

AUSTRALIA'S PERCEPTIONS OF STRATEGIC RISKS AND POLICY RESPONSES

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"Perceptions of Strategic Risk in the Asia-Pacific & and Nuclear Non-Proliferation
Regime: Australian Perspectives"**

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Australia has a distinctive strategic mindset. It is a product of the combination of attitudes, biases, deep historical experiences, pathologies, perceptions, prejudices and phobias – that informs virtually all decisions taken by successive national governments as they pursue what they imagine to be the national interest. The 'national interest', however, is almost never defined. It is little more than an *ex post facto* excuse for decisions that are characteristically too little and too late. 'The national interest' ends the conversation rather than justifying the decision.

Consequently, Australia has a real problem with agency – the ability to act confidently and decisively in pursuit of articulated interests, expressed values and clear goals.

Historically, Australia has been quick to join with imperial and quasi-imperial powers in global action to preserve the imperial *status quo* or to defeat challengers to that *status quo*. Australia is not, however, a practised builder of local coalitions. Nor does it negotiate regional cooperative or defence agreements and treaties that, bilaterally or multilaterally, create the foundations of a regional institutional infrastructure.

Given its natural endowment and wealth, its considerable power, its remoteness from the traditional theatres of warfare (so long as Australia's own "frontier wars" are discounted), and the security benefits afforded by its geographical location, Australia is one of the most secure countries in the world. It has no traditional enemies. Nor does it have any friends.

So why is Australia so diffident in acting on its own account when it is so quick to support the adventurism of its distant allies?

In both its formulation and its realisation, our national security policy is caught on the horns of an exquisite dilemma: a pathological fear of China on the one hand, and a servile dependence on the US on the other. And just as two horns project from a single bovine cranium, so the horns of Australia's dilemma have a singular origin. Australia's security policy has long been an artefact of a deep-seated national insecurity. Insecurity is deeply embedded in the national psyche. It is seen in both the brash and boisterous anti-China barracking that characterises much of the public commentary of those who should know better and in the obsequious deference we pay to all things American, but especially the US military and its leaders.

Perceptions of Strategic Risk

Australia has a heightened sense of threat. The critical fact, however, is that threat and risk are not coterminous. To conflate the two is to make a fundamental error: threat is confronted; risk is managed. The corollary is: the better risk is managed, the easier it will be to confront threat.

In an important sense, Australia has such a diminished sense of risk that we have become one of the most risk averse countries in the world. We do not manage risk. We avoid it. The braggadocio and bravura that so often distinguish Australia on the world stage – for instance, Prime Minister Billie Hughes at Versailles in 1919, Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies during the Suez crisis in 1956 or [Prime Minister Scott Morrison](#) at the Glasgow COP in 2020 – in fact mask a profound insecurity and its consequent overreach. We are frightened of what we do not understand and do not understand what causes our fear. In consequence, we lack the confidence to achieve what we do understand.

Risk is what might constrain the full realisation of an interest or a plan. Appreciation of risk is the analysis of constraints, their likelihood, what damage they might do, and their amelioration, redirection and/or removal. Risks are to be managed. Interests are to be realised and consolidated.

This is a key point: as The Australia Institute [reported](#) recently,

National interests drive strategic policy, which ultimately concerns itself with the role of armed force in protecting and promoting the national interests. It follows that, to be authoritative and legitimate, strategic policy must be interests-based, capable of defending and advancing the national interests whenever they are constrained by the threat of armed force.

But what actually drives Australia's strategic policy is fear, whether it is the fear of abandonment, as Allan Gyngell so memorably put it, fear of attack, fear of our

confronting continent, fear of missing out, or fear of standing up for ourselves and standing on our own two feet.

So we do not perceive risks that might constrain us in achieving our interests, but rather indulge our fears, causing us to focus on threats, real or imagined. It is one thing to say, as President Hoover did, that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. It is quite another to build the agency that is the product of strength and confidence. It is easy, perhaps, to hanker constantly for a protector, a “great and powerful friend”. It is also demeaning.

