



**Confronting a ‘Fear of Abandonment’:  
Imagining Australian Grand Strategy in the Event of U.S. Disengagement**

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**JCSP 51**

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## **CONFRONTING A ‘FEAR OF ABANDONMENT’: IMAGINING AUSTRALIAN GRAND STRATEGY IN THE EVENT OF US DISENGAGEMENT**

*Our alliance with the United States is our past, our present and our future.*

- Scott Morrison, The 2019 Lowy Lecture

Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s remarks on the enduring significance of the US alliance could have been spoken by any number of Australian leaders since the fall of Singapore in 1942; such is the depth and longevity of the Australia-US relationship. In recent years, this importance has only grown, most notably through the establishment of the AUKUS agreement. Yet despite this seemingly deepening commitment, a persistent “fear of abandonment” continues to permeate the halls of Canberra.<sup>1</sup> Amid the seemingly growing influence of the Jacksonian tradition in contemporary American foreign policy, this anxiety may be intensifying.<sup>2</sup> Noting these conditions—and recognising that US security disengagement from the Indo-Pacific would represent “the biggest shift in Australia’s international circumstances since European settlement”—analysing such a scenario is both necessary and timely.<sup>3</sup>

This essay explores the implications for Australia’s grand strategy in the event that the US disengage from the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture. Scenario planning provides the analytical framework to explore the strategic environment and Australia’s prospective responses. What is clear from this analysis is that Australia’s prospects without the US are

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World Since 1942* (Black Inc., 2017), 14-22, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 224-263, ProQuest Ebook Central; Uday Patil and V. Anand, “America’s China Policy under the Trump Administration, 2017–2021: Perspectives from Mead’s Foreign Policy Traditions,” *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 5 (2024): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2024.2434377>; Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, “Donald Trump and American Foreign Policy: The Return of the Jacksonian Tradition,” *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 4 (2017): 375-376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1361210>.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh White, “Without America: Australia in the New Asia,” *Quarterly Essay*, no. 68 (2017): 77, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/agispt.20175180>.

markedly more pessimistic. Each strategic option is undermined by critical challenges, entails greater costs, and delivers a secure outlook.

The essay proceeds in four parts. First, Australia's existing grand strategy, centred on the US' critical role, will be explored using a three-step formulation that considers interests, threats, and responses. Second, a scenario of US disengagement will be established. From this baseline, a 2x2 matrix will be constructed based on two critical uncertainties: the model of regional hegemony China might pursue, and Australia's determination to maintain or relinquish its middle-power status. This matrix enables analysis in the third part of the essay of Australia's potential strategic responses in each scenario quadrant. Each quadrant will be thematically linked to a native Australian animal, the koala, echidna, cassowary, and dingo, to highlight each approach's key traits. While each approach is worthy of detailed consideration, the scope of this essay necessitates a concise treatment, with greater emphasis placed on options more consistent with Australian strategic identity.

Some commentators dismiss speculation of a regional security architecture absent US support as "hyperbolic".<sup>4</sup> While not the most likely scenario, it is nonetheless one of sufficient feasibility to warrant consideration. Indeed, this is where the value of scenario planning, a structured and creative approach to examining possible futures, comes to the fore. By identifying key stakeholders, prevailing trends, and critical uncertainties, scenario planning helps to challenge assumptions and consider uncertain—but highly consequential—futures.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the 2x2 matrix will be used to chart four scenarios based on key uncertainties and

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security in the Event of a Post US Alliance Era," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2024): 485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2369788>.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Schoemaker, "Scenario Planning: A Tool For Strategic Thinking," *Sloan Management Review* 36, no. 2 (1995): 27-29, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/scenario-planning-tool-strategic-thinking/docview/1302991850/se-2>.

strategic actors.<sup>6</sup> These scenarios will support analysis of the factors influencing Australia's strategic choices should the US disengage from the region. Given the potentially severe consequences of such a development, addressing this under-examined topic is a worthwhile, albeit uncomfortable, endeavour.

### **Australia's existing grand strategy: interests, threats and responses**

Grand strategy describes how a state secures itself against external threats.<sup>7</sup> To frame an understanding of Australia's approach, this essay adopts Schmidt's three-step formulation: establishing the state's key security interests; identifying its principal threats; and ascertaining associated responses.<sup>8</sup>

Australia's security interests have generally coalesced around two key objectives. First is the security of Australia's physical territories. Successive post-Vietnam War-era Australian white papers have presented this as the nation's most important strategic objective. It remains the foundational purpose of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), encompassing deterrence and defeat of armed attacks against Australian territory.<sup>9</sup> However, defending Australia is "far more than simply preventing foreign boots from landing on Australian soil".<sup>10</sup> National security has also come to mean ensuring the country's economic prosperity and societal resilience.

This logic forms the second core objective: securing the maritime trading routes upon which Australia heavily depends. As of 2023, Australia's total trade represents more than 45% of

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Kerr, *Safeguarding the Future: A Foresight Handbook for Security and Defence Professionals*, (Archipelago of Design, 2024), 57-61.

<sup>7</sup> Trevor Thrall and Benjamin Friedman, "National interests, grand strategy, and the case for restraint," in *US Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case For Restraint*, ed. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin Friedman (Routledge, 2018), 1-12.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Schmidt, "The Primacy of National Security," in *Foreign Policy, Theories, Actors and Cases*, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Timothy Dunne (Oxford University Press, 2012), 215.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Lockyer, "An Australian Defence Policy for a Multipolar Asia," *Defence Studies* 15, no. 3 (2015): 279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2015.1105461>.

<sup>10</sup> Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security," 494.

national GDP, with over 99% of it being sea-borne.<sup>11</sup> The nature of Australian import-dependence sharpens this vulnerability. Key imports, including petroleum, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, fertiliser and machinery, are critical to the functioning of the economy and broader society.<sup>12</sup> Were Australia to be isolated from its maritime supply lines, it would suffer severe economic damage and be at risk of widespread societal collapse.<sup>13</sup> Australia's security interests are therefore anchored not only in the protection of the continental landmass but also in the defence of Asia's maritime trading routes from which its middle-power prosperity is derived.

