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DISCUSSION

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# China: Australia's new great and powerful friend?

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**ABSTRACT**
This provocation argues that Australian policymakers could, perhaps should, look to China rather than the United States as their new 'great and powerful friend'. Yet at a time when Donald Trump is upending the 'rules-based international order', which supposedly provided the legitimising rationale for both American and Australian foreign policy, neither of Australia's major political parties is contemplating change, much less criticism of an increasingly unpredictable and transactional ally. Exploring why such things remain impossible to imagine tells us something revealing and important about the dominant ideas that shape Australia's place in the world.

**KEYWORDS**
Australian foreign policy; Trump; China; Independence

Some things are simply unimaginable, but not many are more unlikely than this: Australian policymakers could look to China rather than the United States as their new 'great and powerful friend'. True, some might argue that Australia's leaders deciding that they don't actually need a great and powerful friend, and that they might act independently is even more unlikely (Behm 2024). Even when Donald Trump is upending the 'rules based international order', which supposedly provided the legitimising rationale for both America and Australian foreign policy, neither of Australia's major political parties is contemplating change, much less criticism of an increasingly unpredictable and transactional ally. Exploring why such things remain impossible to imagine tells us something revealing and important about the dominant ideas that shape Australia's place in the world.

## The way we were (and still are)

The story of Australia's history as a notionally independent country has been told many times, but it's worth highlighting some of its key features as it has some strikingly path-dependent features. I say 'notionally' because from the outset successive generations of Australian policymakers have been nervous and reluctant to assume responsibility for even making foreign policy on behalf of this country (Walker 1999). It took the

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Second World War and the ignominious expulsion of the British from Singapore at the hands of the Japanese for Australian policymakers to reluctantly embrace the idea that they might have to act slightly more independently.

There were limits to this process, of course. Australia's war-time prime minister, John Curtin famously said that 'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.' We still do. Indeed, in the intervening period, despite radically different geopolitical circumstances, the relationship with the United State has become a deeper, more institutionalised and sacrosanct part of 'Australia's' strategic outlook (Scappatura 2019).

Whether Australian policymakers' belief in the value of the alliance with the USA can survive a second Trump presidency is another question, but one that few in Canberra are willing to contemplate, not least because of the ever-greater strategic links between the two countries. On the contrary, not only are the ties that bind Australia to the USA becoming ever stronger, but even more remarkably, so are Australia's links to its former colonial power. The United Kingdom's improbable desire to have a renewed presence in 'the Far East', and Australia's willingness to facilitate it is a reminder of how deeply historical sensibilities continue to shape current policies.

The principal manifestation of this reality is AUKUS agreement between Australia, the UK and the USA. Defence minister Richard Marles argues that 'in a rational world, what you spend on defence is a function of the strategic threat, the strategic complexity that the country faces' (Clarke 2023). Quite so. The problem is deciding what sort of security threat Australia actually faces, and what the best way of responding to such threats might be, however they are defined.

In this regard, there are many reasons to doubt the wisdom of the AUKUS agreement. But to understand why Australian policymakers might be willing to spend (at least) $368billion on a deal that was conceived during the discredited prime ministership of Scott Morrison with the most perfunctory (if any) cost–benefit analysis and little discussion by the Albanese government, let alone the Australian Labor Party (Fowler 2024), we need to look further back in history.

Congenital anxiety about their place in the region—no matter what it's called—means that no amount of rebranding can make Australia's political and strategic elites feel comfortable about their location. Despite enjoying what are arguably the most strategically advantageous geographical circumstances in the world, making it 'easy and inexpensive to protect' (Roggeveen 2023, 209), policymakers continue to fret about being too far from 'natural' allies and too close to Asia.

Australia, along with the UK and the USA, is a prominent member of the 'Anglosphere'. As Duncan Bell (2019, 53) points out, 'whether their advocates recognise it or not, Anglosphere projects will invariably be associated with the racialised imperial politics from which they emerged'. Consequently, the sub-text of the AUKUS initiative, whose members have only limited—if any, in the UK's case—claims to be members of the Indo or Asia-Pacific region(s) could hardly be more unfortunate as they act to impose order on a region that is, by implication, incapable of doing so without their help.

