Recalibration in the Indo-Pacific: An Australian Perspective

By John Blaxland

The geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region is increasingly apparent, particularly when considered through the lens of Australia's strategic placement on the edge of Asia and its deep integration in regional security and economic frameworks. As middle powers, Australia and South Korea have consequential roles to play in the region economically, politically, and strategically. As long-standing allies of the United States, both countries are key players in what has traditionally been a "hub-and-spokes" security architecture.[1] Historically, their primary strategic links have been with Washington. However, in recent years, there has been a notable rise in inter-spoke or "spoke-to-spoke" collaboration—direct cooperation among the allies themselves.[2] This form of networking has accelerated significantly, reflecting a broader recalibration in the region in response to evolving challenges. To a large extent, such cooperative efforts were encouraged by the United States, but in 2025, U.S. treaty allies are finding plenty of reasons to collaborate beyond any encouragement from Washington.

This article argues that Australia and South Korea, as U.S.-aligned middle powers in the Indo-Pacific, are increasingly engaging in direct bilateral and multilateral cooperation independent of U.S. facilitation or encouragement. This shift is driven by the convergence of global challenges that include climate change, governance breakdowns, great power competition, and technological disruption. Deeper collaboration among like-minded states is both a strategic necessity and a means of sustaining regional stability amid uncertainty about U.S. leadership.

Australian policymakers, like those across the globe, have had to grapple with what has come to be known as the "poly-crisis." I define this as a combination of the overlapping effects generated by looming environmental catastrophe (e.g., rising sea levels, storm surges, droughts, fires, floods, extreme weather events, an unprecedentedly large global human population, and pandemics); a spectrum of governance challenges (including terrorism, people and drug smuggling, piracy, civil war, corruption, anarchy, and international conflicts); great power competition (notably but not exclusively between the United States and China and the spillover effect on international relations and institutions); and the accelerating effect of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (in which society has transformed from web-enabled to web-dependent and, in turn, web-vulnerable). This last domain includes quantum computing, robotics, 3D printing, and artificial general intelligence. If this were pictured as a Venn diagram, the overlapping segment is a domain not addressed in its entirety by any one academic discipline, not governed by any one jurisdiction, and not addressed by any one institution. Yet it affects us all.

Dr. John Blaxland is Director of the North America Liaison Office and Professor of International Security and Intelligence Studies in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC), Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University (ANU).

A New Normal

In a recent policy report entitled *Adapting to Poly-crisis: A National Security Strategy for Australia*, I argued that states are experiencing a period characterized by overlapping and compounding crises.[3] They span great power competition, looming environmental catastrophes, a spectrum of governance challenges, and rapid technological changes under the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Included in the revolution are addictive games and devices that are widely regarded as having a transformative effect on how societies behave, how people think and interact, and how easily people's views are shaped—in both positive and negative ways—by algorithms that reinforce behavioral patterns. The resulting condition might be best described, in popular terms, as "everything, everywhere, all at once."[4]

A notable dimension of the current strategic uncertainty is the perceived shift in the United States' approach to international engagement. While still early in the new U.S. administration's tenure, there are indications of a retrenchment, or a retreat, from international and ideational leadership. Scholars rightly caution against premature conclusions; historical precedent reminds us that the George W. Bush administration initially focused on China during its early months—an agenda ultimately overshadowed by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[5] Accordingly, it is appropriate to exercise some caution in making pronouncements about the trajectory of a presidency early in its term and what the implications might be for Indo-Pacific middle powers and U.S. allies like Australia and South Korea.

Yet, recent imagery and actions suggest a pattern. One notable example includes an early encounter between President Donald Trump in his first term and then German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Group of Seven (G7) Summit in 2018. Jesco Denzel, an official photographer for the German government, captured a now-infamous image hinting at deep divisions between the United States and some of its closest allies.[6] The more recent scene depicting tense exchanges between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, when the Ukrainian president visited the White House for a dressing down by the U.S. president and vice president, offers a counterpoint.[7] That image underscores what appears to be a deeper shift in U.S. thinking under the second Trump administration toward greater sympathy for the position of Russia, a disdain for Europe and its apparent weaknesses (demonstrated by Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference), and a chillingly transactional approach to the fate of Ukraine.[8] These developments are difficult to reconcile for middle powers such as Australia, which have long benefited from a U.S.-led international order built on U.S. ideational leadership and institutions born and headquartered in the United States. The United Nations, for instance, owes its very existence to U.S. initiatives dating back to the closing stages of World War II.[9] It is perplexing, then, to witness the United States pull back from the very institutions it created and fortified for decades, largely surrendering the space to its strategic competitors.

