Peace and security for Australians requires more than defence

AUSTRALIAN PEACE AND SECURITY FORUM

Working towards comprehensive national peace and security

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Peace and security for Australians requires more than defence

Peace and Security Quarterly Report No. 1

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The cover artwork hangs in the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands.

The painting titled Ngayuku Mamaku Ngura (My Father's Country), was created in 2017, by the late artist Wawiriya Burton, an Indigenous Australian artist and senior woman of law in her region. In this work, she depicts a site in her father's country west of Amata, near the remote community of Piplayatjara. This site is Nyumpanytja with, as its most remarkable feature the Cave of the Mice Women. At this important Law site and its cave, Wawiriya became a woman. It is an important place for pregnant women and those who are sick; it is not for men.

This important painting by a senior Aboriginal woman artist speaks about the importance of law and justice to a safe and peaceful society. In presenting the artwork to the ICC in 2021, then Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands, Matthew Neuhaus said "This painting and its story is about the transmission of knowledge and the law to younger generations."

Australian Peace and Security Forum
Working towards comprehensive national peace and security

The APSF is a not-for-profit association bringing together a broad network of informed researchers and professionals working to strengthen peace and security for all Australians by providing information, analysis and opportunities for dialogue with Government and civil society.

For more information about APSF, please visit our website:
austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au
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Contents

Our Contributors ii

Introduction iv

1. **AUKUS jeopardises Australia's Peace and Security** 1
   Michael G Smith
2. **Does China threaten Australia's future peace and security?** 7
   Vince Scappatura
3. **International Law and the Rules Based Order in the Trump Era – the Challenge for Australia** 13
   Matthew Neuhaus
4. **Australia can again become a champion of nuclear disarmament** 16
   Melissa Parke
5. **Artificial Intelligence and War: limits to protect humanity** 20
   Matilda Byrne
6. **If we want peace, we need to prevent conflict** 25
   John Langmore, Adrian Morrice and Russell Rollason

Our Contributors

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John Langmore AM is currently the Chair of the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne. He has worked in PNG, been an economic advisor to the Australian Treasurer; a Labor Member of the House of Representatives for 12 years; and a Divisional Director in the United Nations system in New York for seven years. He is an author of many books and articles. John is co-Vice President of APSF.

Adrian Morrice has been a practitioner and researcher in political transitions, conflict prevention and peacebuilding for several decades. Deploying to UN Force Headquarters, Somalia in 1993 as an Australian Navy staff officer, he later joined the UN in five more peacekeeping operations and political missions (Liberia, Western Sahara, Timor Leste and Sierra Leone). He supported transition elections in Nigeria, Nepal, Mexico, Pakistan, Mongolia and Thailand. Completing a Master of Science from the London School of Economics in 2003, he later joined the UN in New York, working in the Departments of Peacekeeping and Political Affairs where he supported new research and policies on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict, security sector reform and reform to UN Special Political Missions. In Myanmar, he was the UN adviser to the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, and, before returning to Australia in 2023, the UN peace adviser in Nepal for 3 years. Adrian is a member of APSF.

Matthew Neuhaus was appointed an Honorary Professor (International Law) at the ANU College of Law on his retirement from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2023.

He was Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands from August 2018 to October 2022. Mr Neuhaus previously served as Australian Ambassador to Zimbabwe (2011-15) and High Commissioner to Nigeria (1997-2000). He has also held senior positions in DFAT and PMC, covering Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific, United Nations, and international law. He had earlier postings at the United Nations in New York, Port Moresby and Nairobi. Mr Neuhaus was Director of the Political Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London 2002-2008.

Mr Neuhaus has a B.A. (Hons) LLB from the University of Sydney and a Master of Philosophy (International Relations) from the University of Cambridge.

Melissa Parke is Executive Director, of the International Campaign for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) based in Geneva.

Melissa is a former Australian Minister for International Development and former Member of Parliament for the Australian Labor Party for Fremantle from 2007 to 2016. As an MP, she regularly voiced support for nuclear disarmament, including as a member of a cross-party parliamentary group dedicated to the cause.

Prior to entering the Australian Parliament, Ms Parke served as an international lawyer with the United Nations in Kosovo, Gaza, New York and Lebanon. More recently, she served as a member of the U Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen.

Melissa has a Masters of Law degree in public international law from Murdoch University, as well as law degree from the University of New South Wales and a Bachelor of Business degree from Curtin University.

Russell Rollason AM is a former diplomat with the Department of Foreign Affairs and has twenty-five years' experience in NGOs including 12 years as Executive Director for the now Australian Council for International Development. He has worked as an international development consultant in Asia and the Pacific. He is a science honours graduate from the University of Queensland with a Masters in General Studies from the University of NSW. He is Treasurer for APSF.

Dr **Vince Scappatura** is currently Sessional Academic in the School of International Studies at Macquarie University. He has a PhD in International Relations and is author of The US Lobby and Australian Defence Policy. He is currently working on the Nuclear-Capable B-52H Stratoforterss Bombers Project for the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainabillity. He was the Military and Defence Panel Leader into the People's Inquiry into the Australia-US alliance. Vince is a contributor to the public policy journal Pearls and Irritations. A compilation of his recent publications can be found at https://mq.academia.edu/VinceScappatura.

Major General **Michael G Smith** AO(Ret'd) AO served for 34 years in the Australian Defence Force, including numerous command and senior staff positions. He served in Papua New Guinea, Cambodia and Timor-Leste. His civilian career was as CEO of Austcare (now Action Aid Australia), founding Executive Director of the Australian Civil-Military Centre, and service with the United Nations in Libya, Myanmar, Nepal, and Yemen. Mike is the Development Advisor for the Calleo Indigenous Community Fund, Chair of the Gallipoli Scholarship Fund, a Non-executive Director of the Institute for Economics and Peace and the Australian Respiratory Council, and is Public Officer for the APSF. He is a past National President of the United Nations Association of Australia. Mike holds a BA (Mil) from UNSW and a Master of International Relations from ANU.

Introduction

Humanity sits on the cusp of a multi-faceted catastrophe. After decades of global inaction towards mitigating these existential crises, we must act now. An unprecedented complex blend of domestic, regional and global circumstances is not only creating worsening international uncertainty, but it also raises questions about the capacity of democratic government to deal with cross-cutting, overlapping complex crises. Responses to economic upheavals, climate disruption, the erosion of biodiversity, nuclear proliferation, regional conflicts, cyber threats, inequality, and the spectre of worsening pandemics are undermining trust in in governments and other social institutions.

The resulting insecurity experienced by Australians is profound.

The security and future wellbeing of Australians and our environment is the most important and critical function of the Australian Government. People cannot enjoy security and wellbeing in the absence of peace and climate stability. Peace is fragile and means more than the absence of war. As Albert Einstein reminded us, peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding. War destroys and disrupts, but peace restores, builds and strengthens us as individuals, as communities, and as nations.

In developing a comprehensive peace and security strategy, the views and priorities of the Australian people, including our First Nations people must be heard. As Bob Hawke once remarked, "issues of peace and disarmament are too important to be left to governments alone.”

Australian Peace and Security Forum

In 2024, a group of researchers, professionals, advocates and concerned individuals established the Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF) to promote a national conversation on the best ways to ensure Australia’s peace and security and call on the Government to develop an Australian Peace and Security Strategy in consultation with the community. APSF is an incorporated not-for-profit association, and we strive to increase understanding of the interlinked nature of the key security challenges as outlined in the diagram below.

In seeking to build understanding of these issues and the interlinkages, APSF has embarked on publishing online a series of thoughtful articles addressing the four themes in the diagram.

Defence and Regional Security

In this first edition of the quarterly report, we examine key challenges in strengthening defence and regional security for Australians. This is not intended to be a review of Australia's defence policies, a task well beyond the resources of the APSF. But rather, the intent is to encourage discussion on several of the key issues that are central to Australia's thinking on defence and regional security. The subsequent editions in this series will look at the climate and environmental, economic and human security issues.

One of Australia's largest ever military purchases, 8 submarines under the so-called **AUKUS** agreement, is causing increasing concern in the Australian public. The overwhelming cost, that we will hand on as a debt to our grandchildren, and the fear that we may have inadvertently made Australia a key target in the event of a war by being too closely tied to an unpredictable US Government are key issues addressed by **Major General (ret'd) Michael G Smith** in his paper on *AUKUS jeopardises Australia's Peace and Security*. "There can be little doubt that AUKUS was predicated on the unsubstantiated assertion that China threatens the so-called rules-based international order as well as Australia's territorial sovereignty and vital interests. But evidence to support this assertion is scant and highly contestable," writes Smith. He calls on the Australian government to review AUKUS through full and transparent public and parliamentary consultation.

But is **China** a threat to Australia's peace and security? **Dr Vince Scappatura** tackles this question in the second paper. China is Australia's largest trading partner accounting for a third of all our exports. Yet, as Scappatura notes "the Australian government and the national security establishment has opted in no uncertain terms to characterise China's rise as a serious security threat to Australia." The Government points out that China's defence expenditure has increased rapidly in recent years. But, Scappatura observes that "while China's military growth is undoubtedly impressive, it more or less tracks with its extraordinary economic growth. In other words, China's military spending as a percentage of GDP has remained fairly flat, and to this day is still less than India or Vietnam or even Australia, and certainly much less than that of the United States."

The **international Rules based Order** is a foundation for Australian foreign policy. Speaking at the UN General Assembly last September Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated, "these rules always matter – never more so at a time of conflict – when they help guide us out of darkness, back towards the light." In the third paper, **Professor Matthew Neuhaus** provides an overview of the Rules Based Order and the international law in the post Trump era. Neuhaus notes "It is also worth reminding ourselves that international law existed before the United States itself. It will continue long after that nation, which temporarily became the indispensable superpower of our age, returns to being just another big country."