Moving from interest formulation to threat perceptions, Australia has come to see East Asia, specifically China, as its greatest single threat. Since 2016, the prevailing view of China as a "largely pragmatic" actor has been replaced by an unambiguous perception of China as "a malign force interfering in Australian domestic politics and disturbing the regional strategic balance".<sup>14</sup> China is now regarded as Australia's principal security challenge and the benchmark against which Australian defence policy is most clearly oriented.<sup>15</sup> This recalibration has been driven by Chinese actions including political interference campaigns, 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, cyberattacks, corporate espionage, and expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Trading nation: how trade and investment contribute to Australian prosperity* (Australian Government, 2024), 6, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/trading-nation-how-trade-investment-contribute-to-australian-prosperity.pdf>; Australian Maritime Safety Authority, "Operating Environment Snapshot," Australian Government, effective May 12, 2021, <https://www.amsa.gov.au/operating-environment-snapshot>.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Productivity Commission, *Vulnerable Supply Chains: Productivity Commission Study Report* (Australian Government, 2021), 55-80, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/supply-chains/report/supply-chains.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dunley, "The End of the 'Lucky Country'? Understanding the Failure of the AUKUS Policy Debate," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 3 (2023): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2210278>.

<sup>14</sup> Nick Bisley, "The Quad, AUKUS and Australian Security Minilateralism: China's Rise and New Approaches to Security Cooperation," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2024): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365241>.

<sup>15</sup> Maxandre Fortier and Justin Massie, "Strategic Hedgers? Australia and Canada's Defence Adaptation to the Global Power Transition," *International Journal* 78, no. 3 (2023): 469-472, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/00207020231195633>.

<sup>16</sup> Euan Graham, "Learning to Live in China's Shadow," *Adelphi Series* 61, no. 490-492 (2021): 167-174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2021.2187590>.

The clarity of Australia's threat perception has been matched by an increasingly unambiguous policy response. Where a hedging strategy had previously been employed, maximising economic benefits from China while securing defence ties with the US, this approach has since been abandoned with the signing of the AUKUS agreement in 2021; a "Rubicon moment" for Australian strategy.<sup>17</sup> Hedging has been unabashedly replaced by hard balancing against China.<sup>18</sup> While reliance on the US for security has deep historical roots, this reliance has recently become an even "deeper, more institutionalised and sacrosanct part of Australia's strategic outlook".<sup>19</sup>

The Australia-US relationship rests on two key pillars. The first is the ANZUS Treaty based alliance, described by Australia's Minister for Defence as "completely central to [Australia's] national security".<sup>20</sup> The principal effect of ANZUS is to signal to potential aggressors that attacking Australia risks triggering a US military response.<sup>21</sup> This is generally accepted to encompass coverage under US extended nuclear deterrence, although admittedly coverage is not as clear as the US' other major allies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ben Westcott, "Australia's decades-long balancing act between the US and China is over. It chose Washington," *CNN*, September 17, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/16/australia/australia-china-us-aukus-submarine-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Korolev, "Transition from Hedging to Balancing in Australia's China Policy: Theoretical and Empirical Explorations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 5 (2023): 548-568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2274446>; Fortier and Massie, "Strategic Hedgers? Australia and Canada's Defence Adaptation to the Global Power Transition," 465; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, *After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States between the US and China* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009420570>.

<sup>19</sup> Vince Scappatura, *The US Lobby and Australian Defence Policy*, (Monash University Publishing, 2019), 237, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cfvlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6691355>.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Department of Defence, "Joint press conference with US Secretary of Defense Austin Hawaii, United States," Australian Government, effective October 2, 2022, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2022-10-02/joint-press-conference-us-secretary-defense-austin-hawaii-united-states>.

<sup>21</sup> Iain Henry, "Adapt or atrophy? The Australia-U.S. Alliance in an age of power transition," Sasakawa Peace Foundation, effective October 14, 2020, <https://www.spf.org/jpus-insights/spf-worldviews-on-the-united-states-en/woldviews-on-the-united-states003.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Australia is the only major ally of the US without a "dedicated extended deterrence consultation process with Washington". This prevailing arrangement reflects a degree of mutual satisfaction though—neither party necessarily wants to change the status quo. For Canberra, efforts to clarify Washington's commitment could "lead to a

The second pillar is Australia's support for the US-led regional security architecture which is seen as the decisive force containing China.<sup>23</sup> ANZUS forms part of the US' Indo-Pacific 'Hub-and-Spokes' alliance network, regarded as the region's most prominent security arrangement.<sup>24</sup> Canberra sees the US as occupying the apex of a "hegemonic order", whose maintenance is essential for Australian security.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, Australia's balancing efforts encompass other vectors too. Australia has sought to diversify its security relationships with regional powers such as Japan, India and South Korea.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Australia has adopted elements of an internal balancing strategy, most evidently through increased defence spending since 2016.<sup>27</sup> These balancing efforts, however, pale in comparison to the security afforded by the Australia-US relationship. All of these efforts are important, but the US is undisputedly regarded as Australia's primary source of security.

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narrowing of these unstated guarantees". See: Peter Dean, Stephan Fruehling and Andrew O'Neil, "Australia and the US Nuclear Umbrella: From Deterrence Taker to Deterrence Maker," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2024): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2302589>; Ashley Townsend, David Santoro and Toby Warden, "Collective Deterrence and the Prospect of Major Conflict," *United States Studies Centre*, September 2023, 14, <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/ooh1fq7e/production/fd87219e0ebbb57ce3070f6a970afa420b2eb16c.pdf/Collective-deterrence-and-the-prospect-of-major-conflict.pdf>; Vaibhav Karajgikar, "Australia's Strategic Culture and Evolving Threats in the Indo-Pacific," *E-International Relations*, effective February 18, 2025, [https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/18/australias-strategic-culture-and-evolving-threats-in-the-indo-pacific/#google\\_vignette](https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/18/australias-strategic-culture-and-evolving-threats-in-the-indo-pacific/#google_vignette).

<sup>23</sup> Felix Heiduk, "The Asianization of Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2024): 54-56, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/asianization-regional-security-indo-pacific/docview/3140447027/se-2>; Charles Edel, "'Goodbye, America' by Patrick Lawrence – Response by Charles Edel," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 11 (2021): 129, <https://search.informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.713922311918724>.

<sup>24</sup> Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 7-10, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00389](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00389).

<sup>25</sup> Heiduk, "The Asianization of Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific," 62.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Department of Defence, "Address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia," Australian Government, effective September 8, 2021, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/peter-dutton/speeches/address-american-chamber-commerce-australia>; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Australian Government, 2017), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>; Australian Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Australian Government, 2020), 24-29, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update>.

<sup>27</sup> He and Feng, *After Hedging*, 29.



