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Alliance Future: Rewiring Australia and the United States

Evan A. Feigenbaum, editor

Stephan Frühling | Jennifer Jackett | Stacie Pettyjohn | Courtney Stewart | Matthew Sussex | Peter Tesch

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Introduction

Evan A. Feigenbaum

The United States and Australia face a turbulent world: geopolitical turbulence from war in Europe and especially the rise of Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific; economic turbulence from price shocks and a global economy that only recently emerged from a once-in-a-century pandemic; and technological turbulence from disruptive innovations that hold both promise and peril.

Such challenges are best faced together—and then faced jointly with other regional and global democracies. Canberra and Washington have an unparalleled opportunity to fashion broader, stronger, and multilayered partnerships.

But this, in turn, will require self-reflection, not just cheerleading. And that means undertaking an intellectually honest appraisal of the promises and challenges inherent to the alliance.

The inauguration of a new U.S. administration under President Donald J. Trump and an impending election in Australia in 2025 offer the opportunity to do so. Too many people in both capitals presume that the strategic challenge from China alone will make defense coordination easy. The reality is that it could sharpen contradictions around the kind of operational planning that will be needed to enhance deterrence. As Matthew Sussex and Peter Tesch argue in their chapter of this volume, Australian and American defense strategies, while closely aligned, are not identical.[1] The two allies will need to align resources, build complementary regional relationships, and invest in resilience.

A Bipartisan Alliance

The good news is that the alliance enjoys broad public support in both countries and is wholly bipartisan.

In Australia, the Labor Party can claim ownership by looking back to prime minister John Curtin's December 1941 declaration that Australia "looks to America," which ushered in eighty years of shared history and deepening collaboration. For its part, Australia's Liberals and Nationals can look to the ANZUS alliance, signed by prime minister Robert Menzies in September 1951.

American investment in the alliance is similarly bipartisan, reinforced by presidents of both parties since Franklin D. Roosevelt and reinvigorated in recent years through bipartisan Congressional support for the AUKUS security partnership, a host of force posture initiatives, including the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin and Submarine Rotational Force-West, and associated technology sharing agreements.

Operationalizing and Optimizing for High-Intensity Competition

But the bad news, from my perspective, is that Australian and American defense planners have yet to fully confront some thorny operational questions. This volume of papers is dedicated to that end.

For one, Washington and Canberra have a storied history of sending their forces into combat and then fighting shoulder to shoulder, beginning with the 1918 battle of Hamel where U.S. forces served under an Australian commander, General Sir John Monash.[2] But they have very little history divvying up roles and missions in the manner that will be required for deterrence, defense, and ultimately warfighting in the context of high-intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific. As my former Carnegie colleague Ashley Townshend once put it, the two sides are at risk of significant "expectation gaps."[3]

For Washington (and by extension, the Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii), a core issue is how to integrate both Australian and U.S. forces rotating through Australia into U.S. war plans and warfighting. But for Canberra, this whole question of integration poses a political problem: no matter which party leads the government, pre-commitment is both a sovereign and political challenge for Australia.

To be effective, therefore, both countries need to undertake difficult reforms, forge new modes of cooperation, harmonize outdated regulations, better align national strategies, address acute Australian sovereignty concerns and associated questions around risk thresholds, and develop accelerated solutions to enduring alliance management challenges.

And given the loss of strategic warning time, reforming the alliance is now an urgent priority. It has assumed added momentum following Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review and 2024 National Defence Strategy.[4]

Outline of the Volume

This volume is dedicated to that goal. The five papers that follow aim not just to admire the defense challenge that the alliance faces but to deliver innovative prescriptions in four key areas:

1. Regional Defense Strategy.

The first is regional defense strategy. We asked two experienced Australian strategists, Matthew Sussex and Peter Tesch, to address how Canberra and Washington should align their regional defense strategies to advance shared military objectives effectively. What should be done to manage differently weighted strategic priorities and interests?

Sussex and Tesch note the flawed assumption that U.S. and Australian strategic preferences are somehow synonymous. They make clear that Australian decisionmakers do not outsource sovereign choices over where, how, and when military assets might be utilized. Their detailed prescriptions turn on "aligning for effect" by suggesting an array of practical steps to invest across resources, relationships, and resilience.

2. Force Posture and Structure.

The second area involves force posture and structure, two topics that Stephan Frühling tackles head-on. One big question is how the alliance can balance sovereignty concerns and strategic risk thresholds with the imperative to operate in more combined ways. Another is the extent to which combined operations should drive U.S. and Australian force design and posture choices.

Frühling notes that a confluence of factors has made Australia less reluctant to increase the scope for U.S. forces to operate in and from Australian territory, but argues that U.S. and Australian national defense postures are not yet in closer alignment. Frühling, too, offers detailed prescriptions that reflect Australia's current policy realities.[5]

3. Defense Industrial Integration.

The third area is defense industrial integration, a broad area tackled by Jennifer Jackett. Her paper asks how the alliance can advance export control reforms, technology and intellectual property transfers, rapid acquisition and certification processes, information sharing, and other efforts at two-way industrial cooperation?[6]

There has been an array of new initiatives, such as Australia's Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance plan (GWEO); AUKUS Pillar 2, which focuses on technology sharing; the National Technology and Industrial Base Plus (NTIB+); and SciFire, the joint U.S.-Australian Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment, directed at developing a solid-rocket-boosted, air-breathing, hypersonic conventionally armed cruise missile. Jackett builds on these by offering very specific recommendations to address resource constraints and nearer-term strategic risks.

She calls for an even closerknit approach to collaboration between strategists, war fighters, innovators, and investors from the United States and Australia to foster technology development and make better use of capabilities that already exist.

4. Alliance Roles and Missions.

The fourth area is alliance roles and missions. Two authors separately tackle the question of how Canberra and Washington can develop and leverage complementarities in existing and future forces to advance collective defense. These two papers also ask what modular inputs Australia should pursue—including logistics, enablers, and strike—to support the alliance in key operational scenarios.

Stacie Pettyjohn lays out three hypothetical scenarios of Chinese aggression as a test to propose specific ways that the United States and Australia could strengthen their collective response:[7]

(1) a full-scale invasion of Taiwan at some unspecified date in the future,

(2) an attack on Second Thomas Shoal in the near term, and

(3) gray zone coercion against Australian forces in the Coral Sea in the late 2020s.

She uses these scenarios to help identify roles and missions that American and Australian forces would undertake, and then move toward a division of labor.

Courtney Stewart calls for Australia and the United States to assemble and lead a coalitional combined joint deterrence force in the Indo-Pacific. This innovative coalition would seek to leverage existing collective deterrence cooperation with allies like Japan. Stewart draws on lessons learned from two existing multinational forces, the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force and the U.S.-led Combined Maritime Forces.[8]

An Alliance Fit for Purpose

Ultimately, the U.S.-Australia alliance has a crucial distinction that every other American partnership or connection in the Indo-Pacific lacks. Bluntly put, Australia, more than any other country, is best positioned—by shared history, interests, values, and impulses—to join the United States as the first mover in fashioning solutions to real-world challenges. This includes deterrence and defense amid the prospect of high-intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

This volume of exciting and innovative papers—and the larger Carnegie project from which it emanated—seeks to advance an agenda for action that reflects the power of partnership, and an alliance fit for purpose in this challenging new era.

CHAPTER 1

Aligning for Effect: Operationalizing U.S.-Australia Regional Defense Strategies

Matthew Sussex and Peter Tesch

One of the primary challenges of managing future Indo-Pacific security dynamics will be the extent to which the United States and Australia—as alliance partners with convergent strategic interests in upholding regional order—are able to sustain alignment of their respective defense strategies over the coming decade. This is not as simple a task as some, particularly in the United States, believe.[9]

It is commonly assumed that the integration of Canberra's and Washington's respective strategies should be easy and seamless—especially since its alliance with the United States is the so-called bedrock of Australian security and defense policy.[10] Yet, several factors bear upon this. Some are primarily functional, relating to operational capabilities. While increasing the overall lethality of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) via the acquisition of long-range strike capabilities is a positive recent development, the fact remains that Australia will not have significantly enhanced capacity to contribute to independent or combined high-end deterrence for some time.[11]

Other factors are more complex, involving Australian and U.S. relationships with regional actors whose posture during future conflict scenarios will be crucial to successful outcomes. Still others relate to different assumptions about the likely geographic locus of future conflict. Finally, it must be acknowledged that, although they are closely aligned in strategic outlook, the United States and Australia nonetheless have different interests impacting their respective threat perceptions. These shape the conditions under which they might be prepared to use force when responding to regional contingencies.

Each of these challenges must be managed to avoid miscommunication about intent and flawed expectations about the nature and purpose of Australia's commitments to U.S. warfighting objectives.[12] In this paper, we examine that task in more detail and propose ways to better harmonize U.S. and Australian approaches to regional defense. We reject the notion that aligning defense priorities relies on perfectly overlapping grand strategies. Indeed, we find that the recently released 2024 Australian National Defence Strategy (Australian NDS) offers a sound starting point for more clearly synchronizing defense priorities.[13] This document prioritizes deterrence by denial in its broad approach, focusing explicitly on the effects that defense capabilities seek to engender.

In particular, the Australian strategy emphasizes maintaining situational awareness, alongside the ability to hold adversary forces at risk during sustained combat operations. In this context, we identify three priority areas of focus for the alliance: the importance of deploying *resources* effectively, in line with each partner's interests; the need to build deeper *relationships* with regional actors to facilitate joint U.S.-Australia operations; and the opportunity to construct regional networks of *resilience* based on enhanced cooperation between like-minded states, either with or without direct U.S. participation. We conclude that, taken together, investing effort across each of these thematic areas will not only enhance Australian and U.S. alignment but also facilitate much more coherent effects—both in terms of deterrence and for potential future combat operations.

Navigating Uncertainty: U.S. and Australian Strategic Priorities in a Messy Region

Much of the contemporary discussion around Australian and U.S. defense cooperation focuses less on issues of intent and more on how Australia might integrate with American forces to best serve U.S. warfighting priorities.[14] This is a fundamental mistake. First, it makes the flawed assumption that U.S. and Australian strategic preferences are synonymous. Second, it fails to consider that Australian decisionmakers do not outsource sovereign choices over where, how, and when its military assets might be utilized.

It is, therefore, important to recognize that Australian support for U.S. strategic goals is by no means universally assured, even without taking into consideration Australia's keen eye on the U.S. election and the potential for a renewed and more determined "America First" agenda. On the contrary, Australian commitments will not depend only on context and capabilities. Rather, they will rely chiefly on Australia's perception of the circumstances under which its vital interests might be at risk, its ability to do anything meaningful to support Washington's strategic goals, and pragmatic calculations concerning the costs and benefits of doing so.

One arena where this plays out is in Australian domestic debates about strategic policy. Recent disagreements about the utility of the trilateral Australia-UK-U.S. security agreement (AUKUS), and related concerns about force posture cooperation, are a good example of

the plurality of thinking in Australian security discussions. But they are also reflective of broader and longer-standing internal contests over how Australia should conceive of its place in the region and the world, where it should prioritize its defense spending, and how much value it should place on its security relationships.[15]

According to one view, espoused by a number of prominent strategic policy commentators, including a former Australian prime minister and a past foreign minister, the only logical endpoint of Indo-Pacific strategic competition is a Sino-centric rules-based order.[16] Under that scenario, it is argued, the United States will be compelled to withdraw to an offshore balancing role at best, if not a total retreat into nuclear-armed isolationism. Hence, Australia's acquisition of U.S. Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs)—which may end up partly crewed by U.S. Navy personnel—is problematic, and merely entails limited Australian capabilities becoming a more vulnerable target for coercion by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The solution, according to proponents of this viewpoint, is for Australia to prioritize a larger fleet of conventional submarines, adopt a much more localized "Defence of Australia" posture, and establish a deeper relationship with China based on mutual trust.[17]

A second (and related) thread in this narrative concerns the so-called entrapment thesis: the alleged concession of Australian sovereignty over its strategic and defense decisions. This revolves around the proposition that closer integration between U.S. and Australian forces equates to a de facto commitment by Canberra to support any major strategic choice made in Washington. Thus giving Canberra little room to bargain over the commitment of Australian military assets in the event of war.[18] Some champions of this view take the line that Australia should opt for a position amounting to principled armed neutrality—upholding common interests with the United States where necessary, while practicing a normatively ambivalent deterrence-by-denial posture grounded in hard-headed realism, reminiscent of an Australian echidna.[19] In other words, they foresee an ADF capable of inflicting too much pain on an adversary to make attempts at occupation or military coercion viable, but otherwise limited in ability to generate effects. Yet this misses the point of the broader strategy, which sees deterring invasion as necessary—but not sufficient—to Australian needs. Others, more prosaically, reach similar conclusions, but are driven by a conviction that U.S. regional leadership has been destabilizing, and that Australia has been an enabler of American imperialism.[20]

Of course, these views do not represent official policy. They also ignore several strategic realities: First, Australia alone lacks the capability to confront even a moderately determined adversary, let alone a great power such as China. Second, it is impossible to hold an adversary's forces at risk if their range advantage is beyond Australia's capability to reach them. Third, many of Australia's crucial trade routes are outside the immediate vicinity that a "Defence of Australia" strategy would seek to secure[21]—and, in any case, a direct invasion

of the Australian mainland is unlikely. And finally, downsizing the U.S.-Australia alliance would inevitably entail more difficulty sourcing weapons systems of sufficient lethality and scale for a credible denial posture.

The point here is not to champion a particular strategic vision for Australia, nor to make a case for which one may gain the ascendancy. It is merely to note that there is by no means a consensus on Australia's strategic course, and that external as well as internal developments may intrude on the current trajectory of Australian thinking. Returning to AUKUS as an example, the route to an Australian SSN capability—even assuming the best-case scenario delivery of Virginia-class boats in the 2030s, prior to the bespoke AUKUS-class design becoming available in the 2040s—will be long.[22] It may even be the case that the question of strategic competition in the region is settled before Australia receives its first SSN.

The reality of this is not lost on decisionmakers in Canberra. It also contributes to threat perceptions that are distinctively centered on Australian, rather than American, interests. One of the central differences here concerns where those vital interests are located. In the United States, it has become customary to identify Taiwan as the main potential flashpoint for any future conflict with China.[23] There is a solid logic here. First, Chinese President Xi Jinping has pledged to restore Taiwan to the Chinese mainland by force if necessary, and there is strong evidence to suggest he sees it as part of his legacy in realizing the "China dream."[24] Second, although the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act has played an important role in reinforcing strategic ambiguity, a Chinese invasion would commit Washington to respond militarily.[25] Third, a successful Chinese assault on Taiwan would entail a breakout from the first island chain. That would directly threaten U.S. treaty allies Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, as well as other areas claimed by Beijing within the so-called nine-dash line. This, in turn, may also undermine U.S. security commitments and regional resolve for balancing.[26]

However, while Australia has been cautiously supportive of U.S. policy toward Taiwan, it has deliberately avoided committing to taking an active part in hostilities alongside U.S. forces should a conflict arise. This is because Australia does not necessarily see Taiwan's security as part of its most vital interests. Moreover, Australia tends to have a wider planning aperture that links conventional challenges with subthreshold gray-zone activities. In traditional Australian strategic thinking, major threats to its interests are located closer to home, and they encompass the types of vulnerabilities commonly faced by maritime trading states—from blockades to invasion scenarios.[27] This is defined in the 2024 Australian NDS as Australia's "immediate region." It includes the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda Strait to Australia's north, at the intersection of the Andaman and South China Seas, as well as the Torres Strait, Timor Strait, and Arafura Sea. Further afield, it also includes maritime links to U.S. bases in Hawaii and the continental United States via the western Pacific Ocean and the Coral Sea.

The issue of whether—and, if so, how far—Australia might become involved in a conflict over Taiwan is not new. Indeed, former foreign minister Alexander Downer faced exactly the same question in 2004. Admittedly, Downer quickly reversed his initial response (that Australia would remain neutral) after Richard Armitage, then U.S. deputy secretary of state for president George W. Bush, responded that he would expect Australians to fight and die in such an eventuality.[28] However, it underscored the fact that a central part of U.S strategic policy canon is viewed in Canberra as more of a second-order challenge, with hypothetical decisions over Australian involvement revolving more around alliance loyalty than a genuinely held assessment of immediate threats.

A potential U.S.-Australia disconnect over Taiwan is also visible at the doctrinal level. The 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy is clear about what it sees as the most likely future major-power war requiring the commitment of U.S. forces: it will be a high-end contest, with much of it occurring on the high seas.[29] In contrast, the 2023 Australian Defence Strategic Review foresaw that the most likely requirement for the deployment of the ADF would be in green waters-or littoral combat—- than blue-water warfare.[30] This emphasized the need for an Australian deterrent posture that could generate innovative asymmetrical advantages to dissuade attempts to blockade Australia's access to shipping routes. Even so, its notion of an "integrated force" was a radical departure from past planning, obliging the army to reimagine itself for island defense,[31] and requiring long-range capabilities that the ADF had previously not possessed.

Finally, there is also a certain degree of disjuncture between the capabilities required for littoral operations and the capabilities Australia seeks to acquire to conduct them. Put simply, although SSNs give Australia force projection capabilities, they are largely unsuited for green-water naval operations. They are much more useful when deployed in a deep-water environment, where their superior speed and endurance can pose unacceptable risks to maritime expeditionary forces, and they have the range to reach an adversary's homeland. In contrast, conventional submarines remain virtually undetectable in shallower waters but can often be outpaced by the largest maritime targets, and they have limited capabilities in addressing the broad range of deterrence scenarios relevant to maintaining Australian security.

Fortunately, none of the differences in U.S. and Australian interests or doctrine identified so far are insurmountable or precludes the more effective alignment of their respective defense agendas. That said, these differences also cannot be ignored—either by making false assumptions about the inevitability of Australian contributions to U.S.-led combat operations or by discovering too late that Australia lacks the capabilities to be of much assistance in future regional crises. The consequences of doing so would be less effective deterrence efforts and heightened sovereignty risks. Moreover, there are significant opportunities for both Canberra and Washington to maximize their positions in the region through diplomacy and relationship building that are all too often downplayed—or even outright absent—in discussions about strategic alignment. Accordingly, we now turn to consider how these challenges and opportunities might be understood in the context of broader strategy development, with a view to identifying priority areas for attention.

The Effects of Strategy? Or a Strategy of Effects?

Like most grand strategies, the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy,[32] in concert with the accompanying National Security Strategy (NSS) and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR),[33] are primarily aspirational documents. With China identified as the main U.S. "pacing challenge" in a subsequent 2023 Department of Defense report,[34] as well as the need to constrain Russia being central to the 2022 NSS, U.S. strategic policy tries to be both holistic and particular at the same time. This is true not only of numerous regional threat arenas (including the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Western Hemisphere, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic), but also the plethora of threats they identify (state actors, cyberspace, space, pandemics, biodefense, technology, climate change, food insecurity, terrorism, arms control, trade, and economics).[35]

The 2022 Defense Strategy identifies four priorities for structuring its response to the contemporary multifaceted threat environment: defending the homeland from multidomain Chinese threats; deterring strategic threats against the United States and its partners; prevailing in conflict while paying special attention to Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific; and building a resilient joint force and defense ecosystem.[36] These aims are to be achieved in three ways: so-called integrated deterrence, campaigning, and building enduring advantages, particularly by working with industry on innovative capability development across domains.[37]

Yet this tells us very little about how Washington intends to operationalize its overall approach to strategic and defense policy, and even less about how Australian defense policy can be optimized to align with it. Of particular note here is the concept of integrated deterrence, which is virtually synonymous with a whole-of-government approach to statecraft.[38] For one thing, it seeks to fully integrate the levers of U.S. national power. For another, it emphasizes the need to work more closely with allies. But beyond that, it does not articulate how the concept approaches threats and challenges across and between domains, what allies can do differently to contribute more effectively, and how this generates enhanced deterrence against strategic rivals.

A useful alternative way to shed some light on the core areas in which U.S. and Australian defense policies might be better aligned is to view the challenges they face through the prism of the strategic *effects* that are being sought. Doing so arguably allows both partners to focus more keenly on desired outcomes, instead of taking abstract grand strategy formulation (which frequently becomes redundant due to the pace of regional change) as the starting point. This is the main approach adopted by the 2024 Australian NDS, which notes that deterrence by denial is the main frame by which Canberra seeks to achieve its strategic objectives, but focuses much more centrally on the questions of how, where, and with what capabilities it intends to utilize.[39]

To this end, the Australian NDS identifies six effects that the ADF should seek to engender.[40] These are to:

- project force;
- hold an adversary's forces at risk;
- protect ADF forces and support Australian critical infrastructure;
- sustain protracted combat operations;
- maintain persistent situational awareness in Australia's main area of military interest; and
- achieve the decision advantage by possessing resilient command and control capabilities, while simultaneously undermining an adversary's own command capabilities to affect its cost and risk calculus.

Applying the lens of effects-based strategic planning illuminates more clearly the tasks confronting the United States and Australia in aligning their defense priorities. Ultimately, none of the effects listed above can realistically be achieved without investing time and energy into specific capabilities; clearly defining objectives; seeking and obtaining leverage among key regional actors; and finding ways to add value to strategic solutions by creating incentives for enhanced regional cooperation, especially with treaty allies like South Korea and Japan—both with and without the United States as the framework partner.

Without wanting to over-specify the contexts in which Australia and the United States might seek to apply operational effects, some examples are necessary. First, without agreement by key regional players in Southeast Asia to at least tacitly permit transit through the contested and congested waterways and airspace of the South China Sea, the U.S. and Australian militaries' ability to project force and hold the PLA at risk would be severely curtailed. Second, absent commitments from Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines to play a greater role in regional deployments, the ability to maintain situational awareness and generate credible deterrence—against a range of contingencies, from an invasion of Taiwan to gray-zone activities by the PLA Navy-becomes problematic. Third, building minilateral coalitions on a variety of specific issues—from championing norms of responsible behavior in cyberspace and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) technology, to intelligence sharing and cooperation on artificial intelligence (AI) and critical infrastructure protection—is crucial to provide uplift to credible deterrence in a multidomain context.

Resources, Relationships and Resilience: Three Areas for Priority Focus

How might an effects-focused approach to U.S.-Australia defense alignment be put into practice, and what might constitute the key areas needing attention? Below, we identify three areas of priority focus that are both specific and interlinked. We begin with *resources*, which refers to the capabilities needed to effectively deter threats and conduct combat operations if necessary; it also specifically identifies arenas requiring investment by the partners. We then consider the importance of *relationships*, pertaining to the effects benefits generated from leveraging existing, as well as encouraging new, security partnerships. Finally, we consider the need to better evolve networks of *resilience*. These are less tangible in terms of direct effects, but they are nonetheless important planks of order-building that help with norm creation around good behavior and foster surety and assurance among regional actors. In pursuing that agenda, they better serve the strategic effects the United States and Australia are seeking to engender in their respective regional defense policies.