If we survey the procession of “risks” that Australia has addressed since the end of World War 2, we find an ever-changing kaleidoscope of fears, misconceptions and misperceptions where threat replaces threat – inevitably leading governments to support the interests of other powers while diminishing our own. We have variously imagined threats from the Red Menace, the Yellow Peril, communist Dominoes, Indonesian confrontation, chauvinistic nationalism, international terrorism and, more recently, Chinese military bases in the Pacific. We have sided with imperial powers when their interests were threatened – as we did in the Suez Canal in 1956 and Iraq in 2003.

Most recently, we have supported the US-led coalition to liberate Afghanistan from the control of the Taliban, and then the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan that liberated the Taliban to control Afghanistan. Who says that Australian strategists, and their American counterparts for that matter, are impervious to irony?

All of this is not to suggest that Australia totally lacks any capacity to perceive risk. During the second half of the 1970s, for example, the Australian Department of Defence undertook an [extensive evaluation](#) of the geographic and geophysical factors that established the framework within which strategic risk could be evaluated and force structure responses shaped. *The Defence of Australia Studies*, as they were known, provided a disciplined and largely quantitative analysis of the terrain/distance/time factors that must be considered if Australia is to defend continental Australia, and of the oceanographic, bathymetric and distance factors that determine the maritime (sea/air) defence of northern Australia.

Whereas threat, and its bedfellow fear, exist in the imagination, risk exists in the real world. Risk is grist to the actuaries’ mill. It can be analysed, evaluated and quantified. It can be mitigated. Risk can be modelled and experimented upon, to which end the RAND Corporation developed its powerful modelling tool [Massive Scenario Generation](#). The more risk is analysed and evaluated, the more calibrated and effective are the policy and practical responses to risk. The policy responses may extend from diplomacy to public information campaigns, while the practical responses may extend from infrastructure investments to the acquisition of military hardware. But all these responses are grounded in reality rather than instinct.

So why is threat the default starting point for policy rather than risk? The answer is twofold: politics and the devaluation of professional public service advice.

In the world of politics, public sentiment is much more easily excited and manipulated on an emotional plane than on the basis of argument, logic and reason. In his perceptive 2007 [book](#) *The Political Brain*, Drew Westen points out that “What tends to ‘drive’ people . . . are their *wishes, fears* and *values*, and emotion is central to all three (p.81)”. Politicians both foment and feed upon fear. Whether it is the amping up of criminality, global terrorism, road-rage and violence to support more intrusive law enforcement or the identification of a foreign government as an enemy hell-bent on subjugation – often with the socially destructive overtones of the dog-whistle – fear always galvanises political responses. Fear legitimises punitive action, [hyper-legislation](#) that constrains human rights and the inevitable expansion of armouries.

The devaluation of public sector advice, and the corresponding evisceration of the public service, is a key contributor to the infantilisation of anything that might resemble a national conversation. Whether it is the relationship between revenue and expenditure, the dignity and rights of the First Peoples of Australia, the consolidation of structural misogyny, or the remarkable incapacity for national self-affirmation, the absence of the ideas and language that might illuminate a tolerant and inclusive national conversation encourages threat and fear to dominate the popular imagination.

The outsourcing of core public sector functions, especially policy advice, has grown inexorably over the past decade, the growth rate mirroring the decline in public service numbers over the same period. Before the 2022 election, the Labor party [announced](#) that it would reduce outlays on external consultancies by as much as \$3 billion over four years.

But it did not take long after the May 2022 national election for the Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence [to announce](#) a Defence Strategic Review to be conducted not by the Department of Defence but by two external consultants – a former Defence Minister and a former CDF. Worthy and experienced as both Stephen Smith and Sir Angus Houston are, neither has the benefit of protracted exposure to strategic policy advising that one might expect in the conduct of such a review. It is like asking two former hotel managers to prepare soufflés because of an emerging need in the kitchen.

And even before their review has been completed and its recommendations considered, new (and largely meaningless) language such as “[interchangeability](#)” and “[impactful projection](#)” is starting to enter the Defence policy lexicon. While such confected language may represent a newfound strategic policy glossolalia, it does not reflect the measured language of strategic policy experts.

Language such as this is not consistent with risk perception and analysis. Rather, it is indicative of the political spin that is often a precursor to increased expenditure bids.

