

A National Security Strategy for Australia

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Australia urgently requires a National Security Strategy. Our nation has not had one since 2013 when the ALP was last in office. It is disappointing that the current Labor Government has not made this a high priority, while, at the same time, accelerating the development of a Defence Strategic Review (DSR) that has as its prime objective the support of the United States and the containment of China. Since national security is one of the most important responsibilities of government, what is Australia's National Security Strategy?

Despite strong commitment to dialogue and responsive decision-making in many areas of policy, the Albanese Government has given no opportunity for public discussion about the dominant AUKUS plan to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. This follows the mode of Morrison, Biden, and Johnson, – who announced the AUKUS plan as a settled package. Morrison gloated about how clever he was to keep it secret. The Labor Opposition irresponsibly accepted the plan after only overnight consideration. They wanted to avoid being wedged.

After winning the May 2022 election the Albanese Government adopted the same autocratic approach to AUKUS as Morrison. No opportunity for political or public reconsideration was given before the more detailed AUKUS framework was announced by Albanese, Biden, and Sunak. The fact that two of the three national leaders changed in the 18 months between the first announcement and March 2023 shows the political vulnerability of the plan. British Labour, which is likely to win the next UK elections due before early 2025, voted by a large majority at its 2021 National Conference to reject the plan.

Fortunately, Australian democracy is sufficiently vital for many people to disregard such autocratic behaviour. A flood of critiques has since been published, so it is possible to evaluate more aspects with substantially less dependence on conjecture. Organisation of sceptical groups is actively underway. But evaluations so far have mostly been in specialist online addresses which are not seen by the great majority of the public. Much more public discussion is vital.

The first requirement is to clarify the goals which would contribute most effectively to enhancing Australia's national security. Foreign Minister Penny Wong articulated such goals in her address to the National Press Club on 17 April 2023, when she said that 'our foreign policy must be an accurate and authentic reflection of our values and interests ... about how we avert war and maintain peace'. She emphasised that such policies require both 'reassurance and deterrence [about policies which are] most capable of averting conflict and enabling the region to live in peace and prosperity'. With such goals, there are obvious questions about whether the recent DSR, which reconfirmed and justified AUKUS, is the most sensible and cost-effective means of enhancing peace and security for Australia and the region. Accordingly, an open conversation on national security is urgently required.

A National Security Strategy

Since 2017 there has been much scaremongering in Australia about China. Echoing Washington, the media narrative is being shaped by intelligence agencies and military advocates, not experts on China. Australia desperately needs a broader national security conversation that seriously considers means of reducing tensions, recognises the security challenges of climate change, and seeks effective methods of peacebuilding, preventing violence and transforming conflict. The proposal for a parliamentary committee inquiry into means of reducing conflict and increasing cooperation would be one step in establishing an open conversation on national security. This would require more realistic transparency such as in the US system where the House and Senate Intelligence Committees probe

the communities with much of their evidence placed on the public record. Australia needs an open conversation on national security leading to a National Security Strategy based on extensive public consultation.

Successive Australian Governments have tended to use the terms Defence and National Security interchangeably and therefore with ambiguity. Defence policy should not masquerade as national security policy and it should not be determined in isolation from other national security challenges. To do so, as evidenced by the recent DSR, is to put the cart before the horse. Defence policy must align with and often contribute to other critical policies – economic, social, foreign, resources, employment, education, health, agriculture, immigration, demographic, environmental, Indigenous and others. These policies seek to enhance the common good and sovereignty, to achieve national objectives that promote human security and the wellbeing of our citizens. An excellent articulation of many of such measurable objectives is the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which Australia has adopted but not rigorously implemented. These measurable objectives mean far more to our national security than do vague defence strategies of denial and deterrence. Key objectives include the maintenance of territorial integrity and sovereignty; maintenance of a stable, prosperous, and externally focused economy; a stable and prosperous neighbourhood; and global agency commensurate with our power and influence.

In our efforts to maintain peace and security, it is sensible for us to adhere to the rules-based international order. But we must not confuse the global rules-based order sanctioned by the United Nations, with that proclaimed and practised by the United States. These ‘rules-based orders’ are not always the same, and as a middle power we would be wise to champion and promote the former. This would lead to much wider and less threatening relations with China.

Diminishing conflict with China

At present, Australia is locked on a collision course to war with China in support of the United States. Yet the assumption underlying AUKUS, that Chinese assertiveness will automatically lead to military aggression, is shallow. Many of the most professionally accomplished of Chinese scholars reject this simplification. They say that there is no evidence of past or current intentions of China to use force to impose its preferences on other nations. **Australia’s national security would be enhanced by not taking sides and instead by calling for restraint.** It is vital to reduce the prospect of war over the future of Taiwan and China’s increased militarisation of the South China Sea. Despite America’s ‘One China’ policy, the future independence of Taiwan and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea have become major national security issues for the United States. Neither of these, though, are vital national security interests for Australia.