Resources

The ability to provide useful capability contributions is central to any kind of effective integrated military planning between allies. The ADF has long preferred an approach to capability acquisition and force structure that has allowed it to operate as a highly trained and technologically advanced, but necessarily niche defense organization. This was done with two factors in mind. First, any major combat involving the ADF would be in partnership with allies and partners. Second, Australian commitments to maintaining regional and global order help buttress any future calls on alliance assistance it might need to make. Yet with strategic competition now more firmly centered on its region—as noted in the 2024 Australian NDS—the question becomes to what extent Australia can rapidly enhance its independent force projection capabilities while also enabling more appropriate contribution to allied deterrence and warfighting efforts.

Many of the key requirements for such a dual posture are already in progress and are often associated with Australia's advantageous geostrategic location. These include accelerating and enhancing U.S. access to bases on the Australian mainland, with the aim of utilizing Australia as a logistics and resupply hub for U.S. forces. They also include purchases of long-range strike options such as the HIMARS system to upgrade the Australian Army's aging, shorter-range artillery assets for potential deployments beyond the Australian mainland;[41] the acquisition of the Tomahawk cruise missile for Australia's Hobart-class destroyers;[42] plans to purchase the U.S. Joint Strike Missile and Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile;[43] the aforementioned acquisition of SSNs, in line with Pillar 1 of the AUKUS agreement; and the development of uncrewed systems for reconnaissance missions.[44] These aim to serve the requirement in the 2024 Australian NDS for the ADF to better project force, hold adversaries at risk, enhance situational awareness, and build capacity for protracted combat operations if necessary.

But more can be done by both the United States and Australia to generate enhanced effects—not only in a multidomain context, but more importantly by harnessing the allies' levers of power across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic spectrum.

First, the partners should recognize that Australia's capability mix—although evolving—will remain best suited to contingencies that involve green-water and littoral combat and deterrence functions. Here, enhancing the ability of both the Australian and U.S. navies, as well as the Australian Army and the U.S. Marine Corps, to perform joint operations at the land-sea nexus would be an important step toward greater alignment between the two partners. Investing further effort into asymmetric maritime force development—from mines to unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as land-based Tomahawk and HIMARS strike options—would also be a swift and resource-efficient way to maximize Australian capabilities.[45]

Second, the United States can better support Australia's proximity advantage in bolstering adherence to a rules-based order in the South Pacific, where it has long sought to generate good governance outcomes. This is not simply a deterrence function: on the contrary, it will require skillful diplomacy as well as a much more serious effort by the United States to develop concrete subregional investment incentives and opportunities beyond its traditional focus on hard security. And it will be necessary to counter ongoing attempts by China to establish political leverage and a potential security presence in island nations whose preferences are dictated more by concerns about development, climate change, and evolving a blue economy than by major-power strategic competition.[46] Moreover, being responsive to the needs of these states assists Australian and U.S. strategic alignment by providing greater potential capacity for political and in-kind support from regional partners during crises.

Third, both the United States and Australia should devote more effort to developing plans that jointly address hybrid and gray-zone operations in a maritime context. China is likely to increase its utilization of subthreshold activities, including civil-military fusion fleets, the testing of regional actors' exclusive economic zones, and establishing self-declared air defense identification zones in contested territories.[47] Countering this behavior will require coordinated efforts to encourage legal and normative compliance, as well as hard power deterrence and escalation management options. This also reinforces the need to craft and promote a more compelling regional narrative that appeals to interests beyond hard national security. For instance, combining more vocal condemnation of Chinese incursions, developing codes of conduct with like-minded actors, and laying the foundations for networked air defense architecture would go some way toward providing the normative and punitive tools needed to impose costs on such activities.

Fourth, it would be advantageous to enhance U.S. and Australian cooperation on countering hostile cyber operations against critical infrastructure, and to harmonize messaging to blunt disinformation campaigns. In a public-facing context, Australian participation in the U.S.-led Global Engagement Center would be a sensible step, facilitating more coordinated messaging against Russian and Chinese disinformation about issues ranging from the war in Ukraine to the security impacts of regional alliances.[48] Australia should also urgently

develop a regional counter-disinformation capability to address anti-AUKUS messaging in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, which is currently going unchallenged. And deeper bilateral cooperation on AI-enabled political warfare would allow both partners to respond with greater agility to threats emanating from China and Russia.

Relationships

Australia benefits from having constructed strong relationships in its immediate region, and both Washington and Canberra have invested heavily in upgrading ties with like-minded actors on a suite of alliance functions, from intelligence sharing to mutual defense cooperation. These include, for instance, ongoing efforts to draw India into a firmer balancing posture (although such attempts must also accept the reality that New Delhi's appetite for competition in an East Asian context is far more limited than its desire to balance Beijing in South Asia's continental and maritime spheres). There are also other obstacles making regionwide deterrence an unworkable proposition. Many Southeast Asian states (one might argue Australia as well) regard China as the key to their future prosperity. Arguments appealing to democratic values are futile at best—and counterproductive at worst—in a region comprised of a mishmash of partial democracies, illiberal regimes, and semi-authoritarian and authoritarian states. The preference of established multilateral organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is still to avoid becoming involved in great-power competition.

But while an Asian equivalent to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is clearly out of the question, Australia and the United States could take additional steps to maximize the effectiveness of their shared security agendas. One of the most obvious opportunities here is to leverage existing military cooperation with Japan and South Korea for more coordinated allied signaling and deterrence activities. It is certainly true that past attempts to encourage Tokyo and Seoul to take on a heftier share of the regional security burden have encountered several hurdles. Japan, for instance, has been constitutionally constrained in contributing to missions like freedom of navigation operations. South Korea, meanwhile, faces the ongoing threat of an increasingly fractious and capable North Korea, which has captured most of its attention. And, while the relationship between Japan and South Korea is improving, there are still significant historical hurdles to overcome.

That said, the strategic environment has deteriorated to the point where both Tokyo and Seoul have been signaling that they are more amenable to investing in the maintenance of broader regional order, and in the case of Japan it is likely that a government following Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's departure will sustain that course. Both have growing military capabilities, which affect Beijing's risk calculus. Continued violations of Japanese maritime and airspace by Chinese air and naval assets have prompted a more robust commitment by Tokyo to security and defense. Likewise, South Korea's position within China's

anti-access/area-denial perimeter has prompted its willingness to potentially countenance greater risk, especially given concerns over the future credibility of U.S. forward-deployed forces due to potential changes in American domestic politics.

Here, there is an opportunity to build on positive developments emerging from the Australia–South Korea 2+2 meetings and the Thirteenth U.S.-Australia-Japan Trilateral Defense Ministers' Meeting, held in Honolulu in May 2024. Two areas are especially promising. The first is the intention to intensify South Korean participation in Australian exercises such as Pitch Black. Canberra could first propose a joint Australia–South Korea live-fire maritime exercise on the sidelines of Talisman Sabre, which would deepen direct bilateral military cooperation. The second is the emphasis on tighter Australian-Japanese strategic alignment.[49] Canberra might seek to test Tokyo's appetite for greater force posture coordination by jointly wargaming potential conflict scenarios. The benefits of doing so are obvious. Put simply, better interoperability directly between U.S. allies not only assists the United States and Australia in aligning defense priorities in the event of future joint operational requirements, but also helps add credibility to collective deterrence efforts.

A related area where the United States and Australia can generate enhanced deterrence effects is via deepening cooperation among the so-called AP4 (Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand), within the context of its participation as a group with close ties to NATO. While it is unrealistic to assume that European NATO members will make significant military contributions to underpin stability in Asia, the AP4 is an important bridge in underscoring that the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific occupy a shared strategic space.[50] The Baltic states, Poland, Germany, and the UK in particular are increasingly attuned to the systemic challenge of an authoritarian China, alongside the more immediate threat of a revanchist, aggressive, and expansionist Russia. Indeed, NATO went as far as naming China an enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine at its July 2024 summit in Washington.[51] Moreover, in addition to increasing awareness of security challenges affecting both regions, the AP4 is a useful vehicle for cooperation. The recent announcement by New Zealand's prime minister, Chris Luxon, that Wellington will be much more vocal in identifying attempts by China to intervene in New Zealand's affairs was a welcome signal of evolving convergence in threat perceptions amongst AP4 members. This is especially the case since Luxon's comments came soon after a visit by Chinese Premier Li Qiang.[52]

A final way both allies can deepen their relationships to encourage positive effects in U.S.-Australia defense cooperation is by encouraging key partners in Southeast Asia to make contributions that facilitate shared defense objectives. Although it is probably accurate to describe ASEAN as mainly composed of states that wish to hedge on future strategic competition, one bilateral partnership stands out as a potential opportunity: Indonesia.

The imminent inauguration of President-elect Prabowo Subianto has fueled discussion about whether Canberra and Jakarta can evolve their relationship to bolster Indo-Pacific collective security. Indeed, the journal *Australian Foreign Affairs* recently devoted an entire issue to the question "Could Indonesia Ever be an Ally?"[53] Here, one view is that Canberra and Jakarta immediately need a military-security alliance. But it is more realistic—given Indonesia's ingrained tendency to eschew taking sides—to pursue what scholar Evan A. Laksmana calls a "friends with benefits" type of arrangement.[54]

This is borne out by recent announcements about an upgraded Australia-Indonesia security pact, which will facilitate broader military exercises but also respect Indonesian preferences to formally retain a nonaligned posture.[55] Developing agreements (even tacit agreements) involving future scenarios whereby Indonesia, and possibly Brunei as well, would permit transit and overflight by U.S. and Australian forces—and potentially even undertake supportive actions like providing for resupply—would be no small accomplishment. Indeed, it would be crucial to Australia's and the United States' ability to project power more comprehensively into areas of likely future tension, especially in the South China Sea.

Resilience

The third priority area we identify to facilitate U.S. and Australian effect-based strategy concerns resilience. Most of the opportunities in this arena involve initiatives or potential areas of advantage that can add value in a variety of different contexts: regional order-building, domain-specific innovations, and strengthening cooperation between like-minded states on specific military-security issues. As a result, while the suggestions made below should not be seen as independently decisive, they nonetheless contribute to particularly important effects. This is especially the case in relation to the information domain, pertaining to persistent situational awareness and critical infrastructure support. In addition, they also have the beneficial effect of giving more shape to integrated deterrence, operationalizing it in practice as a whole-of-government effort.

It is a simple reality that the Indo-Pacific is not as conducive to the type of deep institutional order that has helped underpin European security and strategic stability. It is composed of multiple subregions, each with their own histories (often turbulent ones), identities, levels of development, and types of political organization. It encompasses continental states, maritime states, and states with both land and sea borders. It is little wonder, then, that the political community in the Indo-Pacific has centered primarily on trade rather than security, and on principles of sovereign noninterference rather than integration.

Multilateralism moves at the pace of the slowest member and, absent the anchoring functions of institutions, states' interests tend to coincide rather than coalesce. Achieving effective security cooperation in the region is, therefore, much more likely to succeed if it is

minilateral in composition and issue-specific in scope. That said, there are several potential avenues that Australia and the United States might pursue. These could include, but are by no means limited to:

- Enhancing "spoke-to-spoke" cooperation between existing U.S. security allies. This not only deepens capacity amongst those nations most comfortable in partnering with Washington, but also enables them to explore cooperation without the United States as the common "hub."
- Deepening military-security cooperation in existing minilateral structures by expanding bilateral 2+2 ministerial dialogues with South Korea and Japan into an additional trilateral format.
- Moving toward a semiformal next tier of intelligence sharing with like-minded nations on specific issues where interests coincide, in "Five Eyes–plus" and "intelligence-plus" formats.[56]
- Exploring opportunities for cooperation on dual-use high-end technology sharing, especially in the AI space with advanced nations such as Singapore.
- Encouraging norms and rules around proper conduct in the maritime domain, space, and cyberspace.
- Encouraging norms and rules around the responsible use of CBRN technologies and access to critical minerals.
- Encouraging robust condemnation of rule-breaking (for instance, Russia's decision to supply North Korea with military technology) in international fora, as well as sanctions coalitions.

Conclusions

Three clear findings emerge from this analysis of U.S.-Australia defense alignment.

First, in seeking to better enmesh U.S. and Australian defense strategies, it must be acknowledged that their interests, threat perceptions, and capabilities, while closely aligned, are not identical. Hence, as a sovereign actor with agency over its choices, Australian support for future U.S.-led combat operations should not be automatically assumed.

Second, and with that caveat, a focus on desired effects represents a better way to conceive of U.S.-Australia defense alignment, rather than the temptation to embrace grand strategy.

Third, a focus on the three priority arenas identified above—resources, relationships, and resilience—adds significant clarity in identifying the enablers of shared U.S. and Australian defense objectives. They also help sharpen the types of opportunities that might facilitate broader regional military-security cooperation, thus enhancing both deterrence and supporting strategic stability.

CHAPTER 2

U.S.-Australia Alliance Force Posture, Policy, and Planning: Toward a More Deliberate Incrementalism

Stephan Frühling

In Article II of the Australia, New Zealand, and United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty—which is nearly identical to Article III of the founding document of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)[57]—Australia and the United States pledged that "in order more effectively to achieve the objective of this Treaty the Parties separately and jointly by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack."[58] Since 2020, Australia and the United States have announced a number of force posture initiatives that, at first glance, seem to increase the importance of the "collective" rather than "individual" elements of this pledge. Yet, in light of the low level of prior force posture cooperation, changes over the years since have been significant more for their novelty than for their overall effect on the U.S. force posture in the Indo-Pacific or Australia's national defense effort.

A confluence of factors has made Australia less reluctant to increase the scope for U.S. forces to operate in and from Australian territory, but there is no sign that this will bring U.S. and Australian national defense postures into closer alignment. Indeed, statements from the Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN)—between the U.S. secretaries of state and defense and Australian ministers for foreign affairs and defense—in 2023 and 2024 have actually dropped references to multilateral deterrence that had been included from 2020 to 2022. Australia's own reconsideration of its national force structure and posture in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR) and 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS) continues to conceive of Australian posture and defense strategy on purely national lines.

To maintain the momentum of practical cooperation since 2020, Australian and U.S. policymakers should seek pragmatic steps that evolve cooperation with, rather than against, the grain of Australia's current policy realities. In particular, they should focus on cooperation that reflects overlapping national interests in operations closer to Australia, and on strengthening deterrence by facilitating horizontal rather than vertical escalation.

The Legacy of History: Allies in Permanent Separation

The basis of the U.S.-Australia alliance is the ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1952 by the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. (U.S. commitments to New Zealand would later be suspended by the United States in 1986 over a nuclear dispute, so that for Australia the treaty is now the basis for two bilateral alliances.) In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the short-lived and ill-fated Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) temporarily complemented ANZUS, but the institutions it created were carefully limited to its own, separate treaty commitments and relationships. Instead, the 1952 Radford-Collins Agreement between the U.S. and Australian navies embodied an approach of minimal coordination, based on geographic division into different zones of responsibility[59]—rather than integration as in NATO (or the U.S.-South Korea alliance) or allocation of different roles in the same geographic area (as in the U.S.-Japan alliance). Politically, Australia's post-Vietnam War defense identity was closely linked to the concept of defense "self-reliance," which meant that Australia sought to be able to defend itself against regional threats (in particular, Indonesia) without having to rely on assistance from U.S. combat forces.[60]

This is not to say that the Australian and U.S. defense and intelligence communities did not develop close ties. Of particular importance are the Joint Facilities in Australia (including satellite and submarine communications) and joint military operations after the September 11, 2001, attacks in various conflicts across the Middle East. Australia and the United States continued to coordinate maritime surveillance in Southeast Asia, but since the end of the Vietnam War, the focus of their defense preparations lay on different threats in different parts of the Indo-Pacific area. They therefore never developed structures for, or even habits of, coordinating regional force posture (let alone force structure).

In 2012, a new era seemed to dawn as Australia and the United States embarked on the Force Posture Initiative (FPI), the centerpiece—and ostensibly only the first component—of which were rotational training deployments of U.S. marines to Australia's Northern Territory. However, the initiative is best understood as a political gesture of support for then U.S. president Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia," rather than a reassessment of Australia's own strategic policy and approach to the alliance. By emphasizing Australia's "full knowledge and concurrence" regarding U.S. operations on Australian territory, a 2012 statement to parliament placed FPI cooperation firmly into the context of the long-standing cooperation on the Joint Facilities.[61] Australia's subsequent 2013 Defence White Paper showed no significant reassessment of the role of the alliance or the U.S. presence in Australia's approach to regional security.[62]

Despite the perception of a close alliance, Australia and the United States must clear higher hurdles than in other alliances to embark on closer force posture integration. These include the lack of relevant policy legacy and traditions, Australian concerns about entrapment and sovereignty implications, the lack of a shared sense of threat and urgency (at least within the wider system of government in Canberra), and traditionally limited U.S. policy attention to the management of the Australian alliance.[63]

Not surprisingly, even though the allies had flagged further naval and air cooperation when announcing the FPI in 2012, little of substance eventuated beyond cooperation on new space surveillance radars in Northern Australia—and long negotiations on cost-sharing. When U.S. officials floated the possibility of deploying U.S. bombers in 2015—or new intermediate-range missiles in 2019—Australian ministers were quick to publicly squash such suggestions.[64] The conservative Liberal-National Coalition's 2016 Defence White Paper emphasized upholding *global* "rules-based order" as the central task for the Australian Defence Force (ADF), deliberately eschewing the traditional policy prioritization of developments in Australia's own region. In short, nothing about Australian defense policy in the years following the FPI in 2012 suggested that Australia and the United States had moved to a changed understanding of the nature of their alliance, a shared recognition of the threat coming from China, a greater sense of the joint military steps necessary to meet this threat, or more urgency in doing so.

Progress Since 2020: Cooperation Without Alignment

In 2019, the AUSMIN communiqué did not even mention deterrence, nor did it reference new developments on force posture cooperation.[65] This all changed in 2020, which emerged as a watershed year for greater progress on force posture cooperation as well as political commitment to multilateral deterrence. The allies announced work on a classified "Statement of Principles on Alliance Defense Cooperation and Force Posture Priorities in the Indo-Pacific," with the aim to "deter coercive acts and the use of force."[66] Initial signs of this increased cooperation included Australian-led contracts for infrastructure to host four tanker aircraft at its Tindal air base south of Darwin,[67] as well as U.S. investment in military fuel storage in the port of Darwin.[68] In 2021—in addition to the announcement of the Australia-UK-U.S. security agreement (AUKUS)—Australia and the United States also agreed to create "a combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise to support highend warfighting and combined military operations in the region."[69] A subsequent agreement in 2022 expanded the Australian air base at Tindal to enable it to host six B-52 bombers,[70] and both countries announced plans for further joint enhancement of Australian bases, fuel, and ordnance storage sites to enable operations by U.S. air and land forces.[71] In 2023, the allies announced that the United States would establish Submarine Rotational Force – West, with up to four Virginia-class submarines stationed in Perth from 2027 as part of AUKUS.[72] The same year, they also announced regular rotations of U.S. Army watercraft to Australia, the scoping of upgrades to Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Bases Curtin and Scherger, the

establishment of a guided weapons production and maintenance capability, plans to produce guided multiple launch rocket systems, and the maintenance, repair, overhaul, and upgrade of Mk-48 torpedoes and SM-2 missiles in Australia.[73]

Yet this seemingly rapid progress, at least compared to the period from 2012 to 2019, is not due to a fundamental reassessment of the alliance and how it relates to Australia's own defense policy, structure, and posture. Rather, it is best explained by the erosion of the political, policy, institutional, and international barriers and concerns that had led Australia to be reluctant to agree to greater cooperation in earlier years. One key development was Chinese economic and political coercion of Australia. This significantly shifted the public's perception of—and policy debate on—China as a threat to Australia, and undercut the argument that Australia's economic relationship with China would benefit from, or even require, political distance from the United States.[74] The 2020 Defence Strategic Update, produced by then prime minister Scott Morrison's government, provided greater focus—and a greater sense of urgency—on conflict with China in national defense policy settings, and it placed deterrence at the core of Australia's national defense discourse.[75] Since then, the Australian Department of Defence has been slowly developing institutional processes and expertise in assessing the implications of major war that might see U.S. forces operating from Australia. This is reinforced by the 2023 DSR, which recommended a so-called net assessment–based planning model and for the government to endorse defense planning scenarios. In Washington, AUKUS certainly increased the priority of Australia-related issues for busy Pentagon executives. And while Australia has always been sensitive to regional perceptions, the participation of Australian tanks transported from Darwin on a U.S. vessel to exercises in Indonesia,[76] as well as the first-ever visit of a U.S. B-52 bomber to Indonesia,[77] seem to signal Jakarta's growing comfort with increased U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation.

However, despite being more receptive to an increased U.S. presence in Australia, major defense policy statements by the governments of both Morrisson and his successor, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, have continued to place Australian security in a local context. Australia's own concept of security is based on self-reliant operations for local "deterrence by denial" and its own defense, rather than to ensure the success of multilateral deterrence.[78] Seemingly major new capability decisions do not fundamentally change this predominantly local outlook. Despite the political significance of the AUKUS partnership, the practical reality is that shifting to nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) will mostly preserve Australia's ability to operate the same way it always has with its fleet of conventionally powered submarines in more benign times. Hence, it represents continuity rather than change in Australia's naval ambitions.[79] And while the acquisition or deployment of Tomahawk (or other long-range) missiles is of strategic significance in Europe, Japan, and South Korea, because it opens new escalation options against an adversary's homelands, the same is not true for Australia. There, the decision to acquire these systems is part of a broader realization that the ADF's guided missile arsenal was—in range and capability—inadequate for the geographic expanses of Australia's northern approaches.