The most critical challenge for international law and cooperation is controlling nuclear weapons. Currently two countries with **nuclear weapons** capability are actively engaged in conflict: Russia in Ukraine and Israel in Gaza. Any use of nuclear weapons anywhere at any scale would be an escalation that could destroy all complex life on earth. The **Hon Melissa Parke** explains how *Australia can again become a champion of nuclear disarmament*. In the late 1980's, the US and Russia agreed to massively reduce the number of nuclear weapons on

the planet, and they almost agreed to eliminate them altogether. But soon after nuclear disarmament stalled. In 2008, in an effort to restart nuclear disarmament negotiations, Australia and Japan established the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation & Disarmament. Former Co-chair Gareth Evans observed, "the fact we have survived so long without nuclear catastrophe is not due to good management, but rather sheer dumb luck, and we cannot expect that luck to continue indefinitely." Significant progress was not achieved until 2017 when 122 countries came together in the UN General Assembly to adopt the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The treaty is a game changer in nuclear disarmament and Parke makes the case for Australia to sign and ratify the treaty.

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have revealed to the world the deadly capacity of remote-controlled drones in Ukraine and the use of **Artificial Intelligence** (AI) systems by Israel in Gaza for target generation for intense bombing with horrific civilian deaths and injuries. In *AI and War – limits to protect humanity*, **Matilda Byrne** outlines how "autonomous weapons will escalate and intensify conflicts facilitating unprecedented speed and scale of killing and reduce barriers to war. Machine errors could have catastrophic consequences in triggering unwanted conflict or escalation."

Australia has extensive investments in AI weapons development projects with the Australian Defence Force, Department of Defence, multinational arms manufacturers, local arms companies and universities Byrne urges that "Australia has a responsibility to ensure robust policy is in place to guide development and promote international law that would reduce the risks to international security through new prohibitions and regulations related to autonomous weapons."

The risk of conflict in our region and beyond is high but conflict is not inevitable and countries around the world invest significantly in **conflict prevention and peacebuilding**. In the final paper, *If we want peace, we need to prevent conflict*, **Professor John Langmore**, **Adrian Morrice** and **Russell Rollason** make the case for strengthening Australia's policy and resource commitments to peace and conflict prevention in our immediate region and beyond. Guided by the UN's 2023 policy brief New Agenda for Peace, they argue for a new government to increase its strategic investments in prevention in 2025, and to develop a more holistic national peace and security strategy. They call for "stronger institutions across thematic peacebuilding areas (women, peace and security, transitional justice, security sector reform) and stronger core and expert capacity among DFAT, defence and AFP staff. We need rapidly deployable mediation and dialogue experts. We need a reinvigoration of our overseas volunteer capacity – both the number of Australians deployed and its visibility as a contribution to regional peace and security."

The Australian Peace and Security Forum aims to publish shortly the second in the "Peace and Security Quarterly Report" series which will focus on how climate disruption and environmental degradation threaten peace and security for Australians. We aim to release it in June, around the time of World Environment Day. To join or learn more about our webinars and other activities, visit our website here.

Special thanks to our writers and thanks to Unsplash, the United Nations, ICJ, ICC and the US Navy for the use of photos. And of course, thanks to John Lennon for the title!

Russell Rollason (Editor)

AUKUS, the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (US), was announced on 15 September 2021 by prime minister Scott Morrison. and subsequently confirmed by prime minister Anthony Albanese. Pillar 1 of AUKUS is intended to eventually provide Australia with eight nuclear-powered submarines, reaching maturity over the next 40 years. A Pillar 2 'add-on' calls for the collaborative development of advanced technologies across six specific areas, all of which can be pursued separately from the AUKUS umbrella. Accordingly, Pillar 2 is not considered in this review of AUKUS.

With the first quarter of the 21st century almost behind us – the Asian century – the AUKUS agreement reeks of a bygone and distant anglosphere, confirmed by the lack of prior consultation with our Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbours (including New Zealand), and disrespectful of France whose Naval Group had already been contracted to build non-nuclear-powered submarines.

Why AUKUS?

Prior to AUKUS, Defence analysts had determined that Australia would need 12 diesel submarines to replace the six ageing Collins-class. The French Naval Group was contracted to deliver these by re-engineering their nuclear-powered variant. As is too often the case with major defence procurement in Australia, there was a lack of parliamentary and public consultation to determine exactly what Australia required and more fundamentally how this capability would enhance Australia's national security. The secretive 'switch' to AUKUS also failed to answer these fundamental questions.

After announcing the 'switch', prime minister Morrison provided the rationale for acquiring long-range nuclear-powered submarines. Their acquisition, he stated, would markedly enhance Australia's contribution to security throughout the Indo-Pacific. This would be achieved by having submarines with greater speed, greater loads/firepower, and greater stealth by remaining submerged indefinitely. There can be no doubt, however, that the primary reason for AUKUS was to counter China by further cementing our defence

alliance with the US and aligning Australia's force structure evermore deeper into the US order of battle.

Australia's negotiations for AUKUS were conducted in secret. At the eye-watering estimated cost of ~$368 billion – by far Australia's most expensive and risky defence acquisition ever – AUKUS attracted significant criticism.

At $368 billion AUKUS is by far Australia's most expensive and risky defence acquisition ever.

The initial public concern of AUKUS has continued to gain momentum, with criticism transcending the secretive process by which the decision was originally taken. Despite these growing concerns, both major political parties – ALP and the Liberal/National coalition – remain resolutely committed to AUKUS. Yet, a growing number of organisations and parliamentarians, strategic analysts and commentators, former prime ministers and senior ministers from across the political divide, as well as former defence force members, continue to raise legitimate concerns.

In an increasingly uncertain era of major power rivalry these concerns have become even more relevant in the wake of President Trump's re-election and his administration's divisive actions. Fundamentally, if the US's closest neighbours Canada and Mexico, and its NATO allies, can no longer trust the US on national security matters, can the US continue to be considered a reliable ally for Australia?

Australia's goal to maintain peace should not be a choice between prosperity from China as our major trading partner <u>or</u> military security from the US. Like other countries, and particularly those in Asia and the Pacific, Australia needs to manage its international relationships, hedge its bets, safeguard its sovereignty, ensure its independence of action, and invest in a comprehensive and achievable national security strategy.

Will AUKUS make us safer?

Far from making Australia safer, AUKUS raises the likelihood of external military threat against us. Rather than being 'protective' AUKUS is 'provocative'. Currently, Australia (like the rest of the world) is not immune from long-range missile and/or nuclear weapon targeting, but no country, including China, currently has the intent to threaten Australia militarily. Our geography, economic prosperity and relative continental isolation continues to be our greatest security assets on which we need to capitalise. Our diplomacy is critically important. If we do not threaten other countries and are committed to working collaboratively with them, our security is more assured.

But AUKUS does the opposite! It directly and inconvertibly aligns Australia with the US in a dangerous containment strategy of China. The US and 'joint' facilities in Australia are already prime targets of China and other countries because these bases are increasingly important to the US's ability to strike and sustain operations in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS increases the likelihood of Australia becoming 'collateral damage' in the event of conflict between the US and China.

While Australia continues to place considerable emphasis on its security alliance with the US, we must recognise that the global balance of power has already shifted, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. China is now the major power in Asia. The curtain has fallen on two hundred years of western dominance. This does not mean the West is irrelevant, but it is no longer able to colonise and dominate Asia. Accordingly, Australia must chart a new course in a complex multipolar world where the US no longer has guaranteed primacy. As for the UK component of AUKUS, the UK has been irrelevant to Australia's security since the fall of Singapore in World War 2.

The annual State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report – highlighted that:

- *China continues to be seen as the most influential economic (59.9%) and political-strategic power (43.9%) in the region, outpacing the US by significant margins in both domains.* And,
- *China has edged past the US to become the prevailing choice (50.5%) if the region were forced to align itself in the on-going US-China rivalry. The US as a choice dropped from 61% the previous year.*

Two other important and related issues are relevant as to whether AUKUS makes us safer. The first is the safe disposal and/or long-term storage of high-grade radioactive waste. Nuclear waste is highly dangerous and persists indefinitely, impacting on future generations. Unless and until a viable solution is found and agreed by the communities most impacted, AUKUS should not proceed.

The second issue relates to Australia's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. In an increasingly unstable world, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has moved the Doomsday clock to 90 seconds to midnight. This should worry us all. While AUKUS submarines are not nuclear-armed (which seriously brings into question their deterrence value) they will be transiting the seas to our immediate north and the declared nuclear-free zone in the Pacific. Our southeast Asian neighbours of Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed their displeasure with nuclear-powered submarines transiting their proximate waters.

Does AUKUS increase the likelihood of Australia going to war with China?

The very worst outcome for Australia would be to become involved in war with China, placing our security and prosperity in peril! Along with dealing with climate change, managing the relationship with China are arguably Australia's two highest strategic priorities.

There can be little doubt that AUKUS was predicated on the unsubstantiated assertion that China threatens the so-called rules-based international order as well as Australia's territorial sovereignty and vital interests. But evidence to support this assertion is scant and highly contestable. In any case, President Trump has made the rules-based order redundant.

China has certainly modernised and expanded its defence force and significantly expanded its political and economic influence globally to assure its position as a major power. But it remains a long way behind the US in overall defence expenditure, although less so in advanced technology.

China is not, and never has been, a hegemonic power.

Through hard work China has assured its territorial sovereignty and national security. It's *Century of Humiliation* by Western powers and Japan will not be repeated. With its increasing military capabilities China has become more assertive, particularly in relation to Taiwan and its claims in the south and east China seas.

But China has not threatened other countries. Its claim for Taiwan 'unification' reflects an unfinished civil war. China has expressed a preference for peaceful reunification unless Taiwan declares independence or is influenced by foreign military forces. Taiwan is China's 'red line' over which they will go to war if necessary. Australia does not recognise Taiwan as an independent state, and it is not in our national interest to become involved militarily. China's claims in the south China sea, identical to Taiwan's, are matched and contested by territorial claims from other countries. Australia should not choose sides but should encourage resolution through adept diplomacy.

China is not, and never has been, a hegemonic power. Unlike America, China has

only one military base abroad (Djibouti) while the US is estimated to have around 800 bases in at least 70 countries. Since the Korean War and unlike America, China has not been involved in major or protracted conflicts.

Also, unlike the US, China has declared a 'no nuclear first strike' policy and is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China is committed to freedom of navigation, on which its trade, including with Australia, depends. China objects to foreign naval and air incursions within its exclusive economic zone and air space: a good place for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to avoid so that it is not the unintentional cause of conflict.