Trump's talks of annexing territories such as Canada, Greenland, or Panama might seem implausible, but to U.S. allies, they are repugnant and foster uncertainty and unease.[10] Such uncertainty is also corrosive of goodwill toward the United States and resonates negatively in Australia's domestic politics.[11]

Moving Beyond the Unipolar Moment

Academic critics abound regarding the rules-based international order—many dismissing it as illusory or having come to an end.[12] Yet, it is difficult to ignore the security, stability, and prosperity that such an order has enabled. Confidence in maintaining such a security arrangement saw many developed countries drop their defense expenditure to low levels, and stability has fostered an unprecedented increase in the level of economic prosperity among countries around the world.[13] This is evident in Australia, but it is particularly striking when considering South Korea and its rapid economic development.

This global system—as flawed as it may be—has provided predictable mechanisms for trade, arbitration, and security since 1945. It is, in many respects, a historical anomaly that has underwritten decades of peace and prosperity, especially for nations such as Australia and South Korea.

To see such ambivalence toward this system from the United States is deeply troubling for long-standing security and economic allies and partners. Overtures that look like emerging strategic friendships with authoritarian leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong Un stand in stark contrast to public rebukes of democratic allies.[14] Such developments raise fundamental questions about the U.S. commitment to ideational leadership and its resolve to maintain global dominance economically and militarily. At the start of the millennium, scholars and policymakers alike described the United States as a "hyperpower" at the helm of a unipolar order in which the United States dictated the terms, but those terms were ones that many in the global community were happy to accommodate.[15] During this time, China was accepted as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). There was a strong sense of optimism in the Bill Clinton administration that this would lead to a path of democratic reform in China. In time, the concessions of designating China with the status of a developing nation would come to be criticized.[16]

The intervening quarter of a century saw the end of the "unipolar moment," with the United States bogged down in two largely fruitless and profoundly expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also witnessed the 2008 global financial crisis and the eclipsing of U.S. economic dominance.[17] The last decade or so has seen the emergence of a more authoritarian and assertive China, eager to sign security pacts in the Indo-Pacific and more forcefully declaring its martial ambitions for Taiwan.[18] Those ambitions are backed by a Chinese economy that now dwarfs all others bar one in total GDP.[19] In addition, China has already emerged as globally preeminent in terms of the number of trade relationships it has forged around the world.[20]

This apparent ending of the unipolar moment and a movement toward a more multipolar world order has deep historical and theoretical resonance. Indeed, if the post-war order in place since 1991, if not 1945, is now in flux, then perhaps the utility of the study of earlier history once again comes to the fore.

The emerging multipolar world has revived interest among scholars in classical geopolitical thinkers, stretching back to Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Halford Mackinder. While there are reasons to doubt Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap" thesis that rising powers inevitably clash with established ones, the broader interpretation remains salient.[21] As for Mackinder, his "Heartland Theory," which emphasizes the strategic centrality of Eurasia and the significance of its global dominance, once seemed a relic of the

early twentieth century.[22] Today, however, as global power shifts accelerate, Mackinder's ideas appear newly relevant. It suggests that Chinese dominance of East Asia likely will have global ramifications not just in terms of economic relationships but also security ties, with small and middle powers reassessing their choices to bandwagon with China, balance with the United States, or hedge between the two.[23]

Similarly, Hans Morgenthau's realist framework, especially his identification of the "elements of national power," offers a valuable lens through which to interpret today's geopolitical transformations.[24] His emphasis on power, geography, economy, and military capacity as determinants of state behavior continues to resonate in the current strategic environment. For states like Australia and South Korea, this necessitates a sober reassessment of their national capabilities and diplomatic postures, particularly in view of shifting signals from the United States. The Trump administration's unpredictable strategic communications—ranging from economic tariffs to ambiguous security guarantees—underscore the importance of resilience and preparation among U.S. allies.[25]