The 2023 DSR and 2024 NDS are important reality checks on Australia's ambitions for—and, indeed, the limited importance of—force posture integration in Australia's national policy. Both place the concept of "denial" in the country's northern approaches at the core of Australian defense planning. In many ways, this is an updated and more proactive version of Australia's posture in its seminal 1987 Defence White Paper.[80] In conjunction with its increased willingness to host U.S. long-range air and submarine forces, as well as U.S. Army watercraft, Australia's national-level force structure and posture development could be seen as complementary to that of the United States—an Australian version of the old U.S.-Japan "shield and sword" division of labor.[81]

Yet neither the 2023 DSR nor the 2024 NDS describes the intent or direction of Australia's defense policy in this way. Instead, the (rather vague) concept of deterrence is linked to the (equally vague) concept of denial,[82] and neither discusses it in meaningful ways as part of multilateral- or alliance-level deterrence of conflict in the wider Indo-Pacific. That Australia would work with "the US and other key partners to make a credible contribution to a favourable regional strategic balance" and that it would "[deepen] defence engagement to enhance and maintain the capability to make greater contributions to collective deterrence" is all the 2024 NDS has to offer on that matter.[83] Indeed, where the NDS actually specifies the basic security threat to Australia, it consistently refers to "strategic competition" between the United States and China,[84] rather than a possible Chinese effort to deter or defeat the United States and its allies in an attempt to establish regional hegemony. And in a return to language similar to that used before 2020, the 2023 and 2024 AUSMIN communiqués announced additional practical force posture cooperation without making a link between that cooperation and deterrence or countering coercion.[85]

It is not surprising, then, that neither the 2023 DSR nor the 2024 NDS reference alliance "roles and missions" as something that should be taken into account in Australian defense planning. Remarkably, Australian strategic guidance today thus has less to say on how possible commitments to broader Indo-Pacific security should factor into Australian force structure and posture than, for example, the 2000 Defence White Paper, which laid out broad guidance on how forces should be designed to meet Australian strategic interests through coalition operations in the South West Pacific, Southeast Asia, and globally.[86] Of course, that approach reflected a time when Australia could think of contributions to regional conflicts as a contingency quite separate from the defense of its own territory. And there may well be U.S.-Australia agreements on cooperation that still remain classified. But neither caveat changes the fact that the vast majority of Australian staff officers, defense planners, and public servants—who must make myriad practical decisions that collectively shape Australian force posture and structure outcomes—do so with less of an explicit policy framework on how Australia's national objectives align with alliance cooperation than their predecessors had two decades ago.

Despite the awakening of Australian defense policy to the possibility of major war with China,[87] Australia's own policy does not articulate a strategic concept for force posture cooperation, let alone a shared concept for escalation or the management of escalation stemming from the role of U.S. long-range forces operating out of Australia.[88] Of note, the practical progress in recent years was almost contained to areas where Australia's interests for its own local defense overlapped with U.S. interests in long-range operations. The need to develop runways and fuel and armament storage at Australia's northern bases, for example, has been long recognized in Australian policy.[89] The increased training and industrial opportunities that come from hosting U.S. SSNs in Australia are key elements in the so-called optimal pathway for Australia's acquisition of its own SSNs. The reorganization of Australia's army for littoral operations in the South Pacific aligns its own practical challenges more closely with those of the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army in the Indo-Pacific.[90] And the importance of Australia creating armaments production capabilities that are less reliant on overseas supply mirrors U.S. interests in broadening and expanding production capacities globally.

Hence, while the U.S.-Australia alliance may be drifting toward closer force posture cooperation, it remains adrift insofar as practical cooperation is driven by largely coincidental overlap of national interests, rather than by a shared understanding of the practical needs for deterrence and escalation management—let alone a joint concept for major war. Indeed, progress may already be slowing. And increased force posture cooperation has not been seriously tested by the need to manage either a regional crisis or a political crisis—such as a radically changed approach to the region or to allied burden-sharing if former president Donald Trump returns to the White House—that may well arise, if not between the allies then in terms of domestic Australian politics.

Toward a More Deliberate Model of Incrementalism

The manner of practical cooperation in every alliance reflects its history and allies' strategic cultures and traditions. NATO collaboration grew over time among allies that deliberately defined themselves as a political-military community. Cooperation in the U.S.-Japan alliance reflects Tokyo's strong legalistic approach to practical cooperation. And the U.S.–South Korea alliance is still trying to shed the last vestiges of an era when Seoul was almost without any say in its own defense. In comparison, the U.S.-Australia alliance is largely a blank slate. The United States and Australia are unlikely to ever hold an equivalent to a NATO summit, where, at least every few years, decisions are made on strategy, force posture, and structure that can deliberately reshape the political and practical direction of alliance cooperation.[91]

Indeed, unlike NATO or the U.S-Japan alliance, Australia and the United States never refer to their joint decisions or posture as being of "the Alliance."[92] The idea that the U.S.-Australia alliance might express a collective identity or community committed to joint action—and, hence, one that should developed shared strategic concepts, plans, and understandings as a basis for closer integration—remains alien to Canberra's approach to

cooperation with Washington. Instead, Australia's political and strategic culture has created a narrative on local defense self-reliance, and the evolution of alliance cooperation on the Joint Facilities toward full knowledge and concurrence between nominally equal partners—as part of the country's long maturation from a colony into an independent nation.

Unfortunately, however, alliance cooperation driven by bottom-up, practical cooperation has a tendency to overstep political bounds, leading to tensions if such boundaries are then reestablished. For example, after U.S. bombers returned to the UK in 1946, difficult negotiations regarding U.S. operations from the UK were a sore point in U.S.-UK relations throughout the 1950s.[93] Norwegian intelligence's cooperation with the CIA on the ill-fated U-2 flight of Gary Powers in 1960 reinforced the Norwegian government's determination to impose stricter political control on the activities of U.S. forces from Norway.[94] And in 2013, the frigate HMAS *Sydney* was temporarily embedded in the U.S. Seventh Fleet[95]—a decision that, according to Canberra lore, was initiated by both navies and blindsided Canberra policymakers. Joint naval patrols or operations in the region, despite their shared interest in maintaining a national regional presence, have remained a notable gap in U.S.-Australia cooperation ever since. More recently, scholar Ashley Townshend observed that the extent of practical cooperation between the RAAF and visiting U.S. bomber task forces may well already outpace the political intent behind incremental steps that officials agreed to.[96]

If Australia and the United States are to avoid a similar crisis and maintain the limited momentum since 2020, they need to find a politically feasible framework to progress and guide the deepening of their force posture cooperation. Discussions of "roles and missions" run against the grain of Australia's own national guidance and defense policy identity. And seeking to develop joint strategy and agreed-upon plans for top-down guidance of practical cooperation, based on a politically difficult presumption of joint action, would likely bring to the fore political ambiguity about Australia's integration with preparations for U.S. vertical escalation.

Instead, both allies should consider practical cooperation in areas that reflect Australia's preparations for major war in its immediate neighborhood; that support multilateral deterrence by facilitating politically palatable horizontal, rather than vertical, escalation; and that help move force posture cooperation from enabling U.S. activities on Australian territory toward greater overall alignment of both countries' defense preparations. With this in mind, both allies should consider the following five directions to provide greater focus, purpose, and direction to force posture and structure cooperation.

Try to Say a Little More Each Time

The United States and its Indo-Pacific allies have been grappling with how to best balance a rising China for years. Recently, they have often embraced the buzzy concept of integrated deterrence. Yet they have not coalesced on a shared concept of deterrence and escalation that would direct how they think about the coherence and complementarity of their respective

national force structure and posture developments. Australia and the United States first started to draw an explicit link between multilateral deterrence and their force posture initiatives in the AUSMIN communiqué of 2020, but they subsequently dropped that reference in 2023 and 2024. Despite the seemingly ever-increasing length of these communiqués, they continue to contain little that would indicate a shared understanding, or even a sustained conversation, about the foundations of strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Such understandings do not arise easily. There is little appetite in Canberra to embark on the development of a document akin to NATO's Strategic Concept or the U.S.-Japan defense guidelines, which would only serve to foreground fundamental disagreements, both between the allies and within Canberra itself, on deterrence and alliance strategy. But one way for both allies to work toward narrowing differences and identifying shared tenets is by aiming to say a little more each time their ministers meet at their regular summits. Over time, restating the enduring principles that relate to deterrence and strategic stability can establish a canon on which future work and practical implementation can be based. NATO, for example, has developed a set of longstanding statements about the nuclear aspects of its deterrence. "The strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance" dates to the Cold War; "Missile defence can complement the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence; it cannot substitute them" dates to the 2012 *Defence and Deterrence Posture Review*; and that UK and French nuclear forces contribute to deterrence through "separate centres of decision-making . . . by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries" dates to the Ottawa Summit of 1974. All of these principles are again included verbatim in NATO's 2023 communiqué following the summit in Vilnius.[97]

For the United States and Australia, such an approach should focus on issues that both allies can agree on, that avoid traditionally sensitive questions (such as the geographic scope of the ANZUS treaty commitment), and that provide more explicit strategic rationale for ongoing cooperation. For example, a general statement such as "The ability of U.S. forces to reinforce the western Pacific is an important element of crisis management, strategic stability, and allied security" might be seen as stating the obvious, but it would be a useful opportunity to engage political decisionmakers and the Australian public on the strategic benefit of force posture cooperation. Given that Australian governments have, for many years, acknowledged the importance of U.S. extended deterrence in deterring nuclear attacks on Australia, the allies might consider regular statements such as "As long as nuclear weapons exist, U.S. nuclear forces remain an important element of strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific." This would provide a basis for both public and policy discussions on Australia's possible role, without prejudging that there should be any role at all beyond the operation of Joint Facilities.[98] And though Australian defense policy statements have been largely silent on the limits of self-reliance, a statement such as "While Australia's self-reliant defense posture is an important contribution to allied burden-sharing, possible adversaries should not doubt U.S. ability and willingness to support its allies' defense" would mirror language used by Australia in the past,[99] while opening up the policy space for discussions of closer U.S.-Australia operational cooperation on continental defense.

Focus on Overlapping Operational Needs and Challenges

Although Australia's defense policy as laid out in the DSR and NDS is largely silent on how it relates to U.S. military strategy in the Indo-Pacific, an ADF that is prepared to defend Australia is broadly consistent with U.S. aims. Australia's main value to the United States in case of a major war is as a secure base area for long-range operations into Southeast Asia and southern China.[100] But Australia is hardly the only U.S. ally where the question of practically and politically balancing local defense with supporting offensive operations against a possible adversary's territory is extremely challenging policy waters to navigate.[101]

While the agreement to prepare hardstands for U.S. B-52 bombers at RAAF Base Tindal attracted relatively little political attention in Australia, that is likely because AUKUS has become the focal point for public debate over alliance cooperation instead. In contrast, joint approaches to developing basic infrastructure at Australia's chain of so-called bare bases in its remote North or the combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise are less likely to run into political challenges. These plans are consistent with what Australia has identified as operational priorities for the defense of Australia itself—and Australian policy never interpreted defense self-reliance to mean strategic autonomy. That said, it is notable that the 2024 NDS does not include a statement on Australia's aim to defend itself without relying on U.S. combat forces, which existed in varying formulations in all Defence White Papers from 1976 to 2013.[102] In reality, the ADF is almost certainly too small for the likely demands of defending the continent, even against the limited air, maritime, or special forces threats that China might project from the South China Sea or possible future regional bases against the Australian homeland and vital shipping routes.[103]

With the presence of Chinese SSNs in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the threat of cruise missiles and to shipping extends all around the Australian coastline, including the major population centers and defense facilities in the southeast and in Canberra. These are difficult and uncomfortable challenges for Australia, but would be a useful focal point for discussions on how to better align U.S. and Australian force posture for major conflict. This is not to say that Washington could, would, or should directly make up for inadequacies in yet another ally's defense preparations. But the United States has a lot to benefit from Australia realizing and addressing its limitations, and it has relevant experience that could be helpful.

The defense of the U.S. West Coast and Australia's east and southeast present very similar challenges in terms of their geographic distance from adversary bases but increasing vulnerability to cruise missiles launched from SSNs or long-range bombers. While Australia is a similar size to the continental United States, the RAAF's roughly one hundred fast jets lacks the home-defense squadrons that the United States maintains through its National Guard.[104] Australia's planned six NASAMS fire units will likely not just be inadequate for the number of facilities that need protection,[105] but also are ostensibly being acquired to defend forward-based land forces rather than, for example, irreplaceable submarine and naval bases in Sydney and Perth. Joint examination of these issues, including drawing on the

analytical work that underpins the U.S. homeland cruise missile defense program,[106] could identify additional specific investments or preparations that would benefit both sides' wider operational objectives.

A second focal point arises from the decision to create a combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise, though which Australia and the United States have already taken the first steps toward the development of a wartime host nation support (WHNS) model for the alliance. The practical implementation of WHNS often reflects the broader characteristics of the respective alliance. NATO integration, for example, led to the creation of German logistics units equipped to service American equipment to support the flow of U.S. reinforcements to West Germany during the Cold War;[107] WHNS in South Korea to this day includes the Korean Service Corps, a U.S. Army logistics battalion staffed with personnel of locally recruited South Korean nationals.[108] Australia may balk at the suggestion of creating units to serve other countries' forces, but both countries should consider the operational and political benefits. Such an arrangement may also help with public support, insofar as it would give Canberra both direct and indirect influence on the operation of U.S. forces from Australia. Public consultation in Australia certainly suggests that there is significant support for closer integration within the alliance, if concerns about Australian sovereignty are clearly addressed.[109]

Third, the United States and Australia should also examine the overlap of their respective strategic and operational objectives in the South Pacific. For Australia, preparing for littoral warfare in the islands to its northeast has become a central focus since the 2023 DSR. In a departure from its previous emphasis on stabilization operations, Australian policy now reflects the need to deal with the possibility of a Chinese military presence or projection into its immediate neighborhood—concerns that were heightened by the close relationship between China and Vanuatu under former prime minister Manasseh Sogavare.[110] Direct confrontation between Australia and China in the region could arise from a range of scenarios short of major war, such as Chinese gray-zone challenges to Australian forces supporting Pacific fisheries protection. Ethnic Chinese communities in the region have repeatedly been targeted when law and order broke down (for example, in the Solomon Islands in 2006,[111] 2019,[112] and 202[113]), where the future deployment of Australian and other regional police and military forces in support of local authorities could raise the specter of a competing intervention by the People's Liberation Army.

In major war, the southwest Pacific is significant for its geographic position along key sea lines of communication that would support the U.S. war effort, notably the lines between Hawaii and Townsville (where the great circle route passes through the Solomon Islands) and Townsville to Manus (and on to Guam or Palau), which passes east of the Papua New Guinea mainland. As in World War II, North Queensland would likely become the key staging area for U.S. operations from Australia, which is reflected in plans to move the combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise from its initial location in Victoria to a future "Logistics Support Area" in Queensland.[114]

U.S. convoys passing through the southwest Pacific would need protection against overt and covert Chinese lodgments in the islands. Australia would have an interest in playing a major role in this, not least because U.S. rules of engagement may well be more tolerant of collateral damage to South Pacific nations and their local shipping than Australia would be comfortable with. Hence, examining the relationship between U.S. plans and concepts for strategic sea transport and force protection and Australia's increased focus on littoral operations in the same region would be a worthwhile area for joint planning and force posture cooperation. As convoys would also require protection against Chinese SSNs further into the central Pacific, there is scope for including New Zealand and France in broader discussions as well.

Facilitate Europe's Participation in Multilateral Deterrence

New Zealand and France, however, are just some of the third partners that are relevant to the broader deterrence aims of U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation. At the 2022 AUSMIN summit, Australia and the United States invited Japan to participate in aspects of their force posture cooperation.[115] But while this was politically significant toward cementing the trilateral Australia-U.S.-Japan relationship, operating from Australia is realistically more relevant to Japan for training opportunities than in actual contingencies.

European countries, on the other hand, are also growing more concerned about the implications of the Indo-Pacific on their own security, and increasingly willing to signal this through regional deployments. In 2024, European Air Transport Command, which coordinates strategic lift and tanker assets across most European Union (EU) member states, supported the concurrent deployment of fifty European fighter aircraft and helicopters to exercises across the Indo-Pacific.[116] Notably, aircraft from Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and the UK, as well as the Italian aircraft carrier *Cavour*, participated in the 2024 iteration of Exercise Pitch Black in Darwin.[117] While Europe's military significance in the Indo-Pacific remains limited, it has potential to contribute to multilateral deterrence through its economic importance to China—and increasingly through the revival of its defense industrial base, which would be of particular consequence in a protracted conflict.

While the strategic significance of U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation is often seen primarily though the extent to which it supports deterrence through possible vertical escalation, there are also important benefits from supporting threats of horizontal escalation. European countries signaling their concerns through deployments to the Indo-Pacific is valuable to the United States, Australia, and regional stability more broadly, as it makes Beijing less likely to assume that it could limit the economic costs of precipitating a crisis or that it could politically isolate the United States from its allies to the point where they might withhold practical support through access to their defense industry or by backfilling other U.S. commitments. In a context where Australia's government may be inclined toward

caution and limited commitment, being part of a broader international coalition signaling its concern about possible Chinese aggression could ease the way for Canberra to action bilateral U.S.-Australia cooperation.

The signaling value of European deployments would thus be of greatest value in an actual crisis, which would arise at short notice if China made visible preparations for a major operation against Taiwan.[118] There are, however, not many destinations to which European nations could send forces in such a crisis to signal their concern. In political terms, they would likely seek control over the decision to becoming actively engaged; in practical terms, ramp space in Japan, Hawaii, or Guam would mostly be taken by U.S. forces. Politically and operationally, Australia is thus a highly plausible and mutually beneficial destination for such deployments. In a crisis situation, European deployments would help shore up Australia's own commitment, complicate Chinese calculations, and—if it came to war—even relatively small numbers of European fighter aircraft could contribute to the defense of northern Australia.

To date, European naval and air deployments to the Indo-Pacific have typically been planned long in advance, and conducted with numerous engagement stops along the way. In a crisis, the creation of an air tanker bridge between Europe and Australia that relies solely on European, Australian, and U.S. air bases and tanker aircraft would be important for the rapid movement of not just European but also European-based U.S. fighter and strategic transport aircraft into the Indo-Pacific. As a first step toward leveraging their own cooperation to further broaden multilateral deterrence, the United States and Australia should engage their EU partners (as represented in the European Air Transport Command) and the UK to test the implementation of such a transcontinental air bridge, possibly as part of the next iteration of Exercise Pitch Black.

Consider the Benefits of UK Involvement in Force Posture Cooperation

Given its role as a major European military power, its national commitments in the region (including the Five Power Defence Arrangements between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK), and its air bases (especially in Cyprus and Diego Garcia), the UK would be a key partner in leveraging U.S.-Australia cooperation into broader coordination with like-minded European countries. But through its involvement in Submarine Rotational Force – West as part of AUKUS, the UK is also already a direct part of U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation. Australia and the United States should thus consider the broader benefits of involving the UK as a partner with unique contributions to offer.

One, often underappreciated, benefit of including the UK in AUKUS is that it has significant experience with the creation of multinational integrated military capability, including the kind of mixed crewing envisaged as part of the AUKUS optimal pathway. Such experience does not always transfer easily within the U.S. military and policy system and its relatively separate Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific policy communities. But it would

be especially useful to Australia, given its own limited experience with force integration in peacetime. In particular, this includes U.S.-UK carrier integration[119] through which British pilots have operated off U.S. carriers and U.S. Marine Corps F-35s have been integrated with HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to enable the UK to retain essential capabilities after it decommissioned old carriers[120]—as well as multinational formations including NATO's Standing Naval Forces and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force.

While British deployments to Australia in a crisis would be much smaller than those from the United States, involving the UK in, for example, discussions about the combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise would enable deeper consideration of how to support and facilitate the deployment of other countries' forces. From a purely Australian perspective, a greater understanding of the UK's decades-long and seemingly quite complex experience with U.S. nuclear and conventional bombers operating from its territory would also be useful in developing political and policy mechanisms to facilitate such deployments in Australia. Off the record, senior UK officials have described arrangements that give the UK a right of veto over U.S. operations from British bases.[121] The UK did, for example, impose conditions on U.S. operations from British bases during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which led the United States to eschew their use.[122] But while former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher is quoted as saying that "under the Churchill-Truman arrangements, there are no circumstances in which American aircraft based in this country may be used without our consent in military operations planned by the United States," declassified records do not show any U.S. agreement to binding limits on the use of UK bases for nuclear operations in wartime.[123]

Develop Graduated Response Plans for the Alliance

Since the time of SEATO, which is now beyond living memory, Australia and the United States have had no experience of developing politically endorsed, alliance-level operational plans for future contingencies. While it is perhaps natural for academic and policy debates to gravitate toward the highest level of escalation—including what role U.S. long-range air strikes from Australia against the Chinese mainland may play at the conventional-nuclear threshold[124]—that is not a politically useful starting point to commence such planning in practice. Instead, Australia and the United States should examine the example of NATO's graduated response plans (GRPs) as a model for deepening joint planning in the alliance.

The GRPs were created after Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. Before that point, there had been no political consensus in NATO on the need for operational plans to reinforce allies on the Eastern flank.[125] In 2014, NATO agreed on the need to plan for the reinforcement of allies—up to the point where hostilities commenced, as there was not yet political agreement on alliance strategy during such a conflict.[126] The GRPs identified what reinforcements might be necessary given the geographic and strategic situations in different parts of the alliance, the logistics of how they could be deployed, the political and military decision points and their timing, and what authorities alliance commanders should assume

over national forces as a crisis progressed.[127] Political consensus on the need for actual defense plans only arose after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022,[128] but the GRPs enabled NATO to quickly activate tens of thousands of personnel to support its eastern member states.

The development of a U.S.-Australia GRP would thus sidestep politically difficult questions about the overall aims and conduct of a conflict with China, and instead address a whole host of practical questions that would arise well in advance of the outbreak of war. For a start, the development of joint operational plans at the alliance level, in the absence of standing alliance commands, would itself be useful to develop political-military mechanisms in the alliance. By identifying decision points and their operational and political significance, the development of the GRP would help address concerns that closer alliance cooperation would be incompatible with the ability of Australia to make sovereign decisions in a crisis. And the development of the plans would help surface differences or draw attention to issues that would be most inconvenient to first face in an actual crisis. These questions include: What first-mover advantage might there be for deploying forces in a littoral context? What would be the role of and what would happen to forward deployed forces—for example, in the South China Sea—as a crisis develops? When and where should allied submarines surge deployments closer to the conflict zone? Would there be a need to reinforce the Christmas and Cocos Islands, which currently do not have a permanent garrison? At what point might the allies consider deploying naval mines before the outbreak of hostilities? What is the signaling value of deploying U.S. long-range bombers? And does it matter whether these bombers would be nuclear capable or not (a question of interpretation that does not seem to have a clear answer in current U.S. policy or practice)?

By developing the GRP, Australia and the United States would also have to address how their national command-and-control (C2) arrangements would relate to each other. So far, public discussion has mostly focused on the extent to which RAAF assets would be used to support the ingress and egress of U.S. long-range bombers to and from Australia in the context of major war. The example of Norway during the Cold War, however, demonstrates that C2 at the intersection of major strategic commands can also raise very significant challenges in a naval context. These included reconciling the U.S. Marine Corps' geographically expansive doctrinal approach to providing organic air defense for its reinforcements to northern Norway with local air defense arrangements, and the risk of naval forces straying into coastal defense zones under a different local command.[129] Similar challenges would likely arise as U.S. convoys passed through Australian land and naval deployment zones in the southwest Pacific, where even Australia's own national plans for joint C2 during such operations remain murky at best.