## The baseline scenario: imagining a post-American Indo-Pacific order

Noting the US' centrality to the regional security architecture, imagining a region without Washington's presence is a difficult task. Discussions around the likelihood of such an occurrence often devolve into simplistic and dichotomous interpretations. Speculating on how such a development could unfold is equally fraught. Scenario planning offers a structured method for considering the implications of US disengagement while mitigating the risks of bias and over-speculation. The common baseline scenario explored here is US disengagement from the Indo-Pacific. On top of this, a 2x2 matrix will be applied to analyse four scenarios arising from the interaction between two "critical uncertainties".<sup>28</sup> This framework enables a focused understanding of the implications for Australia as it orients itself to a fundamentally altered regional dynamic and formulates its response.

While the risks of overanalysing the probability of US disengagement have already been acknowledged, it remains important to *briefly* establish its feasibility. President Trump's disdain for allies and prevailing global norms is well documented, a dynamic seemingly playing out again in 2025 as his administration signals a willingness to eschew NATO commitments.<sup>29</sup> However, the Indo-Pacific and US policy towards China are sometimes considered relatively insulated from these dynamics. The "orthodox" view holds that perceptions of China as the primary threat to US interests are broadly bipartisan, acting as a rare point of cohesion within a "fractured and dysfunctional American polity".<sup>30</sup> As one Australian politician put it, the "Trump

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<sup>28</sup> Kerr, *Safeguarding the Future*, 57-62.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Gates, "The Dysfunctional Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower>; Agencies, "Trump casts doubt on willingness to defend Nato allies 'if they don't pay'," *The Guardian*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support>.

<sup>30</sup> James Curran, "Excess Baggage: Is China a Genuine Threat to Australia?" *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 19 (2023): 18, <https://search.informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.353903302324434>.

Administration remain[s] determined to maintain America's strategic position” in the region—after all, the Indo-Pacific is not Europe.<sup>31</sup>

However, this confidence is not universal. Some view America’s commitment to challenging China as “wafer-thin”.<sup>32</sup> Some of this commentary targets the current leadership. Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, for example, argues that Trump is narrowly focused on China’s trade surplus with the US and that it is “far from clear” whether he would use military force to defend Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> Other doubts extend beyond Trump. Hugh White, a prominent Australian strategic thinker, contends that the US—regardless of leadership—lacks the resolve to uphold Indo-Pacific regional security if directly challenged by China. Competing with Beijing is important to the US, he argues, but not sufficiently so to justify the immense costs of military confrontation. Unlike during the Cold War when the Soviet threat was perceived as existential, China’s rise does not evoke the same alarm.<sup>34</sup> While White’s argument is not without critics, it does raise difficult and seemingly reasonable questions regarding US’ resolve.<sup>35</sup>

Speculating about how such disengagement might unfold is challenging given the innumerable possible trajectories. Nonetheless, two illustrative pathways will be briefly outlined. The first centres on Taiwan, perhaps the Indo-Pacific’s most volatile flashpoint. Were Beijing to attempt to forcibly unify Taiwan, the US would face a critical choice: to acquiesce or to intervene

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Dziedzic, “What the Trump and Zelenskyy fallout means for Australian foreign policy,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-04/trump-zelenskyy-fallout-repercussions-australian-foreign-policy/105004636>.

<sup>32</sup> Sam Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy: Australia's Search for Power and Peace* (Black Inc., 2023), 18, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Turnbull, “Second Coming: How to Deal with Trump,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 22 (2024): 30. <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.T2024102100003691719245543>.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh White, “Reality Check: Taiwan Cannot Be Defended,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 14 (2022): 6–24. <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.306357645863642>.

<sup>35</sup> Kim Beazley, “Without America: Correspondence,” *Quarterly Essay*, no. 69 (2018): 125–29, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.472189515660767>; Kevin Rudd, “Sleepwalk to War: Correspondence,” *Quarterly Essay*, no. 87 (2022): 80–85, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.629267037768248>.

militarily. Should the US either abstain from intervention or intervene unsuccessfully, Taiwan's status, and regional perceptions of US credibility would be fundamentally altered. A second possibility is a US-China grand bargain. Bisley describes various potential forms such a bargain might take, each constituting an "order-changing or order-creating" act involving reciprocal agreements on major security issues.<sup>36</sup> Given the incompatibility of Washington and Beijing's regional visions, any such agreement would almost certainly involve the US accepting Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan in exchange for broader concessions.<sup>37</sup>

Much could be written on the nuances of these scenarios and their potential effects on other regional flashpoints. However, the key takeaway for the purposes of the 2x2 matrix is that each case would almost certainly trigger a region-wide collapse of confidence in US security guarantees. The Indo-Pacific's 'Hub-and-Spokes' system would be in tatters, and states like Japan, Korea, and Australia would be forced to fundamentally reconsider their security strategies. Conversely, China would face a vastly more permissive environment, with its primary constraint, the credible threat of US intervention, severely diminished.

### **The 2x2 matrix and critical uncertainties**

With the feasibility of this baseline scenario established, the 2x2 matrix can be explored. The matrix, shown in Figure 1, is organised around two axes: the x-axis, China's model of regional hegemony; and the y-axis, Australia's strategic ambition regarding its middle-power status.

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<sup>36</sup> Nick Bisley, "A Grand Bargain between the United States and China," in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia's Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2019) 114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.13>.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? the Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 49-90, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00199](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00199); Bisley, "A Grand Bargain between the United States and China," 118-123.



Figure 1: Possible scenarios in the event the US disengages from the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture

Source: Author's analysis and ChatGPT generated images

The x-axis captures the critical uncertainty of how China would seek to assert its regional dominance. Given the gap between China's power and that of all other non-US states in the region, this variable stands to be the most impactful condition in a post-US Indo-Pacific.<sup>38</sup> On the far left, China aggressively pursues the restoration of the 'Middle Kingdom', seeking deference from Indo-Pacific states as vassals or tributary states.<sup>39</sup> This would represent a profound transformation of regional order from the relatively benevolent Rules-Based International Order (RBIO) seen under the US. On the far right, China adopts a more restrained model: still hierarchical, but largely retaining the existing RBIO and minimising disruptions to regional patterns of interaction.<sup>40</sup> Such an approach could see a broadly consistent method of managing regional interstate interactions. This might reflect Beijing's desire to minimise the costs associated with radical transformation and a recognition that it has benefited enormously from the post-World War II order.