Amid widespread speculation about the possible unraveling of the existing order, some analysts are sounding the alarm. They describe the current moment as an existential crisis or even portending systemic collapse.[26] While I acknowledge the seriousness of the challenges at hand—including great power rivalry and climate threats—I believe that doomsday predictions are overstated. The situation is grave but not apocalyptic. Still, the shifting military and economic power dynamics call for a realistic reassessment of existing and prospective capabilities as the prospect of trade wars possibly escalating looms large.

Prospects for the Stability of Regional Dynamics

Drawing on Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories on the influence of sea power, one can see how China's maritime expansion is reshaping strategic calculations across the Indo-Pacific.[27] China's rapid buildup of its navy, coast guard, and maritime militia has caught many off guard. Australia and South Korea, long accustomed to relatively benign maritime environments, now face significant security dilemmas. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is modern, agile, and potent, but relatively small for a maritime trading nation responsible for 10 percent of the Earth's surface. The efficiency, effectiveness, and scale of South Korea's shipbuilding industry illustrate Australia's shipbuilding limitations and the vulnerability of a small and under-resourced fleet. Some in Canberra have been calling for an expanded and modernized RAN fleet going back to at least the 2009 *Defence White Paper*.[28] But successive governments, facing competing political and economic pressures that have drowned out demands for urgent additional defense expenditure, have declined to increase investments.[29] Instead, they have made little more than incremental adjustments in order to modernize and expand the fleet.[30] Today, the RAN has ambitions to replace its fleet of frigates and submarines, but such plans have yet to be delivered substantively and involve only an incremental fleet expansion. This is due in part to recruiting difficulties, industrial bottlenecks, the pursuit of exquisite solutions at the expense of speed of delivery, coupled with constrained government resourcing, whereby the political rhetoric is not fully matched by the funding reality.[31]

As U.S. scholar Michael Green explains in *By More Than Providence*, U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific has historically been driven by a deep-seated concern that a rival power might dominate the Pacific Ocean

and isolate the United States from key markets and allies in Asia.[32] This has long given confidence to strategists in Australia that the United States would maintain enduring interest and active engagement in East Asian and Indo-Pacific affairs writ large. Though much remains unknown about Trump 2.0 this early into the administration, a number of indicators suggesting a lean toward isolationism are misplaced, as the U.S. approach to the region will likely remain consistent with that outlined by Green. The appointment of Elbridge Colby as under secretary of defense for policy suggests this is a valid hypothesis. In his book, *The Strategy of Denial*, Colby argues that the unipolar moment is passing, and as a result, "There are now structural limitations on what the United States can do… it must make hard choices."[33] While "there is a powerful strain, especially in the academy, of arguing that the United States should retrench and adopt a dramatically less engaged foreign policy than it has pursued since the Second World War," the United States can, nonetheless, "pursue and protect their important interests abroad at levels of risk and cost they can realistically and justifiably bear."[34] The United States, he argues, has to play the leading anti-hegemonic role in Asia.[35] Australia and South Korea feature prominently in this calculus. For instance, Australia provides what has been described as a "suitable piece of real estate" for U.S. forces on rotation (in Darwin, Tindal, and Perth, for instance) and for the joint intelligence facility at Pine Gap.[36]

The strategic logic of Green and Colby's work remains relevant. Green's observation about the enduring importance of maritime access, values, and forward defense is particularly salient as China's power grows. Though it is unlikely that Trump has explicitly studied Mackinder, Mahan, or Morgenthau, the

Figure 1. Comparison of the Comprehensive Power of Select Indo-Pacific Countries

Source: Lowy Institute Asia Power Index (2024)

strategic behavior of the United States—intentional or not—often reflects these foundational theories and evidently follows the strategy defined by Green and Colby.