Australia's vital national interests lie in respecting China as a great power by encouraging mutual contact and understanding across economic, social, educational, health and cultural sectors.

China already has the capability to threaten and target Australia militarily. It would be foolish to deny this reality. But equally foolish would be to provide China with the intent for military action against Australia when China, to date, has shown no intent to do so.

Rather than investing in AUKUS, Australia must prioritise its diplomatic efforts and strengthen a resilient self-defence posture. Our best defence is not to contest China, but rather to demonstrate that Australia would be extremely difficult to conquer and impossible to govern. AUKUS promotes the opposite by denying diplomatic options and the means to prioritise our self-defence measures. Instead, AUKUS embeds us further in the US war machine – a choice that is certainly not in Australia's best interest. China's and Australia's vital interests and priorities coincide on trade and prosperity, and certainly not war or maintaining US primacy in the Indo-Pacific.

Instead of contesting and competing with China in the South Pacific Australia should welcome China's economic assistance to help develop these countries and alleviate poverty and disease in accordance with each recipient country's priorities – this is good development practice. China can assist with the development of much-needed infrastructure, far beyond the capacity of Australia to provide. Working with Indonesia and other Pacific countries Australia can actively seek China's agreement for this region to remain a nuclear-free and non-militarised zone.

Does AUKUS strengthen or weaken our alliance with the US?

Successive Australian governments have justified AUKUS as strengthening our alliance with the US. Deputy prime minister and Defence minister Richard Marles has emphasised that the ADF will now be both interoperable and interchangeable. Of course, in one sense this might strengthen the alliance, but 'interchangeability' also seriously weakens Australia's independence and freedom of action. Australian submarines would inevitably be controlled by the US, just as our special forces were in Afghanistan.

Since World War 2 the security alliance with the US has been and remains the central pillar of Australia's defence policy. However, US actions since President Trump's re-inauguration in January 2025, requires Australia to recalibrate its alliance with the US. Any belief that the US will defend Australia

is flawed and dangerous. America will only ever do what is in its best interests.

AUKUS bases and US military/'joint' facilities in Australia will be directly targeted in a war with China, resulting in significant civilian collateral damage

In our quest to be protected by the US, and despite the lack of any major threat to our country, we have allowed ourselves to be colonised by Uncle Sam. Far from assuring our security, AUKUS bases and US military/'joint' facilities in Australia will be directly targeted in a war with China, resulting in significant civilian collateral damage. In contrast, short of nuclear war the US heartland will remain secure.

It is unfortunate that the details and potential consequences of US bases and 'joint' facilities have not been shared transparently with the Australian public. If the government's most important responsibility is to protect its citizens, surely it has a responsibility to explain its decisions. Former prime ministers Malcolm Fraser and Paul Keating have elucidated the dangers and limitations of the US alliance.

For most Australian political leaders, the US alliance, and now AUKUS, are considered components of our national security insurance policy, and to date no premium has been too high to pay. Given the transformation in geopolitical power this insurance policy needs to be reconsidered.

Perhaps it is our 'fear of abandonment' that has caused Australia to commit military forces to failed wars with the US, based on inadequate strategic legitimacy and unachievable ends. Australia has been America's greatest camp-follower to military and political failures in Vietnam and Afghanistan, and complicit in an illegal invasion of Iraq that resulted in regional mayhem. In Afghanistan the reputation of our elite special forces was unnecessarily tarnished. The Royal Commission's findings into deaths by suicide revealed the enormous tragedy to veterans and their families from engaging in these senseless wars. Yet our governments are never held accountable.

It is time for Australia to reassert its independence and cease being the US's 'Deputy Sherrif' and being perceived as such. This perception restricts Australia's diplomatic influence and effectiveness with our Indo-Pacific neighbours and with member states in the United Nations.

Our government needs to recalibrate Australia's commitment to the US alliance, spearheaded by an urgent review of AUKUS. Our government must do all it can to encourage the US not to go to war with China, and to advocate for the US to respect and share power sensibly with China. Above all, the US needs to know that Australia's commitment to a future war with China cannot be taken for granted. Our primary contribution to the US alliance should be the maintenance of peace in the Southwest Pacific. But AUKUS is sending us in the opposite direction.

Should AUKUS define Australia's defence strategy?

Australia's Defence Strategy of 2024 was highly influenced by the AUKUS decision. And as with AUKUS this newly proclaimed strategy of *deterrence by denial* has attracted legitimate criticism. Written in the absence of a comprehensive national security strategy (that a defence strategy should support) the promise of deterrence by denial is hardly reinforced by historical evidence.

Nuclear deterrence has some relevance in its madness because of mutually assured destruction. But there is little historical evidence that conventional deterrence works Alliances promote arms races that are more likely to lead to war rather than avert them. And when armed to the teeth opportunities

need to be found to test the latest technology. The procurement of weapons systems can never deter an opponent, and so it is with AUKUS. As for 'denial', it is not at all clear what it is that our Defence Strategy is 'denying'. In essence, 'deterrence' and 'denial' are nice words without practical meaning.

By contrast, Australia's defence strategy must support and not replace a comprehensive national security strategy, which Australia does not currently have, and which should be of the highest priority for Australia's next government. Our Defence Strategy must be achievable. We will require a strong, independent and balanced ADF focussed on a non-threatening posture of defence-in-depth, backed by demonstrable national resilience, a strong economy and detailed mobilisation planning. Technology can assist greatly. We should not become embroiled in distant wars. Instead, we must demonstrate that we have national defences that will withstand any would-be aggressor. NATO is no longer relevant to us, if it ever was, and these resources should be diverted to our region.

Is AUKUS achievable?

In pursuing AUKUS there can be no guarantee that Australia will be able to procure its eight nuclear-powered submarines on time and on budget, and most likely not at all. This makes AUKUS a very bad business venture, and at exorbitant cost.

AUKUS is a long-term investment in planned obsolescence. Both the US and UK have huge difficulties in meeting their own submarine delivery schedules, further placing AUKUS in doubt and almost certainly behind schedule and over budget. By the time the full fleet is acquired we will be living in different geopolitical circumstances, and technology will have advanced remarkably. The ocean depths will no longer be opaque and large attack submarines will become detectable and have lost their stealth. Greater emphasis will be on smaller and cheaper robotic vessels that are far more relevant to defend Australia's maritime approaches.

Australian submarine experts have advised the difficulty in crewing the much larger AUKUS submarines and ensuring the necessary nuclear expertise. These experts do not believe it possible to crew and service three different classes of AUKUS submarines as is currently planned.

The government has asserted that our AUKUS submarines will be Australian-flagged and operated with no degradation to our sovereignty. But in reality our submarines will operate under US command and control system and be a major part of the ADF's future 'interchangeability' with the US. Most worrying, however, is that AUKUS unbalances the ADF and to fund AUKUS our surface fleet and Army are already being required to pay a heavy price.

Re-evaluating AUKUS

AUKUS was a poor decision made in secret, bereft of parliamentary and public consultation. Our government must now review the AUKUS agreement and consider other and more cost-effective options. A public review of AUKUS will provide Australians an opportunity to understand the choices we face and the costs and benefits of the various options. Our parliamentarians must take this responsibility seriously or be held accountable. The future peace and security of Australia is at stake.

Does China threaten Australia's future peace and security?

Vince Scappatura

The question of whether China threatens Australia's future peace and security is an important one that has dominated Australia's national security discourse for almost a decade.

However, I think a part of the problem in the national discourse about the potential threat posed by China is the very way that this question is formulated in binary terms. The question presupposes a yes or no answer – either China is a threat, or it isn't.

It precludes the possibility that China could be threatening in some ways and benign in others; it may present security *challenges* for Australia, but not necessarily security *threats*; and it may in some ways even contribute to Australia's security. To my mind, all those things are in fact the case.

The same problematic framing is often utilised with respect to Australia's alliance with the United States. Where China either *is or isn't* our greatest security challenge, the United States either *can or can't* be relied upon as our ultimate security guarantor.

The question about whether we can rely on the United States to come to our aid in a moment of crisis has greater prominence in the national discourse today due to the return of Donald Trump and his administration's shake-up of the global US alliance system. But it doesn't make a lot of sense to frame either of these relationships in these binary terms for several reasons.

Climate change

First, while China's growing military power and coercive behaviour in the South China Sea present a challenge for Australia in terms regional peace and security, it's also true that China has played a key role in helping to address or mitigate other global security threats. Take, for example, what is a key – if not the greatest – threat to Australian and global security: climate change.

China is, without question and by far, the greatest producer of green energy in the world. The leading role it has played in the production and export of cheap renewable sources of energy – particularly solar panels – has been a boon for the (very slow and

woefully inadequate) transition to a green global economy.

China is also a big part of the problem as the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter – although not per capita and not in cumulative terms. But it at least appears to be headed in the right direction, and it's certainly playing a more positive role than our so-called key security guarantor – the United States.

What does it mean to call the United States our primary security ally when the Trump administration's key energy policy is explicit about dramatically expanding fossil fuel production and keeping the world hooked on fossil fuels for as long as possible; which, if successful, would all but guarantee a global climate catastrophe?

Nuclear war

It's not just on the issue of climate change where the China threat/US saviour dichotomy doesn't make much sense.

The existence of nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons policies that increase the likelihood of accidental or deliberate nuclear war, is another urgent and existential threat to Australian security.

China has expanded the number of its nuclear warheads to approximately 600 as of 2024 (the US has an estimated 5,044).

All the existing great nuclear powers are expanding or modernising their nuclear arsenals. And Australia should certainly be troubled by the fact that China's nuclear arsenal is the fastest-growing in the world, having significantly expanded the number of its nuclear warheads to approximately 600 as of 2024 (the US has an estimated 5,044).

But then, shouldn't we also be deeply troubled by the fact that the United States is spending a staggering 1.7 trillion dollars over 30 years to modernise its far larger and superior nuclear forces; that the United States has, in recent years, torn up critical aspects of the global nuclear arms control regime; and that it is the United States, not China, that refuses to adopt a 'no first use' policy and continues to dangerously maintain its nuclear forces on 'high-alert'? And might China's expansion of its nuclear arsenal have something to do with the threat that it perceives from America's far superior nuclear forces?