Policy Responses

So what kinds of policy responses are predicated on a keen perception of threat as distinct from risks to the national interests?

Australia has a chequered strategic policy history. For over 80 years – from Federation in 1901 to 1985 – the default position was a national attachment to the strategic policies of the prime protector. Until the fall of Singapore in 1942, that was Great Britain, to be followed by the United States thereafter. The fact that the ANZUS Treaty continues to be regarded as the bedrock of Australia’s security suggests that reliance on a powerful protector remains at the core of Australia’s strategic policy. Whether fear is focused or not, whether threat is specific or not, the response is a constant search for protection, either the embrace of a power that deters the threat or the invisibility that comes with flight. Australia cannot flee, so it is left with a protector as the only response to threat.

So, however it might be paraded, promoted or otherwise dressed up, the leitmotif of Australia’s strategic policy response has been reliance on the protective capacities of a great power. While that has been the default policy response, meeting the canon of sufficiency, is it the correct policy response, meeting the canon of necessity? For what it may be worth, my answer is no.

Australia has extensive experience in the conduct of war, most of it at the tactical level of armed combat, usually in concert with a major power. But no matter how inventive we might be in conjuring up the heroic and mythic tropes of an Australia valiant in its self-defence with brave and virtuous soldiers giving their lives in defence of their motherland and everything its people stand for, the fact is that Australians have given their lives in defence of other countries and what they stand for. In fact, Australia’s self-defences – distance and terrain – are so formidable that Australian forces must travel thousands of kilometres if they are to engage with “the enemy” and die in pursuit of other nations’ causes.

Australia’s support for the Great Britain and its imperial dream in World War 1 was perhaps inevitable. But it was not necessary. Countries such as Spain and the Netherlands which bordered the major belligerents remained neutral throughout the conflict, as did the Scandinavian nations. The USA, a former British colony (albeit with plenty of attitude) remained neutral though aligned for the first three years of the war. Without its imperial colonies, it is doubtful that Great Britain could have defeated Germany: the war would probably have ended before the Americans arrived. And while some kind of *pax germanica* would have changed the face of Europe, its impact on Asia and the Pacific is much less certain.

After the fall of Singapore, necessity changed Australia's strategic alignment dramatically and probably in perpetuity. America replaced Britain. Since then, Australia has been constant in its support for American-led conflicts. Australia's long-term engagements on the Korean peninsula, in Vietnam, in Iraq and in Afghanistan have ended either inconclusively or in defeat. The price of the ANZUS alliance has been lives and treasure, and many Australians question whether any particular Australian strategic interests were served.

As an artefact of Australia's strategic dependence on America as a "great and powerful friend", the ANZUS Treaty is the quintessential policy response to the deep fear and insecurity that infuses Australia's perception of threat. Successive governments have invested their support for US military actions as a kind of strategic insurance policy to guarantee US support for Australia should it ever find itself *in extremis*. That is a notable act of faith, though whether it would generate the hoped-for strategic return is moot. US self-interest will always prevail, even if Australian self-interest does not.

One of the clearest consequences of Australia's preference for threat- as distinct from risk-based policy is the effective abandonment of a coherent and sustained arms control and disarmament policy.

The energy displayed by the late Andrew Peacock as Foreign Minister in the Fraser government to secure Australia's membership of the Committee on Disarmament in the late 1970s, and the enthusiasm shown by Gareth Evans as Foreign Minister in the Hawke and Keating governments to establish the Canberra Commission have given way to a careless complacency.

Under the Turnbull government, Australia [weaseled](#) its way out of attending the negotiations that concluded the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, Australia's concerns at North Korea's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs notwithstanding. Instead of investing in a broad-based multilateral diplomacy to strengthen non-proliferation standards and to work towards the total prohibition of nuclear weapon possession and use, Australia's current strategic policy appears to favour remaining under the shelter of extended nuclear deterrence. Australia's [agreement](#) to the basing of USAF B-52s in northern Australia is an implicit endorsement of current US nuclear use policy. The Australia-US Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks currently underway will probably see the Australian government adopt a 'pragmatic' position in support of the US global nuclear role given the '[threats](#)' facing the global community.