It is essential to stop the current arms race in the Indo-Pacific. As a US ally, Australia should make very clear to all parties that we have no intention of engaging in war in North Asia, and withdraw naval and military assets from that volatile region wherein Australia’s presence is not and will not be a determining factor, and where we could inadvertently cause the escalation of conflict. By withdrawing military forces from North Asian waters Australia would demonstrate its opposition to fuelling the current arms race, and more actively campaign with regional partners to prevent conflict. That is one of the principal reasons for revising the AUKUS proposal.

The decision to procure nuclear-powered submarines would prove as useless, but far more costly, than was the British flawed Singapore strategy before World War 2. Their acquisition is highly problematic, exorbitantly expensive, incurs significant opportunity costs for our Defence Force, and if ever realised would be well-outside the warning time not only of the DSR but of all previous Defence White Papers – by which time they would certainly be obsolete. For diplomatic reasons it is also a faulty decision that undermines trust and cooperation with near neighbours, let alone China. Submarines have a key role to play now throughout the Southwest Pacific and Australia’s littoral.

Accordingly, urgent action is required to acquire high quality conventional submarines and/or ensure the upgrade and seaworthiness of our ageing Collins class boats.

Well-informed scholarly experts on China conclude that there is no military threat to Australia from China. Despite the reduction in warning time for major global conflict, Australia's territory, our people and our vital national interests are not under foreseeable direct military threat from China or any other country. Overall, it is fair to say that Australia's commitment to a major conflict with the United States against China in distant locations is a matter of choice rather than necessity. Importantly therefore, the Government needs urgently to have this conversation with the Australian people.

Minister Wong said wisely in her Press Club address that a central element in our foreign policy must be maintaining a calm and consistent relationship with China, to 'cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, manage our differences wisely, and above all else, engage in, and vigorously pursue our own national interests.'

Defence analysts frequently highlight Australia's vulnerability as a trading nation to interdiction at sea. This potential threat is often used to justify the acquisition of naval combatant platforms, long-range missiles and more recently a switch to nuclear-powered submarines. The truth is that Australia could never afford or staff sufficient platforms to always guarantee freedom of navigation and safe passage for merchant shipping. It is noteworthy that two of the largest merchant marine nations in the world, Norway, and Greece, do not even entertain such an option. China's naval expansion is also used as reason to better protect merchant shipping, but as a massive trading nation China itself is heavily dependent on trade and would suffer most if sea lanes were blocked. This helps explain why China has not restricted merchant shipping in the South China Sea, and only objects to foreign naval and military forces operating within China's declared areas of interest. The most sensible and cost-effective strategy for Australia in retaining its international trade routes is to be non-threatening to other countries. Geography remains important, and Australia must continue to live in, and with, Asia.

In terms of Defence capabilities Australia should not acquire weapons systems that are clearly intended to supplement US forces to contain China. This means that we should not procure overly expensive nuclear-powered submarines and/or long-range missile systems. The opportunity cost of procuring such weapons systems prevents us from having a more effective Defence Force capable of demonstrating support to regional neighbours and the United Nations while at the same time combatting threats closer to home.

Reassessing Australia's Relationship with the US

In addition to New Zealand, the United States is and must remain our closest defence partner. But our respective vital national interests do not always align. From past commitments to US conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq/Syria we have learned that countries which uncritically support the US pay a heavy price in human capital for little or no strategic benefit. Australia has proved more successful in participating in smaller regional conflicts such as in Cambodia and Timor-Leste with the United Nations, and in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands with regional coalitions. In these instances, we have operated without direct US military support. Australia's major contribution to the US alliance should be to help maintain peace and security in Australia's Primary Region of Interest (APRI) – that is our northern approaches comprising Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and the nations of the Southwest Pacific, and New Zealand.

By focusing on the APRI Australia can make substantial savings in defence procurement: we can forego the huge expense of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, long-range offensive missile systems and bombers, and heavy armoured vehicles and self-propelled artillery – all of which have limited utility throughout the APRI. Australia should avoid situations which have no real impact on strategy or the conduct of military operations. Indeed, such commitments jeopardise Australia's

national security, dilute our sovereignty, and affirm to other countries that Australia too readily follows the US. The US is no longer the sole superpower in the Indo-Pacific. It has a choice, either learn to share power or go to war with China.

This does not mean abandoning Australia's alliance with the US, but rather that as a sovereign nation and close friend we should recalibrate the alliance to accord with our own national security priorities. Indeed, this is exactly what the US always does – puts its own national interests first. For the past 20+ years since 9/11, and in showing allegiance to the United States, the Australian public has been told that national security is under threat, first from international terrorism and more latterly from our largest trading partner, China. The nature and extent of both these threats is highly contestable, but they have been used to justify major expenditure in the name of national security.

Recent US media reports also reveal that Australia's decision on AUKUS was significantly influenced by former senior US naval officers and US Defense Department officials as paid consultants by the Australian Government. The primary author of the DSR was simultaneously contracted with the US Government and US strategic think tanks. US influence over Australia's defence and strategic thinking has become far too pervasive and influential, eroding Australia's independent agency and our sovereignty. Together with reinvigoration of the QUAD, these security arrangements in servitude to the US's mission to contain China are fuelling an arms race, including potential nuclear proliferation in the very region that we, and most other inhabitants, would prefer to remain a nuclear-free zone of peace.