It is misleading at best, if not entirely contradictory, to frame China's investment in its nuclear arsenal as threatening to regional peace and security, but America's much larger investment in its nuclear arsenal as critical to the so-called nuclear umbrella that protects Australia from nuclear threats.

If China's nuclear arsenal is targeting Australia primarily because we are becoming increasingly implicated in America's nuclear warfighting plans, including forward-basing US nuclear-capable bombers on Australian territory, is it China or the United States that threatens our security?

China's military build-up

What about the conventional threat China might pose to the region and to Australia's security directly?

It seems entirely reasonable that Australia, and other countries in the region, would want to take steps to respond to China's extraordinary growth in military capabilities; along with the deployment of its military and economic power to bully other nations – particularly over sovereignty disputes with its neighbours – and of more direct concern to Australia, the dangerous harassment by the PLA of Australian warships and military planes as they lawfully traverse the South China Sea. Most troubling of all, of course, is China's increasingly aggressive posture with respect to Taiwan.

The pertinent question, however, is do all these issues amount to a security *threat* to Australia that requires an aggressive military build-up in the form of long-range power projection capabilities, deeper US-Australia defence integration, nuclear-powered submarines, and so on?

Or does China's reemergence as a great regional power present a complex set of security *challenges* that are best managed through a combination of hedging, adept diplomacy and strategic accommodation?

The Australian government and the national security establishment has opted in no uncertain terms to characterise China's rise as a serious security threat to Australia.

According to Defence Minister, Richard Marles, Australia's military build-up, initiated by the Morrison government but continued under the Albanese government, is a direct response to China's growing military power, which he has labelled 'the largest and most ambitious we have seen by any country since the end of the Second World War'.

Furthermore, according to Marles, China's military build-up requires a countervailing military response by Australia because it lacks 'transparency' and fails to be accompanied by 'reassuring statecraft', indicated especially by China's coercive actions in the South China Sea that violate the so-called 'rules-based order'.

In short, Australia's miliary build up is justified to deter China from further coercive behaviour. The flip side of deterrence is that you must optimise for war in case it fails. Deterrence equals escalation, and perhaps even provocation.

China: a security threat or challenge?

There are several points to make in response to this characterisation of the China threat and Australia's militarist response.

First, in point of fact, China's military build-up is **not** the largest and most ambitious since the end of the Second World War as Marles claims – it actually pales in comparison to the build up by both the Soviet Union and the United States during the early decades of the Cold War.

China's military spending as a percentage of GDP has remained fairly flat, and to this day is still less than India or Vietnam or even Australia, and certainly much less than that of the United States

Second, while China's military growth is undoubtedly impressive, it more or less tracks with its extraordinary economic growth. In other words, China's military spending as a percentage of GDP has remained fairly flat, and to this day is still less than India or Vietnam or even Australia, and certainly much less than that of the United States.

This is not to minimise China's formidable military capabilities, but rather to correct the exaggeration of China's military spending to erroneously depict China as hellbent on becoming the regional or even global hegemon.

China in fact has extremely limited capabilities to project power outside of its immediate region: few aircraft carriers, few attack submarines, few amphibious attack ships, few transports/refuelling aircraft, and little combat experience.

With the exception of Taiwan, China's forces are not configured for foreign adventurism, but rather to keep the United States as far away from its shores as possible - a perfectly understandable defence interest.

Indeed, it is entirely conceivable that China's military build-up and assertive behaviour are, at least in part, due to China feeling threatened by the United States, which is increasingly encircling China with military bases and forces.

If Richard Marles thinks that China's extraordinary military spending (estimated at $471 billion), and its accompanying coercive statecraft, are sufficient to engender fear and concern for us, how do we expect China to respond to the gargantuan $1.3 trillion US military budget?

> ***Taking the end of the Cold War as a departure point, the US has spent approximately US$19 trillion on building up its military capabilities, some $16 trillion more than China.***

To illustrate the absurdity of singling out China's 'most ambitious' military build-up as an aberration, one only has to make the comparison to America's defence expenditure in cumulative terms. Taking the end of the Cold War as a departure point, the US has spent approximately US$19 trillion on building up its military capabilities, some $16 trillion more than China.

While China's coercive actions and assertive behaviour are certainly cause for concern, it has plainly been the least belligerent of the great powers since the end of the Cold War, including in comparison to Russia, NATO and the United States.

The United States has hardly reflected in its behaviour the kind of 'reassuring statecraft' that Marles demands of China today, having laid waste to multiple countries in controversial wars and in gross violation of international law.

Israel's genocidal acts in Gaza, critically enabled by the Biden administration, exemplify the United States' disregard for a 'rules-based order' and its willingness to sanction extreme violence and risk the destabilisation of an entire region in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives.

As the Brookings Institution has noted, 'By the standards of the history of rising powers, China's military buildup and its recent record on the use of force are both relatively restrained.'

To reiterate, none of this is to downplay the significance of China's growing military power, its coercive and illegal actions in the South China Sea, and the security challenges China poses for Australia and the region. The point is that China's behaviour can and should be understood as falling within the realm of a normal great power, with strong prospects for addressing its more concerning actions through diplomacy and accommodation, and perhaps even a degree of military hedging.

Securing dominance in Asia

What are Australian defence and foreign policy objectives with respect to China? To look at this, one must first understand America's defence and foreign policy objectives with respect to China.

Although there are important differences, Australia and the US share a similar strategic outlook for the Indo-Pacific that is bi-partisan and that exists both broadly and deeply within both national security communities. The US alliance also forms the cornerstone of Australia's defence policy.

At the broadest level, American defence and foreign policy in Asia is based on the objective

of securing dominance. This is sometimes referred euphemistically as leadership, or primacy, or hegemony. But they more or less refer to the same thing: a hierarchical international order with the US at the apex.

This objective is framed in so-called 'realist' security terms as necessary for preventing another potentially hostile power from achieving dominance in Asia that could then marshal the resources required to threaten the security of the United States. In other words, if we don't dominate Asia, some other hostile power may.

Unless you believe in US exceptionalism - the notion that the United States is unique among empires past and present because it possesses benevolent intentions – then the objective to dominate Asia was and remains motivated not solely, or even primarily, by realist security concerns, but the familiar desire expressed throughout the ages for power, control, status, and wealth.

The major turning point and deterioration in US-China relations can be marked from around 2017, coinciding with the first Trump administration. Washington decisively shifted American policy towards China to one of strategic and economic containment; justified on the basis that China was now a rival of the United States intent on displacing American hegemony.

Openly aligning with the United States to contain Australia's largest trading partner presented unique challenges for Australian statecraft.

In short, these challenges were overcome by a concerted domestic propaganda campaign, initiated by Australian security agencies, in collaboration with the then Turnbull government, that grossly exaggerated the danger of Chinese Communist Party interference in Australia to coordinate and mobilise wider political and public support for a more confrontational approach to China.

The successful manufacture of the China 'threat' discourse helped to lay the foundation for the subsequent Morrison government to portray China's military rise as a direct security threat to the nation requiring a radical shift in Australian defence policy, including the extraordinary decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines via the AUKUS partnership.

It for this reason that AUKUS was viewed in Washington as 'getting the Australians off the fence' so that we are 'locked in now for the next forty years'; in the words of then US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

AUKUS is symbolic of a shift in Australian defence policy from a more independent policy of hedging against China's rise to a fully-US aligned policy of containment. I stress symbolic, because AUKUS is merely the most visible element of a tectonic shift underway in Australian defence policy and the Australia-US alliance.

At the same time Morrison was negotiating AUKUS, a new set of US Force Posture Initiatives were announced at AUSMIN in June 2021 to enhance military cooperation across multiple domains.

Building on earlier developments, these initiatives are 'propelling the U.S.-Australia alliance into uncharted terrain', directly integrating Australian bases into US war plans and rapidly establishing Australia as a major hub for multiple forms of US power projection, including expeditionary US Marines, strategic air bombers and maritime surface and submarine forces.

These initiatives have also expanded joint military exercises and enhanced interoperability and interchangeability, positioning elements of ADF, such as the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), with the latent capability to provide full spectrum support to US forces operating out of Australia.

With all these developments, the Australian government has been reluctant to say out loud what is hiding in plain sight: that it has committed Australia to upholding US regional military dominance through its decision to retrain, retool and restructure the ADF for high-end joint combat operations in the Indo-Pacific, and position Australia as a critical node for supplying, maintaining, enabling and protecting US forward-based forces—including nuclear-capable forces—as part of a collective strategy to contain China.

The 'China threat' discourse undermines potential diplomatic solutions

The rare sighting of a Chinese naval vessel conducting military exercises near Australia typically sparks a predictable response: alarmism. However, there is also often an attempt at the official level to equate such actions with our own efforts, and that of the US, in conducting intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions around China. The impression given is that; we do it and they do it, so there's nothing to see here. Such comparisons, however, are misleading.

Australian ISR activities in the South China Sea include dropping sonobuoys from maritime surveillance aircraft to detect the acoustic signature of Chinese submarines, and then sharing this information with the United States to enable their hunter-killer submarines to trail and sink Chinese vessels at the outbreak of hostilities.

More significantly, Australia's ISR activities contribute to what is a huge and bewildering array of American ISR capabilities that are employed to conduct hundreds of missions every year along China's coast – a vastly superior force to anything China has.

China argues that these activities violate peaceful provisions contained in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and that the United States is 'preparing the battlefield' in violation of the UN Charter. These allegations may or may not be valid – it's a contested area of international law. The point is that China clearly feels threatened by these military activities near its coast – and understandably so.

Meanwhile, persisting with these operations raises the risk of a clash between American and Chinese, or even Australian and Chinese, ships and aircraft – which could be a trigger that spirals into a disastrous war.

There are, it would seem, good prospects for addressing these issues diplomatically. This would require the will on the part of the United States to pull back from its more provocative military activities near China, and more broadly, greater accommodation for China's defence interests in the South China Sea.