Recent data from the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index (see Figure 1) further illustrates the shifting trends in Indo-Pacific power dynamics. While not identical to Morgenthau's elements of power, the index similarly categorizes power in multifaceted terms, including military capability, economic relationships, resilience, and diplomatic influence.[37]

From Australia's vantage point—and likely from South Korea's as well—the Indo-Pacific is not merely a stage for binary U.S.-China competition. Rather, it is a dynamic region with multiple actors possessing varying degrees of agency and influence. I have added Canada and France to the Lowy Index as, in my view, they are consequential regional powers with a significant physical presence in the Pacific and with agency on a broad range of fronts across much of the region.

Shifting power dynamics and the U.S.-China strategic competition extend beyond the Indo-Pacific. One notable example is the rise of alternative power blocs, most notably the BRICS grouping between Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Since its formation in 2010, BRICS membership has increased to eleven countries, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Covering 45 percent of the global population and more than 35 percent of global GDP, BRICS has emerged as a critical institution representing voices in the Global South.[38] Strategically, China sees BRICS as a mechanism for promoting and driving a multipolar order to end the U.S. unipolar moment.[39] The recent inclusion of Indonesia suggests the country's deliberate move toward greater geopolitical hedging between the United States and China.[40] Nonetheless, the emergence of BRICS signals a growing dissatisfaction from China and other emerging economies with the post-World War II liberal international order established by the West.[41]

China Looms Large

This disaffection is especially evident in the context of China's extraordinary growth. In particular, the scale and pace of China's economic rise are without precedent. In the twenty-five years since its accession to the WTO, China has transformed from being a peripheral economic actor to a central hub of global commerce, emerging as the leading trading partner for countries across Eurasia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.[42] There are limits to the applicability of the comparison, but its dominance echoes the evolution of the British Empire. Whereas Britain's rise unfolded over 250 years—driven by the Industrial Revolution, its need for raw materials and markets, and an evolving governance framework—China has achieved comparable systemic influence in a mere quarter-century (evidenced by its leading role in UN-related agencies and in bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization).[43]

The rapid acceleration of China's military spending and its growing dominance in global trade have radically shifted the regional balance of power.[44] For countries like Australia and South Korea, this shift has been particularly jarring. Until recently, neither country felt compelled to match China's defense investments, especially due to the United States' long and outsized role in sustaining regional peace and stability, including its security commitment to both countries. Both Australia and South Korea now find themselves scrambling to respond to what increasingly resembles an existential strategic challenge.

When weighing potential adversaries, intelligence analysts are trained to measure capability and intent. In terms of capability, China's military has exploded onto the scene, with advanced hypersonic weapons, an extended and extensive nuclear ballistic missile force, and much more. In terms of the country's intent, China's "wolf warrior diplomacy" and extensive network of security ties being signed in the last few years, including in the South Pacific, generate considerable concern.[45] Capability takes time to develop, but intent can change in short order. Meanwhile, North Korea presents an existential threat, to which Australia still has an active commitment to come to the defense of South Korea in extremis.

China's rapid ascendancy presents critical questions regarding expectations for the next twenty-five years. For Australia and South Korea, the implications are profound. Economically, both countries are deeply enmeshed with China, yet strategically, they remain wary of a rising China and its assertive behavior and revisionist intentions while maintaining alignment with the United States. Even though the imposition of U.S. tariffs has made this politically less palatable for domestic audiences, the enduring perception is that close alignment with the United States remains critical to what they perceive to be their national interests. This duality underpins a broader fracturing or splintering of the international system. It manifests not only in foreign policy but also in domestic political discourse, where polarizing debates over national identity, trade, and alliance commitments are intensifying. U.S. alliance critics in Australia, for instance, suggest that the United States' transactional retreat from ideational leadership leaves few common values to defend, arguing Australia "should resist strident calls for military boosterism."[46] This duality is becoming harder to manage as both Washington and Beijing grow less tolerant of ambiguity. For Canberra and Seoul, navigating this space has become a central—if uneasy—feature of strategic policymaking.