Reshaping Defence Strategy

How a nation postures itself strongly influences the threats it attracts. The DSR, however, charts a different course, being offensive rather than defensive in nature and clearly choosing China as Australia's adversary. Rather than protecting Australia's security this strategy jeopardises it. Historical evidence shows that conventional deterrence seldom works and more usually fuels an arms race and the next conflict. Rather than being able to respond to more realistic threats should they eventuate, the Australian taxpayer will be paying a King's ransom for nuclear-powered submarines and 'plug-ins' to US forces to respond to an unsubstantiated threat from China.

The overall intent of the DSR is clear: with significantly reduced warning time for conflict in a deteriorating security environment we must regenerate the old mantra of 'forward defence'. Apparently, the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and offensive capabilities with greater range to fight with our US allies as far from our shores as possible supports Defence's current 'mission and purpose statement' which states that: "Defence protects and advances Australia's strategic interests through the provision of strategic policy, the development, delivery and sustainment of military, intelligence and enabling capabilities, and the promotion of regional and global security and stability as directed by Government." Does this sound familiar to those who remember the wars in Korea and Vietnam – the yellow peril, the domino theory, and keeping the chinks at bay?

But relevant Defence strategy must be realistic and measurable. Sensible DSR initiatives include strengthening partnership with immediate neighbours (though neither Indonesia nor PNG rated specific mention), improving logistics and supply chains, and elevating the importance of space and cyber domains to join with land, air and sea domains. The emphasis given to a more whole-of-government civil-military approach is sensible. Particularly pleasing is recognition of the need to significantly enhance our diplomatic capabilities. Governments since 1995-96 have halved the proportion of Commonwealth expenditure for diplomacy. The Government began to reverse this in the 2023 Budget by announcing increased funding for DFAT of close to \$400m over four years.

However, the DSR says nothing about the importance of seeking to apply peacemaking and peacebuilding processes to every conflict in the hope that peaceful ways would be found to reduce tension and strengthen the prospects of peace. In a country seriously attempting to avoid the terrible

destruction of war, it is simply common sense to attempt to find non-violent ways of reducing and, where possible, resolving conflicts. This is a necessary task for official diplomats, but most democracies have also found that professional non-government agencies can sometimes make valuable contributions to peacebuilding. That is the purpose of the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne. The governments of most countries where such NGOs are at work regard them as being of sufficient effectiveness to provide much of their funding. The US Institute of Peace in Washington is granted over US\$50m annually by Congress.

Alarming, however, the DSR has worrying omissions. Expertise in peace operations and support to UN peacekeeping is no longer regarded as important. The impact of climate change is recognised, as is Defence's historical contribution to disaster and humanitarian relief, but capabilities and training for these critical tasks are downplayed both domestically and abroad.

Rather than basing our defence on a vague strategy of 'denial' as proposed in the DSR, it would be far better to articulate a strategy of 'defence-in-depth' – globally, regionally, and domestically – highlighting priorities in these areas, rather than the so-called forward defence of aggressively stationing nuclear-powered submarines in the South China Sea and acquiring long-range offensive missile systems. **One of the most serious reservations is that AUKUS intensifies the arms race in Northeast Asia and raises the prospects of nuclear proliferation. This increases the risk of violent conflict. If Australia continues to prioritise the acquisition of such offensive capabilities it will only encourage other major countries in the region (such as Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia) to do likewise.**

Many critics question whether the fiscal consequences of the proposed AUKUS package through the innumerable cuts and constraints to human services and other forms of defence could possibly be justified. Is Australian wellbeing improved more by owning nuclear-powered submarines or by housing the homeless and strengthening Australian health and education social services? It is utterly unconvincing to make detailed weapons acquisition plans for thirty years ahead.

As former Prime Minister Paul Keating and many others have advised, pursuing AUKUS (and now the DSR) relegates Australia's sovereignty. There is no doubt that given the absence of a credible nuclear industry in Australia and the time required to develop this capability that the procurement of nuclear-powered submarines would put Australia's defence under an unacceptable level of American control. Many countries which seek peace would regard this abandonment of sovereignty as misguided because it increases the risks of being drawn into an unwanted war and ultimately contributing to the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

War is not inevitable. It is a human creation; wars happen because people want them to happen. So does peace. If we want to flourish, we must seek positive peace. If Australia is serious, we will also participate actively in multilateral revitalisation. The Australian Government must continue to work for, and advocate renewal of foreign policy by placing peacebuilding amongst our central goals and processes.

The contemporary UN *Common Agenda* is quite direct about national steps essential for achieving peace sustainably. It includes disarmament to strengthen human, national, and collective security. One such step would be ratifying the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons (TPNW); others include effective reduction of manufacture and purchase of long-range conventional weapons. The wellbeing of all Australians would be permanently strengthened if we recognise that our national interests must focus on peace, justice, economic and strategic security, and committed cooperation with the countries in our region and with the global community through the United Nations. So, before progressing AUKUS and implementing many of the DSR's key recommendations we need a National Security Strategy that reflects the real priorities of the Australian people.