Australian Peace and Security Forum

Working towards comprehensive national peace and security

Submission to NSC Consultations on 'Securing our Future'

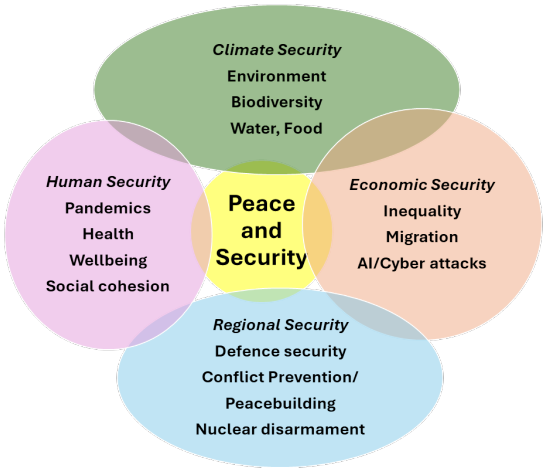
The Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF) welcomes the community consultation being undertaken by the ANU National Security College (NSC) to discover what Australians think when it comes to national security. We are pleased to provide this submission as a contribution to the consultative process. We welcome future opportunities to collaborate with the NSC to promote the need for, and content of, a national security strategy that reflects the priorities of the Australian people.

In this submission, we respond to the key questions outlined in the Issues Paper.

What does Australia's national security mean to you?

APSF believes Australia's national security must be comprehensive and holistic. Too much emphasis has been given to the military dimension without sufficient consideration of other elements essential to sustain peace.

APSF identifies four key sectors that provide the foundation for a comprehensive Australian Peace and Security Strategy (APSS): defence and regional security, climate and environmental security, human security, and economic security. All four sectors interlink to provide peace and security for Australians. Additional sub-sectors can be added. It is important to include the word 'Peace' in the title as this is the outcome that should always be sought and guide decision-making.



Adept diplomacy, ensuring effective peacebuilding and conflict prevention measures, promoting and practicing nuclear non-proliferation, mitigating and adapting to climate disruption, avoiding and responding to pandemics, preventing cyber attacks and crime, ensuring efficient and fair immigration practices, promoting free and fair trade, preventing and combatting terrorism, closing-the-gap for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, maintaining an effective quarantine regime, assuring effective supply lines, stockpiling of essential resources, and effective mobilisation practices, are all important to assuring Australia's future security.

In essence, Australia's national peace and security reflects its resilience to meet these challenges and to ensure the wellbeing and prosperity of the Australian people.

What changes in the world concern you most? How do these affect Australia?

Eight key inter-related concerns stand out. To assure its sovereignty, security and prosperity in an increasingly uncertain world, Australia needs to acknowledge and more effectively manage:

- the changing global geopolitical balance of power;
- the calamitous impact of climate disruption;
- the increasing danger from nuclear proliferation;
- the asymmetry, over-reliance and risks to Australia from its alliance with the United States, including the AUKUS agreement;
- the rise of China and Australia's adeptness in managing its most critical relationship;
- the increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific to Australia's future security and prosperity;
- the promotion of and adherence to international law; and
- the increasing inequality between the 'haves' and 'have nots' globally and domestically.

These important concerns require attention and need to be addressed in a national security strategy, but the APSF considers that AUKUS requires urgent review as it impacts on many of the above concerns.

Taking these concerns together, and agreeing with former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, the APSF considers there is considerable merit in pursuing policies that reflect *less America, more Asia, more self-reliance, and more international engagement.*[1]

We now live in an increasingly multipolar world. Hedley Bull's 'anarchical society' has returned to its traditional and preeminent position in international politics. The unipolar moment following the end of the Cold War was short-lived and is no longer relevant. The United States remains a very important power, but the balance of power is shifting from the west to east, with influence and decision-making shifting from the north to the south. The BRICS + members are offering alternatives to the current international financial system. The curtain has descended on over two centuries of western dominance. China is now the major power in Asia, and Australia's future is as part of Asia. American historian Adam Tooze noted correctly that China's rise has witnessed "the material dethroning of the West as the central driver of world history". The 'rules-based international order' is under threat, and more so because of US policies that consistently ignore international law. Sadly, the United Nations is becoming

[1] Hon. Gareth Evans AC, APSF Webinar 8 July 2025, *Abandoning our fears: finding peace and security in our region*, https://austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au/category/webinar/

increasingly side-lined and may not survive should the United States withdraw further or fail to pay its assessed contributions.