The GRP should be politically endorsed by both allies and facilitated by table-top exercises with actual decisionmakers, which, in turn, would help improve their understanding of the operational and strategic demands of common deterrence and defense. This could build on the political endorsement of ADF planning scenarios introduced in the 2023 DSR. Major exercises—Talisman Sabre in particular—should then start to reflect key elements of the

GRP to demonstrate and test the allies' willingness and ability to implement them,[130] even if later stages of the exercises may still reflect more politically fictitious (and, hence, palatable) scenarios of actual conflict.

Conclusion

Despite the progress made since 2020, U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation remains limited by the lack of alliance institutionalization and political agreement, especially domestically in Australia, on its aims and objectives. This is not helped by the fact that the deployment to Australia of U.S. long-range naval and air strike forces tends to draw attention to thorny questions of vertical escalation as part of that cooperation. But at a more fundamental level, Australian willingness to participate in these activities is itself a form of deterrence by horizontal escalation, which is more politically palatable and relevant for Australia's contribution to multilateral deterrence.

In the next phase of U.S.-Australia force posture cooperation, success should not just be measured by increased U.S. activity in Australia. Rather, it should be judged by whether it leads to greater complementarity between U.S. and Australian force postures and structures in general, and the extent to which it facilitates the contribution by third countries, especially in Europe, to multilateral deterrence. Although the 2023 DSR and 2024 NDS had little to say on the alliance's implications for Australia's national defense effort, the new direction they set for the ADF has widened the door for greater alignment between both allies' defense preparations. The United States and Australia should grasp this opportunity for the next phase of their force posture cooperation.

CHAPTER 3

Innovative Alliance: U.S.-Australian Defense Science and Technology Cooperation for a Dangerous Decade

Jennifer Jackett

Introduction

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) rapid military modernization and fielding of next-generation systems could challenge the preeminence of the United States and its allies, like Australia, in the Indo-Pacific. Maintaining an edge in defense science and technology is one part of the U.S. and Australian strategy to develop capabilities that could contribute to deterrence or increase the likelihood of victory in war. The integration of advanced technologies into military capabilities, decisionmaking, and operating concepts could provide qualitative or asymmetric advantages. For example, developments in fields like artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomy could result in battlefield applications of human-machine teaming that are cost-effective and improve decisionmaking and survivability.

Innovation alone is insufficient. The speed and scale of innovation and adoption matter most in the rapidly shifting geopolitical and technological landscape. The United States and Australia are attempting to reform their defense innovation systems to deliver outcomes in months, not years. The United States, especially, is experimenting with research, development, testing, and evaluation (RDT&E) to harness commercial innovation. Together, the United States and Australia are pursuing innovation activities through the AUKUS strategic partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Progress is being made on hard issues, like defense trade controls, but implementation hurdles remain. Australia's tech sector and defense industry are small but growing, although the cultural change needed to open collaboration between government and industry is still a work in progress.

This paper outlines the strategic imperative for allied technology leadership, discusses recent national and cooperative innovation initiatives, and identifies opportunities for progress. The paper argues that resource constraints and nearer-term strategic risk demand an even closer-knit approach to collaboration between strategists, war fighters, innovators, and investors from the United States and Australia to foster technology development and to make better use of capabilities that already exist. The longer-term risks of the PRC's growing military capabilities and hostile intent also necessitate a sustainable boost to technology and industry capacity in both countries.

Recommendations

The U.S. and Australian defense departments should:

1. **Establish a rapid commercial and dual-use technology acquisition cell between U.S. and Australian defense contracting organizations.**

   A cadre of contracting officers should meet annually to discuss contracting strategies for nontraditional commercial technology providers. The cell should share lessons in acquisition, including from the U.S. Immersive Commercial Acquisition Program, to better support nontraditional providers to cooperate in each other's defense activities in a time frame relevant to current and future strategic risks.

2. **Establish a Future Warfare Strategy Team involving strategists, war fighters, technologists, researchers, innovators, and investors.**

   The team would meet biannually to explore possible operational responses to different Indo-Pacific contingencies (without preempting political decisions), like a Taiwan blockade or invasion, a Korean peninsula crisis, or an escalation in maritime coercion against the Philippines. The team would explore how existing capabilities might be used to achieve different military effects, identify ethical and safety issues around deploying new technologies, and select operational problems that could guide future technology acceleration activities. The activity would help companies, especially smaller and medium sized enterprises and researchers, as well as investors, better understand defense problems, and help defense organizations understand areas of technology opportunity.

3. **Mobilize a group of venture capitalists from the United States and Australia to independently scope a new dual-use technology fund in Australia.**

   U.S. and Australian defense departments should seek interest from venture capital firms and family offices to establish a new dual-use technology fund in Australia. The fund should be able to access low-cost, long-term financing options from both governments, modelled on programs like the U.S. Small Business Investment

Company Critical Technologies Initiative, to help leverage investment. A new fund could help diversify financing options for defense and dual-use technology startups in areas like quantum science, advanced materials and biotechnology.

4. **Strengthen defense industry threat intelligence sharing among U.S. and Australian defense, intelligence, and law enforcement organizations.**

   The group would meet biannually to share threat intelligence and policy responses to espionage and technology transfer activities targeting U.S. and Australian defense research and industry. The group would support best practice research and industry security and help strengthen confidence between the United States and Australia regarding the protection of sensitive defense technologies.

5. **Accelerate planned cooperation between the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) and the Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator (ASCA).**

   Both governments should set up exchange positions by early 2025 to facilitate an additional pathway for engagement between governments, investors, and innovators to break down historical, bureaucratic, cultural, and technical barriers to bilateral Australia-U.S. defense collaboration. Their activities should complement and be deconflicted with defense trade facilitation organizations in each country.

Strategic Imperatives for an Innovative Alliance

Geopolitical Headwinds

The United States and Australia confront a dangerous and unpredictable geopolitical environment. The United States sees the PRC's technological, military, and economic rise as its "pacing challenge."[131] Australia has now concluded that it has lost its ten-year warning time for major conflict.[132] Beyond the PRC, other drivers of instability include Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war, and long-standing flashpoints like the Korean peninsula. The United States' and Australia's recalibration of their diplomatic relationships with the PRC has largely improved the tactics and optics of engagement rather than underlying prospects of cooperation. PRC capability and intentions remain inimical to U.S. and Australian interests in a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The PRC has shown its willingness to exploit economic interdependence for strategic gain. The PRC continues to entice, intimidate, and coerce third countries to act in line with its preferences, including in the South China Sea, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

Risks that the PRC might move to reunify the democratic island of Taiwan with mainland China through force, blockade, or other means, persist. In 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping's report to the Twentieth Party Congress stated that "Taiwan is China's Taiwan. . . .

We will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary."[133] Some senior U.S. officials have warned that the PRC may be ready to try to invade Taiwan around 2027, which falls within "the period of greatest peril for a failure of deterrence,"[134] when retirement of U.S. platforms will coincide with advances in the Chinese People's Liberation Army's counter-intervention capabilities. Successfully preserving the status quo across the Taiwan Strait will involve both reassurance and deterrence, including the United States maintaining an edge across military platforms, supported by a strong enough defense industrial ecosystem to make the PRC doubt whether military action would succeed and could be sustained.[135]

The Changing Technology Order

The pace, scale, and intersection of advances in hardware and software is improving the speed, range, lethality, and cost-effectiveness of military systems. Advanced AI-enabled software can now analyze large amounts of data quickly to support decision advantage.[136] Quantum-enabled positioning, navigating, and timing solutions are being developed for environments where global positioning systems are unavailable.[137] Unmanned AI-enabled systems like the Boeing Australia Ghost Bat combat aerial vehicle have been developed to support and protect manned platforms. The proliferation of expendable unmanned systems in Ukraine is transforming the battlefield. New or concealed capabilities could support military surprise against or by adversaries, which may also add to miscalculation and escalation risks, especially where AI-enabled systems are deployed in the nuclear domain.[138] With adversaries studying and seeking to overcome U.S. and allied advantages, the contest for a military technological edge is constant and long-term.

The evolving technological landscape is reshaping the global power balance, with the United States and its allies like Australia facing a relative decline in their competitiveness vis-à-vis the PRC. The U.S. National Science Board assessed in March 2024 that the PRC had surpassed the United States in producing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) talent, research publications, patents, and knowledge- and technology-intensive manufacturing.[139] In June 2024, *The Economist* also concluded that the PRC was already "a leading scientific power" in areas like chemistry, physics, and materials science.[140] Research by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute similarly shows that the PRC now leads high-impact scientific research in fifty-seven out of sixty-four critical technology areas, including AUKUS-relevant areas like hypersonics, electronic warfare, and undersea capabilities.[141] The Center for Security and Emerging Technology projects that the PRC will have nearly twice as many STEM PhD graduates as the United States by 2025.[142] The PRC continues to attract major research and development investments from foreign firms like Volkswagen, Apple, and AstraZeneca because of the country's talent pool, lower wages, and strong work ethic.[143]

Nevertheless, the PRC faces broader challenges in its innovation ecosystem due to interventionist policy, inefficiency, waste, and stringent data and intellectual property rules, alongside wider economic problems. The United States remains the largest spender on

research and development (R&D), with public and private spending totaling $806 billion compared to the PRC's $668 billion in 2021. Restrictions on access to foreign technology appear to have had some success in throwing sand in the gears of PRC firms and slowing high-tech production in areas like advanced semiconductor chips.[144] The United States' planned rules to limit U.S. capital flows into Chinese high-tech companies could further impact the growth of Chinese AI, semiconductor, and other companies. Nevertheless, the PRC's political will, talent pipeline, industrial capacity, and university and commercial sectors mean that it is still likely a question of when, not if, the PRC becomes a leading science and technology power.[145]

Industrial Capacity Pressures

Both the United States and Australia face constraints in their defense industrial bases, creating a potential mismatch between their strategic defense objectives and their capability and capacity to meet current and future needs. The manufacturing base is important for stockpiling and pre-positioning, as well as replenishing materiel and surging production in the event of war, especially if it is protracted.[146] Successive U.S. administrations have recognized the need for a greater industrial capacity, including in both former president Donald Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy and current President Joe Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy. Ukraine's need for materiel to defend itself against Russia and U.S. arms support to Israel have provided recent impetus for accelerating defense industrial production amid pressures on military inventories.

Despite growing production rates, experts assess current U.S. production capacity as more suitable for peacetime than intensifying strategic competition.[147] There is a risk of "empty bins," or inadequate quantities of materiel like munitions in the event of a conflict.[148] A war game by the Center for Strategic and International Studies that simulated a U.S. response to a PRC invasion of Taiwan showed high munitions use by U.S. forces, especially of long-range precision missiles.[149] In three to four weeks of expected conflict, the U.S. global inventory of long-range anti-ship missiles was exhausted in the first few days of a conflict, with joint air-to-surface standoff missile inventories sufficient until the third or fourth week. Current demands on industrial capacity, in addition to future needs, have created a generational opportunity for defense industrial transformation.[150]

U.S. Efforts for Innovation at Speed and Scale

In a challenging global climate, innovation is seen by U.S. leaders as an enduring source of U.S. military advantage.[151] However, it is no longer enough to be at the forefront of innovation. The United States recognizes it needs to more quickly innovate and adopt technology at scale to maintain its historic advantages over potential adversaries. The U.S. Department of Defense, White House, and Congress have pursued wide-ranging strategy, policy, infrastructure, workforce, and industrial base initiatives. These are supported by large RDT&E

budgets, which make up around 17 percent of the overall defense budget (compared with under 5 percent in Australia). For FY 2025, Biden requested $143.2 billion for RDT&E (about four times Australia's entire annual defense budget for 2024–2025), and the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations approved even more than the requested amount to provide the Department of Defense with $145.1 billion.[152]

Private Sector Innovation and Capital

The United States has sought to leverage its dynamic, venture capital–powered innovation ecosystem to spur development of commercial and dual-use technologies like unmanned systems (see Case Study 1: The U.S. Replicator Initiative below). The United States wants to increase the speed, capability, and capacity of its industrial ecosystem to meet defense needs in line with the 2022 National Defense Strategy's commitment to "act urgently to *build enduring advantages* across the defense ecosystem."[153] This includes promoting competition in a highly consolidated defense industrial base where the Department of Defense primarily relies on five prime contractors to develop, maintain, and project military power.[154] The department has its sights on breaking down barriers and creating incentives for a broader pool of small companies and new entrants to enter the defense ecosystem.[155]

Decentralization, diversity, and risk acceptance characterize the United States' approach to fostering national security–relevant innovation. In 2023, RAND Corporation identified some seventy-two organizations with a role in accelerating the identification, development, and adoption of commercial technology for the U.S. military.[156] These include long-standing organizations like the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, which invest in breakthrough technologies for national security. There are also more recent creations like the DIU, established in Silicon Valley in 2015, which has a high profile in seeking to expand and accelerate the delivery of commercial and dual-use technology to the U.S. military, although its budget of $1 billion in 2024 is a relatively small share of U.S. RDT&E funding.[157] There are service-specific organizations like xTechSearch and AFWERX, as well as specialized organizations like In-Q-Tel and SOFWERX. Entities like the Rapid Defense Experimentation Reserve (RDER), created in 2021, have been stood up to support the innovative application and absorption of existing and bleeding-edge technologies through agile prototyping and experimentation, such as the Vanilla ultra-long endurance unmanned aerial vehicle, with plans to undertake some activities in Australia this year. RDER aims to reduce the timeline for delivering capability by years, but its future is a little uncertain; U.S. Senate appropriators have recently scrutinized RDER's efficacy in accelerating fielding outcomes and recommended a slowdown in the program's funding.[158]

Better harnessing of diverse sources of capital to help national security relevant start-ups to scale and bringing their products or services into market has been a growing area of interest to the U.S. Even though private equity and venture capital investment into the U.S. defense industry has slowed over the past couple of years, it has otherwise been on

an upward trajectory.[159] Initiatives like the Small Business Investment Company (SBIC) Critical Technology Initiative, a joint venture between the Small Business Administration and the Department of Defense (through the Office of Strategic Capital), are focused on scaling public-private partnered capital by providing low-cost, long-term financing. The SBIC Critical Technology Initiative aims to drive investment into technology areas that traditionally have high, up-front research and development costs, like semiconductors and biotechnology, from mission-driven venture capital firms like America's Frontier Fund, Shield Capital and Dyne Asset Management or offices of high-net-worth individuals and families whose investment thesis aligns with national security and defense objectives. Such investors recognize the value of "clean" or trusted capital, without any links to potentially adversarial states, when funding technologies for the U.S. government. Some of these investment sources, like family offices, may also not be seeking quick returns, thereby providing "patient" capital that supports opportunities to fund longer-term, deep-tech projects. The SBIC Critical Technology Initiative is complemented by other programs like the Pentagon's National Security Innovation Capital initiative, which receives around $15 million annually to invest specifically in dual-use hardware startups, noting early-stage hardware companies have historically only received about 10 percent of private U.S. venture capital.[160]

Streamlining Acquisition and Adoption

Despite the range of U.S. initiatives in place, there remain challenges for companies in bridging the gap between prototyping and procurement. Reforms to Department of Defense acquisition authorities aim to support greater flexibility and speed in contracting.[161] Other transaction agreements for research, prototypes, or production support faster and more cost-effective project design and a wider range of collaborations with industry, which may also help to quickly expand defense production when needed.[162] The Immersive Commercial Acquisition Program created in 2022 also aims to equip contracting officers with the expertise to keep pace with commercial technology providers and product cycles. Such initiatives can help nontraditional partners, startups and smaller companies that might otherwise find it difficult to work within defense timelines and processes.

The United States is also seeking to make it easier for more companies to enter the defense ecosystem. In 2025, Congress appropriated $400 million for the pilot program to Accelerate the Procurement and Fielding of Innovative Technologies to enable Department of Defense programs to procure technology from small and nontraditional contractors.[163] The Common Entry Point for Small Businesses program helps small businesses navigate Department of Defense opportunities and processes. The Tradewinds Solutions Marketplace, launched in 2022, also provides a virtual portal to connect technology solutions from companies and academia with demand from Department of Defense organizations. Before becoming available in the marketplace, data, analytics, digital, and AI/machine learning solutions are assessed and vetted in accordance with relevant Defense regulations and policies. This allows Defense organizations to move to rapid acquisition procedures to source what they need. However, smaller and nontraditional partners continue to face challenges in working with Defense,

Marine Corps Lance Corporal Emmanuel Saulsberry flies an unmanned aircraft system during a squad attack range as a part of Exercise Predators Walk at Mount Bundey Training Area, Australia, May 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Defense website, https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2003474257/.

such as meeting cybersecurity requirements, mitigating risks of foreign ownership control and influence, and navigating points of entry into the department.[164] Small businesses' share of the department's prime procurement contracts has hovered around 25 percent for years, notwithstanding various initiatives to improve their piece of the pie.[165]

Beyond procurement, the Department of Defense is looking at systemwide approaches to the integration of technology solutions, especially data and AI-enabled software, to scale the advantages they afford. The highest-profile initiative, the Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2) capability, aims to provide information and decision advantage to war fighters by connecting sensors and communications across air, sea, land, space, and cyber domains. Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks says the capability shows "the beauty of what software can do for hard power."[166] The CJADC2 will be enabled by new data infrastructure, like the Open Data and Applications Government-owned Interoperable Repositories (Open DAGIR). Led by the Department of Defense's Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office, the Open DAGIR seeks to enable government and industry to integrate their data infrastructure in a way that preserves government ownership but supports industry to develop applications for Defense. As new technology applications are integrated and rolled out, issues of trust and confidence will continue to be critical to achieving the department's goal of being both "responsible and rapid."[167]

Case Study 1: The U.S. Replicator Initiative

In August 2023, the Pentagon announced its Replicator Initiative: a process to get at hard, long-standing problems like breaking down organizational barriers and institutionalizing leadership needed to accelerate the fielding of capabilities.[168] The first iteration (Replicator 1) aims to acquire and field thousands of all-domain attritable autonomous systems (ADA2) in around two years, by August 2025. The lessons from Replicator 1 will be used to build future iterations to address other capability gaps. Replicator 2 is expected to focus on software that connects platforms and enables multiplatform collaboration. Around $1 billion was allocated to Replicator across FY 2024 and FY 2025.

ADA2 systems are cheap, reduce risks to personnel, can be improved upon quickly, and can enhance the lethality and survivability of exquisite and manned platforms like aircraft, ships, and tanks.[169] Replicator 1 aims to "counter China's military buildup"[170] and support the U.S. Indo-Pacific commander's plan to create an "unmanned hellscape," [171] or lethal shield, to

slow or defeat the PRC if the United States comes to Taiwan's aid in the event of a Chinese invasion. The use of drones by all parties in a Taiwan contingency is expected to speed target identification and execution.[172] In February 2024, the DIU announced that the Pentagon had selected the capabilities under the first iteration. These include the Switchblade 600 extended-range loitering munition, an unmanned system armed with an anti-armor warhead with a range of 25-plus miles and endurance of forty-plus minutes. Nevertheless, it is not yet clear whether Replicator's current funding levels can support the quantities of systems needed to create an "unmanned hellscape" with the range and endurance necessary for the Indo-Pacific theatre.

Another key challenge is U.S. manufacturing capacity, which will be critical to achieving the quantities that the Pentagon is seeking through Replicator, and to support the possibility of a large and/or protracted conflict.[173] However, U.S. industry has voiced concerns over its capacity to rapidly increase production of unmanned systems.[174] U.S. manufacturing capabilities are already facing challenges in scaling to meet demand from Ukraine.[175] This is partly attributable to drone companies competing for skilled labor, materials, and parts with the broader and growing aerospace market.[176] On top of this, U.S. industry also faces challenges in competing with subsidized PRC drones and components.[177] As of June this year, the Association for Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International assessed that Chinese-made drones like those made by Shenzhen-based company DJI accounted for more than 90 percent of the U.S. consumer market, 70 percent of the industrial market (drones as tools) and over 90 percent of the first responder market.[178] Companies have said they need sustained commitment and demand signals from the Pentagon, including multiyear block-buy contracts and stable portfolio funding, which could help derisk investments by venture capitalists.[179] However, such an approach would also need to be flexible enough to allow for rapid updating of contracts and system requirements, given the pace of technological change. Some have also called for new acquisition policies, noting the difference between procuring low-cost, attritable unmanned systems compared to other defense materiel.[180]

Australia's Defense Innovation Potential

In 2021, the Defence Innovation Review (DIR) concluded that Australia's defense innovation ecosystem "need[ed] a much stronger sense of urgency"[181] to contend with a deteriorating strategic environment international climate, the changing character of warfare, and new technology, including through improved government-industry collaboration. Similar conclusions were drawn in the 2015 First Principles Review. Most recently, Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review again identified the same challenges and said that "Defence must have a national science and technology system that enables the development of disruptive military capabilities."[182] These recurring messages reflect the complexities and challenges of innovation in general, but also the fact that Australia's defense innovation programs have not had the right institutional, financial, procedural, and cultural foundations to succeed.

Broader Barriers and Constraints

The success or otherwise of Australia's defense innovation programs is shaped by the broader state of the science and technology ecosystem. Compared to the United States, Australia has a small—albeit growing—tech sector and defense industry. Australia conducts world-leading research in areas like AI and quantum physics and possesses a highly skilled STEM workforce. From a supply chain perspective, Australia is resource-rich, with vast reserves of critical minerals (a key input into high-tech military equipment) and is prioritizing supply chain derisking from the PRC in favor of the United States and other partners, like Japan. Historically, Australian scientists and companies have produced cutting-edge military capabilities, such as the Jindalee Operational Radar Network, the Nulka ship missile decoy, and the Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicle.[183] Australia's tech sector has shown in its ability to scale companies, producing more than twenty unicorns over the past twenty years, especially in software as a service businesses like Atlassian and Canva.[184]

Australia's scientific and technological achievements have occurred despite barriers. Australia's economy generally does not produce diverse or highly sophisticated exports, ranking ninety-third in the Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity (the United States ranks fourteenth).[185] R&D spending is low, especially by government. In 2021 and 2022, Australian R&D funding sat at 1.68 percent of the country's gross domestic product, well below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 2.7 percent.[186] Australia, like many countries, struggles with the "valley of death:" the financing (and broader cultural, expert, and institutional support) between R&D and commercial-scale production. The high concentration of small businesses in the economy (around 93 percent) creates structural barriers to investing in, adopting, and scaling innovation. This lowers the overall demand for innovation.[187] Labor productivity has declined over the past two decades as a result.[188] Australia has a simplified manufacturing base—the smallest in the OECD—creating vulnerabilities for production and scaling in the event of crisis or conflict.