In return China would need to exercise greater restraint and a commitment to the peaceful resolution of sovereignty disputes it has with its neighbours. We can't be sure that there exists the will on China's part to do so. But why don't we try and find out?

Until and unless Australia disabuses itself of the 'China threat' discourse the possibilities for diplomacy will continue to be severely circumscribed.

International Law and the Rules Based Order in the Trump Era - Challenges for Australia

Matthew Neuhaus

As the new US Government led by President Trump questions and undermines key aspects of the post World War II international rules-based order which the USA itself played a leading role in creating, attacking the principles of international law which hold it together, it is legitimate to ask whether the order still exists.

State sovereignty, self-determination, the sanctity of national borders, the rules on occupied territories, the protections of international humanitarian law, the decisions of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the work of the International Criminal Court (ICC); the very fundamental principles of international law are all under question or defied, in an approach more reminiscent of "rogue" states. Are we back to the law of the jungle already?

We need to take a breath and remain conscious that the international law and the rules-based order, built on the UN Charter agreed in 1945 "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war", still stand. It is hard to see the US denouncing the Charter and leaving the United Nations, not least because its veto in the UN Security Council is a key lever of power for it. Even Russia, perhaps after North Korea the nation that seeks most regularly to breach international rules and wreck the current order, has not gone that far.

Even when the USA pulls out of multilateral organisations such as the WHO or Human Rights Council – and it has done that before – their work continues. Hobbled but not ended. Organisations like the International Criminal Court without the USA, China, or Russia as members but with 125 states parties have done effective work now for many years.

The recent arrest of former President Duterte of Philippines for war crimes is a reminder how justice can catch up with such leaders, as it did with Milosevic or Charles Taylor of Liberia. Putin and Netanyahu beware.

A much-maligned body like UNRWA, providing key humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people in occupied Gaza, the West Bank and beyond, and denounced by both Israel and the USA, maintains its work of relief under siege with the assistance of other humanitarian bodies and aid agencies.

In the face of this challenge, it is encouraging to see the Australian Government adhering firmly to the principles of international law. Speaking at the UN General Assembly last September Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated, "these rules always matter – never more so at a time of conflict – when they help guide us out of darkness, back towards the light."

In this spirit Australia continues to support the rulings of the ICJ, remains committed to the ICC, follows international law in its Middle East votes and has recently announced further support to UNRWA.

Nowhere is the need to respect international law more pressing than in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), one of the oldest and most developed areas of the law of war seeking to establish limits on the savagery of conflict and protect innocent civilians. This has been most apparent in the Gaza Conflict, but in Ukraine, Myanmar, and the many conflicts in Africa the breaches have been breathtaking and deeply concerning. Australia's initiative for a Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel announced in the Foreign Minister's speech at the UN General Assembly has brought a welcome focus on this issue.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that international law existed before the United States itself.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that international law existed before the United States itself. It will continue long after that nation, which temporarily became the indispensable superpower of our age, returns to being just another big country.

International law continues to be respected by most nations because it works. It helps define boundaries, keep planes in the air, support commerce and trade, and ensure agreements between nations and companies are honoured. That is what "pacta sunt servanda" – "agreements must be kept" – means, as one of the most fundamental principles of international and treaty law.

The concept of freedom of the seas, enshrined today in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, goes back to the Dutch philosopher Grotius writing "Mare Liberum" (Free Seas) in 1609 and arguably well before that. The Chinese may challenge it in the South China Sea, but they assert it off the coast of Australia – and elsewhere. These concepts remain fundamental to the way we work internationally.

China, like many nations in the global South, affirm their commitment to international law and engage actively in multilateral institutions and negotiations. At the same time, to quote Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March this year, it is seeking to reshape it "to build a more equitable and orderly multipolar world." There is both menace and possibility there.

Australia, as a nation which has had an important role in the decades since World War II in shaping the current order, needs to be alert to the opportunities and challenges this presents as it engages China and other nations not just to protect but also to improve the global order.

We may be faced with a Trump government which seeks to carve up Ukraine with Russia, or take Greenland or Panama, or redevelop occupied Gaza, or breach Free Trade Agreements with tariffs, or ignore International Court of Justice decisions or Advisory Opinions on Chagos, Genocide or Occupied Territories, or walk away from the Paris Accords on Climate.

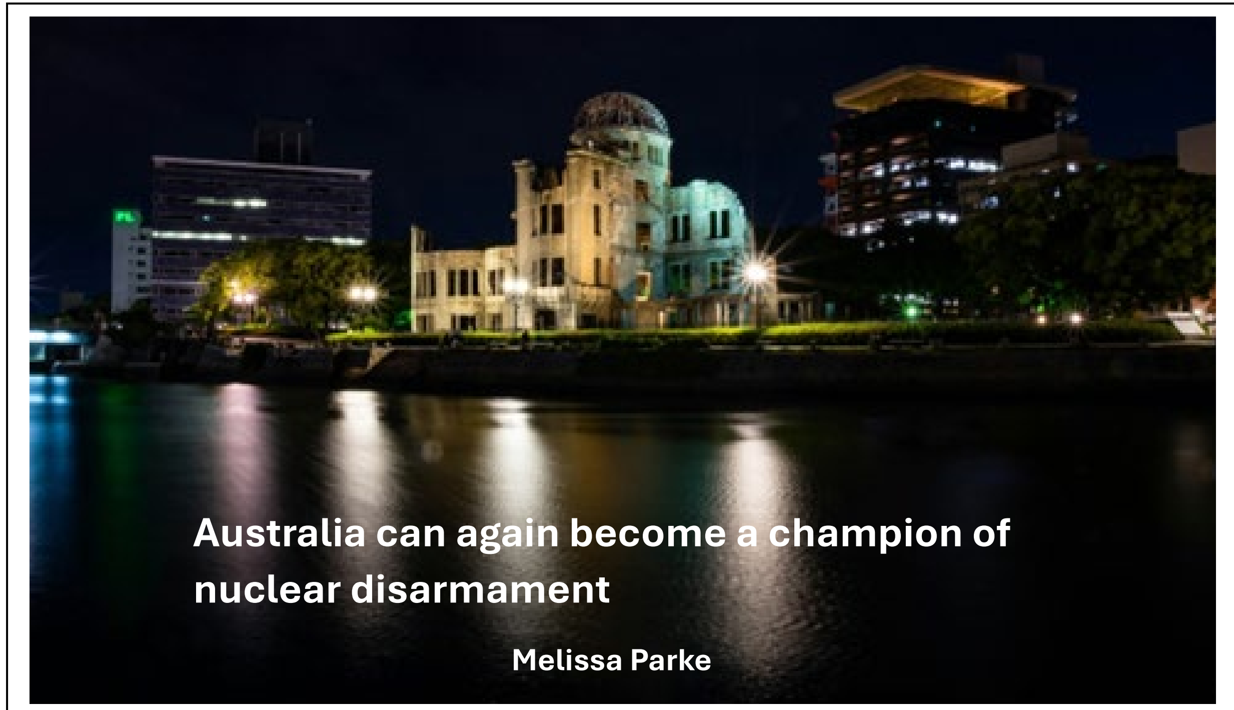
But even if any of these actions occur, they are likely to be temporary. As the experience of decolonisation shows, people will assert their self-determination. Trade and globalisation happen because it enhances the wealth of the world and the economic well bearing of people, and comparative advantage will undermine the nonsense of tariffs. Climate action is necessary for the planet's very survival. America alone will be America diminished, and the opportunity opens for other nations to forge new alliances and take leadership.

In the end international law works because most nations need it to work.

In the end international law works because most nations need it to work. However, it, and the international rules-based order it underpins, is a work in progress. Many nations seek to break the rules for short term advantage. Even so international law has outlasted such efforts and will outlast the chaos of the Trump regime, and the decline of American power and state cohesion his election demonstrates.

What will be key now is how other nations react – particularly leading middle power nations like Australia who share the values of international law and a rules-based order. We need to strengthen our economic, technological and security capabilities and work together with others to defend and shape further the rule of international law and a rules-based order.

There is a leadership opportunity here if we are bold enough to take it. Australia played a key role in creating the new world order in 1945 when we were a small nation emerging from British domination. Today as the world's 14th largest economy, and a key power in our Indo-Pacific region with global reach and interests, we need to be ready to do more.



Australia can again become a champion of nuclear disarmament

Melissa Parke

Human beings have created a weapon that has the capacity to destroy all complex life on earth.

Indeed, the latest science as reported in Nature Food journal in 2022 confirms that even a limited nuclear war using only a small fraction of the world's nuclear arsenal would cause global climate disruption, from firestorms that would send enormous amounts of soot into the stratosphere, circling the globe, blocking out sunlight, leading to agricultural collapse and the death by starvation of more than 2 billion people in a nuclear winter.

A major nuclear war, say between US and Russia, would mean the end of human civilization and most other life forms. So nuclear weapons are an issue for the collective security of humanity and the planet. They should not be dealt with as the national security prerogative of a select few countries.

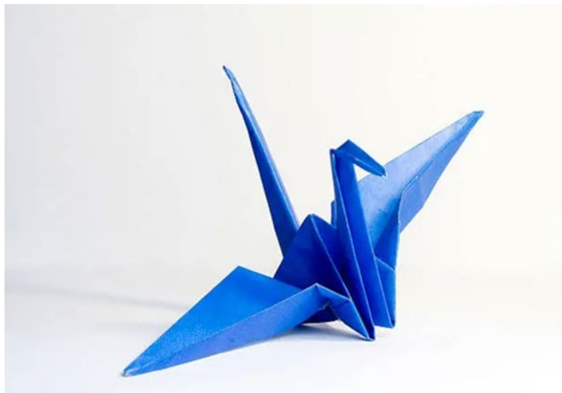
The only other global policy issue remotely comparable in terms of its planetary impact is the environment crisis: but nuclear bombs will kill us and the environment a lot faster. So long as any nuclear weapons remain anywhere, they are bound one day to be used -if not by design, then by mistake or miscalculation. The Cuban missile crisis back in 1962 is just one of a list of nuclear near-misses and accidents where the world could have ended. Chatham house released a report in 2014 documenting 13 such instances.