That successive Australian governments appear to be entirely ignorant of the damage this might do this country's image in the region (Patton 2024), or more concerned about addressing their strategic anxieties whatever collateral damage that may cause, will do

little to reassure other states that will continue to be our neighbours if—or more likely when—the USA and the UK decide that they have other priorities closer to home. Indeed, it is noteworthy in this regard that even the British government is looking towards Europe rather than the USA for security.

## The agonies of AUKUS

In the meantime, we are left with AUKUS, which Paul Keating considers to be 'the worst deal in all history' (Karp 2023). It is not simply the astounding sum of money that Australian policymakers are committing to a project that looks increasingly unlikely to be delivered (Briggs 2025), will likely be obsolete even if it is, and won't 'deter' China whatever happens, that makes the proposed purchase of a handful of nuclear propelled submarines an astoundingly bad idea, though.

As yet another former prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, pointedly asked: 'the question on US-built nuclear-powered submarines is simply this: can they be operated, sustained and maintained by Australia without the support or supervision of the US Navy?' If not, Turnbull argued, 'sovereignty would be shared with the US' (Murphy and Hurst 2023).

This would mean, of course, the Australia would be even more closely tied to, and reliant upon the USA, and even less capable of taking independent actions at times of crisis (Curran 2024). To judge by the historical record, the idea that Australian policymakers in either of the main political parties might contemplate not following American's lead in strategic matters remains highly unlikely—no matter what the cost in blood and treasure.

The perceived political consequences of looking 'weak' or being wedged on national security issues remains equally unthinkable, for the ALP's leadership, even in the face of unhappiness among its own members. The costs may not be simply political or even financial either, of course: the AUKUS agreement effectively guarantees Australia's participation in yet another war of choice on the part of the USA, no matter how tangential or distant the actual threat to Australia's domestic security and well-being may be.

A conflict with China over Taiwan would not be in any credible definition of Australia's 'national interest', especially when the notional opponent is also this country's principal trade partner. Ironically, enough, it is not impossible that Trump may seek to make a deal with China that effectively gives the latter a free hand in its 'sphere of interest' (Yeh 2025), an outcome that would make a mockery of both America's and Australia's recent strategic policy.

More to the point, the USA clearly does not need Australia's vary modest contribution to the military balance in East Asia. What it *does* need is an enthusiastic and ever supportive regional cheer squad and—more consequentially in Australia's case—what Des Ball (1980) famously called 'a suitable piece of real estate'. Not only can Australia provide some useful legitimation or cover for whatever grand strategic misadventure the USA may embark on—as in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan etc—but it is also home to pivotally important communications infrastructure and military bases over which it has little influence (Tanter 2024).

The point to emphasise is that Australian doesn't need to embark on a ruinously expensive exercise to demonstrate its continuing fealty and strategic importance to the

USA. While ever the USA is interested in remaining a power in the Asia/Indo-Pacific, Australia will be an important element of its geostrategic footprint. Its continuing presence will be determined solely by an *American* calculation of its national strategic interest, and this is not dependent on anything Australia may or may not do (White 2017).

One might have thought that the 'realists' who populate Canberra's self-absorbed strategic and policymaking bubble would have recognised this, at least. Skilful diplomacy might allow Australia to follow the lead—and become much more closely aligned with and connected to—our immediate Asian middle power neighbours who make a virtue of their situation by promoting 'hedging' as an appropriate (not so) grand strategy for the lesser lights of the regional geopolitical landscape (Kuik 2008).

It's not only a lot cheaper and less likely to give offence to great powers with delusions of grandeur, but it really doesn't seem to affect the overall security position of smaller states. After all, the ASEAN states can do little to influence the geopolitical ambitions of either China or the USA. Countries that adopt such strategies may even some capacity to play off one great power against another for their own benefit, too.