Australian policymakers are aware of these challenges and are focused on derisking innovation and commercialization through initiatives like concessional finance, grants, and business advisory services.[189] Planned investments like the $1 billion AUD toward critical technologies as part of the National Reconstruction Fund and the reform agenda set out by Future Made in Australia are intended to support Australian industry transformation, including strategic and national security-related projects. Experts still consider that further work is needed to drive not just supply but demand for innovation across the economy, including support to businesses aiming to grow export opportunities.[190]

The Defense Innovation Reform Journey

Added layers of complexity exist in the Australian defense context. Australia's defense innovation apparatus is centralized and slow, compared to the United States' generally diffuse and dynamic ecosystem. The Australian Department of Defence is the primary purchaser of items from Australia's defense industry, and the department can be a difficult customer. Companies face cumbersome tendering and acquisition processes, insufficient clarity over or changing requirements and demand signals, and risk-averse decisionmaking. For startups and small companies, the resources and time they must invest before gaining a contract mean they face funding gaps and shortfalls. Importantly, their systems and timelines are not geared toward working with a big government client where delays in government processes could impact the survivability of smaller companies. These challenges can be compounded by lack of security-cleared staff, which impedes access to classified briefings and collaborations, and generally low levels of mobility between government, industry, and academia (only 1.3 percent of Australian government officials moved into the private, academic, and nonprofit sectors in 2021).[191]

Relative to the U.S., the smaller size of the Australian Department of Defence as a client can limit the scalability and profitability of Australian companies. A viable business model may therefore depend on export opportunities. Historically, this has meant that Australian companies with promise move to the United States. While overseas success of Australian businesses is positive, sometimes it results from a missed opportunity and lack of risk appetite by the Department of Defence to purchase Australian products and contribute to higher local production and a stronger sovereign industrial base. It can also create further challenges in cases where Australia must navigate the U.S. International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) to access U.S.-based, Australian-origin technology.

The Australian Department of Defence, supported by reviews and experts, has recognized these challenges and embarked upon various reform agendas. In June 2023, the Australian government kicked off its latest initiative, the Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator (ASCA) (see Case Study 2: ASCA). Alongside ASCA, a broader agenda is being built to strengthen Australia's military industrial base. Steps are being taken to streamline "some of the densest and most bureaucratic processes for procuring capability."[192] Tender response documentation requirements have reportedly halved this year, which has reduced paperwork by 45 percent. The Australian Department of Defence now has a more streamlined process for returning companies doing business with the organization. However, there remains a broader opportunity to minimize and fast-track acquisition processes beyond the initial tendering phase (see Recommendation 1). Australia is also investing in defense industry development and export opportunities and updating export control regulations to ease collaboration with the United States and the United Kingdom. Later this year, Australia's Department of Defence will also release a refreshed defense innovation strategy, which offers

Australia's deputy prime minister and minister for defense, the Hon. Richard Marles, MP, and the minister for defense industry and minister for international development and the Pacific, the Hon. Pat Conroy, MP, with chief defense scientist of the Defence Science and Technology Group Tanya Monro at the announcement of the establishment of ASCA.
Source: Australian Department of Defence website, https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=20230428adf8630742_8428.jpg&Type=Filename.

an opportunity to reform defense innovation beyond ASCA, including how defense innovation can better feed into strategy and concepts to achieve useful effects, both in a national setting and bilaterally with the United States (see Recommendation 2).[193]

These are all steps in the right direction, though many are yet to be fully implemented or implemented with a strong sense of urgency and appetite for risk. Australia still needs a broader shift in how national security technologies are financed to address market failures in funding of emerging industries that could support a "defence-finance-tech ecosystem."[194] Australia could better combine U.S. and Australian expertise to support venture capital financing of early-stage or high-growth startups in defense and dual-use areas, including tapping into Australia's $3.5 trillion AUD superannuation industry (see Recommendation 3). Moreover, many initiatives like ASCA are not yet getting at key cultural challenges impeding collaboration, like bringing in outside expertise and the devolution of decisionmaking and calculated risk-taking. While current initiatives are well-meaning, and the aspiration for change exists at and is being signaled by the highest levels of government, the scale and speed of activity on the ground and the push from leaders at all levels does not yet match the transformation necessary for near and longer-term strategic risk. Opportunities for timely progress at scale remain.

Case Study 2: Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator

ASCA was established in June 2023, following the Defence Strategic Review. ASCA aims to streamline Australian defense innovation programs and drive capability development and acquisition pathways in response to defined operational challenges. ASCA's activities are akin to the U.S. DIU, with an aim to deliver solutions for military end users within a few years. The Australian government committed up to $3.8 billion AUD in funding over the decade, with $748 million AUD for the next four years, resulting in $50 million AUD additional annual innovation funding.

ASCA is focused on driving missions focused on strategically directed defense priorities that aim to lead to the codesign of a minimum viable capability with industry. The Ghost Shark program is ASCA's "Mission Zero" and aims to deliver a stealthy, autonomous long-range undersea capability to enable intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and strike. The capability is being developed by Department of Defence and U.S.-owned Anduril Australia. The program is seen as ASCA's proof of concept, since it delivered its first prototype a year ahead of schedule with a pathway and funding to transition into service. However, Ghost

Shark commenced pre-ASCA. So, ASCA's second planned mission, following Ghost Shark, will offer a better test of how ASCA works from start to finish and areas of improvement. The second mission is expected to be focused on two different military problems: how to degrade and infiltrate advanced air defense systems to support long-range strike, and how to process and synthesize data to better use intelligence platforms. The next stage of the mission is in development, although the companies involved remain classified so as not to reveal to potential adversaries the solutions and capabilities being pursued. An industry expert is yet to be appointed to lead the mission.

Alongside missions, ASCA's Innovation Incubation program aims to acquire new or commercial technology. The program focused its first innovation challenge on small and cost-effective aerial drones, which resulted in $1.2 million AUD in contracts across eleven companies. These have since been down selected to three companies to produce one hundred systems each. A second innovation challenge on electronic warfare is underway with the United States and the UK. ASCA will run a third innovation challenge in September with the Australian Army, seeking industry solutions on littoral operations. ASCA has retained a function to fund longer-term research through its Emerging and Disruptive Technologies program, with the initial priority on information warfare (synthetic media and disinformation).

In its first year, ASCA announced that it had signed around $200 million AUD (its full budget allocation) in contracts for over 160 companies, a majority of which are small or medium-sized enterprises. Around 25 percent of the funding ($50 million AUD) was for new ASCA work, with the remainder for legacy innovation programs. Moving forward, ASCA still needs to demonstrate its willingness and ability to attract talent into its ranks from research and the private sector to help drive missions and disrupt the organizational culture.[195] Its key measure of success, however, will be how quickly ASCA can either fail or succeed in supporting the development and fielding of new capabilities. Speed, scale, and effort are key, with the aim that at least some projects result in outcomes that make a difference to war fighters.

The Alliance Innovation Opportunity

On October 25, 2023, Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese "inaugurated a new era of U.S.-Australia strategic cooperation." A hallmark of this era would be the pursuit of an "Innovative Alliance" through enhanced and wide-ranging cooperation on critical and emerging technologies in areas like data and AI, clean energy, and space.[196] This follows a long legacy of scientific cooperation through the alliance across security, economic, and now climate and clean energy pillars, and in trusted multilateral groupings like the Five Eyes Technical Cooperation Program.

The United States recognizes it cannot work alone in building its capabilities and capacity to deter hostile actors in the Indo-Pacific.[197] The United States is seeking increased scientific cooperation and defense industrial integration with trusted allies like Australia to build a collective strategic advantage against potential adversaries like the PRC and strengthen the resilience of allied defense supply chains in the Indo-Pacific. The United States sees bilateral cooperation, and the AUKUS partnership, with Australia as part of its broader approach of "integrated deterrence," which it defines as "working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theatres, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power, and [its] network of Alliances and partnerships."[198] In the nearer term, the greatest deterrence benefits of AUKUS are likely to arise from the rotation of American and British submarines through HMAS Stirling in Western Australia from 2027.

Laying the Foundations

AUKUS is now the flagship science and technology initiative of the United States-Australia alliance. Announced in September 2021, AUKUS initiated a step-change in the scope and substance of technological and industrial cooperation between the United States and Australia, as well as the UK.

Pillar I aims to equip the Australian Defence Force with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, as early as the 2030s, to expand the individual and collective undersea presence of AUKUS partners in the Indo-Pacific. This will entail building or increasing the capacity of all three nations to produce and sustain nuclear-powered submarines.

Pillar II supports broader military technological cooperation in areas like AI and autonomy, undersea warfare, and hypersonic systems, which (once integrated into military forces) could provide an asymmetric advantage on the battlefield, including enhancing the capabilities of nuclear-powered submarines. For example, AUKUS partners are sharing and integrating algorithms to analyze sound signatures of P-8 Poseidon aircraft used for roles like maritime ISR.[199] A Defense Investor Network of more than 300 venture capital firms and family offices collectively worth more than $265 billion has been established across AUKUS nations to spur financing opportunities for Pillar II projects.[200]

For Australia, AUKUS has strong bipartisan support, and is seen as an initiative that must not fail, despite the complex and ever-present political, bureaucratic, regulatory, financial, and industry implementation risks. For the United States, the AUKUS partnership has bipartisan support, although Australia will likely need to work hard to sell its advantages to maintain support for all elements should there be a change of administration in the United States next year.[201]

A less immediately tangible but important element of AUKUS is improving the innovation and regulatory enablers to support joint research, production, and trade (see Case Study 3: AUKUS Innovation Challenge). Notably, AUKUS has provided the impetus for

defense trade rule reform. In late 2023, the U.S. Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act for FYr 2024, which provides a pathway for an historic export control exemption for Australia and the UK. In March 2024, Australia passed a reciprocal national exemption for the United States and the UK through the Defence Trade Controls Amendment Act 2024. The UK is pursuing similar exemptions through an AUKUS specific open general license. Together, these initiatives are expected to result in license-free trade for 70 percent of defense exports from the United States to Australia, and over 80 percent from Australia to the United States.[202]

Notwithstanding the significance of in-progress export control reform, some of the historic impediments to closer allied integration created by the indiscriminate and extraterritorial reach of the ITAR will still exist. Thirty percent of trade without the AUKUS exemption falls onto the excluded technologies list. This includes items and services that may be relevant to Pillar II, like electronic warfare and uncrewed underwater vehicles, which will be subject to licensing requirements.[203] In such cases, the possibility of expedited treatment is being explored for AUKUS partners.[204] This will be important to address previous barriers that slowed and disincentivized collaborative capability development and technology transfer.[205]

Culturally, implementation of defense trade control reforms once they are finalized later this year will be important to the success of AUKUS. Within the U.S. State Department, that will require a faster and more open approach to sensitive technology collaboration with AUKUS partners than in the past. However, more streamlined defense trade is occurring in a context where Australia, like the United States and the UK, faces persistent espionage threats to its defense industry, which are only likely to increase because of AUKUS. Indeed, the 2024 annual threat assessment by Australia's director general of security revealed that a foreign intelligence service had offered "Australian defence industry employees money in return for reports on AUKUS, submarine technology, missile systems, and many other sensitive topics."[206] Successful implementation of the defense trade reforms will require increased monitoring and assurances, especially from Australian and British partners, that U.S. technology will be protected (see Recommendation 4), building on existing industrial base security strategies.[207]

Case Study 3: AUKUS Innovation Challenge

On March 26, 2024, AUKUS partners kicked off their first complementary set of innovation challenges on technologies and capabilities that support, or provide protection to AUKUS partners from, electromagnetic targeting. This challenge is an opportunity for each country to showcase what it can offer to a trilateral industrial base, especially for Australia as the smallest defense industrial player among the three AUKUS partners—but with cutting-edge research and technology to contribute.

The challenges aim to foster government, industry, and academic collaboration on solutions to operational problems. They have a nearer term focus to develop solutions that could be fielded in a one- to three-year timeframe. According to Australia's Chief Defence Scientist Tanya Monro, the launch will "quickly accelerate the best of the breed from each of our nations" and there will be a "regular drumbeat" of similar challenges.[208] Modest sums of money, around $150,000, will be awarded to winners of the first challenge in each nation. It is a start, but the small pools of funding mean scale is lacking. Even though researchers, startups, and small- to medium-size companies are likely the key audience, the innovation challenges are unlikely to incentivize defense primes—key sources of defense technology development—to operate within the innovation challenge construct.

While the outcomes of the first challenge are yet to be finalized, getting it off the ground shows that the hard work of closer defense industrial integration is underway. The three nations must first agree on a shared operational problem set, and then simultaneously organize their administrative and bureaucratic machinery to mobilize their academic and research sectors. The Australian government has described one objective of the challenge as learning "how each of our innovation systems work[s]."[209] Mutual understanding of each other's systems is important, but the differing financial, legal, and administrative systems among the three partners mean that impediments to collaboration are likely to remain. Breaking down historic budgetary, bureaucratic, cultural, and technical barriers, among others, could be facilitated by more permanent exchange positions among the three countries into each other's defense innovation accelerators at a senior enough level to drive change (see Recommendation 5).[210]

While the winning solutions will be trilaterally available, there are no commitments to codevelop or coproduce solutions, at least not yet.[211] The Australian government has said it is ultimately "a sovereign decision based on national interests"[212] when it comes to how each AUKUS nation will use the solutions and whether they will fund further development. An ideal outcome would be U.S. and UK companies purchasing and fielding Australian solutions, and vice versa, as well as an increase in collaboration among research organizations in the AUKUS nations on defense-relevant research and development. This would prove the concept for AUKUS Pillar II in line with national leaders' objectives to leverage each other's strengths and more closely integrate the three industrial bases.[213]

Conclusion

The dangerous geopolitical landscape is driving innovative approaches to defense science, technology, and innovation in both the United States and Australia, notwithstanding substantial differences in the scope and scale of these efforts. Through the alliance, and in broader Five Eyes contexts, defense science and technology cooperation between Australia and the United States is already wide-ranging. AUKUS initiated a step-change in the ambition, scale, and scope of defense cooperation into the most sensitive and advanced capability projects. Early work in the AUKUS partnership has focused on improving innovation and

regulatory enablers to support joint research, production, and trade. Notably, promising defense trade rule reforms are being put in place to enable more seamless advanced capability collaboration and procurement between the two nations. AUKUS will continue to occupy a huge amount of energy between the two countries, particularly in Australia, to manage political, bureaucratic, financial, and industry risks associated with both Pillars I and II. This may mean there will be limited bandwidth, time, and money to develop and pursue new initiatives.

The Quantum Systems Vector 2-in-1 and Sypaq Systems CorvoX will provide the Australian Army and Royal Australian Air Force with small uncrewed aerial systems designed to operate across a range of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, enhancing situational awareness, force protection and the potency of Defence's capabilities across land and littoral operations. Source: Australian Department of Defence website, https://images.defence.gov.au/assets/Home/Search?Query=S20241893%20SYPAQ%20-%20CorvoX-1.jpg&Type=Filename.

Nevertheless, near- and longer-term strategic risk necessitate a constant evolution in thinking and approach about what more both the United States and Australia can do to deliver on their shared political and strategic objectives. Learning from each other, and playing to each other's strengths, could help frontload and expedite the work needed and better use capabilities and resources already at the countries' disposal. The national contexts and reform agendas of both countries, especially the United States, provide lessons into issues like private sector financing of defense and dual-use technologies and acquisition approaches that can be used to strengthen alliance and AUKUS activities. The recommendations of this paper across issues of strategy, structure, investment, process, and security, aim to reinforce the likely success of existing collaborative defense science and technology initiatives. If implemented, they could help support the longer-term techno-industrial uplift of both countries needed to deter conflict in the Indo-Pacific and support a protracted strategic contest for military and technological leadership with countries like the PRC.

Author Note

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CHAPTER 4

More than the Sum of its Parts: Developing a Coordinated U.S.-Australian Response to Potential Chinese Aggression

Stacie Pettyjohn

Backed by its growing military strength, China has increasingly engaged in coercive and belligerent behavior in the Indo-Pacific region.[214] Beyond its frequent use of gray zone tactics to harass and intimidate neighbors, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) territorial claims have heightened fears that it might start a war to subjugate Taiwan or forcibly seize disputed features in the East or South China Seas.[215]

The 2022 United States National Defense Strategy (NDS) identified competition with China as the nation's priority challenge and recognized that U.S. forces alone cannot successfully deter or, if necessary, defeat Chinese aggression. The U.S. NDS categorizes allies and partners as "a center of gravity of the strategy" and an asymmetric American strength.[216] Similarly, the Australian 2024 National Defence Strategy makes deterrence by denial the priority mission, and echoes the conclusion of the Defense Strategic Review that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is currently "not fully fit for purpose."[217] The Ministry of Defence also maintained that "Australia must work even more closely with our international partners" and that it would "deepen and expand" military cooperation with the United States.[218]

To realize these goals, Australia and the United States have agreed to work together to co-produce munitions through Australia's Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise (GWEO).[219] Additionally, AUKUS, the trilateral arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, will provide nuclear-powered attack submarines

for Canberra and enhanced technological cooperation among the three allies.[220] Although American-Australian military cooperation appears to be rapidly deepening, true strategic integration, which is critical for all other forms of military cooperation, remains inadequate.

Becca Wasser and I defined strategic integration between allies as a "common understanding of threats and prioritization among them and a coordinated division of labor for responding to these challenges."[221] Strategic integration is the most difficult type of cooperation to achieve—particularly in peacetime—given that each nation has its own interests and desire to protect its sovereignty. The strongest form of American-Australian strategic integration—a firm and public precommitment to combined defensive operations—is not likely feasible given political realities. However, even less formal forms of strategic alignment can enhance the credibility of combined deterrent threats and help to ensure that other forms of military cooperation support the objectives identified at the strategic level. A shared understanding of threats, roles, and responsibilities among alliance partners should shape other forms of institutional and tactical cooperation, so that every level of effort works towards shared goals. For instance, Canberra and Washington would ideally agree to co-develop and co-produce weapons that each party would need in priority scenarios, such as maritime strike and air defense missiles.[222] Similarly, combined exercises should practice operations that are relevant to priority scenarios, and Australian and American forces should assume their likely roles and practice operating together as envisioned by plans.

Yet strategic integration does not require perfect alignment of priorities and a precommitment to respond. Rather, the United States and Australia together need to explore the military challenges that they could face and have honest conversations about their interests, capabilities, and constraints so that both parties have a better understanding of collective goals. A routine and frank strategic and operational dialogue will enable Washington and Canberra to identify similarities and differences between them, and to develop workarounds, so that they can develop combined response plans to potential crises based on viable and realistic assumptions. Any alliance plans could have multiple variants and be conditional. Additionally, senior Australian and American leaders would certainly need to decide during a crisis to implement them. More likely than not, any of the off-the-shelf plans would need to be significantly modified because of unexpected developments. These plans may not be entirely "worthless" as Dwight Eisenhower declared. But as the former president noted it is the act of planning that is truly important because it enables a faster well-thought-out response. Combined planning would force Australian and American officials to be "steeped in the character of the problem" and truly enable them to quickly develop a sensible response based on an actual crisis, which will be different from what the plans envisioned.[223]

Since the end of the Cold War, American and Australian forces have frequently operated together in the Middle East. However, these conflicts differ significantly from one with a great power like China with a large conventional force and nuclear weapons arsenal. Against these threats posed by state and non-state actors in the Middle East, the United States' response

planning only began after a crisis emerged. Typically, the United States cobbled together a coalition, which eventually agreed upon a strategy and operational plan. This process often took weeks if not months. After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the United States had a luxurious five months to assemble a coalition, build up forces in the region, and develop a plan to liberate Kuwait.[224] In Operation Allied Force, the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) air war against Kosovo, the alliance would only agree to a graduated air campaign. When that strategy failed to compel Serbia to back down, NATO member states engaged in painstaking negotiations and General Wesley Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander, had to get alliance approval to strike potential targets.[225]

If China engaged in a war of aggression, the United States, Australia, and other nations would not have much time to develop a coordinated response. A swift military response by the United States and Australia would be essential in halting Beijing from achieving its objective. Otherwise, both countries face the prospect of having to roll back China's territorial gains. Ideally, the allies would already have a good appreciation for each other's capabilities, a shared and deep understanding of the problem, plans for how to respond, and an agreed-on military command structure for combined operations. Currently, despite significant apparent alignment between Australia and the United States' defense strategies, there are fundamental differences between the two allies.[226] Many of the concrete steps taken to deepen American and Australian military cooperation in the last few years have occurred in the absence of a foundational understanding of how the two militaries might work together to deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific region.[227] It is therefore imperative that they begin having these conversations and developing these plans now.

This chapter considers the issue of how the United States and Australia can deepen their strategic integration to counter Chinese aggression. It lays out three different scenarios and outlines a plausible division of responsibility between American and Australian forces based on each parties' interests. I select three possible but hypothetical scenarios of Chinese uses of force: a full-scale invasion of Taiwan at some unspecified date in the future, an attack on Second Thomas Shoal in the near term, and gray zone coercion against Australian forces in the Coral Sea in the late 2020s. These scenarios were chosen because they differ significantly in terms of where the aggression occurs, and the varying levels of strategic interests for Washington and Canberra in each situation. Each of the following three sections broadly outlines the following: a scenario in which China attacks or harasses an area that is "strategically" important to the United States and Australia. Then a plausible defensive plan that identifies roles and missions that American and Australian forces would undertake to counter hypothetical Chinese attack in the Indo-Pacific.

The final section of this report considers how Canberra and Washington can develop a unified approach to strengthen deterrence in all situations and move towards a division of labor that enables them to leverage their strengths and compensate for weaknesses.

