advocate drawing down US commitments elsewhere (Colby and Velez-Green 2023). This picture, of course, relies on a degree of coherence and rationality in the approach of a second Trump administration that was not always apparent in his first term. A number of hawks in the national security community including the likes of John Bolton, tried to tame Trump and failed. It is far from certain that future efforts will be more successful. There must be serious questions about the extent to which the Australian government, and its people feel confident in grounding their security on an alliance with a power led by someone as inconsistent as Trump.

There is arguably an even bigger challenge to the American alliance than the prospect of another 4 years of Trump. Historically Australia and the US have not always seen eye to eye on all issues, but there has been a broadly shared view of the world which has underpinned the connection. This was an alliance of values as well as one of interests. As Julia Gillard remarked in her oft-quoted speech in 2011, ‘our values are shared and our people are friends. This is the heart of our alliance.’ (Gillard 2011) These statements remain the bread and butter of communiques from both sides, generally rapidly followed by some reference to the shared ‘faith in freedom and democracy’ and the rules based international order (Biden & Albanese Press Conference 2023). The problem is that this increasingly sits ill with the reality in Washington. Whilst many still remain committed to these concepts, they do not have the universal bi-partisan support that they
once did. We may soon have a sitting President who has explicitly tried to subvert the
democratic process in the United States, and crucially he has brought large sections of
the GOP and wider population with him. Trump has openly admitted that he will use
the judiciary to pursue political vendettas, and will seek to co-opt institutions such as
the intelligence apparatus and the military (Politico 2024; Rosin 2023). These are
measures taken directly from the authoritarian’s playbook. Given this, it is unsurprising
that Trump has maintained his infatuation with President Putin, despite the latter’s
illegal invasion of Ukraine. Increasingly, of course, Trump is not alone. The traditionally
hawkish think tank the Heritage Foundation has conducted a remarkable volte face on
Russia, and in Congress there has been growing opposition among some Republicans
for continued US support for Ukraine (The Economist 2024; The National Review
2023). It must, of course, be noted that Congress did, eventually approve a further
tranche of aid for Ukraine in April 2024, and more broadly the influence of the
MAGA fringe of the Republican Party can be overestimated. However, there remain sig-
nificant causes for concern, especially with indications of shifting views within the poli-
tical base. As was stated bluntly in the New York Times recently ‘large parts of the
Republican Party now treat Vladimir Putin as if he were an ideological ally’
(New York Times 2024). Whereas during Trump’s first administration allies such as Aus-
tralia could hope to hunker down and wait for the storm to blow over, it is now apparent
that this is the new normal.

The gulf between the rhetoric of the joint press releases, and the reality on the ground
in the United States is bound to create issues. In an effort to counter these concerns it has
regularly been pointed out in recent months that the alliance ‘reflects an enduring overlap
of Australian and US interests, not just sentimental attachments’ (Blaxland 2024). That
there is a core of shared interests at the heart of US-Australian relations is unquestion-
able, however, to cut away the values component of the relationship would dramatically
alter its worth to Australia. Put simply, a transactional alliance of interests is a very
different thing to ‘100 years of mateship’, and it would require Australian policymakers
to completely rethink how they weigh the costs and benefits of the alliance. At its most
extreme, it may well still be in Australia’s interests to remain allied to a non-democratic
United States, but it would have to be a very different form of relationship.

Most of the focus of discussions over the US alliance has revolved around the ques-
tions of US commitment to the region, and the continued alignment of Australia with
a Trumpian America. It is, however, necessary to at least consider the even more
extreme possibility that the United States may be unable to maintain its position in
the region, not due to some meta processes around the rise of China, but through failings
of its own domestic politics. The events of 6th January 2021 cannot be simply ignored,
and the issue, if anything, has grown in significance. Polling shows that a significant min-
ority of Americans continue to believe that President Biden’s victory in the 2020 election
was illegitimate (WRAL News 2024). Trump has worked hard to perpetuate this myth
and implied that similar attempts are afoot to rig the 2024 election (The Independent
2023). This effort to undermine the electoral process, together with the continuing polar-
isation of American politics, means that there is now a small but real risk that the United
States may come out of the November 2024 election without a government whose legiti-
macy is sufficiently widely accepted to enable it to make coherent policy. A power
vacuum in Washington has the potential to embolden America’s rivals, and therefore is arguably the most dangerous situation for allies such as Australia.