As noted by many experts including the former Co-Chair of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Gareth Evans, the fact we have survived so long without nuclear catastrophe is not due to good management, but rather sheer dumb luck, and we cannot expect that luck to continue indefinitely. UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres has also said, when it comes to nuclear weapons 'luck is not a strategy'.

US President Ronald Reagan said nuclear weapons are 'totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, and possibly destructive of life on earth', which is why he and President Gorbachev agreed in the late 1980's to massively reduce the number of

nuclear weapons on the planet, and they almost agreed to eliminate them altogether.

It's time to finish the job. The 2024 Nobel Peace prize winners Nihon Hidankyo, the survivors of the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have courageously retold and relived their childhood trauma again and again in the hope that the world will listen to their message about the danger of nuclear weapons and the urgent need for disarmament.



Such powerful testimonies, combined with the failure of the nuclear armed states to abide by their legal obligations to disarm under the NPT, led to a growing sense of injustice concerning the nuclear status quo, eventually resulting in 122 countries coming together in the UN General Assembly in 2017 to adopt the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

The treaty is a game changer in nuclear disarmament, which had been stalled for decades.

The TPNW comprehensively prohibits nuclear weapons and builds on Article 6 of the NPT by providing a pathway under international law for nuclear armed states to disarm in a time-bound verifiable manner. The TPNW is also the first multilateral treaty to provide victim assistance and environmental remediation for communities impacted by nuclear weapons use and testing, as well as a Scientific Advisory Group and a gender stream. The treaty acknowledges the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on women and girls, and on indigenous peoples. So, the TPNW is not only a disarmament treaty, but also a human rights, environment and feminist treaty.

The TPNW is an investment in international law and multilateralism at a time when those things are increasingly under threat, and it is democratising the nuclear weapons debate by taking it out of the hands of the UN Security Council Permanent Five (members) – all nuclear armed states - and bringing it to the UN General Assembly where every country has an equal vote.

The nuclear armed states and their allies often try to portray the TPNW as a soft humanitarian approach that is not based on real security. But the reality is the reverse. Looking at humanitarian and environmental consequences is very much security. The wholesale destruction of infrastructure, the economy and the environment, millions of people dying of blast, burns and radiation, and billions dying of starvation from a nuclear winter is very much security. The more important question is how sustainable is a security approach based on nuclear weapons, any use of which would be not only genocidal but also suicidal?

Half the countries of the world have already joined the TPNW, but not so far Australia

Half the countries of the world have already joined the TPNW, but not so far Australia, although the Labor Government has sent an observer to the two meetings of states parties of the treaty.

So what is Australia's position on the TPNW?

Back in December 2018, in an impassioned speech at the Labor Party's national conference in Adelaide, Anthony Albanese – whose political mentor was Tom Uren - described nuclear weapons as “the most destructive, inhumane and indiscriminate weapons ever created”.

Referencing the party's long history of action on disarmament, he urged delegates to support a motion that would commit a future Labor government to signing and ratifying the TPNW. The motion was adopted with unanimous support and resounding applause. It was reaffirmed at subsequent national conferences.

Six years later, Albanese is prime minister and the TPNW is part of international law. Many of Australia's neighbours, including New Zealand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste and Indonesia are among its states parties. But we are still not on board.

> ***The paradox is that nuclear states see their weapons as protective, yet expect others not to pursue them***

The principal impediment to Australia joining the TPNW is our reliance in our defence policy on America's so-called 'nuclear umbrella'.

This dangerous and absurd concept (dangerous because it makes Australia a nuclear target; absurd because the US would never sacrifice one of its own cities for ours) has severely restrained Australia's advocacy for a nuclear-weapon-free world. How can we credibly argue that nuclear weapons must be eliminated while asserting, in the same breath, that they guarantee our security and prosperity?

Even believing nuclear weapons provide security is dangerous. If true, why wouldn't all non-nuclear nations arm themselves? The paradox is that nuclear states see their weapons as protective yet expect others not to pursue them.

And, as Gareth Evans has argued: 'keeping nuclear stockpiles - even if you don't intend to use them except by way of retaliation - is not a risk-free enterprise. The deterrent utility of nuclear weapons is illusory and the risk of retaining nuclear weapons outweighs any conceivable benefit from them.'

The more that nuclear armed states and their allies insist that nuclear weapons are essential for their security, the more other countries will want them, thus encouraging proliferation. We are seeing the rapid escalation of nuclear risk on the Korean peninsula and in the middle east, and a number of countries starting to speculate publicly about potentially acquiring nuclear weapons themselves, including South Korea, Saudi Arabia and even some European leaders.

The AUKUS military partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, has further diminished Australia's credibility as a non-proliferation advocate.

Under AUKUS, Australia hopes to acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, to be fuelled with highly enriched uranium, the essential ingredient for nuclear bombs. This poses a major challenge for the non-proliferation regime – since it is the first time a nuclear armed state will provide weapons grade material to a non nuclear weapon state (for nuclear-powered submarines), and could set a dangerous precedent for others to follow. Neighbouring countries have understandably responded with alarm and anger at the prospect of the greater nuclearization of our region.

If the planned acquisition occurs – and there are serious doubts as to whether it will – it would be all the more imperative for Australia to join the TPNW, as this would provide additional guardrails against nuclear weapons, applicable to the current government and future governments. The

TPNW prohibits a broader range of activities than the NPT and the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone or Rarotonga Treaty, to which Australia is already a state party.

A different path for Australia is possible and necessary. A path that prioritises investments in peace and diplomacy over weapons and war, and avoids further harm to people and the environment. To become a champion of nuclear disarmament, as Australia has long claimed to be, we must end our complicity in the perpetuation of global nuclear dangers.

The most obvious first step would be to act upon Labor's promise of signing and ratifying the TPNW.

As part of this, Australia would have to remove our stated reliance on the US nuclear umbrella from our defence policy. And to the extent that Pine Gap, the US military and intelligence facility near Alice Springs, plays a role in US nuclear command and control, that would also need to end.

In addition to providing a legal framework for the verified elimination of nuclear weapons, the TPNW includes novel provisions for assisting communities harmed by nuclear use and testing. In this regard, it is of particular importance to military veterans, and to indigenous Australians, who still live with the toxic legacy of the British tests conducted on their soil, and to our neighbours in the Pacific, where more than 300 US, British and French tests were carried out.

Nuclear weapons are not part of the natural world that we are doomed to suffer. We do have a choice.

Australia joining the TPNW would also help to alleviate serious concerns that Australia has through AUKUS and other agreements relinquished its independence in foreign and defence policy to the US. These concerns have only increased now that Donald Trump has resumed the presidency and the next four years promise to be a period of heightened chaos and unpredictability.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists just two weeks ago moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock forward to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest we have ever been to global catastrophe.

Nuclear weapons are not part of the natural world that we are doomed to suffer. We do have a choice – we can choose to eliminate the existential risk by eliminating nuclear weapons. And of all the global challenges we face, this is the least complex, humans built nuclear weapons, humans can dismantle them. All it requires is political will and leadership.

So far it is civil society and TPNW members states who are showing that leadership. We in ICAN look forward to Australia showing the same leadership, and doing so in the near future. To borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King Jr, who often made the connection between the black freedom struggle and the need for nuclear disarmament:

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action."

AI and Security - Overview

Rapid technological advancement over the last decade has facilitated the development of capabilities and applications in defence and society domains that have many implications for security and humanity. Among them, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has proven particularly transformative. AI is already providing benefits across a range of applications as well as creating new and significant risks in many areas.

Broadly, the ramifications of AI in accelerating the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as exacerbating post-truth society have destabilising consequences for peace and security. Automated decision-making, whereby a person is subject to harm based on the processing of data by an algorithm, has led to digital dehumanisation in areas including employment, banking and loans, the criminal justice system, policing and warfare. How we address the most acute form of this digital dehumanisation, killing with autonomous weapons, sets moral and legal precedents for global humanity, with implications for the other domains of society. Therefore, we must recognise these broader human security issues related to AI technologies, when considering questions of military AI in the defence domain.

In terms of military technology, AI has been developed and integrated for a wide range of purposes. Some applications, such as robotics for mine clearance, information systems and predictive maintenance, provide value and only pose limited risks that can be mitigated. In this way, AI provides opportunities to bolster security in the defence domain.

However, other applications of AI are destabilising and raise other legal and ethical concerns. In terms of promoting peace in our region and beyond, there is a need to balance the use of AI where appropriate and lead norm-building around unacceptable uses of AI, particularly in the military context, to ensure regional security.

The range and scope of AI used in conflict is growing rapidly. This paper addresses two areas of concern: autonomous weapons and AI tools related to targeting. In Ukraine, a real-conflict 'testing ground', shows increasing autonomy on both sides, as remote-controlled drones are replaced by loitering munitions, and other weapons that require less control by human operators. AI systems such as those used by Israel in Gaza for target generation, sees software starting to replace humans in these decisions.

These systems raise questions around the erasure of human control, international humanitarian law, digital dehumanisation and undermining human rights.

AI tools in the military

Militaries worldwide are increasing the integration of AI into many of their systems. AI tools of particular concern to the maintenance of peace and security include decision-support systems (DSS) and target generation and identification systems. These systems raise questions around the erasure of human control, international humanitarian law, digital dehumanisation and undermining human rights.

AI-based DSS are being developed by many militaries, including within the decision-making process on the use of force. These systems are becoming more complex than previously, introducing, for example, machine learning algorithms. The function of these systems erodes human judgement. The International Committee of the Red Cross have explained that this poses legal, humanitarian and ethical challenges and risks.

We are witnessing the use of specific AI tools, related to target generation and identification, used by Israel in Gaza. Reports on 'Lavender', 'The Gospel' and 'Where's Daddy' demonstrate that these systems are dehumanising and make false equivalencies, inevitably leading to civilian deaths enabling 'AI-assisted genocide'. Such tools also require and incentivise unprecedented surveillance. For instance, "Where's Daddy" is designed to identify targets based on phone data. There are many circumstances where this would result in error, causing the loss of innocent lives.