The United States and China are locked in a gigantic power struggle, and smart governments are hedging their bets. Australia should muster the courage to 'abandon its fears' and do likewise. A majority of states are trending towards China, as trust in the United States declines and China continues to expand its economic reach. The United States continues to be a major power, and the predominant global military power. But its 'America First' approach and historic hegemony is unsettling, and its mantra of 'Make America Great Again' confirms that it is no longer as 'great' as it once was. Unfortunately, in a highly conflicted US political landscape the anti-China sentiment is one of the few unifying factors for Republicans and Democrats alike. Unless the United States can concede power gracefully – and presently there seems little evidence of this happening – this does not bode well for future peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. The oft declared US 'pivot to Asia' has not occurred. Nevertheless, the US's intention to contain China and compete with it – if necessary through military action – remains very clear, even though a recent opinion poll in America showed that only 36% of respondents supported sending US troops to break a Chinese blockade or repel a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

The worst possible outcome for Australia would be war between China and the United States in which Australia becomes involved. Should Australia once again blindly follow the United States it will almost certainly suffer collateral damage. Yet, unless the nuclear threshold is breached, it is most unlikely that continental United States would be targeted.

This means that there is an urgent need for Australia to recalibrate its alliance with the United States. Such alliances, even those as asymmetric as ANZUS, cannot and should not be dismantled overnight, but needs to be reassessed. Those who call for this dismantling of ANZUS misunderstand the deep linkages between the two countries and the need to maintain a positive relationship. To simply walk away from an ally is neither sensible nor realistic. But since all alliances must work in the best interests of all parties it is necessary to constantly recalibrate the nature and consequences of Australia's alliance with the United States. Indeed, Australia's current government's oft quoted mantra regarding its relationship with China is equally relevant to Australia's relationship with all countries and international organisations, and particularly to allies like the United States – we should 'cooperate where we can … disagree where we must … and manage our differences wisely'.

At a time when the world should be uniting to counter climate disruption, avoid nuclear proliferation and the increased possibility of nuclear war, mitigate the threat of future pandemics, and achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which Australia signed but seems to have largely abandoned – Australia seems instead to be heading in the other direction.

What are Australia's strengths in protecting itself? What's missing?

Australia has many strengths to protect itself and assure its security. Our multicultural community, lack of direct threats from other countries, strong democratic and government apparatus and expertise in a range of security risks positions Australia to protect itself effectively. However, a failure to centre First Nations values, views and knowledge, the lack of national Peace and Security Strategy, a defence force in need of better capabilities, and better-informed parliamentarians for the current environment are significant shortfalls.

Australia has a strong democracy and multicultural community with many citizens having a cultural heritage from the Indo-Pacific region, along with those of Anglo or European heritage. Our indigenous citizens are still waiting for their history of dispossession and discrimination to be fully acknowledged. Many Australians have good links in the region and many travel in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia has a small and well-trained defence force with good partnerships across the region. Equally, Australia has an effective although under-resourced diplomatic corps and a strong commitment to bilateral and multilateral relations. Our population is well educated, and our governance systems are robust and efficient, although there are areas needing improvement. Our economy is strong although too dependent on resource extraction and export, with four of our five largest corporations in the banking sector.

What is missing is a national narrative that values the views and knowledge of First Nations People, Australia's history and its future in the region – greater understanding of Asia and the Pacific, increased cultural interaction and language proficiency. Australia needs political leadership that can encourage the community to understand the international dynamic and how Australia's role must evolve. We need a new vision for the future and not one that harks back to the Anglo-imperialist past.

Importantly, no country directly threatens Australia or its vital national interests. Nor are they likely to, unless provoked unnecessarily. This means that Australia needs a professional defence force that can operate independently, backed with a mobilisation capacity that clearly demonstrates to any would-be adversary that invasion would be futile. Australia's geography, economy, wealth, trade, and highly educated multicultural population optimise conditions for what APSF member Albert Palazzo has called the "Strategic Defensive".[2] *Palazzo advocates persuasively that Australia's future security policy is best based on the military philosophy of war known as the Strategic Defensive, rather than a continuation of the present policy of dependency.*[3] These conditions provide a potent reason why Australia needs an APSS, derived through national

[2] Albert Palazzo, *The Big Fix: rebuilding Australia's national security,* Melbourne University Press, 2025
[3] Ibid., p. 7

consensus with the Australian people. Sadly, this open consultation on national security – the government's most important responsibility – has been missing. By contrast, Defence policy currently masquerades as national security, derived too often in secret and without public input. This is evidenced by AUKUS, derived in secret in 2021 and accepted as a 'given' in the *2024 National Defence Strategy*.