None of this may ever eventuate. There is still a strong likelihood that the United States successfully manages its domestic challenges, and the bedrock of the alliance remains solid. However, for arguably the first time since the end of the Second World War, the certainty around the US relationship has evaporated. This means that it is time to look again at Australia’s options outside the alliance. An honest examination will enable Australian policymakers to properly assess the value of what is an increasingly contested alliance, and consider what steps maybe necessary to prepare Australia for the future.

**Basics of Australian security**

Before looking at how Australia might provide itself with security beyond the US alliance it is worth very quickly considering what are the country’s vital interests that require securing. From one perspective this is well traversed ground, with most defence white papers and reviews setting out some form of strategic basis upon which to draw conclusions. These do, however, tend to be framed in a very specific way, rarely actually going back to first principles, and understandably focused on issues with a defence solution (Lockyer 2017, 83).

Through many of these statements, there is a considerable degree of consistency. Firstly, Australia must be able to defend itself and its territories. Most assessments have also concluded that Australia needs, in the words of the 2016 Defence White Paper a ‘secure nearer region’ to prevent ‘a foreign military power seeking influence in ways that could challenge the security of our maritime approaches’ (DWP 2016, 69). Beyond this, there is a widespread acknowledgement of the benefit of a secure situation across the expanse of continental south-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific, although Australia’s role in contributing to this has been a core subject of debate in Australian defence policy since 1945.

As was noted above, the strategic context in the Defence of Australia era allowed for an explicit focus on the territorial defence of Australia, with wider concerns around economic security and Australia’s connections to the outside world, minimised (Dibb 1986, 39). Whilst rarely explicitly acknowledged, this was based on the assumption that there was no meaningful threat to Australia’s sea lines of communication, because American primacy in the region was undisputed (DWP 1987, 27–28). As the 1976 Defence White Paper had noted, ‘for practical purposes, the requirements and scope for Australian defence activity are limited essentially to areas closer to home’ (DWP 1976, 6). This has changed notably in recent years. Since the 2009 Defence White Paper there have been consistent references to the defence of ‘critical sea lanes of communication’ being an essential task for the Australian Defence Force (DWP 2009, 13). Until very recently these have been described as ‘proximate sea lines of communication’, once again with a largely unacknowledged reference to the fact that Australia’s allies will do the heavy lifting further afield (DWP 2016, 33). The DSR has seen a significant further shift. It acknowledges something that was self-evident to earlier generations of Australian defence planners, namely that the country is ‘a maritime nation dependent on our sea lines of communication’ (DSR 2023, p. 57). The Albanese Government’s National
Defence Statement in response to the DSR explicitly lists protecting ‘Australia’s economic connection to our region and the world’ as one of the core ADF missions, separate from the need to protect the sea–air gap.

What has been largely missing from these assessments of the importance of the sea lines of communication is a clearly spelt out understanding of precisely what it is that needs securing. The protection of Australian territory is an obvious and easily understandable national interest. The significance of the protection of foreign-flagged merchant vessels transiting thousands of miles from Australia’s coasts is less apparent. This is for good reason. Simply put, the protection of ships is not the core national interest. Instead, it is the human security, most broadly defined, of Australians that is the national interest. The government needs to be able to guarantee that Australians can have food on their tables, medicine in their hospitals, and other vital interests met. Historically this has always been achieved by seeking to protect sea lines of communication, but that is not the only way of achieving this end. Understanding this is important as it enables one to rethink what is critical and what is not.

To recapitulate, Australia’s core national security interests can be set out as such. At the highest level of priority is the requirement to be able to ensure the defence of Australian territory, and the human security of Australians. Beyond this it is fair to see a range of interests gradually descending in significance the further away you get from Australia, in line with the concentric circles approach proffered by White. Most of the Australian defence debate over the past 50 years has focused on a relatively small subset of potential challenges to these interests. In particular it has looked at the requirement for the ADF to be able to defend Australian territory and near interests against low to mid-level threats. Security of Australia’s trade, wider regional security, and protection against threats stemming from a more substantial conflict have always been primarily provided through Australia’s alliance relationships. This has been the case since colonisation, and is a product of the challenges of the country’s geography and relatively small population. Put simply, Australia has never had the demographic and economic weight to generate sufficient power to project across its vast region.