As a military historian, I find it instructive to view these developments through the prism of evolving domains of warfare. From land and sea, through the introduction of air power in World War I, to space (with the V-2 rocket) during World War II, and now to the digital revolution and the emergence of cyberspace, each domain has brought unique challenges and opportunities. Today, it is also necessary to consider the cognitive domain associated with cyber issues. This cyber domain covers not just hardware or software but wetware—the human mind, or the cognitive domain.[47] This domain is increasingly targeted by influence operations, disinformation campaigns, and digital propaganda, often blurring the line between healthy collaboration, robust and sometimes aggressive competition, and outright (kinetic) conflict.

In understanding today's strategic competition between the United States and China, it is helpful to move beyond Western analogies such as chess, which emphasize direct confrontation and elimination. Instead, the Chinese game of Go offers a more apt metaphor, emphasizing encirclement, indirect pressure, and strategic patience. Chinese military theorists, including those drawing from the legacy of Sun Tzu, prioritize winning without fighting.[48] This gray-zone approach encompasses cooperation, compromise, contestation, and confrontation—often simultaneously.

In assessing the possibility of conflict in East Asia, it is essential to revisit several key regional flashpoints, or what Professor Brendan Taylor described as the "four flashpoints" in his well-received 2018 book of the same name.[49] These include the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and

Taiwan—areas that remain volatile due to unresolved territorial disputes, overlapping military claims, and the growing assertiveness of regional powers such as China, North Korea, and Russia.

Among the four flashpoints, Taiwan is perhaps the most geopolitically charged. Contemporary scenarios evoke strong historical parallels, particularly with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson excluded the Korean Peninsula from the U.S. defensive perimeter in Asia during a speech at the National Press Club in January 1950.[50] North Korean leader Kim Il Sung interpreted this as a green light for aggression, and within months, North Korean forces had crossed the Thirty-Eighth Parallel to invade the South. The United States reacted forcefully, supported by the United Nations, after the Soviet delegation's absence at the UN Security Council meeting enabled the formation of the UN Command. Over one million Chinese casualties later, the war ended with what effectively looked like a return to the pre-war status quo.

No rational Chinese leader would wish to replicate that experience. But China's strategic ambitions regarding Taiwan are real and intensifying. Rather than pursuing a high-risk military invasion, Beijing may instead opt for incremental coercion—a concept some analysts describe as "squeezing, not seizing."[51]

Kevin Rudd, former prime minister of Australia and current ambassador to the United States, has advocated for "managed strategic competition" as a means of avoiding open conflict between the United States and China.[52] This concept reflects a broader recognition that the Indo-Pacific is entering a protracted period of strategic contestation. Competition is increasingly playing out in the gray zone—a space between peace and war—characterized by cyber operations, maritime brinkmanship, psychological operations, and economic and legal competition (or lawfare), among other tactics. Australia has been grappling with the implications of this challenge for more than a decade, although the political elites tend to be reluctant to address this publicly, criticizing those who raise concerns as "China hawks."[53]

Growing U.S.-China Competition

In Australia, the concerns of the so-called hawks revolve around the implications of an authoritarian and economically dominant China squeezing out the United States, Australia's principal ally and preferred security partner. As Kevin Rudd observed in *On Xi Jinping,* Xi is a Marxist, a Leninist, and a nationalist.[54] In other words, Xi believes in communism and the one-party state, with a mission to extract revenge for the country's "century of humiliation." Treatment of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong is seen not just as internal affairs but as pointers to the future—a world where China's economic power, military power, and political ambitions expand commensurately.

China's growing footprint in the South Pacific is also a source of concern for Australia.[55] Security pacts with Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Kiribati, in addition to other forms of expanding cooperation and exchanges, are natural by-products of China's dramatic economic expansion. It is understandable that China's expanding desires for raw materials, seabed resources, political influence in domestic politics, and support in international organizations drive its regional actions. However, China's penetration into Oceania undercut Australia's influence over these southern Pacific Island countries and is thus perceived as a strategic risk, if not threat, to Australia.

With regards to Taiwan, the contest matters enormously. Not only has Taiwan become a beacon of liberal democracy for Asia, but it is also critical to the first island chain, which stretches from northern Japan down to Indonesia. Control of the island chain by U.S. allies and partners constricts the freedom of action by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) across the Pacific Ocean. If China were to invade or gain control over Taiwan and the first island chain, this could trigger the neutralization or co-optation of neighboring Japan and the Philippines, with the prospects of cascading effects in the region. Its fall could also generate constraints that lead to a significant U.S. withdrawal from engagement across the Indo-Pacific.