1. Taiwan Invasion Scenario

While China invading Taiwan is not as likely as other forms of coercion such as gray zone attacks, the United States Department of Defense has identified a full-scale invasion of Taiwan as its "pacing scenario" due to the magnitude of the operational challenges and strategic consequences.[228] It is therefore the benchmark that American forces are ultimately measured against, and is the driving force behind U.S. operational planning, modernization efforts, and posture.[229] A large-scale amphibious and airborne assault on Taiwan would be an incredibly complex undertaking, but Taiwan's proximity to mainland China and distance from the United States and Australia is a fundamental reality that will be difficult to overcome in the event of an attack by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Beijing maintains that Taiwan is a part of the People's Republic of China and that eventually Taipei must submit to rule by Beijing, preferably peacefully. If Taiwan seeks to declare its independence or refuses to accept future rule by the PRC, Beijing has made it clear that it is willing to use force to compel Taipei's submission.[230] Since 1979, the United States has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan in which Washington provides defense articles and services to Taipei, but does not have an ironclad commitment to defend the island in the event of a PRC attack.[231] Although formal U.S. policy remains unchanged, President Joe Biden has several times stated that the United States would defend Taiwan should China attack.[232]

I make no judgment about the likelihood of an imminent Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which is a hotly contested issue. There is no doubt, however, that the modernization of the PLA is shifting the balance of power in East Asia. This modernization has emboldened Chinese forces to take aggressive actions throughout the region, and increases the odds that the PLA could successfully undertake such an audacious operation.[233] If Beijing is convinced that the pathway to peaceful unification is closed or will not occur in a timely fashion, it might gamble on an all-out invasion of Taiwan.[234] The most difficult Taiwan invasion scenario involves the PLA undertaking a large-scale attack in an effort to quickly conquer the island—a territorial *fait accompli*—before Taiwan's international partners can intervene.[235]

The PRC's attack would likely begin with multi-domain precision strikes—what the PLA calls a Joint Firepower Campaign—against key Taiwanese military forces, U.S. bases in the region ,and American naval forces inside the second island chain.[236] At the same time, the PLA would use cyber, electronic attack, counter space capabilities, and information operations to degrade the United States' intelligence, targeting, and communications, in the hope of disconnecting and disorienting American forces.[237]

An initial large salvo of ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles is likely to knock out most of Taiwan's air defenses and would limit the ability of American fighter aircraft to effectively operate at scale. As a result, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) would likely

have air superiority over the strait and Taiwan and would continue to use airpower to weaken Taiwan's defenses by picking off remaining forces and directing sea- and ground-based fires against priority targets.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) would aim to isolate Taiwan from the rest of the world with a joint blockade campaign, so that Taipei cannot rally international support, and to prevent supplies and arms shipments from reaching the island. The PLA's blockade operations would entail cutting internet cables, strikes against ports and airfields, and a traditional quarantine around the island.[238] At this point, the PLA would launch the joint island landing campaign by simultaneously sending its fleet across the strait to conduct an amphibious landing on Taiwan's northern beaches, while its airborne and special operations forces conduct an airborne assault to secure key terrain including airfields, bridges, and ports. The troop transport ships would be escorted by the PLAN's formidable fleet of advanced destroyers and cruisers.

Defending Taiwan: Roles and Missions

An international effort to defend Taiwan would involve multiple, simultaneously occurring major military missions. Before the attack begins, there would be questions about conducting forward deterrent operations to dissuade Beijing from launching the invasion. Once the war has begun, however, there are three core operational tasks: stopping the invasion force, attacking military targets on the Chinese mainland, and defending rear areas. Given their interests and capabilities, Australian forces would likely focus on defending rear areas and perhaps send a symbolic force forward as a deterrent. For its part, American forces would focus on attacking the Chinese invasion forces and the suppression or destruction of key military capabilities in mainland China, should mainland strikes be authorized. This division of responsibility aligns with these countries' interests and capabilities, with the United States responsible for offensive operations against PLA forces, while Australian forces would be responsible for defending key sea lines of communication and their own territory.

The ideal warfighting posture for American and Australian troops is in tension with the desire to forward deploy forces for deterrence.[239] Washington needs to distribute American forces across the depth of the theater to a more survivable posture to withstand a Chinese first blow. For allies like Australia, whose forces are far from the primary area of operations, they would have to decide whether to move forces forward as part of a demonstration to China that a multilateral coalition would oppose any invasion attempt. As Australia has a limited number of aircraft and ships, even if they survived an initial assault, it would be difficult to sustain and could not contribute significant combat power to front line operations. Moreover, forward deployment would degrade Australia's ability to protect its homeland, as well as key sea lines of communication in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. In this scenario, therefore, it is likely that Australia would make a minimal contribution to a forward deterrent operation, and instead signal its readiness by deploying forces in and around Australia to bolster homeland defenses and protect key maritime chokepoints.[240]

After the Chinese start the invasion, American forces would need time to recover and reconstitute from the opening strikes and begin to effectively conduct offensive and defensive operations. A pure denial strategy focuses on defeating the invasion force by sinking ships, particularly those that are ferrying troops across the strait, and supporting Taiwanese forces by attacking any PLA troops that make it ashore. As the invasion fleet would be protected by screening forces consisting of PLAN destroyers, cruisers, and corvettes armed with advanced surface-to-air and anti-ship cruise missiles, most of the defensive firepower would initially come from attack submarines and standoff missile strikes.[241] American submarines would cycle in and out of the Taiwan Strait to sink PLAN ships. Even once Australia has its first Virginia-class attack submarine in 2032, the ADF likely would not focus its undersea forces on operations in the Taiwan Strait. First, this is due to the narrow topography and shallow waters of the strait, which enable only several submarines to safely operate in the passageway at a time.[242] Second, the Taiwan Strait is thousands of kilometers from HMAS Sterling, and transit takes days each way. An Australian nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) would need to make this long voyage to reload after expending its torpedoes. Since Australia has a very limited number of submarines, and only a few can contribute to strait operations, it is probable that the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) diesel Collins submarines and its Virginia-class SSNs would focus on patrolling the key south Pacific maritime sea lines of communication to ensure that PLAN forces cannot conduct distant operations and threaten Australia or other rear areas.

The second aspect of defeating the invasion force involves attacking the PLA lodgment and providing air support to Taiwanese defenders, as some PLA forces are likely to make it to Taiwan. Pressuring the lodgment and limiting the number of reinforcements that land on the beach would help to prevent a Chinese breakout. This could take the form of long-range missile strikes against the lodgment, or direct attacks from the air. Ideally, air attacks would be coordinated with Taiwanese forces to prevent friendly fire incidents and increase the accuracy of the strikes. Fighter sweeps over Taiwan would be necessary to escort the attacking force and prevent PLAAF aircraft from observing and attacking Taiwanese defense positions. As PLAAF fighters would control the airspace over Taiwan, fifth-generation stealthy fighters would be needed. Thus, U.S. Air Force F-22 and F-35 fighters operating in a distributed fashion and supported by tankers, would likely take the lead in providing air support to Taiwanese ground forces. Although Australia has three squadrons of F-35s that could participate in air operations over Taiwan, this is unlikely for several reasons. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F-35s would need to be integrated into U.S. Air Force distributed operations to survive PLA attacks, which would be very challenging, and would need American refueling and logistics support to support their deployment and operations. Moreover, their involvement would leave very few fighters to defend Australian bases.

If they were to be authorized, attacks on the Chinese mainland could enable the coalition to suppress Chinese airpower and degrade or destroy the PLA's intelligence and targeting systems that are critical for long-range strikes.[243] Again, this mission would likely be

undertaken by United States forces. The United States possesses a fleet of stealthy bombers capable of flying very long ranges, penetrating Chinese layered defenses, and delivering large payloads against Chinese military targets, including hardened and buried facilities.[244] Additionally, non-stealthy American bombers may launch long-range cruise, or hypersonic missile strikes against some Chinese targets. It is doubtful that Canberra would ever authorize Australian attacks against China. Moreover, Australian aircraft lack the range and all-aspect stealth necessary for strikes against mainland China. While the RAAF has long-range air-to-ground cruise missiles, it does not have a bomber that can deliver the large salvo required to penetrate China's integrated air defenses. Therefore, the RAAF would likely reserve these missiles for other operations, such as protecting the sea lines of communication, and potentially striking PLA bases on the disputed features in the South China Sea.

An additional consideration that must be discussed in American-Australian planning for this contingency, in general, but particularly for strikes against PLA targets on mainland China is the risk of nuclear escalation. Given its growing nuclear arsenal, China is likely to emulate Russia and threaten to employ a nonstrategic nuclear weapon in an attempt to deter the United States and other countries from intervening and from striking its territory. But the likelihood that China undertakes a limited nuclear attack in the early days of a Taiwan war remains low due to the plethora of conventional strike options available to it.[245] The risk of China employing a nonstrategic nuclear weapon grows if the war becomes protracted as escalating may enable conflict termination on favorable terms.[246] Regardless, China's growing strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons cannot be ignored. The United States and Australia must consider escalation risks of their actions, approaches to managing escalation, and factor these issues into their defensive plans.[247]

The final mission is the protection of rear areas. Given ADF's operational limitations and priorities, Australia would likely lead missions that include defending its own territory and protecting sea lines of communication to the north. By keeping most of its air and naval forces in the South Pacific, Australia would be able to bolster its defenses and challenge the PLA's power projection in the south. It is also essential to protect Australian air and naval bases, which would be critical launch pads for American bomber and submarine operations. The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) possesses dual-capable intermediate and intercontinental ballistic missiles that are in range of Northern Australia. Additionally, Chinese Guided Missile Submarines (SSGNs) and bombers could launch cruise missile attacks on northern Australian bases. While the PLAAF currently has a limited aerial refueling capability, one should expect its ability to conduct long-range bomber operations to increase over time as the H-20 bomber enters the force and more H-6s are made air refuelable. China may strike Australian bases particularly if they are being used to support American operations. Thus, Australia would need layered air defenses that include combat air patrols by its F-35 and F/A-18 aircraft, ground-based air defenses, and Australian missile defense ships that are positioned in the northern approaches so that they can intercept incoming Chinese missile salvos. These forces would be cued to incoming threats by Australia's Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN) and the RAAF's Wedgetail airborne warning aircraft.

Moreover, Australia's maritime patrol aircraft, submarines, and over-the-horizon radar network would monitor its northern approaches and the strategic chokepoints of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombak. By taking the lead in collecting reconnaissance from multiple sources, fusing, and processing the information, Australia could enhance situational awareness and prevent Chinese forces from breaking out of the first island chain. Australia's JORN can detect maritime and air objects out to 1,000-3,000 kilometers.[248] This would help to provide early warning of potential threats that would need to then be verified by other assets like the P-8, E-7, or high-altitude drones, and submarines. The diesel-electric Collins-class submarines, which have limited endurance, could loiter in the shallower waters around chokepoints to interdict any PLAN submarines or ships that try to pass by. If Australia has Virginia-class submarines, they can lurk in deeper waters watching for subsurface and surface PLAN assets.[249]

Should the PRC invade Taiwan, Australia could make important contributions to the defense effort by defending bases and forces in the South Pacific and patrolling key maritime chokepoints, while American forces focus on defeating the invasion and attacking mainland China. There is a misconception that once the RAN has U.S. SSNs, it would be expected to contribute to offensive operations, which is neither feasible nor sensible.[250] In a large-scale war with China, providing base access and logistics support along with air defenses are hugely important operations that align with Australia's core interests and its capabilities.

2. Second Thomas Shoal

Chinese gray zone coercion against Philippine forces at Second Thomas Shoal—a disputed feature in the South China Sea—is already happening. The Second Thomas Shoal is a reef in the Spratly Islands that is claimed by both the Philippines and China. To protect its claims to the Second Thomas Shoal, which falls within its exclusive economic zone, the Philippines intentionally grounded a naval ship—the BRP *Sierra Madre*—on the reef in 1999. Since that time, the Philippines has regularly conducted resupply missions to the ship and has periodically rotated the crew stationed on the dilapidated outpost.[251] In 2013, China established a coast guard patrol in the vicinity of Second Thomas Shoal and began harassing Philippine resupply missions.[252] China's Coast Guard and maritime militia presence around the shoal increased notably in 2022, and these irregular forces have used increasingly aggressive tactics in an effort to cut off the *Sierra Madre*. Previously, Chinese ships have played a game of chicken with the Philippine resupply boats, aggressively maneuvering towards them while demanding that they desist. In the second half of 2023, Chinese forces upped the ante further by often ramming the Philippine boats or firing water cannons at them.[253] In one incident, a Philippine sailor was injured by Chinese personnel wielding machetes and spears.[254]

The July 2024 agreement between the Philippines and China temporarily cooled down tensions around Second Thomas Shoal but did not permanently resolve the fundamental areas of disagreement.[255] By early 2025, Beijing yet again accused Manila of attempting to build a permanent structure on the reef that would eventually replace the *Sierra Madre,* as the

eighty-year-old ship is rapidly deteriorating. At the same time, Chinese Coast Guard, maritime militia, and PLAN ships established a consistent presence around the reef and resumed their harassment of Philippine resupply missions. Beijing has insisted that the Philippines stop "construction," and has threatened to blockade the reef, forcibly seize the shoal, and remove the *Sierra Madre*. The Philippines has asked for American and Australian assistance in this crisis but has not officially invoked its mutual defense treaty with the United States.

Defending the Second Thomas Shoal: Roles and Missions

In this short of a major war scenario, the Philippines, United States, and Australia want to prevent further Chinese territorial gains in the South China Sea and uphold the status quo at the Second Thomas Shoal, but they are also seeking to prevent the crisis from escalating into a full-scale war. The core Philippine military missions in this scenario are manning the shoal, resupplying the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) forces on the *Sierra Madre*, conducting surveillance of air and sea around the disputed reef, and conducting air and maritime exercises and freedom of navigation operations. In this scenario, the Philippines would remain responsible for manning and resupplying its manned outpost on the shoal, while the United States and Australia would likely provide only indirect support in the form of military assistance, surveillance, and by asserting their right to freely navigate through the South China Sea.

To date, Philippine forces have independently manned the *Sierra Madre*. There have been sporadic calls for the United States to establish a combined presence on the disputed reef with the Philippine crew, and to replace the rusting hull with a more permanent structure.[256] Either of these courses of action would be incredibly escalatory as it would involve the United States taking sides in the status of a territorial dispute to which it is not a party and where it does not formally recognize its ally's territorial claim. China has already stated that the Philippines' construction on the reef to reinforce the ship is a red line. However, those in favor of a combined presence argue that President Xi is aware the PLA is not ready to defeat U.S. forces, especially at such a distance from the Chinese mainland. It is also important to note that President Xi would also be weighing how he is perceived domestically, and that he has gone to great lengths to avoid appearing weak; therefore, he may not back down if American forces began to directly support the Philippines' presence on the shoal.[257] Since Australia does not have a direct interest in the Second Thomas Shoal dispute or a mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, Canberra likely would not consider manning the reef. This mission is best left to the Philippines.

American or Australian naval or coast guard ships could directly participate in the resupply mission by transporting supplies to the Second Thomas Shoal or escorting Philippine cargo and personnel ships. Both courses of action increase the likelihood of direct confrontation. If China were to quarantine the shoal, resupply could involve running the blockade and forcing a showdown. It is, therefore, less escalatory and more likely that the Philippines remain responsible for maritime logistics support to the *Sierra Madre*, but the United States

and Australian navies could train Philippine sailors how to engage in evasive maneuvers and teach them to defend against forcible search and seizures. Moreover, both nations may want to donate patrol ships that the Philippines could use for this mission. With a larger fleet, the Philippines could maintain a more persistent presence around the shoal in their effort to deter Chinese aggression.[258]

The preferred way to provide food and other provisions to the crew on the Sierra Madre is by boat. But if aggressive tactics by Chinese ships prevent any Philippine ships from reaching the reef or through a full-scale quarantine-style blockade, supplies could also be air-dropped to the Philippine crew. In 2014, when China blockaded the Second Thomas Shoal for three weeks, the Philippines used airdrops to supply the crew trapped on the reef.[259] The Philippines also airdropped supplies as recently as 2024. From Washington and Canberra's vantage point, it is better for the Philippines to maintain responsibility for the resupply mission. Should a blockade extend for a considerable amount of time, both nations could consider assisting the Philippines in this effort. Airdropping basic provisions like food, water, and medicine could be undertaken as a humanitarian mission. The PLAARF could contest an airdrop, but unlike at sea, it would be difficult for Chinese aircraft to persistently patrol the airspace around the shoal, which is far from the Chinese mainland. American or Australian airdrops would risk escalation as it would directly put their forces in a position where China may decide to interdict them, which is probably not in Australia's interest. But the United States may be willing to run that risk due to its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, while it is less likely that Australia would do so.

Simply knowing where Chinese ships are operating is a difficult challenge for the Philippines and is an area where the United States and Australia could potentially help. China's PLAN warships are supplemented by the Chinese Coast Guard and the maritime militia vessels, which try to evade detection by blending in with commercial fishing vessels. The maritime militia, which is a state-sponsored paramilitary force, has been at the forefront of asserting China's sovereignty claims through its dangerous maneuvers and low-level attacks against other countries' ships in the South China Sea.[260] Chinese fishing vessels, whether truly commercial fishing mariners or maritime militia, seldom have their automatic identification system (AIS) transponders, even though they are legally required to do so.[261] Because of this obfuscation, identifying and tracking maritime militia vessels in real time is difficult, and as has been demonstrated at Second Thomas Shoal, the maritime militia can be called in as reinforcements by the Chinese Coast Guard.[262] To improve the Philippines maritime domain awareness around the Second Thomas Shoal, the United States and Australia could establish a multinational South China Sea surveillance center that fuses multiple different types of intelligence collected by satellites.[263] Additionally, Australia and the United States could periodically increase the presence of maritime patrol craft, crewed like the P-8 or uncrewed systems like the MQ-9B.

In this scenario, the ultimate mission is to assert the right to freely navigate in the South China Sea, and to bolster the Philippines with a combined show of force. Multinational exercises that demonstrate an ability to operate together with air and maritime forces

identifying, tracking, and engaging potential hostile ships and aircraft in disputed waters upholds the right of free passage and demonstrates capability to resist.[264] Both American and Australian forces, as well as other interested nations such as Japan, likely would participate in periodic training events and combined operations to strengthen deterrence.[265]

In the Second Thomas Shoal, neither Washington nor Canberra has such interests at stake that they would want to be at the frontline of deterring Chinese aggression. Because China's gray zone tactics are a persistent threat, it is logical for the nation being harassed to take the lead in countering them. The Philippines, therefore, likely would continue to provide forces to hold onto the Second Thomas Shoal, and Philippine boats and aircraft will continue to ferry supplies and personnel to the reef. Nonetheless, the Philippine forces are widely outmatched by the PLA and Chinese Coast Guard, and they lack the space or airborne surveillance capabilities and processing to closely monitor Chinese ships. The United States and Australia can signal combined resolve to uphold the status quo and resist unilateral efforts to forcibly seize territory by establishing a combined maritime domain awareness center and conducting occasional multinational exercises in the South China Sea.

3. Coral Sea Coercion

PLA forces have established a persistent presence in the South Pacific due to deepening cooperation with the Solomon Islands and by 2025 regularly harass Australian ships and aircraft operating in Coral Sea. In this hypothetical future scenario, China has established a military footprint in the South Pacific, and its air and naval forces have been engaging in the same sorts of gray zone coercion that have been so prevalent in the South and East China Seas. China's interest in the South Pacific stems first and foremost from its desire to fuel its economic growth and secure access to the region's resources, especially fish, minerals, and lumber.[266] In addition to promoting and protecting its economic interests, China's pursuit of overseas bases aims to weaken existing alliances, while building associations that Beijing leads.[267]

China's expansion into the South Pacific began in April 2022 when Beijing signed a clandestine security pact with the Solomon Islands in which the two nations agreed to cooperate in the areas of security and law enforcement.[268] This agreement was leaked to the press and followed up in 2023 with the Solomon Islands awarding a Chinese state company, the China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), a contract to refurbish the port at Honiara and wharves in Makira and Renbel provinces.[269] Protestations by the government of the Solomon Islands that it would never allow China to use the island as a military base proved to be false.[270]

In early 2025, even while construction at the port is still underway, PLAN ships increasingly make port calls at Honiara and Chinese fishing vessels and maritime militia increasingly ventured into the Solomon and Coral seas. As Chinese overwhelm the island to work on the ports, local resentment at the Chinese presence grew. In the spring of 2025, protests

erupt against the pro-Chinese Solomon Islands prime minister.[271] Invoking the security pact with China, the Solomon Islands prime minister requests Chinese help in stabilizing the situation. Beijing responds by sending People's Armed Police (PAP) as "peacekeepers" to help restore order to the capital.[272] The protests are quickly put down by the PAP, but the Chinese forces remain in Honiara and are soon joined by PLAAF fighters and drones, and a PLAN surface action group.

In addition to conducting illegal fishing, Chinese ships and aircraft begin to harass Australian military aircraft and ships operating in the northern approaches.[273] Chinese forces begin unsafe maneuvers in the Coral Sea by flying and sailing dangerously close to RAN and RAAF ships and aircraft. For example, a PLAAF fighter fires flares at RAAF P-8 aircraft conducting a routine patrol in Australia's northern approaches, which is a tactic the PLAAF had used previously against Australian helicopters in the Yellow Sea.[274] Such an uptick in Chinese harassment of Australian forces leads to near-miss incidents, such as a Chinese ship nearly colliding with Australian amphibious ships transporting American and Australian Marines for a combined exercise.

Coral Sea: Roles and Missions

In the Coral Sea scenario, Chinese gray zone tactics have grown in frequency and intensity against Australian forces. However, there is no territorial dispute in the Coral Sea, and this will impact the scope of a potential conflict in this scenario. As a result, the primary roles and missions would be to increase patrols of northern approaches, document and publicize illegal and unsafe Chinese behavior, and assert freedom of navigation in the hopes of deterring further harassment. Given Australia's interest in this situation and the proximity of its forces, Australian forces would be responsible for guarding its northern waters and recording Chinese forces' aggressive and irresponsible actions. At the same time, the United States would serve as the backstop for Australia's routine patrols with an intermittent military presence, which would make clear Washington's readiness to defend Australian forces against any Chinese hostility.

For Australia, an increased PLA presence could make Canberra vulnerable to military coercion, and it may need to defend its outlying islands and waters from Chinese aggression. Because the situation could pose a direct threat to Australian sovereignty, Canberra therefore would prioritize countering unfettered Chinese gray zone tactics. Moreover, the ADF is best positioned to respond to this harassment and to protect the freedom of the seas. Its ground-based over-the-horizon radar network, when coupled with airborne intelligence assets, enables the ADF to monitor the area while the RAN could increase its patrols of Australia's northern approaches. Australia would need to expand the number of RAAF aircraft routinely deployed to its northern bases. The ADF could also deploy ground forces with long-range missiles and air defenses to protect these bases, also providing Canberra with the ability to hold nearby Chinese forces at risk. While the objective is to compel the PLA to stop its gray

zone coercion without direct confrontation, it is important for Australia to have a credible threat of escalation. This is where periodic deployments of American bombers and ships, as well as combined exercises, could contribute to the underlying coercive threat.

Although the United States rotates Marines to the Northern Australia city of Darwin annually, and periodically deploys other forces for exercises to Australian air bases, the episodic nature of its presence does not lend itself to being the primary response force to day-to-day coercion by the Chinese. Additionally, Australian forces would take the lead in recording these incidents and share them with the international community. The United States could, however, supplement Australia's intelligence with its space-based capabilities to help identify Chinese illegal actions and track force movements. Furthermore, U.S. Marines already deployed to Darwin might transit on Australian amphibious vessels and other RAN ships in the Arafura and Coral Seas. This type of combined naval presence already routinely occurs, so therefore should not be seen as escalatory, and the allies should continue this practice.[275] This type of deep maritime integration also helps send a strong signal to China that the United States will support Australia. Generally, however, America would be supporting the ADF, which would take the lead in countering Chinese gray zone tactics.