What we are considering is a scenario where the United States ceases to provide security for this critical section of Australian national interests. There are two obvious responses. The first of these is to find a new great power ally who can fulfil this function. This is not entirely uncharted territory for Australia. Prior to the Second World War Britain had fulfilled this role. Over the following twenty years this mantle was passed to the United States, where it has remained ever since. The problem this time around is that there is no obvious candidate. No other state has the power nor inclination to fulfil this role. The second option is for Australia to stand up and secure those national interests itself. Here, again, however, there are problems. One of the few points where there is near consensus in the current debate is that Australia will never have the naval power to be able to defend its trade on its own against a major adversary. As Stephan Frühling has noted there is ‘a fundamental mismatch between the military power that Australia could and can hope to generate on its own, and what is required to make a significant impact on the maritime balance of power in Asia’ (Frühling 2019, 10).

This leads us to the central conundrum. If Australia really wants a Plan B in case the US alliance ceases to remain viable it has to find a way to secure its national interests. At
the very least it has to be able to provide for the territorial security of the country, **and** the security of the basics of the Australian way of life. Sadly, doing this is nothing like as straightforward as the likes of White and Roggeveen have suggested, and will require a far greater reimagining of Australian security and indeed Australian society, than anyone has previously contemplated. Whilst the territorial defence of Australia is something that can plausibly be achieved independently through military means, the same is not true of the defence of Australian human security. If, as is widely accepted, Australia cannot provide sufficient defence for its vital supply lines to ensure that Australian society can continue to function effectively, then it would be necessary to reorientate the very concept of security away from its current defence focus and onto a broader whole of society effort.

**Three options**

There are a number of potential avenues which could help provide Australia with security in a post alliance world. I am going to outline three that I consider to be the most plausible. I make no effort here to be exhaustive, and the primary purpose is to open a debate and not conclude one. In this spirit, I will set them out as separate concepts. In reality, however, it seems certain that Australia would have to undertake some combination of all three, and perhaps other approaches aiming to both protect its vital national interests where possible, and reshape them to be less vulnerable where not. Notably, I am not discussing the force structure of the ADF in the way that White and Roggeveen have. As I have argued, Australia’s strategic challenges in a post US alliance world would be far greater than either has admitted, and could not be addressed by adjusting the numbers of fighter aircraft or submarines.

**Middle power alliance network**

Australia has always relied upon its great and powerful friends (Taylor 2019). As noted above, there is no obvious candidate to replace the United States in its role within Australian security. This does not, however, mean that there are not a number of potentially very useful middle powers both within the region and beyond, who share common interests and concerns with Australia. The development of security cooperation with middle power and smaller states has a long history within Australian strategic policy, and has gained at least some traction in the current scholarly debate (Carr and Roberts 2019).

Recent regional engagement in the Indo-Pacific has been characterised by the rise of mini-lateral agreements, which have dramatically increased the ties between Australia and other key middle or rising powers. The India-France-Australia trilateral and the India-Japan-Australia trilateral provide examples of this growing network of connections which are increasingly enmeshing regional powers with broadly shared interests (India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue 2023; Joint Statement on the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative 2022). There is considerable scope to continue this trend. The obvious regional partners with sufficient weight to influence security in the wider Indo-Pacific are Japan, South Korea and India, to which one could probably add extra-regional partners notably France and the UK, dependent on the security situation in Europe.

Australia already has very strong defence relationships with these countries. Ties with Japan and India are often viewed through the frame of the Quad, but extend well beyond...
Recent years have seen the conclusion of a Reciprocal Access Agreement between Japan and Australia, and ever closer ties between the militaries, exemplified by the regular and increasingly sophisticated joint exercises (Australia and Japan deepen defence ties 2023; MacAllister 2023). This is underpinned by a close alignment between the views of Canberra and Tokyo on many of the major challenges in the region (Tenth Japan-Australia 2+2 2022). Relations with India are not quite at the same level, but there has been a similar step up in defence collaboration, ultimately underpinned by shared security concerns (Hall 2023; Parker 2023). Relations between Australia and South Korea have largely failed to live up to expectations, but there are now signs of closer collaboration, again with defence and security at the forefront (Lee 2022). Whilst the direct military ties are not as close as with Quad partners, Australia has recently developed a recurring, if fraught, interest in developing defence industry connections (Pittaway 2023). Ties to external middle powers with an interest in the region, notably France and the UK, remain close. Those with the UK have been supercharged by AUKUS, and the obvious synergies in interests have helped heal some of the wounds in Paris from the unceremonious dumping of the French submarine contract.