Like the United States, Australia is a continent-spanning, multicultural, English-speaking, federal, bicameral, constitutional, free-market, and broadly liberal democracy. In addition, Australia has deep historical and cultural ties with the United States and has invested in the bilateral relationship through active economic, technological, military, and intelligence cooperation. Conversely, the United States is enormously invested in facilities across Australia, as mentioned earlier. It should be expected that the bilateral relationship may endure some turbulence generated by U.S. domestic politics and the prospect of a major regional conflict. Barring an unlikely precipitate U.S. withdrawal from the region, Australia will continue to align with the United States, regardless of its own domestic ructions and emergent regional challenges.

Notwithstanding this enduring alignment, Australia's alliance with the United States—while historically robust—is now under significant scrutiny. Unlike NATO's Article 5 clause of collective defense, the U.S.-Australia alliance is based on a treaty that lacks binding force commitments beyond an agreement to consult.[56] There are no standing headquarters, no assigned forces, and no automatic triggers for military intervention. This structural ambiguity creates both flexibility and uncertainty. Australia—like South Korea—simultaneously fears both abandonment and entrapment: the prospect of being left unsupported in a crisis or war, or alternatively, being drawn into a conflict not of its choosing and in which it might otherwise seek to avoid being entangled.[57]

Australia on the Move

Managing U.S.-China strategic competition has become more centrally placed in Canberra's policy repertoire in recent years. This has manifested through a number of reports and proposals aimed at bolstering regional diplomacy, cybersecurity, defense engagement, and regional aid and development. The Department of Home Affairs, for instance, issued a cybersecurity strategy document in 2023, providing a roadmap for Australia to become a world leader in cybersecurity and a benefactor to partner nations in need. [58]

Australia has also signed numerous security and economic agreements with a range of regional partners, raising the floor significantly for bilateral and multilateral engagement across Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and beyond. For instance, bilateral trade, development, educational, and security ties have deepened with Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam. In addition, Australia has strengthened multilateral security connectivity through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) with Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom to bolster regional security and stability.[59]

Another multilateral mechanism to consider is the Australia-UK-U.S. technology-sharing agreement known as AUKUS. AUKUS is intended to enable the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology to Australia, allowing the RAN to operate a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. These submarines are designed to circumvent challenges that have made diesel-electric submarines redundant for long transits. Such vessels are exposed to highly capable low-Earth-orbit (LEO) satellites, and when coupled with pattern analysis, AI, and armed drones, they face critical vulnerabilities. The combination means that the wake of a submarine snorkel can be detected from overhead as the submarine runs its diesel motors to recharge its batteries. This means stealthy transits over long distances are now impossible for diesel-electric submarines, even between ports around Australia.[60] The way around such vulnerability is to stay underwater. For long transits, like from Perth to Darwin or Melbourne, nuclear propulsion is required.

There is also the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. While not a formal security treaty, these four countries have a common interest in collaborating to respond to China's assertive maritime claims and aggressive actions in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and beyond.[61]

In addition to the Quad, Australia has worked with like-minded states in enforcing UN-mandated sanctions on North Korea. Yet, the environment of strategic competition is challenging traditional distinctions between war and peace. For example, Australian surveillance aircraft continue to patrol near North Korea, even as China and Russia have withdrawn their support for the UN-endorsed mission.[62] Australian forces are not ideally postured for this multi-faceted strategic competition. With no counterpoint at sea, for instance, to the Chinese Coast Guard and armed maritime militia, Australia has no instrument short of naval forces with which to respond to their maneuverings.