The y-axis reflects a fundamental choice facing Australia: whether to continue pursuing middle-power status or to accept strategic decline. Historically, Australia's security has rested on

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<sup>38</sup> Susannah Patton, Jack Sato and Hervé Lemahieu, *Asia Power Index: 2024 Key Findings Report* (Lowy Institute, 2024), 2-3, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2024-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2020 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (United States Congress, 2020), 80-112, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020\\_Annual\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf); Jake Sullivan and Hal Brands, "China Has Two Paths To Global Domination," *Carnegie Endowment*, May 22, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/05/china-has-two-paths-to-global-domination?lang=en>; Dean Cheng, "How China Sees the World: The Return of the Middle Kingdom," *Westminster Institute*, October 2, 2020, <https://westminster-institute.org/events/how-china-sees-the-world/>.

<sup>40</sup> Discussion of such an approach is covered in: Wu Xinbo, "China in Search of a Liberal Partnership International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 995–1018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy141>; Joseph Nye Jr., "Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea," *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive>; Dong Wang, "The Liberal International Order: A Chinese Perspective," in *US-China Foreign Relations Power Transition and its Implications for Europe and Asia*, ed. Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Dong Wang (Routledge, 2020), 33-40.

assurances from ‘great and powerful friends’, first from the United Kingdom and then the US.<sup>41</sup> This security has underpinned Australia’s prosperity as a trading nation reliant on open maritime routes through Asia.<sup>42</sup> Without the US military’s backstop, Australia would face extreme difficulties in trying to secure favourable maritime conditions—any effort to do so independently would be prohibitively expensive and almost certainly set to fail.<sup>43</sup>

Accepting a decline (bottom of the y-axis) would generate budgetary savings, enabling greater domestic spending but at the price of international irrelevance and reduced prosperity. Australia would become a more isolated actor, unable to meaningfully shape maritime trade dynamics in Asia if they evolved in ways counter to Canberra’s interests. Conversely, continuing to pursue middle-power status (top of the y-axis) would require substantial, likely painful, investments in national instruments of power, particularly defence and diplomacy. Opportunity costs would be high and likely to affect taxation, public health, education, and infrastructure. Nevertheless, given Australia’s strategic culture and interests, it is difficult to conceive of Australia meekly acquiescing to Beijing’s overtures, even in the absence of Washington’s security assurances.

These critical uncertainties represent the most significant conditions influencing Australia’s formulation of grand strategy absent the US. Most important would be China’s choice: a post-US order would render Beijing’s view of the region highly deterministic for

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<sup>41</sup> Former Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies popularised the phrase “great and powerful friend”, which has since become totemic in Australian foreign policy and security studies. For one of Menzies’ earliest uses of the phrase, see: Robert Menzies, “West New Guinea: Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R G Menzies in the House of Representatives - 29th March 1962,” Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00000489.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> The notion of a ‘middle-power’ is contested and attracts a range of interpretations. While focused on the Canadian context, Chapnick provides a review of different interpretations of the term. See Adam Chapnick “The Middle Power,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 7, no. 2 (1999): 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.1999.9673212>.

<sup>43</sup> Stephan Frühling, “The Defence of Australia: From Lucky Country to Uncomfortable Normality,” in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia’s Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2019) 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.13>.

Australia's place within it. However, the agency of middle-powers should not be entirely dismissed; Australia's choice regarding its status could also be decisive. The interaction of these critical uncertainties produces four quadrants (Q1-Q4) in the 2x2 matrix, each of which lends itself to the generally accepted options for smaller states formulating security policy: bandwagoning, neutrality, or balancing.<sup>44</sup>

While these quadrants provide a structured way to understand Australia's options in a post-Pax Americana Indo-Pacific, two caveats must be highlighted. First, the strategic approaches and outcomes linked to each quadrant are not intended to be exhaustive; rather, they reflect some of the more prominent possibilities worth exploring. Second, in practice, Australia would likely pursue a combination of approaches rather than rigidly adhering to a single option. This reflects a pragmatism that different approaches suit different short-term conditions, but also a more theoretical basis that states generally "cannot easily be characterised as 'pure' balancers or bandwagoners".<sup>45</sup> Like any model, the 2x2 matrix serves as a heuristic tool, but it has inherent limitations that must be acknowledged before proceeding to analyse each strategic alternative in detail.

### **The koala – bandwagoning with a regional hegemon**

The koala quadrant is perhaps the most disquieting. Were Australia to willingly accept a decline from middle-power status while China asserted hegemonic dominance across the region, bandwagoning could emerge as the most logical, albeit deeply unsettling, approach. Scholars

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<sup>44</sup> Baldur Thorhallsson and Sverrir Steinsson, "Small State Foreign Policy," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, May 24, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.484>.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Bloomfield, "To balance or to bandwagon? Adjusting to China's rise during Australia's Rudd–Gillard era," *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 259-282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2015.1013497>.

acknowledge the unease surrounding this prospect, viewing it as “simply unimaginable”; nonetheless, they consider its theoretical advantages worth examining.<sup>46</sup>

Beeson argues that there are “obvious synergies” to be gained if Australia were to accept China as its new ‘great and powerful friend’. He identifies mutual benefit arising from the complementarity of the Australian and Chinese economies and suggests scope for cooperation on global challenges such as reducing reliance on fossil fuels.<sup>47</sup> Acceptance of Chinese regional hegemony could also, theoretically, allow Canberra to divest from defence spending and redirect spending elsewhere. Framed in the most optimistic light, Chinese regional dominance *could* deliver economic and environmental dividends for Australia.

Despite these potential opportunities though, it is challenging to realistically conceive of such a future. Beeson offers little explanation for how mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation under these conditions could practically occur. His narrow focus on economic synergies neglects the broader range of factors influencing a state's national interests.<sup>48</sup> At a more foundational level, bandwagoning entails ceding a degree of autonomy to another state.<sup>49</sup> Ayson highlights the dangers of relinquishing control over national interests, citing Wellington’s approach in the current, far more permissive, environment as “a warning sign”.<sup>50</sup> He and Feng, highlighting the comments of a former New Zealand Prime Minister, raise similar concerns around adopting

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Beeson, “China: Australia’s New Great and Powerful Friend?” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2481057>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Heather Smith, “Reconciling the Australian National Interest,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/reconciling-the-australian-national-interest/>; Daniel Flitton, “Penny Wong defines Australia’s “national interests”,” *The Lowy Institute*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/penny-wong-defines-australia-s-national-interests>.