This raw material offers significant opportunities for closer collaboration between these middle powers, who all share security concerns, largely focused on the growing influence of China in the region. Together Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea constitute a very significant force. With a combined GDP of $11.36 trillion (USD) and a population of over 1.6 billion they have an economy 65% of the size of China, and are significantly more numerous. Their combined defence spending is also over two-thirds that of the stated figure for China (IMF Data 2023; World Bank Defence Spending Data 2023; World Bank Population Data 2023). This means that such an alignment could offer an opportunity for Australia to continue its alliance-based approach to security, albeit in a new minilateral format.

Despite the promise, there are obvious issues with efforts to develop these type of middle power networks (Carr and Roberts 2019). The US Indo-Pacific Strategy has talked of replacing the traditional hub and spoke alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific with a new ‘latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions’ (Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States 2022). Many of Australia’s recent minilateral connections can be seen through this lens. This laudable endeavour does not, however, lessen the centrality of the United States as the glue that holds much of this structure together. If, for whatever reason, the United States were unable to fulfil that role, the implications would be huge. In security terms, Australia would be in a far better position than most. Fear of China might drive Japan and Korea to look to strengthen partnerships of this type, but the dynamics could also play out in other ways. In such circumstances, accommodation with Beijing may appear more prudent than any arrangement that smacked of efforts to challenge China’s newfound regional hegemony. Even if these four middle powers were to bury their differences and group together, they would still lack the military heft necessary to replace the United States. Indeed, the military institutions in South Korea, Japan and Australia are all to a greater or lesser extent designed to support the US rather than operate independently in the event of a major conflict. Furthermore, they also rely heavily on underlying American infrastructure, logistics, communications, and industrial base. How much access they may have to this is incredibly difficult to
predict, but it is apparent that the assumption behind the current force structures would end up being a significant problem, if the American keystone is removed.

Beyond this there are deeper strategic questions about the validity of such an approach in a world where the sum of the alliance parts is less than the threat. Even today there are very real doubts over whether Australia should intervene in a conflict between a US led alliance and China sparked by a crisis in North East Asia (Lowy Institution Poll 2023). That question becomes hugely more acute if you remove the connective fabric of the US alliance. If we imagine a situation where, in a post-US world the Indo-Pacific middle powers had formed an alliance and a crisis erupted between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. It is virtually impossible to imagine Australia and India viewing it as being in their strategic interests to intervene. The geographically dispersed nature of such an alliance, together with its relative weakness when compared to its primary rival, would give China plenty of opportunity to isolate members, and thereby undermine it.

In the context of the search for a Plan B, a middle power network in the Indo-Pacific has a lot to recommend it as a policy option for Canberra. Arguably it is something that is already being pursued. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and the 2024 National Defence Strategy both focus on the importance of partnerships with the Indo-Pacific middle powers, with Japan being described an ‘indispensable partner’ and India as a ‘top-tier security partner’ (NDS 2024, 49). Explicitly these relationships exist within the frame of the overarching US alliance(s), however, it is possible to see the strengthening of these ties as reflective of a degree of quiet hedging against overreliance on the United States. This is likely to become more significant if the concerns about the American alliance continue to grow. It is, however, likely to be more effective as a counterbalance to potential American volatility than as a substitute for American power. Such a middle power network simply lacks the strength and cohesion to replace the United States alliance in Australia’s approach to providing itself with security.

**Resilience and security of supply**

One can look at efforts to provide a country with security as being divided into two broad camps. The first of these, and the one that we almost exclusively focus on, is the use of power, generally military power, to secure existing national interests. This approach starts from the premise that there is a set basket of interests that need protecting, and then looks to defence forces, and potentially allies, to provide that security. The alternative, more commonly associated with small states, is to seek where possible to shape interests in order to minimise vulnerability. This is often framed as an effort to increase resilience.