Indeed, some argue it may be possible for middle powers like Australia to exercise greater agency at a time of international transformation. The Trump administration will provide a searching examination of that hopeful thesis (Taylor 2025). Either way, it is noteworthy that our Anglosphere neighbour, New Zealand, remains as secure as it ever was, despite leaving the ANZUS strategic alliance. They have also not needed to significantly expand defence spending to do so either (Beeson 2015). All of which begs the question: why bother wasting scarce resources that could be much better utilised elsewhere?

## Opportunity costs

One of the principal problems associated with the AUKUS project are opportunity costs: if we spend scarce resources on submarines, we can't spend them on anything else (Beeson forthcoming). The list of much worthier projects is potentially endless, but some of the more obvious are paying for the transition to a sustainable economy and providing much needed social housing. We would also add free education of a sort from which the architects of Australian public and strategic policy benefitted.

But there is another, even more unlikely and unimaginable cost of our policymakers' continuing anxiety about our strategic future and the concomitant need to demonstrate our reliability, loyalty and fealty to our current great and powerful friend. By prioritising strategic ties with the USA over all other foreign and strategic priorities, Australian elites necessarily relegate the relationship with China to a second order issue, despite the People's Republic being our chief trade partner and an increasingly consequential presence in the region.

As neighbours in the ASEAN grouping (ought to) remind us: we don't have to choose between the increasingly belligerent great powers. On the contrary it is possible to argue —somewhat quixotically, no doubt—that the region's middle powers might form a like-minded coalition to encourage responsible behaviour on the part of their greater counterparts.

Given that Australian policymakers have often made greater claims about the potential for middle powers to play such a role (Evans and Grant 1995 ), it ought not to be quite

as unthinkable as it seems to be. Indeed, some noted realists and strategic heavyweights have suggested that it might even be possible to imagine the development of a new regional 'concert of powers' as an alternative to the increasingly fraught and acrimonious strategic stand-off between the USA and China (White 2011).

But given that the USA seems impervious to accepting advice from its supposedly influential allies, especially but not exclusively under Trump, why don't Australian policymakers try their luck with China? True, China isn't known for listening to unsolicited advice either, as Kevin Rudd discovered (Callick 2009). And yet when China is clearly attempting to expand its influence and spending much of its own money cementing its place in the region's infrastructure via the Belt and Road Initiative, it could hardly be less receptive to friendly diplomatic overtures and advice than the USA has been over forty years. At the very least, Australia might get a high speed rail link between Sydney and Melbourne that has been discussed but never delivered for over forty years.

There are even some obvious synergies for the PRC and Australia to explore, too. The two countries famously have complimentary economies and a serious attempt by Australian policymakers to become the clean energy superpower of the region might be beneficial to both countries (Garnaut 2019). It might help to wean both countries off their reliance on using or exporting coal, too—something that would help to address the real, increasingly urgent threat to environmental security that both countries face. At least China is using the language of environmental responsibility (Geng and Lo 2023), rather than promising to abandon it like Trump.

It is almost obligatory in any discussion of this sort involving China to observe that the flip side of crisis is opportunity. Hopefully, there is still something in this idea, although the time available to do something serious about climate change is rapidly running out. It is at least conceivable that China and Australia could cooperate for mutual benefit. It might even set a good example for other states about the benefits of coordinated policy initiatives, not least for their confidence building side effects.

The fact that such a development would represent an unimaginable—on the part of strategic elites, at least—transformation in policy thinking and practice is not simply unfortunate, it is potentially catastrophic. It is no longer controversial to suggest that humanity faces a looming existential crisis in which our civilisational faces the very real prospect of collapse (Milman 2023).

This is already a reality for some of the less fortunate (and blameless) parts of the world, of course. But it is entirely possible that even the most 'advanced', wealthy and seemingly capable parts of the world will succumb to the effects of unmitigated climate change in the not-too-distant future.

And yet our policymakers seem incapable of recognising, much less responding to this crisis. To be fair, we have never had to deal with a collective action problem of this sort, but it ought to be apparent by now that this is the real existential threat that confronts Australia, China and every other country on the planet. If we can't recognise that much, at least, and act accordingly, then we face an inevitably catastrophic future in which the current debates about submarines are an irrelevant distraction.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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