A risk-based approach to arms control and disarmament policy would deliver an entirely different policy result. The war in Ukraine has provided dramatic evidence that the risk of nuclear weapons use has increased. President [Putin](#) and Foreign Minister [Lavrov](#) have repeatedly used the nuclear threat to constrain Ukraine's President Zelensky and to deter direct NATO engagement in the war in Ukraine. But to reinforce

reliance on extended nuclear deterrence as the preferred policy response to the increase in risk is to legitimise both the possession and use of nuclear weapons. As the international response to the pandemic threat has reminded us, sound policy responses are all about control, management and, wherever possible, elimination. That is risk management.

Alternative Policy Options?

In considering alternative policy options to reliance on US power, it is interesting to reflect on what happens when Australia deploys its military resources its own behalf, and in its own interests.

The Malayan Emergency saw Australian forces operating with British and New Zealand forces against insurgents on the Malay Peninsula. Australian forces operated purposefully and successfully, and Australian interests were realised.

The *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) with Indonesia at the time of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia took place without US involvement or support. An undeclared war, it relied on smoke and mirrors, thimbles and peas, two card tricks and a particularly agile diplomacy. While Indonesia was in fact confronting Malaysia and Singapore, Australia's role was clear enough to Jakarta. The two countries maintained diplomatic relations while they were skirmishing in Borneo, and Australian interests were preserved in Malaysia – substantially assisted by the coup d'état that precipitated the fall of President Sukarno.

Working with New Zealand, Australia led a successful peacekeeping operation in Bougainville between 1994 and 2003. At Australia's initiative, subsequently supported (and then claimed) by New Zealand, ground forces in Bougainville were unarmed. The decision that the peacekeepers should be unarmed reflected informed sensitivity to the cultural practices of the Bougainvillean people. It was warmly welcomed by them, reinforcing the message that they were not a threat to the peacekeepers. And while, two decades later, Bougainville's political future remains undecided, Australia's interests in supporting regional stability were certainly realised.

Similarly, Australia led two peacekeeping operations in the Solomon Islands between 2003 and 2017 to assist in resolving ethnic tensions between the Malaitan and Gwale peoples living on Guadalcanal. The ethnic complexities were considerable, and the Australian military and police contingents generally showed nuance and sensitivity in their dealings with the opposing parties. Importantly, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), as it became known, was led by a diplomat rather than a military officer.

The most interesting Australian initiative was the establishment of a peacekeeping force in East Timor, following 25 years of Indonesian occupation and a period of armed

instability. Arriving in East Timor in September 1999, INTERFET and its successor UNTAET remained in place until East Timor gained independence in 2002. It was a particularly complicated operation that involved a coalition of twenty-two nations, including the US and the UK. Of an overall force comprising almost twelve thousand military personnel, Australia contributed 5,500 and New Zealand 1,200, not including substantial logistic forces based in Darwin and elsewhere in Northern Australia.

In each of these policy responses to critical regional events, Australia has demonstrated two key attributes that together support an alternative to dependence on an external power: advanced organisational skills, and significant coalition-building skills. It also demonstrated that Australia is effective in amalgamating the core elements of military capability (hard power), the tools of international development assistance (soft power) and an effective and engaged diplomacy (smart power) to deliver key national and regional policy objectives. The overwhelming mass of American military power makes that a much more challenging task for the US, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have so sadly demonstrated. In each of the instances in which Australia has either taken the lead or played a significant role in generating a successful outcome, Australia has demonstrated that it does in fact enjoy considerable agency when it displays initiative and acts decisively in its own strategic interests and in the strategic interests of its neighbours.

Conclusion

Australia has considerable national power. But it is diffident in exploiting that power because of the fundamental strategic insecurity that drives it to rely on a great power for its ultimate ability to deter threats. Threats come and go, and hence are no basis for long-term strategic policy. Risk, however, is a constant in a world that is inherently chaotic. The serious analysis of risk and the disciplined design of long-term approaches to risk mitigation will inevitably suggest policy options that play to Australia's strengths as a strategic agent rather than magnifying its weaknesses as an insecure dependent.