A notable incident that illustrates Australia's changing regional threat environment occurred in early 2025, when Chinese forces circumnavigated Australia and conducted naval gunfire exercises under the flight path between Sydney, Australia, and Auckland, New Zealand. This is an activity that, while it may appear relatively routine and benign in the Korean context, represents a significant shift in Australia's and New Zealand's security calculus. This is not a standard transit route for Chinese naval vessels and has not happened in living memory. The closest similar incident happened when a Russian naval flotilla transited the Coral Sea off the northeastern coast of Australia during the Group of Twenty (G20) meeting in Brisbane in 2014. [63]

A Pivotal Region

U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region are deeply entrenched. Pundits who dismiss this view overlook the enduring U.S. territorial presence in the western Pacific. However, for too long, U.S. policymakers seem to have viewed the region as a constellation of minor islands or isolated outposts.[64] This perception overlooks the vast political and economic significance of the region, which includes over twenty votes in the UN General Assembly across the Pacific and at least ten more in Southeast Asia and covers a vast expanse of exclusive economic zones, extensive fisheries stocks, and considerable seabed resources.[65] China is not clueless to the region's economic, strategic, and political potential. Through trade, investment, financial assistance, security support, and education and cultural connections, China actively expanded its influence in the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, and other Pacific Island countries

traditionally dominated by the United States and its allies. There are mixed views on whether the United States can sustain its influence and protect its strategic interests.[66]

For Australia and South Korea, this strategic encroachment is alarming and merits a considered and coordinated response. It underlines the interdependence of regional security and highlights the urgency of collective action. The maritime chokepoints of the Indo-Pacific—most notably the Strait of Malacca—remain vital arteries for global trade. Over 70 percent of East Asian trade (by value) passes through this narrow corridor.[67] China's Belt and Road Initiative can be understood, in part, as a strategic hedge against this vulnerability. It seeks to develop overland routes and alternative sea lines of communication to reduce China's dependence on this jugular vein of commerce.[68]

Australia has responded to these shifting dynamics strategically and with some flexibility. Faced with rising uncertainty about U.S. leadership and growing pressure from China, the Australian government has taken steps to diversify its partnerships and reinforce its position within the Indo-Pacific. Australia's 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*—a "Plan B" for Australian diplomacy—was crafted in the aftermath of the first Trump administration's retreat from multilateral engagement, notably its departure from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It outlined a comprehensive strategy to strengthen ties with partners across ASEAN, the Pacific Islands, and the Indian Ocean. It also emphasized deeper engagement with other multilateral and minilateral frameworks such as the Quad, AUKUS, and NATO, as well as an expanding network of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), including one with South Korea.[69]

These efforts reflect Australia's broader concern that the United States, once the principal architect of the post-war international order, may be abdicating its leadership role. The U.S. withdrawal from the TPP and the underwhelming implementation of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) have left significant gaps. The absence of strong U.S. economic engagement in the region has undermined the United States' strategic credibility, especially but not exclusively in Southeast Asia, where states are evidently hedging their bets about future security and economic ties with China vis-à-vis the United States. As Hunter Marston observed, "The US risks irrelevance in Asia."[70]

A Wide Range of Spokes

For Australia, trade diversification is a national imperative. After China imposed punitive tariffs and sanctions in 2020—estimated at USD 16 billion—Australia intensified efforts to expand economic ties elsewhere.[71] It renewed negotiations with the European Union for an FTA and a security pact.[72] It also reinvigorated existing agreements with Singapore, ASEAN, and New Zealand. This involved refreshing ties, expanding collaboration on defense capabilities, and expanding multinational military exercises.[73] Australia is also advocating for renewed engagement with India, encouraging the country to reconsider its withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Australia's relationship with Singapore stands out as a model of strategic alignment. It rivals the intimacy of the Australia-New Zealand relationship, underpinned by mutual trust (with recognized common educational, legal, professional, and technical standards), overlapping interests (a shared interest in supporting ASEAN-related mechanisms, for instance), and a shared commitment to open trade and

regional stability (exemplified by their comprehensive strategic partnership and the Singapore-Australia FTA).[74]

Similarly, the relationship between Australia and South Korea is rooted in seventy-five years of commitment to the defense of South Korea under the banner of the United Nations, as well as decades of shared training, technological standards, and the U.S. defense architecture—all of which have been fostered by U.S. strategic leadership. That has manifested in the establishment of Hanwha's defense manufacturing precinct in Geelong, Victoria.[75] However, the continuation of strong ties cannot be taken for granted. A concern increasingly voiced in Canberra and Seoul is that Washington's retreat from ideational leadership risks eroding the normative foundations of the international order. U.S. power has always rested on a mix of hard and soft power. When the soft power component erodes, U.S. influence becomes harder to sustain in democratic contexts, where public opinion is sensitive to perceived hypocrisy or abandonment.