<sup>49</sup> Albert Palazzo, *From Dependency to Armed Neutrality: Future Options for Australian National Security* (Australian National University Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2018), 6, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/1eda5595-2293-4d05-8940-0124b3ffb4d8/content>.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Ayson, “Unarmed and Independent?: The New Zealand Option,” in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia’s Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2019) 178-179, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.13>.



“naïve kiwi optimism” to inform strategic calculations.<sup>51</sup> A more realistic interpretation of Q1 would have Australia reduced to a Chinese client state, lacking meaningful sovereignty.<sup>52</sup>

This approach could be argued as the most pragmatic, especially if Australia’s ability to challenge China, either independently or in cooperation with others, was dismissed entirely. Indeed, it is an approach worth further exploration beyond the brief attention received here. Its manifestation along a spectrum of extremity, for example, would be a rich area for deeper analysis.<sup>53</sup> However, it is difficult to imagine how a vulnerable Australia, subject to the unchecked whims of an assertive Beijing, could be considered secure. Much like the koala, bandwagoning in this scenario would render Australia harmless, heavily reliant on a single patron (as the koala depends on trees), and dangerously exposed whenever its interests diverged from Beijing’s (akin to a vulnerable koala aground, far from its home in the trees). Given the broad focus of this essay—and the greater feasibility of other approaches—the analysis will proceed.

### **The echidna – internal balancing for more independent defence**

The echidna quadrant also conceives of Australia stepping away from middle-power status. However, unlike Q1, it entails substantial effort to preserve sovereignty and autonomy. These conditions naturally favour internally-focused balancing strategies, like neutrality. Strategies privileging internal over external balancing share a desire to deter threats to Australia’s most immediate interests while adopting a markedly more independent or, to channel

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<sup>51</sup> He and Feng, *After Hedging*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Palazzo, *From Dependency to Armed Neutrality*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> For further discussion on different approaches within the “bandwagoning zone” including capitulation and approaches more akin to accommodation, see: Alan Bloomfield, “To balance or to bandwagon? Adjusting to China’s rise during Australia’s Rudd–Gillard era,” *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 259-282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2015.1013497>; Baogang He, “Politics of Accommodation of the Rise of China: the case of Australia,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 73 (2012), 53-70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.627666>.

McDougall's framing of a tradition in American foreign policy, "unilateralist" approach.<sup>54</sup>

Borrowing Roggeveen's description which inspired this essay's selection of metaphors, the echidna, like Australia under this strategic approach, is:

"...no threat to anything other than ants and termites, so cannot induce fear among larger creatures. But by its sharp quills, it does warn them to keep their distance. It does signal to them that, should they decide to attack, the costs are likely to exceed the benefits...[it] has a friendlier image [than more lethal animals]... [and it] is a solitary creature."<sup>55</sup>

Broadly, neutrality sees a smaller state seek to separate itself from the stronger powers' desires. For it to work, two conditions are generally required: favourable geography and strategic interests that do not threaten the stronger power.<sup>56</sup> Australia's geographic isolation—its borders being far from China's contested periphery with India and the South China Sea, for example—makes it well suited to meeting the first condition.<sup>57</sup>

The second condition, however, requires assuming the scenario parameters rather than current reality. Specifically, Australia accepting a fall from middle-power status could reflect recognition, in light of US disengagement, that it would be unable to generate sufficient naval power to secure its trade routes.<sup>58</sup> A key criticism of models proposed by advocates of a more independent defence posture is their neglect for security of Australia's trade-derived prosperity.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In a case like this, a focus on internal balancing would not necessarily preclude externally focused balancing efforts too. Indeed, some of the internal balancing measures described in Q2 could be used to make Australia a more appealing partner for other states, like Indonesia. However, the focus in the echidna quadrant is toward securing Australia through Australian power. For discussion of the unilateralist tradition in American foreign policy, see: Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 40.

<sup>55</sup> Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Thorhallsson and Steinsson, "Small State Foreign Policy."

<sup>57</sup> Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security," 493.

<sup>58</sup> Frühling, "The Defence of Australia: From Lucky Country to Uncomfortable Normality," 10.

<sup>59</sup> For examples of prominent critiques, specifically against Hugh White's models of a more independent defence posture, see: David Kilcullen, "How to Defend Australia [Book Review]," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 7 (2019): 119, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.685941275744703>; Peter Jennings, "How not to defend Australia," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-not-to-defend-australia/>; Rory Medcalf, "Sleepwalk to War: Correspondence," *Quarterly Essay*, no. 87 (2022): 104–105. <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.629360202624539>.

And, within the contemporary real world, these criticisms are fair. However, Q2—which accepts a fall away from middle power status—allows further examination of neutrality by assuming away the potentially insurmountable challenge of Australia independently securing Asia’s maritime trade.

What, then, would neutrality in the echidna quadrant look like? Australia’s security interests would be radically redefined. Defence of Australian territory would become the singular focus of grand strategy. By leveraging its isolation, Australia could offset the challenge associated with a relatively small population defending a large land mass and EEZ, thus making an internal balancing strategy more viable. Literature on contemporary neutrality informs this section well. Its fundamental assertion—that Australia should meet its security needs independently—aligns with the assumption that US guarantees are no longer present.

A common goal of neutral states is to generate sufficient strength to meet security interests without relying on alliances.<sup>60</sup> For Australia, this would mean not threatening China, but deterring attacks against Australian territories or interests. Across internal balancing discussions, a reinvigorated ADF is a consistent priority. Roggeveen’s vision is relatively modest: an ADF structured to protect Australia’s northern maritime approaches through an anti-access area-denial posture.<sup>61</sup> Others advocate for more expansive transformations and significantly increased spending. Jennings, for example, proposes raising defence expenditure from ~2% to 3% of

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<sup>60</sup> Palazzo, *From Dependency to Armed Neutrality*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy*, 114-137.

GDP.<sup>62</sup> These increases would support a larger ADF, potentially bolstered by national service, and equipped with a range of high-end maritime denial capabilities.<sup>63</sup>

Internal balancing also demands mobilisation and revitalisation of Australia's sovereign defence industry. Both are costly but essential to greater autonomy. Manufacturing currently accounts for only 6% of Australia's GDP—the lowest level among OECD nations.<sup>64</sup> More specifically, the domestic defence industry is poorly structured and ill-equipped to supply the ADF during conflict.<sup>65</sup> This vulnerability is a key concern for internal balancing advocates. Without significant revitalisation, “credible armed neutrality for Australia is little more than wishful thinking”.<sup>66</sup> Any strategy relying on internal balancing would clearly need to address this.