Conclusion

The United States and Australia need to strengthen deterrence, which involves having the ability to defeat various types of Chinese aggression in different locations across the Indo-Pacific. American and Australian forces have a long tradition of working with other countries to counter shared threats, but China presents a much greater challenge than any recent adversary. Chinese military strength has grown to such a level that no one country—not even the United States—can match it alone. And China aims to achieve quick military victories that would be very difficult to reverse. Alliance planning before the war begins, rather than after, is essential. Although Australia and the United States' defense strategies appear to be in lockstep, there remain considerable differences between the allies. But officials in Washington and Canberra likely do not fully appreciate these gaps and need to engage in a combined strategic and operational planning process to develop a shared understanding of where each stands.

Given that Washington and Canberra have different interests in the three hypothetical scenarios presented above, it is unsurprising that a divide and conquer approach in terms of who is in the lead for specific missions in different scenarios makes sense. Neither country has the capacity, or the capabilities postured at the right locations, to undertake all the missions in the three disparate locations. My proposed threat ranking for each ally and their assigned roles and responsibilities are detailed in the table below. Yet Australia and the United States do not need to close all the gaps between them to develop plans that will strengthen deterrence. Behind closed doors, Canberra and Washington need to broach these topics and draft combined response plans to enhance their responsiveness to any aggression.

There are many questions about whether Australia would join in a United States–led effort to defend Taiwan.[276] Ultimately, the Australian government at the time of an attack would make the decision about whether it was in Canberra's interest to join the war. The government may be unwilling to join an anti-China coalition, or refuse to provide American forces with base access because of its deep economic ties to Beijing and vulnerability to Chinese long-range missile attacks.[277] In the proposed division of responsibilities laid out, however, Australian forces are not fighting Chinese forces in the strait, but supporting a multilateral effort by protecting the Australian homeland and key northern sea lines of communication. Australia is the rear guard, while American and Taiwanese forces are on the front lines.

In the South China Sea scenario, both Australia and the United States are interested in stopping Chinese territorial aggrandizement, but also do not want to end up in a major war over a disputed reef. Thus, they would both provide limited support to the Philippines, who will continue to take the lead in resupplying forces on the Second Thomas Shoal. The United States has more formal ties and interest in supporting the Philippines than Australia, and thus, would probably do more in terms of providing the conventional deterrent threat with its occasional military presence than Australia.

In the Coral Sea, Australia has the most at stake. Its geographic proximity to the main area of operations, naturally puts it in the lead for contesting Chinese gray zone attacks. The United States has a deep interest in defending Australia, but because the Coral Sea scenario does not center on a territorial dispute, there is less likelihood of immediate escalation. The United States would provide similar support that it provides in the Second Thomas Shoal scenario to Australia in the Coral Sea with an occasional military presence and combined exercises with ADF troops.

This paper is intended to stimulate conversation among academics, think tankers, and Australian and American government officials. It does not provide a definitive answer to what American and Australian forces should or would do in any particular scenario. For the U.S.-Australian alliance, these may not be the top three scenarios of interest, and my characterization of threat perceptions and preferred division of responsibilities almost certainly does not align with reality in either nation. Yet Canberra and Washington do not need the same prioritization of threats, a precommitment to an allied response, or even an agreement about their appropriate roles and responsibilities. Australian and American officials, however, must discuss and debate these issues in detail if they want to develop coordinated and practical plans for responding to Chinese aggression in the hopes of deterring it from occurring in the first place. If the alliance really is going to be more than the sum of its parts, Washington and Canberra must have difficult conversations in peacetime about their threat perceptions, and how they would coordinate their responses to specific Chinese attacks.

	United States	U.S. threat ranking	Australia	Australian threat ranking
Taiwan invasion	• Distribute forces to increase survivability and deter • Counter invasion • Mainland strikes	1	• Limited forward deployment, if at all • Rear area defense	2
Second Thomas Shoal	• Train the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard • Potentially airdrop supplies to Second Thomas Shoal • Contribute to maritime domain awareness • Provide Philippines with additional patrol ships • Conduct multilateral exercises in the South China Sea	2	• Train Philippine Navy and Coast Guard • Contribute to maritime domain awareness • Provide Philippines with additional patrol ships • Conduct multilateral exercises in the South China Sea	3
Coral Sea	• Provide satellite information to help with maritime domain awareness • Put U.S. Marines on Australian ships • Fly air and sea freedom of navigation operations • Increase exercises in northern approaches	3	• Increase tempo of RAN patrols in area • Fly air and sea freedom of navigation operations • Document unsafe practices and publicize • Position ADF anti-ship missile batteries, air defenses, and RAAF aircraft in northern territories	1

CHAPTER 5

Think Bigger, Act Larger: A U.S.-Australia Led Coalition for a Combined Joint Deterrence Force in the Indo-Pacific

Courtney Stewart

Introduction

The United States, Australia, Japan, and other like-minded allies and partners need to think bigger and more ambitiously to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains free, open, prosperous, and secure. Threats to regional security by China are undercutting the rules-based order. No singular nation, alliance, or existing multilateral forum can effectively deter the types of actions and tactics China utilizes to undermine international law in pursuit of its strategic ambitions. The region's evolving security architecture, marked by a so-called latticework of burgeoning minilateral and bilateral partnerships, reflects a growing desire for collective approaches. Yet, this diffuse framework lacks the structural coherence required to fully integrate disparate components into a cohesive, coordinated, and integrated combined deterrence force. Like-minded nations must urgently establish a framework that consolidates their collective capabilities to deter shared threats and respond if deterrence fails, while competing for mutual interests to secure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The establishment of a combined Joint Deterrence Force (JDF) in the Indo-Pacific is an opportunity to fill a critical gap in the security architecture. By capitalizing on the current political synergies among the United States, Australia, and Japan these nations must take steps to better integrate their combined capabilities and capacities for more effective deterrence. This paper describes how a JDF, led by the United States and supported by existing collective deterrence cooperation with allies like Australia and Japan, would serve as the bedrock of a deterrence coalition. Further, it explores the dynamic and evolving security architecture

that is giving way to ambition coloration but lacks a common strategic framework and a mechanism to actualize the force-multiplying power of an operationalized deterrence coalition. Finally, two existing multinational forces, the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Forces and the U.S.-led Combined Maritime Forces, are reviewed to derive lessons and inform the features of a JDF.

An Evolving Indo-Pacific Security Architecture

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a profound transformation. The move from unipolarity to multipolarity is marked by a growing preference among nations from formal alliances to more flexible arrangements, and from multilateralism to minilateralism, giving rise to coalitions.[278] A range of tectonic geopolitical shifts are behind these changes: the loss of America's regional primacy; China's increasingly coercive military actions and aggressive sovereignty claims; the rise of new and emerging players like India; and the global ripple effect of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Heightened insecurity caused by this broad dynamic is resulting in more nations seeking new or deeper defense cooperative relationships to reinforce their collective ability to respond to threats to their interests. As China grows more assertive—through actions that jeopardize regional peace, stability, and prosperity—nations are increasingly investing in minilateral coalitions. The impetus is not only for their own national security, but the acknowledgment that their peace, stability, and prosperity won't mean much without the collective security of the region.

A main driver behind the region's evolving security order is the combination of China's explicitly stated ambition to establish "world-class forces by the mid-21st century" to ensure its "territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests, and national unity."[279] China's opaque military and nuclear modernization is happening at a pace and scale not seen in the world for half a century, and is underscored by sustained defense budget investments—in 2024 China spent $236 billion, representing just 1.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).[280] The Chinese army and navy (and shipbuilding industry) are the largest in the world, its aviation force is the largest in the region, and it continues to upgrade its strategic forces to include intermediate-range ballistic missiles equipped with hypersonic glide vehicles capable of evading missile defenses.[281]

China's military expansion enables its pursuit of greater power projection capabilities, positioning itself as a formidable force both within and beyond the region. Beijing is increasingly wielding its military power in ways that harass, intimidate, or test the resolve of its neighbors by gradually shifting the status quo without shattering the glass plate that would potentially trigger a military response. The June 2024 South China Sea maritime confrontation with the Philippines over the Second Thomas Shoal epitomizes the type of hybrid tactics China employs to advance disputed territorial claims along the first island chain that are escalating regional tensions.

China's aggressive pursuit of its strategic ambitions directly challenges U.S. dominance, which no longer holds uncontested sway as the regional hegemon. Beijing's revisionist policies are in contravention of international principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom of navigation, all fundamental to a free and open Indo-Pacific. This is not merely a bilateral contest, but a more complex, multifaceted competition, where shifting geopolitical dynamics and interdependencies are drawing in a broader array of actors.[282]

The Rise of Collective Deterrence Through Minilateralism

Recognizing that no single nation or bilateral alliance can unilaterally advance its own interests, America along with its allies and partners are increasingly diversifying and deepening security arrangements toward a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The rise of minilateralism has advanced both U.S. objectives and collective regional aims by reinforcing the pillars of effective deterrence: capability, credibility, and communication. America's focus on great power competition has renewed its emphasis on working closely with allies and partners to address shortfalls in power projection and enhance deterrence to maintain the status quo, as well as dissuade the use of force to resolve disputes.[283]

America's treaty alliances remain the backbone of its defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific. These alliances can enable the collective ability to address the challenges that China presents through a concept of integrated deterrence. The 2024 Commission on the National Defense Strategy highlighted significant ongoing gaps in the U.S. military's capabilities and capacity to effectively deter or prevail in conflict.[284] It also warns that the Joint Force is nearing a critical point in its ability to maintain readiness. The 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) had sought to reverse the trend of strategic overreach by placing allies and partners at the center of its integrated deterrence framework. This concept emphasizes combining strengths across warfighting domains, theaters, and the broader whole-of-government, as an all-hands-on-deck application of national power.

Through the NDS, the U.S. Department of Defense was directed to strengthen and sustain deterrence by prioritizing interoperability and enabling coalitions with enhanced capabilities, new operating concepts, and combined, collaborative force planning.[285] Central to the pursuit of integrated deterrence is the enhancement of and interoperability among ally and partner denial capabilities. U.S. allies and partners provide critical access and positioning, allowing routine military presence and operations near potential flashpoints such as Taiwan, enabling more timely U.S. responses to regional contingencies. Furthermore, a dispersed U.S. military presence across regional locations creates operational dilemmas for Beijing, forcing it to consider a coalition response in the event of an attack.

Collaborative efforts among the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies are increasingly focused on measures that support posture enhancements, defense industrial cooperation, technology transfers, and joint military exercises that are both supporting allied capacity to respond to regional contingencies and advance America's integrated deterrence aims.[286] New

minilateral groupings, such as AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), exemplify this cooperation, with recent additional partnerships like the U.S.-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Agreement, the Australia-Japan-Philippines-U.S. Defense Ministers' Meeting, and the signing of the U.S.-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework, some of the notable examples of the level of momentum behind these burgeoning arrangements.

The expanding security architecture is evolving into a complex web: a latticework of minilateral groups layered over existing bilateral and multilateral relationships.[287] According to the U.S. National Security Council senior director for East Asia and Oceania, the evolving latticework underpins the 2022 NDS by encouraging allies "to step up alongside the United States in new and innovative ways."[288] No two nations share America's commitment to advancing Indo-Pacific security through deterrence better than Australia and Japan. Both nations prioritize regional stability by countering China's growing influence while ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. Their alignment is reflected in substantial commitments to increase national security–related spending, and a shared ambition to enhance their defense posture. This partnership is producing tangible results through reinforced security cooperation with the United States and building broader collaborations with other like-minded nations in the region. A closer analysis of both nations illuminates their distinct, yet convergent, perspectives on achieving a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific through collective deterrence. This insight offers an essential context for understanding the challenges and opportunities they face in this evolving regional landscape and how more must be done to capitalize on this cooperation.

Japan's Strategic Evolution: A Proactive Approach to Indo-Pacific Security

Over the last decade, Japan has made increasingly significant investments in defense capabilities and shifted toward a more proactive role in upholding regional security. China's assertiveness and constant maritime pressure around the Senkaku Islands, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Beijing's strategic alignment with Moscow, have driven Japan to reassess its strategic alignments, defense posture, and capabilities. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's remark, "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," encapsulates Japanese national concern that a similar conflict is on its doorstep, prompting a focus on shaping and deterring for collective regional security.[289] Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program (DBP) chart a strategic course that emphasizes strengthening its own defense and joint deterrence capabilities while deepening ties with the United States and other like-minded partners.[290] Japan's investments in long-range strike capabilities, new naval assets, self-destruct drones, a new satellite constellation, and advanced fighter jets reflect its commitment to a stronger deterrence posture. Japan's ambitious plans represent its largest military buildup in postwar history[291]—funding its national strategies at a cost of approximately $319 billion over five years.[292]

Strategic defense investments serve to bolster Japan's defense posture while reinforcing the joint deterrence capabilities with the United States. Central to Japan's security strategy is the integration of its military assets with those of the United States, with the overarching

objective of deterring any attempts to alter the regional status quo through force. These measures build upon nearly fifteen years of cooperation through the U.S.-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue. The venue has served as a critical coordination mechanism to establish a shared deterrence lexicon and policy framework, prioritize the alliance's deterrence posture and response capabilities, and manage existing and emerging threats through the establishment of an Alliance Coordination Mechanism.[293]

Recently, the focus of Japan-U.S. alliance deterrence efforts is on deepening the integration of their military forces, thereby enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of their collective defense posture. Significant military investments have been directed toward improving coordination in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; optimizing the operational use of Japan's counterstrike capabilities; and bolstering Japan's support for the stationing of U.S. forces.[294] This includes the forward deployment of a carrier strike group and the Third Marine Expeditionary Force, both of which are integral to U.S. power projection in East Asia and boosts the alliance's combined deterrence and response capabilities.[295] To enhance the alliance's capacity to deter, joint flexible deterrent options and operational coordination functions, bilateral contingency planning, and additional training and exercises are being pursued in this era of strategic competition.[296]

In July 2024, the Japan-U.S. alliance announced its most far-reaching enhancements around coordination and command and control to strengthen the credibility of their deterrence posture in recognition of rising regional tensions. In a landmark decision, both nations agreed to pursue efforts that would reconstitute U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) as a joint force headquarters (JFHQ) reporting to the Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).[297] Through this approach, USFJ would augment its capabilities and operational cooperation with the Japan Self-Defense Forces Joint Operations Command (JJOC), and assume primary responsibility for coordinating security activities in and around Japan, in accordance with the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.[298]

Through a joint force headquarters, these allies' forces improve their ability to respond rapidly and effectively to security threats, reinforcing the perception that they are unified and capable of countering aggression. This integration enhances deterrence in two key ways. First, the establishment of a JFHQ strengthens operational readiness, improving real-time situational awareness and the ability to make coordinated decisions swiftly. Second, by linking these command structures directly to USINDOPACOM, Japan and the United States demonstrate a robust, joint commitment to regional security, signaling to potential adversaries, such as China or North Korea, that any aggressive actions will be met with a highly coordinated and immediate response. This elevated coordination raises the cost of any military escalation for adversaries, enhancing the overall deterrent effect by demonstrating that Japan and the United States can credibly and decisively respond to threats.

Second only to Japan's alliance with the United States is Japan's robust and ambitious partnership with Australia. The relationship is rooted in shared values, a common strategic vision, mutual recognition of shared threats, shared status as middle powers, and close

American allies. The 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), reaffirmed these nations' Special Strategic Partnership, solidifying their collaborative commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, anchored in the rules-based international order.[299] This framework emphasizes the importance of respecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, and promoting a strategic balance to deter actions that undermine global norms and legal frameworks.

In 2022, Japan flew two F-35s and moved fifty-five people to the Northern Territory in Australia for the country's first international venture by their Joint Strike Fighters—marking post-war Japan's first expeditionary air operation, except with the United States.[300] These forces then accompanied Australian F-35s back to Japan to participate in Exercise Bushido Guardian. The JDSC has further committed both countries to consulting with each other on contingencies that may affect their sovereignty and regional security interests and to consider joint response measures. The 2023 completion of the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) marked a further major milestone between the two countries—as well as it being Japan's first defense treaty with an international partner since 1960—that underscores the strategic significance and the mutual commitment these partners have in deepening bilateral security cooperation.[301]

For more than ten years, the Japan-Australia-U.S. trilateral relationship has demonstrated a consistent commitment to enhancing cooperation to promote the security, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific, and a growing desire to work together to address regional challenges. The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), initiated in 2002, involves regular minister-level meetings to pursue an ongoing defense cooperative agenda that highlights the value of shared perspectives and a unified approach to enable more rapid responses to shared threats and interests. In late August 2024, a Chinese surveillance plane violated Japanese airspace, which was followed just five days later by the incursion of a Chinese survey ship into Japan's territorial waters occurred shortly before the Australia-Japan 2+2 ministerial meeting.[302] Within a week of that meeting, Japan, Australia, and the United States initiated discussions aimed at enhancing command and control coordination between Australia's Joint Operations Command and Japan's JJOC, as well as exchanging liaison officers between these commands. Additionally, Japan and Australia agreed to jointly strengthen their deterrence capabilities in the region, leveraging their partnership with the United States as a shared ally. One significant initiative under consideration is Japan's participation in U.S. Marine rotations in Darwin, which may include deployments of the Japanese Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade and F-35 fighter jet deployments, alongside an increase in joint exercises in and around Australia.[303]

Japan is steadily expanding its network of defense cooperation arrangements in response to China's increasing military assertiveness, while deepening partnerships where strategic interests intersect. Outside of deepening the U.S.-Japan defense partnership, Japan is also expanding ties with key partners in separate minilaterals with South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and NATO, through the Asia-Pacific Four (or AP4) represented by Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. A key focus of these partnerships is around

capability development and interoperability, as well as joint training and exercises around shared interests, such as maritime security and cyber defense. Japan's new RAAs with the United Kingdom and the Philippines, and negotiations with France are a case in point. These RAAs are emerging from shared concerns about the global implications of the deteriorating security situation in the South China Sea, driving the need for deeper cooperative activities and improved interoperability. Japan's evolving approach to collective security, with a strong emphasis on deterrence, reflects both a response to growing regional threats and a proactive effort to shape the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Australia's Expanding Influence is Shaping Collective Deterrence

Australia is undergoing one of the most significant shifts in its defense strategic policy since the Cold War. Australia seeks a regional strategic equilibrium—enabled by a collective pursuit of deterrence—in which the sovereignty of all countries, large and small, is respected, and where all countries are free to pursue their national interests within the confines of a rules-based order.[304] The 2023 Defence Strategic Review recommended that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) "maximize deterrence, denial, and response options" by transforming into an integrated force capable of delivering effects across all domains.[305] The 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS) took this recommendation a step further by adopting a strategy of denial, aiming to dissuade adversaries from taking actions harmful to Australia's interests and regional stability.[306] To enable this strategy, the ADF is bolstering its capability to independently and collectively deter, in concert with the United States and partners like Japan.

Not only is Australia's most recent national defense strategy complementary to the United States. NDS, but it has demonstrated a commitment to shared interests both in words and deeds. Australia is making substantial investments in both direct and indirect deterrence capabilities. Key among these investments is the acquisition of force projection capabilities from the AUKUS-enabled nuclear-power submarines, strike systems like the Joint Strike Missiles for the F-35, the acquisition of the Tomahawk cruise missile for Australia's Hobart-class destroyers; and the land-based Precision Strike Missiles and Army Tactical Missile Systems for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems. This also includes ADF enhancements in passive defense through large purchases of smart sea mines. Investments are also being made toward enabling capabilities like MQ-4C Triton unmanned surveillance aircraft for enhanced situational awareness in the maritime domain. Former chief of the defence force general Angus J. Campbell reinforced the requirement to work collectively, because: "enhanced defence capability alone is insufficient. As a relatively modestly sized military, credible deterrence can only be delivered in partnership with those with whom we share common cause."[307]

Australia is playing an increasingly pivotal role in U.S. efforts to counter China's military strategy and deter potential aggression. Critical to this arrangement is the bilateral Enhanced Force Posture Cooperation Initiative. Under this initiative, Australia hosts rotational U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps elements for training and exercises for enhanced air, land, maritime, combined logistics, sustainment and maintenance, and space cooperation. These efforts are a significant expansion on force posture cooperation since they began in

2011. Australia and the United States are collaborating on infrastructure improvements to include base upgrades and expansion into new facilities, such as the use of Cocos Islands for extended maritime surveillance operations—stemming from the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.[308] Funding upgrades to two bases in Northern Australia, for example, to support rotations of B-52 and B-1 aircraft and long-range bomber operations is another example of such posture investments.[309]

An early milestone in the AUKUS partnership, Australia is set to host Submarine Rotational Force-West, with U.S. Navy Virginia-class attack submarines beginning rotational deployments by 2027.[310] In 2023, Australia completed its first-ever deep maintenance activity on a U.S. Navy MH-60R Seahawk helicopter, and in August 2024, U.S. and Royal Australian Navy personnel conducted joint maintenance on the USS *Hawaii*, a Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarine, and the first U.S. attack submarine to undergo such work on Australian soil.[311] These interoperability efforts are poised to greatly enhance American force projection capabilities across the Oceania region.

Australia has been a vocal advocate for the role of deterrence and the collective pursuit of a regional balance of power. Not only is Australia investing in significant minilateral arrangements like AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, but it is active in deepening defense relationships beyond Japan, to include South Korea, India, New Zealand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Canada, and other partners in Southeast Asia. During consecutive Shangri-La Dialogues, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles has argued that the need for new capabilities is "about Australia playing its part in helping contribute to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific . . . and to regional balance."[312] Shortly after the 2024 Philippines-China Second Thomas Shoal incident, he argued that:

<EXT> "all nations need to invest in a form of collective deterrence. We cannot just appeal to great powers to conduct strategic competition responsibly. That is too passive. Rather, we should seek, through our own national capabilities and regional architecture, to build a sustainable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in which no one country in our region is militarily dominant. We must seek a set of conditions in the Indo-Pacific which constrain and ultimately preclude military options as a tool to seize or gain territory by ensuring that the risks of force outweigh any perceived benefit. We must all deepen our network of strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific that more effectively integrate our capabilities. This, of course, has a strong bilateral dimension."[313]</EXT>

As Australia seeks to optimize and capitalize on available advantages and signal a commitment to upholding a favorable balance of power in the region, America remains indispensable to this approach. Australia and the United States are more firmly aligned than ever on the need to advance a collective approach to deterrence and security in the Indo-Pacific.

The Need for a Coalition Approach for Competition and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific

The collective ambition of the United States, Australia, and Japan to counter China's assertive behavior and safeguard a free and open Indo-Pacific region faces critical challenges. While trilateral and bilateral security cooperation between these nations has dramatically expanded, structural barriers hinder the creation of a more cohesive coalition capable of delivering effective deterrence. A core issue is the lack of a shared strategic framework to coordinate military capability. Although the countries share a vision for regional stability, they have not fully aligned their objectives, especially to prioritize specific threats and defining collective responses. Without clear and coordinated goals, policy alignment remains fragmented, diminishing the potential for a unified deterrent force.