These ideas are not entirely new to Australia. Indeed, through the experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, Australia developed a very wide-ranging conception of civil defence. By the early Cold War, this was defined as being all measures, other than active defence, taken to minimise the effects of enemy attack on the civil population. It includes the organisation of the nation, so people can maintain the will to win, industry can continue essential production, public services can function and governments can govern. (Latchford 1986, 501)
This broad-ranging concept focused primarily on national security has morphed over the past 75 years into a discussion of resilience with specific reference to natural disasters. As a recent report has noted, the concept of national resilience has ‘been far less prevalent as an integrating concept within the broader national security dialogue’ (Ablong 2024, 13). This has begun to change. The DSR included an entire chapter on deterrence and resilience, arguing that ‘resilience makes Australia a harder target and less susceptible to coercion’ (DSR 2023, p. 38). It is, however, notable that this is one of the few areas where there are no specific recommendations, at least in the public-facing document.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the issue of resilience, and in particular Australia’s extreme exposure to even relatively limited supply chain interruption into clear focus (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2020, 47-58). This has prompted calls for a ‘national resilience framework to assess which elements of Australia’s critical national systems are vulnerable to high-consequence supply chain disruptions’ (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2020, vii). Other countries are far further along this path. Nordic states have recently revived their Cold War concepts of ‘total defence’—‘a whole of society approach to national security intended to deter a potential enemy by raising the cost of aggression and lowering the chances of its success’ (Kenneth 2020, 62). These concepts cover a wide range of areas, but most pertinent here is the focus on security of supply. This is a broad concept, defined by the Finnish government as ‘preparedness for crises and disruptions as well as continuity management to ensure production, services and infrastructure critical to the livelihood of the population, the national economy and national defence during major disruptions and emergencies’ (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs 2023, 3; Wigell et al. 2022). This is a whole of society approach, encompassing all of government, defence, the private sector, and beyond. Stockpiling critical resources is a vital element of the approach, and one which receives most of the attention. However, as the Finns observe, ‘it is not only a question of stockpiling but of creating a production and technological base in Finland that is sufficient for security of supply’ (Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs 2023, 28). These requirements are also shifting as a result of technological change, with the necessity to secure new vital economic infrastructure such as power transmission from renewable sources and digital infrastructure.

The Nordic model highlights what can be done given sufficient government and societal will. Whether it would be sufficient to provide security to Australian interests in an extreme scenario such as one in which the country was at war with a major power on its own remains more questionable. A critical element of much of the national resilience conception is the idea that it is a short-term measure to tide a country over until better times. In a scenario without a great power ally, it is unclear where the proverbial cavalry would come from. Arguably autarky is what Australia really requires, but how viable that would be in the modern world is unclear. It is, however, apparent that adopting a security of supply approach would significantly bolster Australia’s ability to defend itself independently. As the DSR observes, a ‘high level of resilience would signal to an adversary the extent of Australia’s resolve to defend itself. This would contribute to deterrence.’ (DSR 2023, p. 38) The critical question here is whether the Australian government, and ultimately the Australian people are willing to pay the price. There are always ‘security, sovereignty and prosperity trade-offs’ in economic security policies, and Australia has done very well in embracing the free
market, especially since the 1980s (Mitchell 2024). Is the government really ready to wind the clock back, adopting the major government intervention in industry, and protectionist policies necessary for such an approach to work? Are the Australian people willing to pay the price of greater independent security in their bills for goods and services every day? There is a strong likelihood that they will have to accept some of these costs, but how much is Australia actually willing to pay in order to provide security outside the US alliance?

*Hide in plain sight*

The final option to consider here comes straight out of the small and middle power playbook—hiding in plain sight. Australia has long been a confident and vocal member of the international community. Indeed, there have been concerns raised that recent Australian foreign policy has tended to speak loudly whilst only carrying a small stick (Hartcher 2021; Murphy 2022). In the event of serious questions being raised about the American alliance this would have to change.