APSF is amongst the growing chorus who have highlighted the inappropriateness of AUKUS and call for an urgent and transparent parliamentary and public review. The opportunity cost to properly defend Australia is enormous, the timeline is ridiculous, the business risk is unacceptable, the so-called deterrence impact on China is absurdly naïve, the safe storage of nuclear waste remains unresolved, and the positive impact on strengthening relations with our nearer neighbours is seriously jeopardised. These large nuclear-powered submarines are not optimised for Australia's littoral waters. The three variants will be very difficult to crew and maintain. By the time the final fleet of eight submarines arrive (if ever), they will, in all likelihood, be obsolete and highly detectable.

- AUKUS locks Australia into an aggressive US stance towards China.
- It commits Australia to fund the US and UK submarine industries without any guarantee of Australia ever receiving a submarine.
- The outrageous cost ($368 billion) forecloses other option for a more purposeful and balanced defence force and other security requirements such as climate adaptation, improved health and hospital services, and adequate funding for education at all levels and research.
- AUKUS and other US bases and 'joint facilities' are and will be military (possibly nuclear) targets.
- It is already provocative for Australia to maintain aircraft and naval surveillance in the South China Sea, amongst those contesting territorial claims. There is no need for the added provocation of planning to operate nuclear powered submarines off the coast of China, our largest trading partner.

Many countries have national security strategies, including all of Australia's Five Eyes partners and many of its regional neighbours. So, it makes sense for Australia to articulate its national peace and security approach and priorities. Importantly, an APSS must be based on, and preceded by, a national risk assessment. A good model to follow, but not replicate, is that of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Critically – and this is very important – both the national risk assessment and the APSS must be devised in full consultation with the Australian Parliament and the Australian people. And this is where the role of civil society is vital in our democracy, and why the NSC should take a leading role in shaping this outcome. The NSC is part of a university

and not a government department. With such independence and liberal funding in comparison to other civil society organisations such as the APSF, the NSC is in a unique position to advance the case for a national security strategy.

Australia is fortunate to have experts over the wide range of security threats and challenges, who can contribute to developing required approaches across academia, industry, trade unions, professional bodies and broader civil society. The NSC can play a vital role in facilitating a comprehensive process towards a national security strategy.

In thinking about Australia's security, what risks or vulnerabilities concern you the most?

No comprehensive national security strategy: the failure since 2013 of successive Australian governments to consult with the Australian people and provide a national security strategy remains the greatest risk to how Australia best assures its national security. A democratic nation that cannot articulate its national security priorities, transparently developed and agreed with civil society, jeopardises its democracy, sovereignty, its independence and its credibility. The APSF advocates strongly for the Australian Government and Parliament to urgently progress a program to develop an APSS based on a national risk assessment. The APSF believes that the NSC has a privileged position and that it can take a leading role in this endeavour. The APSF is keen to be a collaborative partner.

China relations: APSF is alarmed by the demonisation of China in Australia driven by some politicians, researchers, institutes and media commentators, most promoted and funded by US entities. China is not an aggressive country and has only one military base outside China, whereas the United States has over 700 military bases around the world. China's expenditure on arms as a percent of GNI is similar to Australia's and a fraction of the United States. China is the major economic power in our region and Australia's principal trading partner. China is not a security threat to Australia, and it is not sensible but self-defeating to frame Australia's security in terms of possible conflict with China.

The question of Taiwan is an important international security issue, and it is sensible for Australia to actively advocate diplomatically for the status quo. But unless Australia was threatened by China the future of Taiwan is not a vital interest for Australia. Australia does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state and has accepted the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legal government, acknowledging the position of the PRC that Taiwan is a province of China. Australia's prosperity is linked to China, not to the United States.

Accordingly, it would be sensible for Australia to withdraw its naval and air forces from so-called freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Rather than deterring and containing China, these operations increase the possibility of

miscalculation from which Australia would find it difficult to extricate. Close-call incidents have already occurred. Unlike the United States, China is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). With one of the largest merchant marines in the world, China welcomes and is reliant on freedom of navigation. Like other countries, however, it understandably objects to foreign military operations in its immediate vicinity.