Indeed, many in Australia, South Korea, and Japan are watching developments in the United States with growing unease. Domestic democratic processes mean that the public of each country is not a passive observer. The perception of U.S. unreliability—whether in defense, trade, or global governance—has tangible consequences. It not only affects alliance planning but also reshapes political debates within these countries.

Middle Power Leverage

Despite prevailing anxieties over great power rivalry, it would be a mistake to view the Indo-Pacific solely through the lens of U.S.-China bipolarity. Middle powers such as Australia and South Korea still possess considerable agency. Morgenthau's elements of national power are worth reflecting upon. These countries are not mere pawns but active participants in shaping the regional order. Both countries are democracies, possess significant economic and technological capabilities, have committed to bolstering each other's defense capabilities and force postures, and continue to demonstrate a consistent commitment to international norms.

As such, they are not without leverage. Indeed, their shared interests create significant scope for cooperation. Strategic hedging—a form of calibrated alignment that avoids total dependence on any single major power—has become the modus operandi for many in the region. This is evident in the behavior of ASEAN states, which continue to balance engagement with both the United States and China while quietly strengthening intra-regional ties and defense capacity. Australia and South Korea have a role to play in influencing the perceptions of these nations and their policies toward resisting, hedging, or bandwagoning on a range of issues, particularly in response to Chinese attempts at economic and political coercion, cybersecurity challenges, maritime economic pressures, and more. The current moment also offers opportunities. Crises often reveal previously unrecognized pathways for innovation and collaboration.

Not surprisingly, therefore, cooperation between Australia and South Korea has been deepening. Military interoperability, defense industrial collaboration, and intelligence sharing have all advanced significantly. South Korean and Japanese defense companies are now manufacturing equipment in

Australia, and joint command-and-control systems have enhanced trilateral coordination. Australia and South Korea have often reinforced each other's military, diplomatic, and related efforts in Southeast Asia and the Pacific by collaborating to deepen an ASEAN-led regional architecture and cooperation with the Pacific Island Forum.[76] This is particularly important in light of the evident looming environmental catastrophe faced by several of the micro-states in the Pacific Ocean.

Conclusion

For Australia and South Korea, there is a strong case for deeper strategic and economic integration—not only bilaterally but also with other like-minded actors such as Canada, the European Union, India, Japan, and Singapore, while remaining engaged with China. The legacy of interoperability across defense platforms, intelligence-sharing frameworks, and economic systems positions these countries to work more closely together. The imperative for such cooperation only grows should there be a faltering of U.S. leadership in Asia.

It is equally important, however, that these efforts are not construed as anti-American. On the contrary, they should be seen as a form of strategic burden-sharing that reinforces U.S. interests by promoting regional stability. Even if U.S. ideational leadership recedes, the realpolitik calculus of U.S. engagement in Asia remains intact. As long as the United States seeks to prevent Chinese hegemony over the Indo-Pacific, alliances with Australia, South Korea, and Japan will remain indispensable.

But the long-term sustainability of these alliances depends on mutual credibility. Strategic ambiguity, inconsistent messaging, or unilateralism by any party threatens to erode the trust that underpins these relationships. Australia and South Korea must, therefore, continue pressing the United States—politely but firmly—to uphold what remains of the rules-based order it once championed. As middle powers, they cannot afford to be passive. Their prosperity and security are at stake.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the challenges the Indo-Pacific faces today are not occurring in isolation. Great power competition, climate-related crises, governance breakdowns, and disruptions from the Fourth Industrial Revolution are converging to create a new, more complex strategic environment. This poly-crisis demands a new kind of strategic literacy—one that combines historical insight with geopolitical foresight.

As Australia navigates this landscape, its goal should not be to predict the future with certainty but to build resilience, expand cooperation, and act with principled pragmatism. In this, the partnership between Australia and South Korea can serve as a model—not only for the Indo-Pacific but for the wider world.

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