Moreover, a critical weakness is the absence of a mechanism to integrate capabilities into a combined, operationally ready force. The lack of joint command structures, integrated planning, and synchronized military exercises in pursuit of key priorities, further undermines operational readiness. This leaves the coalition unable to have the level of readiness necessary to influence changes to the status quo. Despite pockets of excellence in elements among the United States, Australia, and Japan there is an insufficient level of interoperability across the human, procedural, and technical domains to enable the level of operational cohesion required for a credible deterrence posture.[314]

Interoperability must be viewed as a strategic enabler, critical for leveraging collective military power in ways that promote mutual trust and operational effectiveness. Without an institutionalized means of integrating member states' forces, efforts to coordinate joint missions, fill capability gaps, and execute joint deterrence measures remain disjointed. The absence of seamless interoperability undermines the coalition's ability to demonstrate both the readiness and resolve necessary to sustain a credible deterrence posture. By prioritizing interoperability, and pursuing integration—the highest level of multinational interoperability according to the U.S. Army manual on multinational interoperability—a coalition can undertake more sophisticated and coordinated military operations, producing greater combat power, thus enhancing their collective capacity to deter.[315]

A coalition approach allows for the pooling of military, economic, and political capital, amplifying the collective power of individual nations to coordinate and harness military capability toward common interests in a competitive security environment. A framework approach to collective deterrence enables the coalition to prioritize the most critical scenarios or threats—maritime security, territorial integrity, freedom of navigation or critical —lending greater credibility to its deterrence strategy. A unified stance among multiple nations also raises the costs for any potential adversary attempting to coerce or intimidate individual members, complicating adversarial strategies. This force-multiplying effect not only strengthens the credibility of the deterrence posture but also, forcing any act of aggression to be

far riskier. Without the ability to act together coherently and effectively to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives, the deterrence coalition risks: failure, legitimacy, preparedness, and potential undue harm to coalition forces.[316]

The Way to Operationalize Coalition Deterrence

The complexity of deterrence, especially in the context of Indo-Pacific dynamics, demands more than minilateral arrangements and fragmented alliances. To ensure a credible and effective deterrence posture, the growing deterrence coalition among the United States, Australia, and Japan should move toward a permanent joint force structure that enables operational cohesion and strategic alignment. The establishment of a multinational Joint Deterrence Force (JDF) could serve as the foundational mechanism for a robust, combined military framework capable of addressing shared regional challenges and deterring aggression collectively.

The Indo-Pacific security architecture, despite its extensive alliances and partnerships, lacks a dedicated mechanism to fully harness collective deterrence. The absence of a permanent, combined joint force undermines the ability to plan, coordinate, and execute joint operations effectively against shared threats. Misaligned defense capabilities, unclear political priorities, and a lack of integration across command structures and intelligence-sharing mechanisms hinder the coalition's capacity to respond cohesively in times of crisis, increasing the risk of miscalculation and weakening the regional security dynamic. A JDF would provide the structural framework needed to operationalize coalition deterrence, institutionalizing collective security goals and enhancing military interoperability for combined force. By aligning strategic objectives and integrating capabilities, the JDF would enable proactive competition, faster resource mobilization, and improved crisis communication. This cohesive approach would strengthen the coalition's deterrent posture and signal a unified commitment to regional stability, while also ensuring the capability to act decisively should deterrence fail.

In Pursuit of Coalition Deterrence

To operationalize a JDF, several key requirements must be met. First, there must be a shared strategic vision that aligns the goals and priorities of coalition members. Without a clear understanding of the threats to be deterred and the objectives to be achieved, the coalition will struggle to maintain cohesion and credibility. Second, the JDF must have institutionalized command and control structures. These structures would allow for real-time coordination, intelligence sharing, and joint decision-making. By centralizing command and control, the coalition could act with greater speed and effectiveness, ensuring that all members contribute to the deterrence effort in a meaningful way. Third, the coalition must prioritize interoperability across all military domains. This requires regular joint training and exercises, standardized equipment, and integrated logistics. Only by achieving a high degree of interoperability, can the coalition ensure that its forces can operate together seamlessly in response to any contingency. Lastly, the coalition must create a sustainable mechanism for burden-sharing. This involves ensuring that all members contribute fairly to the collective

deterrence effort, both in terms of resources and political commitment. Burden-sharing not only strengthens the legitimacy of the coalition but also ensures that no single nation bears a disproportionate share of the costs and risks associated with deterrence.

The United States, given its military capabilities and global influence, is best positioned to lead the establishment of a Joint Deterrence Force with Australian support for the establishment of a coalition approach to regional collective deterrence. As the primary advocate for the rules-based international order and its extensive coalition-building experience, the United States has both the power, influence, and resources to drive this initiative forward. Australia's leadership role within the region would further enhance the coalition's legitimacy. As a middle power with deep connections to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, Australia can act as a bridge between smaller nations wary of antagonizing China and the broader coalition effort. The United States, while essential, often faces resistance when its actions are perceived as overreach. Australia, on the other hand, brings a degree of regional trust and soft power that is crucial for cultivating a broad, inclusive coalition that resonates with the security concerns of its neighbors. Australia has also been a strong advocate for a collective approach to security and deterrence for free and open Indo-Pacific. Ultimately, no two countries in the Indo-Pacific share the level of depth and history of defense cooperation as the United States and Australia—both nations have fought together in every major conflict since World War I.[317]

USINDOPACOM in Hawaii should serve as the logical headquarters for the JDF, given its role as a hub for multinational operations and its unifying alliance status. The decision to reconstitute U.S. Forces Japan as a joint force headquarters reporting to the Commander of USINDOPACOM, reinforces the primacy of this option from a command-and-control perspective. Today, Australia has a significant footprint at USINDOPACOM, with some forty-five members of the military embedded, including two two-star Generals.[318] The establishment of a multinational JDF represents a pivotal opportunity to operationalize coalition deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. By creating a permanent, combined force structure, a coalition of like-minded nations will be far better positioned to deter threats, shape the regional security environment, and address specific security challenges too significant for any single or bilateral alliance to handle alone.

Defining the Features of Combined Joint Deterrence Force in the Indo-Pacific

Globally, a few examples of permanent combined joint forces provide meaningful insights about the institutional structure that would be required of forces operationalizing collective deterrence. No singular example in another region of the world can be used to mold the JDF, however two case studies exist that should inform the potential vision and scope of such a force in the Indo-Pacific, and provide meaningful lessons learned for the development of such a combined joint force.

Case Study 1: The Joint Expeditionary Force

The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a UK-led coalition of ten nations united by a shared commitment to respond swiftly to crises and to deter and defend against threats to the security of Northern Europe.[319] Its geographic focus covers the High North, considered the European Arctic, stretching from the North Atlantic from Greenland in the West to the Norwegian-Russian border in the Barents Sea to the East, and South into the Baltic Sea region. JEF participant nations are all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, and they share a commitment to democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and regional peace in Northern Europe. As a collective international body, the JEF can respond quickly to emerging crises, which in turn reinforces individual national defense capabilities and contributes to bolstering NATO's deterrence posture. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has contributed to JEF Participant Nations' commitment to unified cooperation and collective strength as enablers of regional security.[320]

When the JEF was launched in 2014 at a NATO Summit in Wales, the UK government described it as "a pool of high readiness, adaptable forces that is designed to enhance the UK's ability to respond rapidly, anywhere in the world, with like-minded allies, or on behalf of international organisations such as the UN or NATO."[321] The JEF emerged from NATO's Framework Nations Concept designed to foster multinational defense collaboration by organizing functional groupings around a larger ally.[322] NATO's vision was that the larger allies who maintain a broader spectrum of capabilities could provide a framework for other like-minded allies to plug into.[323] The primary catalyst for the JEF's creation was the evolving security environment in Europe, particularly Russian aggression in Crimea and broader Eastern Europe, highlighting the need for rapid, flexible military responses from Europe. The UK's involvement in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq had led to the disbandment of their Joint Rapid Reaction Force, which had been established in the mid-1990s to provide capabilities for military and humanitarian crisis.[324] Renewed geopolitical regional threats made it clear that a high-readiness multinational force was necessary for deterrence and crisis response.

As the framework nation, the UK is both the operational and institutional lead. The JEF Standing Joint Force Headquarters and the JEF Secretariat, located at the UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood, London is where all overseas military operations are planned and controlled.[325] The JEF is commanded by a British two-star Major General and supported by upwards of 150 multinational personnel.[326] As highlighted by the UK Parliament, the JEF is not a separate standing army or fighting force, but rather a collection of units that train and exercise together that serves as a forum for discussion of defense and security issues between allies.[327] As such, the UK is not given forces, nor are any forces identified. The JEF utilizes each nation's existing high readiness forces and upon consultation and sovereign national decision of the participants, deploys them, as and when required, operating under an "opt-in" structure.[328]

The JEF is complementary to NATO aims and objectives, but it is not part of NATO. The coalition operates independently in its own right but can also do so seamlessly with NATO. Members are not treaty-bound, and the JEF mechanism is designed to supplement NATO and participant nations' own response capabilities. The JEF was specifically designed to enable swift responses to security threats and crises below the threshold of conventional war. Operating independently from NATO's formal structures, it allows decision-makers to act more flexibly and without the need for consensus, ensuring faster, more adaptable engagement in rapidly evolving situations. The JEF fills a niche absent in NATO, the ability to take collective action, without the delays of consensus negotiations and potentially triggering "Article 5" —their principle of collective defense.[329] This approach allows members flexibility to contribute forces, resources, and expertise as needed, depending on the mission or activity. If there is an agreement among two or more JEF members to work together, a JEF operation will proceed, and force contributions, support, and lead elements execute.[330]

Since the 2018 signing of the Comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding, the JEF has progressively expanded its primary operational focus to include defending critical national infrastructure and strengthening force integration through joint military exercises.[331] This evolving mandate reflects the JEF's adaptability to emerging threats in the region, ensuring preparedness in both conventional defense and hybrid security challenges. This has been demonstrated through the JEF's early support for Ukraine, providing military, political, humanitarian, economic, and legal assistance, signing the international Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, and efforts to strengthen security cooperation. Ukraine is to observe JEF exercises in 2024 and 2025, with the intention to "increase interoperability, and enhance the capability of the Armed Forces of Ukraine."[332]

JEF operations are based upon the JEF Operating Framework to meet the needs of its participant nations in both peacetime and crisis situations. Thus, persistent JEF Integration Options (JIOs) and proactive JEF Response Options (JROs) are developed as planned integrated military activities to support a range of strategic pursuits to enhance multilateral capabilities, to reassure nations and deter aggression, and to deploy below the threshold of war throughout the continuum of competition to conflict. JROs are designed for optimal alignment to the JEF participant nations' national defense plans and the NATO family of plans.[333] During peacetime, members integrate their capabilities to demonstrate unity and cohesion through joint training and exercises, and to continually innovate ways to enhance their operations for cohesiveness and effectiveness. In November 2023, JEF Defense Ministers agreed, for the first time, to activate a JRO, toward the protection of critical undersea infrastructure, and again in 2024, as a series of activities to include exercises, and the integration of new technologies.[334]

The JEF is more than a joint expeditionary force, it's a dynamic mechanism for member nations to contribute to regional security and deterrence, enhance their own capacities, and serve as a forum to collaborate and coordinate security threats.

Case Study 2: The Combined Maritime Forces

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) is the world's largest multinational naval partnership and maritime coalition. Its 46 members operate a network of influence within an area of responsibility (AOR) covering approximately 3.2 million square miles of international waters from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.[335] The AOR encompasses three of the top six crucial maritime choke points in the world, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb.

The U.S.-led CMF was established in 2001 by twelve like-minded nations as a Maritime Security Operations (MSO) combined task force outside the Arabian Gulf to counter the threat of international terrorism at sea post-9/11.[336] This was an expansion of a U.S. Navy formation under Operation Enduring Freedom. However, the CMF's origins date back to 1991, under Operation Desert Storm, when the United States called for the first "coalition of the willing."[337] Many of the original CMF nations were participants in the Desert Storm coalition, contributing to the CMF's extensive multinational operational history.

The CMF's goal is to ensure regional freedom of navigation by combating piracy, smuggling, terrorism, and other threats, while also supporting the strategic interests of partner nations.[338] This includes the capacity-building of its members. CMF operationalizes this mandate through five Combined Task Forces (CTFs) that focus on both regional and functional threats and challenges. The CTF focus areas include: CTF-150 MSO outside the Arabian Gulf, CTF-151 counter-piracy, CTF-152 MSO inside the Arabian Gulf, CTF-153 Red Sea Maritime Security, and CTF-154 Maritime Security Training.[339] CTFs are commanded on a rotational basis among members, based on interest, experience, and resources, which require the members to devote additional personnel to the task force staff. Each CTF has a unique history, member composition, missions, training, exercises, and interdictions or interceptions focus.

The CMF maintains an active and strategic public affairs presence across social media platforms, effectively showcasing key activities, leadership transitions, and operational successes. This outreach bolsters transparency, fosters a global awareness of CMF initiatives, and underscores the tangible contributions of member nations. By highlighting these achievements, CMF not only strengthens its international reputation but also enhances deterrence by demonstrating collective maritime security capabilities, as well as highlighting individual national achievements at a global stage that improves their military operational credibility.

The CMF is commanded by a three-star U.S. Navy vice admiral, who also serves as commander of U.S. Navy Central Command and U.S. 5th Fleet, co-located at U.S. Naval Support Activity Bahrain. CMF's deputy commander is a UK Royal Navy commodore, and other senior staff roles at the headquarters are filled by personnel from member nations, with a large share provided by Australia, France, Italy, and Denmark.[340] At their most recent annual Maritime Security Conference, CMF Commander and Vice Admiral George M. Wikoff articulated the combined force's unique command structure, "I see myself as the

CEO and you are the board of directors. And as that board of directors, you tell me what we want to achieve, and it is up to me and the CMF organization to deliver."[341] The CMF conference functions as a high-level consultative forum, providing an opportunity to assess past initiatives, plan strategic objectives for the coming year, and explore new avenues for strengthening maritime security and partnerships.

Nations join the CMF with a shared commitment to upholding the international rules-based order, safeguarding the free flow of legitimate commerce, ensuring regional maritime security by deterring illicit activities, and maintaining readiness against emerging threats. Recognizing that no single nation can unilaterally ensure maritime security, member states contribute forces and personnel to collectively address significant threats. Membership in the CMF also supports military objectives such as capacity-building, gaining operational experience under different command structures, and enhancing interoperability with nations outside formal alliances. In November 2023, India transitioned from associate partner to full CMF membership, becoming the tenth Indo-Pacific participant alongside Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and the United States. India's decision was framed as a strategic move to deepen interoperability with the United States and advance the sophistication of their defense partnership. India's participation is also key to advancing their security objectives, with maritime partnerships playing a crucial role. By April 2024, the Indian Navy completed its first mission under a foreign flag, interdicting the narcotics trade under CTF-150, led by the Canadian Navy.[342]

Institutionally, CMF membership is voluntary, tiered, and flexible; having no elaborate political or military mandate, no set working language, or established contribution requirements to join or participate.[343] Instead, each nation's contribution varies depending on its ability to contribute assets and the availability of those assets at any given time. As such, contributions vary from the provision of one or many liaison officers at CMF headquarters to the supply of warships or maritime reconnaissance aircraft in task forces. For instance, the CMF can call on warships not explicitly assigned to CMF to give support, which may be offered if that nation has the time and capacity while undertaking national tasking.[344] The contribution philosophy is that members "will never be asked to do more than what their national mandate allows."[345]

The CMF has proven highly effective in the Middle East—serving as a critical mechanism for collective action. In the last ten years, membership has risen more than 50 percent, representing key regional players like India; and in the last two years, two new task forces were stood up, expanding the scope of maritime security operations in the region. The CMF contributes to security in direct ways—in 2021, the CTF 150, under Royal Canadian Navy command, led to a record-setting seizure of 2,835 pounds (1,286 kilograms) of heroin during a counter-smuggling operation in the Arabian Sea.[346] Examples like this are making a salient impact on impeding drug trafficking, which is often used to finance terrorism in the region. This essential work is indirectly contributing to enhancing regional deterrence of threats against freedom of navigation and legitimate free flow of trade.

Lessons from the JEF and CMF and Critical Features of an Effective Coalition

The JEF in Europe and CMF in the Middle East serve similar functions as multinational military frameworks dedicated to complex systemic regional threats focused on delivering discrete capabilities for specific mission sets. However, they achieve their aims through unique institutional approaches. Numerous lessons and defining features of these cooperative bodies can inform the scope and structure of an effective Joint Deterrence Force in the Indo-Pacific region.

Establish a Clear Vision and Policy Direction for Unity of Effort

A clear vision ensures all members are aligned and working toward the same objectives and preventing misunderstandings of regional neighbors. A shared vision also enhances coordination among diverse members, fostering cohesion and effective collaboration in the development and participation of activities from training to deployment. Achieving campaign objectives requires civilian-military coordination to ensure continued support and strategic alignment. However, this kind of unified effort is traditionally challenging to accomplish. The JEF's political-military connection is rooted in its public policy direction and accompanying classified military strategic objectives. JEF holds regular senior political, policy and military meetings to develop and refine JEF's coordinated responses to meet evolving challenges and strategic priorities.[347]

The CMF and JEF demonstrate an overriding unity of strategic purpose, which is essential for coalition unity of effort. Kathleen McInnis argues these critical components are essential to coalition success because, as mission difficulty and risk increase, coalition cohesion decreases without an overwhelming threat.[348] Without shared interests, nations are unlikely to prioritize collective goals over their own, leading to fractures among partners. Building agreement into military coalitions requires compromise, which can in turn, constrain operational-level effectiveness. Having shared interests, such as a perceived or real threat, is crucial for achieving strategic-level consensus on the purpose, goals, and end state of coalition operations, which is essential for coalition formation and success.[349] Ultimately, the stronger the unity of interest, the greater the commitment of members to a coalition.

Develop a Political Identity and Foster Cohesion

Both the CMF and JEF emerged from preexisting organizations with established operational histories in their respective regions or thematic areas, drawing on their original memberships. For instance, the political cohesion of the JEF is a function of its "like-mindedness" as NATO allies and close geographic proximity to each other. Similarly, the backbone of CMF membership was united against the common threat of terrorism, and their identity was formed out of common values and interests. This feature of the CMF's identity, coupled with its flexible and member-driven agenda, has enabled it to evolve with changes to the security environment, re-prioritize its mission based on current threats, and maintain unity and cohesion.

A strong, shared identity is key to building cohesion within a Joint Deterrence Force (JDF). Greater transparency, as seen with the CMF and JEF, can help strengthen this identity. Both organizations maintain public visibility through joint statements, press releases, active websites, and social media. This openness raises awareness of member contributions, enhances credibility, and legitimizes the coalition's mission, fostering a sense of unity and purpose among participating nations.

Leadership, Membership, and the Pursuit of Interoperability

The CMF and JEF are led by nations with significant global influence, robust military capabilities, and extensive experience in multinational coalitions. The United States and the UK, as leaders, provide the strategic vision, political will, and commitment to collective security essential for effective coalition leadership. Their ability to manage members' differing risk tolerances and operational caveats (i.e. scoping directives on force employment) is crucial to maintaining cohesion and operational success.

While the CMF and JEF take different approaches to membership, both balance the need for (such as high cohesion) over quantity (that is, highly inclusive). The CMF, for instance, operates without a fixed language, formal membership criteria, or mandatory contributions—nations participate voluntarily by committing forces or personnel. This flexibility can challenge cohesion and interoperability but also allows for broader participation. Effective coalitions must carefully balance political and military participation, as greater membership does not always equate to more effective missions. The strengths of the CMF and JEF lie in their flexible, opt-in formats, which allow nations to contribute based on specialization, interest, and capability. This structure not only generates force-multiplying effects by matching capabilities but also enables smaller nations to participate in ways they otherwise couldn't, enhancing capacity, interoperability, and the overall legitimacy of the coalition.

Overall, the strengths of both the CMF and JEF in their opt-in membership format contribute to the coalition based on a participating nation's specialization, interest, and capability, which enables a number of benefits. First, flexible participation in a structured format allows the CMF and JEF to match the capabilities and contributions of larger and smaller nations within their unique task force groupings to generate force-multiplying effects. It further supports smaller participating nations to contribute capabilities or capacities to tasks they would otherwise not be able to generate, and thus, the structure provides a mechanism for nations to work together, build capacity, interoperability, and greater legitimacy of the coalition.

Implementing a Joint Deterrence Force

A future Joint Deterrence Force should encompass a comprehensive and integrated approach to collective security, enabling its members to collectively shape the environment and deter aggression through credible and coordinated military activities and operations. The JDF would be designed to complement other international frameworks and avoid duplication, and should support other bodies, such as the United Nations or NATO, as appropriate or

required. The JDF should focus on developing joint operational readiness, ensuring high levels of interoperability across air, land, sea, cyber, space domains, and unifying strategic goals among participating nations. Members would contribute the capabilities that would enable the JDF to plan, exercise and operate effectively together. The JDF should aim to complement member nations' direct and indirect deterrence capabilities. This approach would be enabled through enhanced shared situational awareness with greater interconnectivity and integration enabling common solutions to common challenges. The JDF would serve as a vital forum for political consultations on defense and security challenges affecting the region. This political cohesion would not only enhance the deterrence posture but also fortify the legitimacy and credibility of the coalition's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Several key features directing the mechanics of the JDF require more extensive consideration to address unique facets of regional geopolitics and deterrence requirements. Those include formality and decision making, contribution of members, and identification of potential task groups around functional security threats or in sub-regions. A JDF should consider an opt-in, flexible arrangement, offering levels of membership, that is grounded in a memorandum of intent establishing clear member contributions, as well as roles and responsibilities. To this end, JDF participants should not be obliged to contribute forces to any given activity or deployment; instead, it remains a sovereign national decision for participants to contribute, within their respective legal frameworks. As such, the JDF operations and force deployments would only require consensus among two members to pursue an activity or operation, similar to the JEF. Lastly, to enhance cohesion, defense secretaries and ministers should meet annually, and the JDF should hold regular political, policy, and military working group meetings at a senior level to maintain a shared understanding and maximize coordinated and synchronized responses to evolving challenges.

Conclusion

Deterrence is complex and coalitions are hard. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, "There is at least only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them."[350] History tells us that managing and operating in a military coalition is very challenging due to the extraordinary requirements around multinational cooperation, coordination, and cohesion politically and militarily at the strategic, operational, and institutional levels. An ambitious international response toward the goal of an open and free Indo-Pacific regional order is necessary. The United States and its allies possess both the capabilities and an emerging framework for action; what remains essential is the leadership, trust, and unified political will to assert their collective influence in shaping the future of the international order.

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