Concerning target generation, 'Lavender' and 'The Gospel' make recommendations based on a rating generated from a person's activity corresponding with 'incriminating features,' including communications patterns, social media connections, and changing addresses frequently. Given these are blunt tools, reports of "sweeping approval for officers to adopt Lavender's kill lists, with no requirement to thoroughly check why the machine made those choices or to examine the raw intelligence data on which they were based" are particularly alarming.

As Stop Killer Robots explain, with tools such as these, "the potential reduction of people to data points based on specific characteristics like ethnicity, gender, weight, gait, etc. raises serious questions about how target profiles are created and in turn how targets are selected," in the protection of civilians and preservation of human dignity.

It is essential to consider how different AI systems constitute elements in a chain of functions that facilitate targeting and attack.

Humans could be removed from any of these steps, and when threaded together form a frightening reality regarding the nature of potential future warfare. The security considerations for our region and national defence must reflect a prioritisation of human security and peace, when shaping policy and establishing norms and regulations.

There has been some international activity regarding norm-setting in the use of AI in the military. The Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy was launched by the US and is signed by 58 states, including Australia. The REAIM (Responsible AI in the Military Domain) Summit is an initiative that began in 2023, convened by the Netherlands and was hosted in 2024 in South Korea. It created a 'Blueprint for Action' with general principles much like the declaration. These acknowledge the potential for AI to be disruptive and threaten peace, security and stability. Although general principles are being asserted, there are no discussions for meaningful regulatory outcomes on these kinds of tools. As is often the case, military

Increasing autonomy in weapons is a particular concern for regional security.

technology is well in advance of policy regulation. But the consequences of unregulated 'killer robots', with the human removed from the decision loop, are now more severe than previously. Corrective action is required urgently.

Autonomous Weapons

Autonomous weapons are escalating and intensifying concern for regional security. Autonomous weapons, those which deploy force to targets based only on sensor inputs (such as facial recognition, heat imprint or acoustic signature) pose significant moral, legal and security concerns. As mentioned, increasingly autonomous weapons are being tested in real-time conflict, such as in Ukraine and Sudan.

Autonomous weapons will escalate and intensify conflicts facilitating unprecedented speed and scale of killing and reduce barriers to war. Machine errors could have catastrophic consequences in triggering unwanted conflict or escalation. This is pertinent worldwide, but in the context of our region, is of particular concern where tensions between neighbours pose threats of destabilisation or conflict. There are many hot spots in the Indo-Pacific region, where autonomous weapons would undermine efforts to prioritise de-escalation and peaceful solutions, which should be at the forefront.

Australia, as a developer of autonomy in defence, has extensive investments in projects by the Australian Defence Force, Department of Defence, multi-national arms manufacturers, local arms companies and universities. Among defence capabilities, autonomy and collaboration have been articulated as priorities.

Under AUKUS, pillar II focuses on technology sharing between the US, the UK and Australia. The full scope of collaborating on AI for the military as part of AUKUS is unclear. Already in 2023, an inaugural 'autonomy-trial' was conducted within AUKUS activities.

Australia has a responsibility to ensure robust policy is in place to guide development and promote international law that would reduce the risks to international security through new prohibitions and regulations related to

autonomous weapons. This is particularly important when collaborating with other states, for instance as part of AUKUS, to assert clear policy and standards which may differ between states at present, in the absence of international law.

International efforts to address this gap have been growing. However, Australia resists the need for new international law. Since 2014, dedicated discussions to address autonomous weapons have been held at the United Nations (UN). The primary forum is within the Convention for Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) in a 'Group of Governmental Experts on lethal autonomous weapons systems' (hereafter 'the Group'). Discussions within the Group have progressed slowly. Although there is a clear desire for new international law among the majority of states, consensus rules result in any meaningful outcome being blocked and substantive advances being watered down.

In the last two years, political will has been demonstrated through several international conferences on autonomous weapons. This includes the 2024 Vienna Conference, the first international gathering which convened 144 states and more than 1000 participants. Since early 2023, several regional conferences have been held across Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Trinidad and Tobago, Sierra Leone and the Philippines.

The Manila Meeting called for Indo-Pacific voices to address the risks of autonomous weapons. Diverse perspectives from our region were expressed. For example, the Vice President of the Republic of Palau highlighted the need for more inclusive discussions that take into account primary concerns of small island developing nations, such as potential environmental damage.

These areas have otherwise been largely overlooked, although regional initiatives, involving these states, have seen an emphasis on proliferation to non-state actors and concerns for illicit activity as well as environmental impacts.

Fiji has rightly emphasised environmental security concerns. With reduced human oversight the use and testing of autonomous weapons could exacerbate environmental degradation, particularly in marine and land environments.

This concern of Fiji highlights the interlinked nature of multi-faceted risks, that require a cross-cutting and comprehensive approach to conceiving security.

Significantly, the Communiqué from Costa Rica was the first to express a regional commitment to a legally binding instrument, as have those from Trinidad and Tobago and Sierra Leone. The Manila Meeting did not reach such an outcome, with some divergent views in our region. With regard to the desire for new international law, of the 43 states across Asia and the Pacific, 24 have expressed their support, and only five (Australia, India, Japan, North Korea, South Korea) have indicated they are against a legally binding instrument. Notably, these include the Quad Alliance members, and North and South Korea.

Activity at the UN has also expanded. In 2023, the first UN General Assembly resolution on the issue of autonomous weapons was adopted, with a second in 2024. Australia voted in favour of both resolutions. However, Australia was among the few states who curtailed the ambition of the resolution by reducing its scope, specifically concerning consultation to convene through the General Assembly in 2025. The eventually agreed two-day consultation enables participation of many states. In particular, this benefits those who are represented at the UN in New York but are not part of the CCW. Fourteen states from our Asia-Pacific region are not represented in the CCW, yet Australia has

reiterated it is the most appropriate forum for discussions. In terms of open discussion inclusive of our whole region on this issue, Australia should welcome other forums for engagement and dialogue.

Australia could engage by committing to work towards legally binding instruments in line with growing global momentum. This includes establishing essential prohibitions and obligations and the need for meaningful human control. This would be a shift from Australia's current approach which undermines key regulatory elements to adequately address moral, legal and security risks of autonomous weapons.

This is our generation's 'Oppenheimer moment'

Remarks at the Vienna Conference captured the essence of the security risk before us – this is our generation's 'Oppenheimer moment.' While AI brings a lot of potential, the implications for security are immense, and applications are already demonstrating the concerns that need to be addressed to foster a peaceful and secure society and humanity.

If we want peace, we need to prevent conflict

John Langmore
Adrian Morrice
Russell Rollason

Australia's region faces a new set of risks and opportunities that make relevant the founding goal of the United Nations in 1945 to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."[i] Today, however, Member States are failing to achieve that core purpose of maintaining international peace and security. States are primarily preparing for war in the face of opportunities to prevent it. With the US retreating from peace and human rights issues that are central to our global and regional foreign policy goals, Australia needs to step in and step up. While the Minister for Foreign Affairs' 2023 and 2024 statements at the UN General Assembly supporting peace building efforts are welcome[ii], there remains limited public debate, and commensurate bi-partisan strategies, policies and resources to prevent and mitigate threats. To better assure peace and security Australia needs much greater emphasis on diplomacy to complement an affordable fit-for-purpose defence force.

Collective efforts with and through the UN have succeeded in many important ways: there have been no world wars and nuclear weapons have not been used in war for the past 75 years; some of the greatest risks of escalation have been prevented. However, our world has changed. We are now seeing what the UN Secretary General called 'our biggest shared test since the Second World War'[iii] including the largest number of violent conflicts since World War 2. Australia has not had a commensurate re-focus and re-prioritisation of foreign policy and aid that reflect these geo-political and regional shifts.

The Pact for the Future adopted by UN Member States in September 2024 recognised "We are at a time of profound global transformation. We are confronted by rising catastrophic and existential risks, many caused by the choices we make. Fellow human beings are enduring terrible suffering. If we do not change course, we risk tipping into a future of persistent crisis and breakdown."

The scale of death and destruction is horrifying. While there is debate over the figures, many observers believe more than a million people have lost their lives in the three years since Russia invaded Ukraine. In Gaza, the death toll exceeds 50,000 Palestinians, with more than 18,000 being children and 100,000 injured in the most recent two-year conflict. In Africa, the civil war in Sudan has entered its second year killing more than

15,000 people and displacing 8.2 million, and the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo threatens to become a regional war. In our region, the seven-decades old civil war in Myanmar grinds on with more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees still in camps in neighbouring Bangladesh, 3.7 million displaced since the 2021 coup, and with no settlement in sight. The UN humanitarian office estimates last month's 7.7 earthquake with its epicentre near the middle of Myanmar has impacted another 17 million people.[iv]

> ***In 2023, expenditure on armaments totalled $2.44 trillion***

Global military expenditure has surged in response to international conflicts and rising tensions. In 2023, expenditure on armaments totalled $2.44 trillion. President Trump has been fuelling the fires of the military industrial complex by calling for European countries to increase their defence budgets. In the face of a cost-of-living crisis, there is pressure on Australia to do so as well.

Agenda for Peace

In the lead-up to the Summit of the Future, the Secretary General released a new Agenda for Peace where he observed that "the world is moving closer to the brink of instability, where the risks we face are no longer managed effectively through the systems we have.'

Key issues in the Agenda included:

- Reducing strategic risks with stronger commitments for the non-use of nuclear weapons.
- Strengthening international foresight and capacities to identify and adapt to new peace and security risks.
- Reshaping our responses to all forms of violence.
- Investing in prevention and peacebuilding.
- Putting women and girls at the centre of security policy.
- Supporting regional prevention.

While UN member states expressed their concerns about the increasing and diverse threats to international peace and security, they reaffirmed their continuing commitment "to establish a just and lasting peace" and "to act in accordance with international law, including the UN Charter."

In adopting the **Pact for the Future,** the Members States also affirmed their commitment to strengthening the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) through action in 4 areas (para 72):

1. Enhance the role of the PBC as a platform for building and sustaining peace,
2. Make greater use of the Commission to support Member States progress their nationally owned and led peacebuilding, sustaining peace and prevention efforts,
3. Establish more systematic and strategic partnerships between the Commission and international, regional and sub-regional organizations, including the international financial institutions, to strengthen peacebuilding and sustaining peace efforts.
4. Ensure the Commission plays a vital support role to countries during and after the transition of a peace operation.