Beyond military capability, internal balancing strategies emphasise national resilience. These efforts contribute to credible deterrence by signalling that Australia is a hard target capable of resisting coercion.<sup>67</sup> They also call for broader participation in national security. A state seeking resilience must accept that defence cannot be left solely to traditional portfolios—

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Jennings, “Trump means we need a ‘Plan B’ for Defence,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 21, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250214181018/https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/trump-means-we-need-plan-b-defence>.

<sup>63</sup> Hugh White, “Great Expectations: Can Australia Depend on Its Neighbours?” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 10 (2020): 7. <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.438154337763025>. 28; Palazzo, *From Dependency to Armed Neutrality*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Shepherd, “Why Australia must rebuild its lost industrial base,” *Australian Financial Review*, April 2, 2023, <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/why-australia-must-rebuild-its-lost-industrial-base-20230402-p5cxcp>.

<sup>65</sup> Stephan Fruehling and Graeme Dunk, “Time for a rethink of Australia's approach to defence industry,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, December 18, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/time-for-a-rethink-of-australias-approach-to-defence-industry/>.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew O'Neil, “The future of Australia–US strategic and defence cooperation: An Australian perspective,” in *The Future of the United States–Australia Alliance: Evolving Security Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Scott McDonald, Andrew Tan, (Routledge, 2020), 187, <https://doi-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/10.4324/9780429317521>.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel Byman and Seth Jones, “How to Toughen up Taiwan: America Must Help the Island Deal With China's Gray-Zone Tactics,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 13, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-toughen-taiwan>.

departments responsible for education, energy, and the environment, for example, all have crucial roles in bolstering resilience.<sup>68</sup>

Nonetheless, significant challenges accompany Q2. Substantially larger sums would need to be invested in a more autonomous defence posture. These investments entail uncomfortable consequences for a population accustomed to prosperity. Government intervention in markets, for instance, would become far more prominent as the economy is restructured to meet resilience and independent defence supply needs.<sup>69</sup> Aside from the political challenge of mustering national will, the actual feasibility of this endeavour remains uncertain. One critic observes that “Australia is not the regional economic powerhouse” it once was, raising doubts about whether it has the industrial potential to support a more self-sufficient military posture.<sup>70</sup> When factoring in the echidna quadrant’s assumption of diminished prosperity alongside the loss of middle-power status, the relative costs of self-reliance would be even sharper.

### **The cassowary or dingo – external balancing through partnerships**

The final two quadrants assume Australia seeks to maintain its middle-power status and influence over Asia’s maritime trade routes. This goal, as established earlier, is generally assumed to be achievable only through cooperation with others. Accordingly, Q3 and Q4 would see Australia dedicate considerable effort to external balancing. Substantial internal balancing efforts would still be necessary, but relatively less important. Across both quadrants, Australia's approach to external balancing remains relatively consistent; the key variable determining

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<sup>68</sup> Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*, 187.

<sup>69</sup> Dunley, “Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security,” 493.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Dean, “Armed Neutrality?: Dependence, Independence and Australian Strategy,” in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia’s Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd, 2019), 204, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972>.18.

outcomes is China's behaviour rather than Australia's decision. While this underplays middle-power autonomy, it is intended to emphasise China's decisive influence.

The most immediate question for external balancing in Q3 and Q4 is whether a substitute 'great and powerful friend' could emerge. Historical precedent exists for Australia pursuing this type of change: during World War II, Australia, disillusioned with Britain's regional defence capabilities, turned decisively to the US. However, the current strategic environment is vastly different—no great power currently appears ready to assume America's existing role in Australian security strategies.

India holds the greatest potential. By 2050, it is projected to be the world's second-largest economy.<sup>71</sup> Even a partial realisation of this growth could allow India to impose limits on Chinese aspirations, especially across its expected realms of dominance in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, India's increasingly sceptical view of China since 2020 strengthens its alignment of threat perceptions with Canberra. The Sino-Indian border conflict that year represented a "turning point" in India's view of China—hopes of accommodation and mutual respect gave way to a solidified perception of China's "insatiable appetite for territory and their non-recognition of Indian regional status".<sup>73</sup> India's potential, alongside this perception, hints at the possible appeal of India as a substitute 'great and powerful friend'.

Yet India's prospects must be tempered. History suggests economic growth does not immediately translate into strategic weight; Kennedy notes a "lag time" between wealth and

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<sup>71</sup> Brendan Taylor, "Message to Washington: How to Maximise US Strength in Asia," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 8 (2020): 69, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.971994650034928>.

<sup>72</sup> White, "Without America," 68.

<sup>73</sup> Lai-Ha Chan and Pak Lee, "Quad 2.0 in flux, how possible? A study of India's changing 'significant other'," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 5 (2023): 495, <https://doi-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/10.1080/10357718.2023.2264238>; Michael Wesley, "Pivot to India: Our next Great and Powerful Friend?" *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 13 (2021): 8, <https://search-informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/INFORMIT.090233812239780>.

military capability, and India is unlikely to be an exception.<sup>74</sup> Its military remains inwardly focused, underdeveloped relative to its economy, and burdened by systemic domestic challenges, including vast social division and a loose governance structure.<sup>75</sup> Even if India secures regional dominance in South Asia, its influence over East Asia and the Western Pacific, where Australia's vital trade routes lie, would likely remain limited. Moreover, even by 2030, India's GDP is expected to be only half that of China's.<sup>76</sup> India may act as a constraint on Beijing's ambitions, but it is unlikely to fill the strategic void left by an absent US.

Japan is another potential candidate. Some observers highlight former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's regional diplomacy as evidence of Japan's leadership ambitions.<sup>77</sup> Others see empowerment of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces as reflecting Tokyo's pursuit of hard power to shape the region.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Tokyo arguably possesses Asia's only military, other than the US, capable of credibly contesting China in a maritime conflict.<sup>79</sup> Japan's economic weight, military capabilities, and proximity to China lend it strong credentials.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, Australia's strategic alignment with Japan has deepened in recent years and would likely persist absent US leadership.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Unwin Hyman, 1988), xxiii.

<sup>75</sup> Brendan Taylor, "Searching for a New Great and Powerful Friend?" in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia's Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd, 2019), 149-150, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.18>; Wesley, "Pivot to India," 24.