China's history does not indicate hegemony. It is a trading nation. Sharing land borders with 14 countries, and maritime borders with others, China is able to manage most disputes without resort to major conflict. Chinese vessels sailing in international waters around Australia is not new. The first Chinese map showing Australia dates from 1477. Chinese settlers arrived in large numbers from the 1920s, by 1961 they constituted 3.3% of the population, and in 2025, 5.5 percent of Australians have Chinese heritage.

Given China's rise to be the major power in Asia, and as Australia's largest trading partner, Australia needs to strengthen relations with, and knowledge of, China. It would be sensible for Australia to promote greater understanding of Chinese language, history and culture in its education system, and to strengthen community ties, sports and cultural exchanges.

It would also be sensible for Australia to cease competing with China in the South Pacific. Australia's focus should be on poverty alleviation and combatting climate disruption. With its enviable track record and proven capacity China can greatly assist, particularly with much needed infrastructure. Australia's Pacific neighbours are consciously aware of this. Accordingly, Australia should avoid referring to our Pacific neighbours in paternalistic terms, such as Australia being their preferred 'partner of choice', or that we are all part of a 'Pacific family'. That is for those nations to decide, not Australia. Working with China, rather than against them, to achieve the development priorities of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations would be best development practice and enable Australia to better negotiate with China to dissuade the establishment of military bases and the maintenance of a nuclear-free zone of peace.

Climate Disruption: APSF agrees with Pacific Island countries that climate disruption poses the single greatest threat to global security and wellbeing. It is an existential threat, a threat multiplier. The impact of climate change directly impacts the health, wealth and wellbeing of Australians. The Australian Defence Force can play an important role in mitigating the impact of climate disruption, both in pre-disaster preparation and response. Working closely with neighbouring countries on civil-military climate action can forge prospects for a peaceful and more resilient future.

United States dependency: although a close and important ally, the United States has a track record of embarking on unsuccessful military operations, with Australia steadfastly by its side. Military commitments in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq have

failed to achieve intended outcomes, and at a devastating cost to all involved, as well as having wider ramifications. These examples illustrate how our wider foreign policy has been influenced in ways detrimental to Australia's interests. None of these operations proved vital to Australia's national security, although claimed to be so at the time.

Historical records confirm that America has never been interested in defending Australia. Rather, Australia provides suitable real estate to serve America's national interests. Australia can no longer continue to support the United States in the belief that this will guarantee US protection, because it never has. The rise of China to be a major power, and America's commitment to contest this reality, is neither a guarantee nor in Australia's long-term interests. While concern about China's military growth is warranted, Australia also needs to consider the implications from military action instigated by the United States (the oft-stated 'Thucydides Trap').

The re-election of President Donald Trump, with his singular focus on 'America First' and his unpredictable approach and decision-making, and disregard for international rules and organisations, raises increasing doubts as to the assurance of Australia's reliance on the United States. For over a decade, US leaders have shown contempt for the international rules-based order. Distrust in the United States has reached new heights with the poor treatment of allies by the Trump administration. Most Australians polled in 2025 now consider the United States to be an unreliable ally. Canada, European countries and others around the world realise that the United States is no longer a reliable and predictable ally and are forging new paths to maintain their security. By contrast, the Australian government is hoping everything will return to a bygone era when the United States had primacy in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, Australia needs to forge a broader and more independent relationship with China and its Asia-Pacific neighbours. Australia needs to shed the perception of being the US Deputy Sheriff, thereby demonstrating its commitment to peace and security as an independent and confident nation. An important initiative will be to review AUKUS.

US bases in Australia (often referred to as 'joint' facilities) significantly increase the risk of Australia being targeted should major power conflict occur in the Indo-Pacific. It seems logical that China (or any US adversary with the capability) would wish to deny the United States a firm base of operations. Such action could result in significant death and destruction against which Australia would have little (if any) defence. Since 2014 the United States has been granted increased access and basing rights, including the basing and transit of nuclear armed or nuclear capable platforms as part of the Force Posture Agreement (FPA). The FPA must urgently be reviewed by Parliament, with full disclosure to the Australian people regarding the costs, benefits and risks to Australia's security and sovereignty. Critics of the FPA have contended that key US bases cede Australian sovereignty to the United States, and that such bases will be directly targeted in the event of a conflict between the United States and China. These are issues of

enormous significance about which the Australian public, and probably most parliamentarians, have little knowledge.