Hiding has been an essential part of smaller state grand strategy going back centuries. It ‘aims to protect the security interests of the small state by signaling its disinterest in great power politics and committing to impartiality’ (Wivel 2021, 494). Such an approach usually requires favourable geography, and a lack of a specific clash of interests with the great powers (or a willingness to sacrifice that interest) (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017). Classic examples include Switzerland during both world wars, and Sweden and Finland during the Cold War (Winnerstig 2022; Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi 2016). Australia is in many respects well placed to adopt such an approach. It is geographically isolated from the major threat in north east Asia, and does not have any direct conflicts of national interests, such as those between China and the states bordering the South China Sea. Furthermore, it is in fact extremely difficult to imagine a situation in which a great power such as China would look to project major military force (as opposed to employing coercive measures) at an Australia that withdrew itself from great power politics. No power covers Australian territory or areas of jurisdiction, and Australian resources are always likely to be far easier to obtain via the market than through force.\(^2\)

The idea of Australia adopting a non-aligned, or neutral position is not entirely new, but these concepts have never become mainstream (Dean 2019). There are also questions about whether Australia would need to go with a form of armed neutrality, or if it could take ‘the New Zealand option’ of being ‘unarmed and independent’ (Ayson 2019, Palazzo 2018). Clearly, any form of neutrality strategy could not work on its own, as it would be susceptible to many of the criticisms that have been levelled at the arguments of White, Roggeveen and others. Instead, it would inevitably need to be paired with a concerted effort to enhance Australia’s economic resilience as discussed above. It is no coincidence that the classic example of the adoption of defensive neutrality are the Nordic countries which we have already discussed in relation to the concept of security of supply. Neutrality and ‘total defence’ are two sides of the same coin. The latter was aimed at raising the cost of any aggressive measures taken against them, whilst the former reduced the drivers for such aggression. It would also require a fundamental shift in Australia’s attitude towards the world (Gyngell 2021). As has often been noted, for countries such as Sweden, neutrality was not just a policy choice, it was a profound part of the national identity (Agius 2012). By contrast, Australia has long been a major voice on
the regional and world stage, pushing its agenda on issues such as human rights and the
maintenance of the rules based international order. Stepping back from this would
involve politicians, diplomats, and Australians more generally fundamentally rethinking
their country’s place and role in the world.

**Conclusion**

Defending Australia outside of the US alliance is plausible. However, it would be much
more difficult than the likes of Hugh White have suggested. Defending Australia must
always be understood to be far more than simply preventing foreign boots from
landing on Australian soil. By going back to first principles, this article has sought to
show why it is necessary to protect the welfare and livelihoods of Australians as well
as the Australian landmass. Doing so is generally viewed through the lens of sea lines
of communication, but does not have to be, and arguably cannot be if Australia is to
act independently. Instead, Australia would need to look to a far wider range of policy
options primarily focused on reducing vulnerability as opposed to protecting its interests
through power. Given the deteriorating strategic circumstances in the region, many of
these measures make sense even without the loss of the US alliance. Indeed, you can
see elements of the first two of the approaches outlined above already coming through
in DSR and wider strategic discourse. The important point to note, however, is that if
Australia were to seek security for itself outside of the US alliance these would have to
be pushed much further than anyone is currently considering. In turn, this would
mean that the implications of such a shift on the country would be far more profound
than anyone has previously argued. There is a recurrent irony in the present debate. It
is frequently suggested that that those advocating a policy of continuing to rely upon
the alliance with the United States are unrealistically optimistic in ignoring the reality
of the rise of China and US decline. However, the arguments of those suggesting that
Australia branch out on its own are reliant on what is, at best, an extremely optimistic
analysis of the benefits bestowed by Australian geography, and at worst is a wilful ignor-
ing of the true strategic situation. An appreciation of what would actually be necessary to
go it alone casts the true benefits of the US alliance into sharp relief. Australia may have
no option but to fall back on a Plan B in the coming decade. It may even decide that the
costs of the alliance have come to outweigh the benefits. But it should do so with a clear
understanding of just how important that alliance is to the country’s security, and how
costly it would be to defend Australia independently.

**Notes**

1. This term is generally associated with non-traditional threats, however, I think is a useful
way to reimagine this aspect of Australian security, putting people back at the centre of
what is the true national interest.
2. With the possible exception of the Australian Antarctic Territory.

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