<sup>76</sup> White, "Great Expectations," 20.

<sup>77</sup> Graeme Dobell, "Abe changed Japan's meaning for Australia," *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/abe-changed-japans-meaning-for-australia/>.

<sup>78</sup> Sheila Smith, "How Japan Is Doubling Down on Its Military Power," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-japan-doubling-down-its-military-power>.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, "Message to Washington," 60; James Holmes, "The Sino-Japanese Naval War of 2012," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/20/the-sino-japanese-naval-war-of-2012/>.

<sup>80</sup> Curran, "Excess Baggage," 26; Peter Varghese, "The international outlook and what it means for Australia," *The University of Queensland*, March 17, 2017, <https://about.uq.edu.au/governance-and-organisational-structure/chancellor/speeches-and-articles-chancellor/international-outlook-and-what-it-means-australia>.

<sup>81</sup> Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security," 489-490.

However, serious constraints overshadow Japan's potential. Chief among these is its demographic decline: Japan's population is ageing and shrinking at a rapid rate. Projections indicate Japan's total population by 2050 will shrink by more than 20 million from its 2010 peak.<sup>82</sup> Population decline of this scale has not been seen "since the great plagues of the Middle Ages".<sup>83</sup> This demographic trajectory will, at the very least, challenge Tokyo's economic vitality and ability to increase defence spending.<sup>84</sup> Despite constitutional reinterpretations allowing for a more assertive security posture, the headwinds Japan faces may still limit its capacity to challenge China.

Other possible substitutes, such as Indonesia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, or France, merit consideration but face similar limitations. Whether because of size, internal challenges, or political will, no individual power appears ready or able to replace the US' role as a regional security guarantor.<sup>85</sup> The conclusion for Canberra is sobering: the search for a substitute 'great and powerful friend' appears unlikely to succeed.

A viable alternative is seeking strength through middle-power partnerships. Australia has a tradition, albeit less dominant, of cooperating with middle and small powers, and in today's

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<sup>82</sup> United Nations Population Division, "Data Portal," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://population.un.org/dataportal/data/indicators/67/locations/156,392,643,840/start/1990/end/2030/table/pivotbylocation>.

<sup>83</sup> Steven Koptis, "Japan's Demographic Crisis Will Only Get Worse. Here's Why That's Bad News for America," *The National Interest*, July 19, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/japans-demographic-crisis-will-only-get-worse-heres-why-21594>.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Haas, "Ageing and Foreign Policy Preferences," in *The Routledge Handbook of The Economics of Ageing*, ed. David Bloom, Alfonso Sousa-Poza and Uwe Sunde (Routledge, 2023), 604-612, <https://doi-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/10.4324/9781003150398>.

<sup>85</sup> For consideration of these countries' credentials and weaknesses as substitute 'great and powerful friends' for Australia, see: Taylor, "Searching for a New Great and Powerful Friend?"; Dunley, "Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security."; Liselotte Odgaard, "European Security and Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 6 (2024): 911-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2398747>.



Indo-Pacific, middle-powers are not insignificant.<sup>86</sup> By 2050, Japan, India, Indonesia and Australia combined are expected to have a population of 2.1 billion people and a combined GDP (purchasing power parity) of \$63.97 trillion, compared to China's population of 1.4 billion and GDP of \$58.45 trillion.<sup>87</sup> Added to this are the advantages afforded by strategic geography for nations like Japan, India, and Indonesia which sit astride China's key maritime approaches.<sup>88</sup> Such projections and traits suggest that a coordinated network of middle-powers could generate considerable force.

Intraregional cooperation has precedents in Indo-Pacific. In a US-absent region, Australia would likely continue supporting existing constructs, like ASEAN, as moderating multilateral influences. However, ASEAN's record against Beijing's overtures is weak.<sup>89</sup> Emphasis on consensus and non-interference hampers ASEAN's ability to address hard security issues.<sup>90</sup> Accordingly, while existing multilateral forums may feature in Australia's Q3 and Q4 strategies, it would not be the centrepiece.

More promising is the rise of minilateralism—smaller, “exclusive” and more “competitive” groupings that contrast with ASEAN's broad inclusiveness.<sup>91</sup> Minilateral arrangements foster deeper strategic consensus, resilience, and coordination among like-minded

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew Carr and Christopher Roberts, “Security with Asia?” in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia's Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd, 2019), 161-162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.18>; Andrew Erskine, “The Middle Power Dynamic in the Indo-Pacific: Unpacking How Vietnam and Indonesia Can Shape Regional Security and Economic Issues,” *United States Air Force Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (2022): <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2927137/the-middle-power-dynamic-in-the-indo-pacific-unpacking-how-vietnam-and-indonesi/>.

<sup>87</sup> Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*, 14.

<sup>88</sup> Lavina Lee, Ian Woolford and Michael Wesley, “Correspondence: Pivot to India,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 14 (2022): 131. <https://search.informit-org.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/doi/10.3316/informit.306525342604966>.

<sup>89</sup> Huong Le Thu, “China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN,” *Pacific Review* 32, no. 1 (2019): 20–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1417325>.

<sup>90</sup> Carr and Roberts, “Security with Asia?” 165.

<sup>91</sup> Bisley, “The Quad, AUKUS and Australian Security Minilateralism,” 8.

states.<sup>92</sup> These traits make them better suited to addressing major threats, achieving greater cohesion and delivering faster responses. In an Indo-Pacific without the US, these models of selective groupings could form a backbone of collective resistance to Chinese hegemony. If Australia is to seek to effectively manage Q3 and Q4 scenarios, it will have to “rediscover its traditions of diplomatic activism and innovation”<sup>93</sup> to capitalise on the “unprecedented desire”<sup>94</sup> for novel forms of cooperation in the region.

However, minilateralism is no panacea. Critics note that such arrangements are unlikely to produce mutual defence commitments on par with NATO.<sup>95</sup> These critics focus on political will as a key shortfall: would India or Australia really be willing to risk military conflict over a Chinese attack on Japan’s Senkaku Islands? Strategic interests could be compatible, but arguably not to that extent.<sup>96</sup> While minilateralism could complicate Beijing’s calculations and bolster deterrence, it is unlikely to replicate the certainty of the US’ security guarantee.