2025: A Year of Opportunity

In 2025, the UN system will review its peacebuilding arrangements and institutions (Peacebuilding Architecture Review: PBAR) to improve effectiveness and encourage renewed international effort and commitment.[v] These four issues will be a focus for action.

A key pillar in the UN peacebuilding architecture is the PBC, which was established in 2005 via joint UN General Assembly/ Security Council resolutions.[vi] The same resolutions created the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF).[vii]

The core mandate of the PBC includes marshalling resources and advising on and proposing integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery; providing recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors; and to promote an integrated, strategic, and coherent approach to peacebuilding.

In 2022, the Commission supported 14 separate country and region-specific settings, broadening its geographical scope; including by holding meetings for the first time on Timor-Leste, South Sudan, and Central Asia.

Increasing Australia's commitment to conflict prevention and peacebuilding

In February 2025, Australia took up its two-year seat on the PBC, signalling a new commitment to global peace and security at a moment the world faces a new array of threats to prevent. The PBC has had mixed results since its founding. With the permanent members of the UN Security Council in open geopolitical competition, there is meaningful work the PBC can do in many less publicised conflicts. Australia's objectives have been laid out in the Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong's speeches to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2023 and 2024 and to the Indian Ocean Conference in February 2024. This importantly includes that Australia has indicated it will campaign for a non-permanent two-year seat on the UN Security Council from 2029-2030. From now Australia can also be active in promoting the election of the first female UN Secretary General, with António Guterres' term ending in December 2026. Australia will need to sustain an increased commitment to conflict prevention and peacebuilding on the African continent if it is to be taken seriously.

At UNGA 2023, the Minister recognised that the "modern arms race forever transformed the scale of great power competition and pushed all of humanity to the brink of Armageddon" and called for a new commitment "to building such preventive infrastructure to reduce the risk of crisis, conflict and war by accident." In Perth in early 2024, the Minister noted that "Across our region, we see military power is expanding, but measures to constrain military conflict are not – and there are few concrete mechanisms for averting it." She concluded that "Peacebuilding today must rise to this potentially catastrophic challenge."

In September at the UNGA, Minister Wong said in Australia's national statement, "We must also reform the peacebuilding and conflict prevention architecture. It is not working. That will be the focus of our coming term on the Peacebuilding Commission.... Australia will support national prevention strategies in our term, essential for local peacebuilding."

The Minister also announced that Australia will provide "additional resources and staff to the PBC's support and secretariat bodies" as well as increasing Australia's "voluntary contribution to the UN Peacebuilding Fund to $15 million per year."

Minister Wong affirmed Australia's support for regional security pointing to the announcement at the Pacific Islands Forum of Australia's backing for the call by Fiji's President for a cessation of ballistic missile testing in the Pacific.

What can Australia do to strengthen peace and security this year?

Of the four areas of foreign policy – diplomatic and trade relations, defence, intelligence and aid – Australian governments have been preoccupied with military and intelligence capacity, and neglectful of diplomacy and constructive developmental cooperation. This will seriously undermine our security as the trend towards more defence and intelligence and less diplomacy and aid is set to continue unless a strategic shift occurs.[viii]

Until the election of President Trump, Australia was locked in as close ally of the United States and some see this as putting us on a collision course to war with our largest trading partner, China. But events and comments by the new Trump administration have left Europe with the realisation that the US is no longer a reliable ally. As Australia's former top diplomat, Peter Verghese has asked "Where does all this leave our great strategic project of a US-led balancing of China?"

Well informed scholarly experts on China conclude that there is no military threat to Australia from China. The advent of the Trump presidency is forcing Australia to reassess its relations with the US and to review the future of the AUKUS agreement because it intensifies the arms race in Indo-Pacific and raises the prospects of nuclear proliferation in the region. It is in our interest to realign our national security by not taking sides and instead calling for restraint. Australia's defence interests are protecting its own territory and vital interests, not on supporting America's misjudged wars. Radically different approaches to Australia's defence have been made persuasively by Sam Roggeveen in *The Echidna Strategy* and Hugh White in *How to Defend Australia*, among others.

Expenditure on diplomacy as a proportion of total Commonwealth outlays was halved between 1995 and 2022 undermining our foreign policy goals. Aid has been cut so drastically that Australia has joined the meanest donors among wealthy countries, while military expenditure is increasing. Yet there is still no process in place for a comprehensive review.

Australian expenditure on diplomacy is now increasing, slowly, but so far, is doing little to recover from the neglect of the last quarter century. If we want other UN Member States to restrain their military spending and increase their diplomacy, we must do so too.

- ***We need a more holistic vision of strengthening tools to address our threat environment, beyond defence spending***

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding must become a higher priority for the Australian Government with diplomacy more central to Australia's engagement in the region and internationally. Australia and its allies' military-industrial complex and its many defence departments and national security institutions are well placed to lobby for increased defence spending on a plethora of security threats. It is time to level the field, listen more to non-military options, and reinvest in international development assistance, climate adaptation and conflict prevention. A more public and urgent debate is needed on regional climate security risks and to identify measures to mitigate and prevent what we can.[ix] We need more peacebuilding education; we need more people trained for international diplomacy.

- ***Australia must review the AUKUS decision to purchase nuclear-powered submarines.***

AUKUS undermines Australia's security, both strategically and operationally. The agreement degrades our sovereignty, curtails our independence of action and fuels an arms race in our region. And all this comes at the eye-watering financial costs (at least $368 billion), funds that could contribute to the security of Australians by housing the homeless, enhancing our response to the climate crisis and support the peaceful, environmentally responsible development of the Australian people and of our neighbours in the region.

Australia has said it supports the new UN study on the impacts of Nuclear War, but the Government is yet to sign the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The Prime Minister has stated his personal commitment to Australia signing. A new government should commit to this; now is the time for action.

- ***Support regional initiatives on peace and security***

It is time to change the public narrative on peace and security. There is too much focus on increasing defence spending, intelligence sharing and a military approach to regional peace and security. We need a national narrative that integrates the challenges posed by unrelenting climate change, extreme inequality, a failing economic system, increasing migration from fragile states and their impact on peace in the region. We need stronger institutions across thematic peacebuilding areas (women, peace and security, transitional justice, security sector reform) and stronger core and expert capacity among the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Federal Police staff. We need rapidly deployable mediation and dialogue experts.

We need a reinvigoration of our overseas volunteer capacity – both the number of Australians deployed and its visibility as a contribution to regional peace and security. We also need to lead and gap-fill in places where US funding has dropped off or disappeared.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain a comprehensive set of targets for international cooperation and the Pact sought to give them a boost. Australia can do better in its efforts to implement the SDGs, with more focus on SDG 16 – peace, justice and inclusive institutions – including the Women Peace and Security programs. Addressing women's rights and preventing violence must be a cornerstone of the new narrative. The UN

Secretary General put the backsliding on these agendas in clear terms when he said 'we must dismantle the patriarchy and oppressive power structures' which are preventing progress on gender equality.[x]

Australia plans[xi] to give high priority to supporting regional peacebuilding, including national conflict prevention strategies. Australia has in the past supported peacebuilding efforts in Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Philippines, Solomon Islands and Myanmar.

..build on the internationally recognised Peacebuilding model developed by Timor Leste.

A major contemporary regional challenge is resolution of the conflict in Myanmar. To date we have been too cautious in our approach to directly supporting ethnic armed organisations, People's Defence Force (PDF) and National Unity Government (NUG) entities, who are performing de facto government functions and protecting civilians, some for decades. This is not only critical to reach civilians impacted by the recent earthquake but in any future peace process.

Australia assistance to fragile states to develop national prevention strategies could include support for the development of national prevention strategies in the Pacific building on the internationally recognised Peacebuilding model developed by Timor-Leste. Several Australian individuals and organisations with significant experience in assisting countries in the Pacific in conflict prevention and peacebuilding could assist with such an initiative.

An Australian Peace and Security Strategy

Australia needs a comprehensive peace and security strategy that establishes national objectives and policies for the broad range of interlocking issues in defence, climate and environmental security, human and economic security that will deliver peace and security for all Australians. It needs to bring into the public domain the recent climate security assessment and integrate it into our preparedness and conflict prevention goals. It requires consultation at all levels: democratic political representation; rigorous, expert bureaucratic review; cabinet discussions; comprehensive parliamentary committee assessment; opportunities for scholarly research; free journalism; consultation and community discussion.

An Australian Peace and Security Strategy would identify the mechanisms for building trust and cooperation, nationally and internationally, which requires focusing on domestic policies for maximising wellbeing

[i] Charter of the United Nations, October 24, 1945.
[ii] See her speeches to the UN in New York: National Statement to the United Nations General Assembly, 23 September 2023, and; UN summit of the future, 23 September 2024
[iii] United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General, A Common Agenda, 2021.
[iv] Crisis Group, Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2025, 1 January 2025; Myanmar Peace Monitor Dashboard, 11 March 2025; UN OCHA, Myanmar earthquake flash update #3, 3 April 2025
[v] Security Council Report, The Peacebuilding Commission at 20, March 2025
[vi] United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1645, adopted by the Security Council at its 5335th meeting," United Nations, 20 December 2005, S/RES/1645

United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution 60/1, adopted by the General Assembly during its Sixtieth session," United Nations, 24 October 2005, A/RES/60/1.

[vii] It also created the UN Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) as PBC secretariat, reporting to the UNSG. This office was later folded into the current Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs.
[viii] Development Intelligence Lab, Australia's 2025 Federal Budget, 26 March 2025
[ix] Karen Barlow, Secret briefings on climate national security risk, The Saturday Paper, 15-21 March 2025; Australian Security Leaders Climate Group, Too hot to handle: The scorching reality of Australia's climate-security failure, May 2024
[x] UN Secretary General, A new agenda for peace, July 2023
[xi] FM The Hon Senator Penny Wong, Keynote Address to the 7th Indian Ocean Conference, 09 February 2024