Advanced technology: Due to technological advancement and dependence, there are many vulnerabilities in the cyberspace domain. The rapidly expanding use of artificial intelligence (AI) is a multiplier of many of these threats, and lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) in modern warfare will accelerate and intensify conflict. The increasing autonomy in warfare is alarming, especially in the absence of legal limits.

Algorithms that can remove humans from the decision loop, pose security, legal, ethical and humanitarian risks. This includes challenges to international law, human rights and accountability. In these areas technology is way ahead of policy, and the AUKUS partners are yet to agree common legal standards. Consequently, the full scope of AI collaboration for AUKUS Pillar 2 is unclear. Australia has a responsibility to ensure that robust policy is in place to guide development of weapons systems that accord with international law. To date, Australia has been resistant to new legal rules, such as a binding instrument as called for by many in the 'Group of Governmental Experts on LAWS' in the UN's important Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

Human Security: Australia is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet inequalities across wealth, housing, health and education have worsened over the past two decades. 3.3 million Australians live below the poverty line. There is a significant housing crisis for all ages, and young Australians are finding it increasingly difficult to enter the housing market. The rise of the 'sovereign citizen' movement, and incidents of religious and racial intolerance, highlight the reality that national cohesion and security start at home.

Despite nearly 20 years of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continues to lag behind other Australians, with only four of the 19 targets currently on track. These are complex issues with no simple solutions. But overcoming Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage is a critical element in ensuring peace and security for all Australians.

Prioritising human security is a cornerstone for a national peace and security strategy. It is integral to ensuring peace and security in Australia but is seldom acknowledged in government security circles. By addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals and communities, Australia can enhance resilience and stability, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts and crises.

Human security rests ultimately on the freedom and wellbeing of our citizens. Assuring peace and security at home will require having trust and confidence in our government. But peace at home will be elusive unless and until we are able to close the gap with our First Nations people, ensure justice and human rights for all under our care.

Addressing climate disruption and environmental restoration with integrity, preparing for potential pandemics and reversing the increasing economic and social inequality gap between rich and poor are essential to peace and security. The achievement of full human potential and sustainable development can only be realized when all women and girls have their full human rights respected, protected and fulfilled. In defining a peace and security strategy, we need to be clearer than ever about what kind of Australia we want to live in, what counts as progress, and how we measure how well we're succeeding.

What do you consider to be Australia's most important national interest?

Do values and national identity matter to your idea of security?

What aspects of Australia's way of life should we strive to protect?

How do we safeguard our national security without undermining the way of life we are trying to protect?

APSF believes it is critical for the Australian people to be engaged in the development of the APSS, based on a thorough national risk assessment. The government will need to inform and discuss regional security issues with the public to enable informed contributions and to build a national consensus and commitment to peace and security.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding should be cornerstones of our national security strategy and have a high priority with Australian society backed by education programs. Australia should actively work with our near neighbours to ensure the region remains a nuclear free zone of peace. This is clearly what our neighbours want, but successive Australian governments have failed to pursue this outcome with any vigour.

What should a whole-of-nation approach to national security look like?

What roles should government, the private sector and civil society play in national security?

What benefits – or problems – do you see in spreading security responsibility widely in society?

With limited resources available Australia will need to focus more on addressing injustice and less on military alliances. This will require greater independence in decision-making, and decoupling from being a sub-imperial power, to improve our international reputation. We will need to show greater commitment to peacebuilding, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, arms control mechanisms, security sector reform, nuclear non-proliferation, climate restoration and achievement of the SDGs, with a strong focus on climate change, maintaining biodiversity and preparedness for pandemics.

While bilateral relations will remain critical, Australia must continue to show leadership in important multilateral peace and security initiatives, particularly in our immediate region and with and through the United Nations. Australia's presence on the UN Peacebuilding Commission provides a valuable opportunity.

The Government has a leadership role but must bring the community along with its thinking if it expects acceptance and support. The private sector, universities, trade unions, professional bodies, and civil society more generally have important contributions to make through development of technology, research and public education and information. There is always a risk that oppositional voices may at times be very loud, but public agreement for national peace and security must win out through debate and broad public engagement. Making decisions in secret only raises suspicion and is unlikely to garner public support, as the AUKUS decision shows only too well.

The vision for the kind of society Australia seeks should be shared with regional neighbours.

The benefit of public engagement in Australia's security is that it builds trust in government and social cohesion in society. Civil society organisations play an important role in public information and education as well as contributing policy ideas to government.

As Albert Einstein reminded us, 'peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding.'

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