In pursuing middle-power partnerships to collectively balance China, Australia would face several challenges. Canberra would need to be uncomfortably pragmatic in its selection of partners, something it has largely avoided under US protection. An “orthodox realist” lens would

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<sup>92</sup> Jagannath Panda and Daewon Ohn, “Minilateralism and the New Indo-Pacific Order: Theoretical Ambitions and Empirical Realities,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 6 (2024): 767–770, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2410411>; Carr and Roberts, “Security with Asia?” 164.

<sup>93</sup> Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in the New Global Order* (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2020), chap. 6, <https://login.wwwproxy1.library.unsw.edu.au/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlbk&AN=2658558&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>94</sup> Carr and Roberts, “Security with Asia?” 172.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 166; White, “Great Expectations,” 23.

<sup>96</sup> Dunley, “Plan B?: Reconsidering Australian Security,” 491; Susannah Patton, “Time to retire the term ‘Plan B’,” *The Lowy Institute*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/time-retire-term-plan-b/>; Sarah Percy, “A World Transformed: The Need for New Defence Approaches?” in *After American Primacy: Imagining the Future of Australia’s Defence*, ed. Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2019) 215–216, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1744972.13>.

be required to prioritise shared interests over aligned values. This does not imply abandoning Australia's values, but rather maintaining strategic flexibility in choosing partners.<sup>97</sup>

Other fundamental challenges exist too. China's military spending already exceeds the combined budgets of all other Asian and Oceanic states (excluding the US), a gap projected to widen.<sup>98</sup> Based on the "iron law of numbers", the difficulty of sustaining a regional balance without American power would be vast.<sup>99</sup> This does not imply that China would dominate the region without consequence—*denial* strategies that are increasingly viable with the advent of improved missile technologies could complicate Beijing's calculations. But achieving *control* amidst such imbalance would be far more challenging.

Additionally, the assumption that middle-powers could effectively coordinate their military, diplomatic, and economic efforts cannot be taken for granted. There is no shortage of analogous examples, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and ASEAN Regional Forum, where collective powers fail to cohere and realise their potential.<sup>100</sup> In any Indo-Pacific coalition, divergent threat perceptions could severely hamper unity.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, a post-US security environment would be fluid. A shifting power balance could spur nationalism and mistrust, making the cooperation Australia would seek more elusive.<sup>102</sup> Forecasting the strategic behaviour of sovereign states amid major systemic transitions is fraught with uncertainty.

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<sup>97</sup> Raby, *China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future*, chap. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Lee, Woolford and Wesley, "Correspondence: Pivot to India," 126.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Chien-peng Chung, "The Role of Asia-Pacific Organizations in Maintaining Regional Security," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no. 2 (2008): 182, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270802062803>; Matthew Crosston, "The Pluto of International Organizations: Micro-Agendas, IO Theory, and Dismissing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Comparative Strategy* 32, no. 3 (2013): 287–292, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2013.806004>.

<sup>101</sup> Patton, "Time to retire the term 'Plan B.'"; Carr and Roberts, "Security with Asia?" 166; Bisley, "The Quad, AUKUS and Australian Security Minilateralism," 13.

<sup>102</sup> Bisley, "The Quad, AUKUS and Australian Security Minilateralism," 13.

Australia's response in Q3 and Q4 would emulate the traits of the cassowary or dingo. In Q3, Australia would invest heavily in balancing efforts which may ultimately prove futile against an assertive China intent on reshaping the region. Like the cassowary—armed with powerful claws but unable to fly and stuck eating fruit—Australia's efforts may be impressive but ultimately insufficient to deter Chinese ambitions. This represents one of the most costly outcomes: Australia bearing great expense yet failing to resist a dominant hegemon.

By contrast, Q4 is more appealing. Here, Australia, drawing strength from collective action, would resemble the dingo: potent in combination with others, even if not overwhelming alone. Substantial internal investments, reinforced by external minilateralism, could give China pause for thought, allowing Australia to continue prospering as a credible middle-power. Though costly, such a path may ultimately be one the Australian public supports if it yields continued prosperity and security.

### **Conclusion: Australia without the US**

Envisioning Australia's strategic outlook absent the US is, unsurprisingly, a bleak exercise. As even optimistic defence planners acknowledge, Australia's *current* strategic outlook is already sobering, and that is with the US present. A region without Washington, as this analysis has shown, would demand even more from Australia's government and society. Whether balancing through internal or external strategies, vastly greater costs would be incurred. Bandwagoning would have its own costs, arguably far more damaging to Australia's national identity and sovereignty.

What emerges as a critical factor across each quadrant where Australia seeks to retain its sovereignty (Q2-Q4) is the vital importance of generating sufficient national will to resist what would be a testing period for the country. Unless Australia is willing to accept the risk of an

unchecked China installing a confronting vision of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ across the region, achieving and maintaining this national will becomes not just desirable, but essential.

On a more optimistic note, several positives can be drawn from this analysis. Aspects of the strategies in Q2–Q4 align with existing features of Australian defence policy and are not incompatible with current trajectories. Elements of the 2024 National Defence Strategy, such as strengthening sovereign defence capabilities and deepening ties with regional middle-powers, may prove beneficial regardless of continued US engagement.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, progress in these areas could even reinforce Washington’s perception of Australia as a serious, more self-reliant partner—a perception that may carry particular weight with the current White House’s leadership. Perhaps too—although unlikely to be discussed openly—Australia’s strategic planners are already grappling with the implications of a regional security architecture without the US. Their policy choices may reflect quiet preparation, hedging against future uncertainty, while desperately avoiding any dialogue that undermines or puts the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific at risk.

The implications of US disengagement would be far-reaching. While this essay has focused on a specific set of uncertainties, several other important dynamics have been omitted. Chief among them is the strategic agency of other regional states. The responses of countries like India, Japan, Korea, and Singapore would decisively shape the region’s post-American security landscape, and by extension, Australia’s options. Less prominent, but perhaps more likely, are scenarios involving more graduated US decline in the region. These also demand further analysis. While not as jarring, such developments would challenge Australia in different ways,

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<sup>103</sup> Australian Department of Defence, *2024 National Defence Strategy* (Australian Government, 2024), <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>.

especially if they were to arise from a divergence in Canberra and Washington's interests or values.

This essay has not sought to predict the future, but to illuminate the implications that US disengagement could bring. Considering such a scenario reinforces the need for clear-eyed thinking about resilience, autonomy and adaptability. Were the US to disengage from the Indo-Pacific, these traits could become key to Australia retaining its sovereignty, or perhaps even its fundamental national identity.

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