

The Decline of US Primacy in the Asia-Pacific and the Future of a Key US Ally, Australia

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ANZUS, the longstanding trilateral security alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (US), has been a central feature of Australia's foreign policy since World War II. However, the growth of Chinese economic power, which will supersede the US by 2028 (BBC News), calls into question how adequately the ANZUS alliance fulfills Australia's national security interests given its unique position in the Asia-Pacific. Given how China is aggressively countering American power in Asia, Australia's security partnership with the US may put it at greater risk than if Canberra pursued a more neutral foreign policy independent of the US. Similarly, the relative decline of American power means that the US may not be willing or able to guarantee Australia's long-term security needs. Since Barack Obama was elected president and Iraq and Afghanistan have communicated important lessons, Washington DC looks less likely to use armed force for causes that are outside its immediate strategic boundaries. This includes the defense of Australia, should it be threatened militarily. Similarly, the unrivaled military hegemony the US once enjoyed has ended, as China represents a legitimate match to American military capabilities. Even if the US came to Australia's aid if the country was threatened, there is no certainty that Washington could effectively safeguard Australia's defense needs against Beijing's military power. It is crucial to consider the cost of maintaining the status quo of Australia's security policy; it may not be in Australia's national

interests to continue to rely on ANZUS if it cannot guarantee its long-term security. Accordingly, it is essential for traditional US allies like Australia to question alternative foreign policy, security, and defense arrangements in light of the decline of US primacy in the Asia-Pacific.

The Assumptions of the US-Australia Alliance

The US-Australia alliance is structured on the core belief that the US would be willing and able to defend Australia from attack. However, recent developments invite skepticism on almost all portions of these assumptions.

First, it is unclear whether the US would be willing to defend Australia. Since World War II, Australia has been a ready supporter of the American interventionist cause in Korea, Vietnam, the First Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the US-led coalition against the Islamic State. This involvement was based on the idea of reciprocal loyalty, with the faith that Australia would receive immediate American support in a time of Australian crisis (Henry). However, during the crisis in East Timor in 1999—a significant security concern on Australia’s doorstep—the Clinton Administration failed to provide immediate military support to Australia’s operations in the country (Shearer). This was in spite of Australia’s dependence on American intelligence and logistical support and the Australian Defence Force’s (ADF’s) struggle to deploy and sustain a modest fighting force (Shearer). The inaction of the US on East Timor calls into question the extent to which the US will assist Australia in conflict, especially if the action is unpopular politically or not in the immediate strategic purview of Washington.

Due to global shifts in the distribution of wealth and power, it is estimated that, by 2030, China’s GDP will reach 42.4 trillion USD compared to America’s \$24 trillion (Roggeveen). Accordingly, Americans struggle to determine whether their strategic leadership in Asia is worth the expense and danger of disputing with China, the emerging regional hegemon in Asia (White). The election of Donald Trump in 2016, a public figure who has long advocated for the US to renege the burden of global leadership, is a testament to how Americans are becoming more internally focused (White). This sentiment is largely mirrored by Democrats and Independents who believe the US should focus less on global problems and more on internal issues (Pew Research Center). The Biden foreign policy doctrine perpetuates the trends foreshadowed by the Obama Administration, which pushed restraint and “red-lines,” as well as President Trump’s abstinence from more “endless wars.” As highlighted by the August 2021

withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden Administration's policy decisions reflect the reluctance of Americans for more armed conflict unless it is commensurate with America's immediate national interests (Cooper et al.). This may translate to a tentative response from the US, should Australia become entangled in a conflict. While it is commonly believed that the ANZUS Treaty compels the other signatories to war if one member state is attacked per the principle of *casus foederis*, ANZUS only compels *consultation* between member states in the event of conflict (ABC News). Clearly, Australia cannot anticipate or rely on American assistance, and it must take alternative action to ensure its security interests are upheld.

Similarly, Australians have no assurance that the US would be victorious in a conflict with China. Just as US power is retracting internationally, the capacity of the US Armed Forces (USAF) to match the growing military might of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is declining. The capability of the US to project power by air and sea has been undercut by China's growing geostrategic advantages in the Western Pacific and the extensive expansion of its air and naval forces (White). If a war is fought in East Asia, supply chains from San Francisco will be overstretched, and should the trend of declining US power continue, it is unlikely that the US will prevail in an armed conflict with China (White). It is also important to note that the US is a naval power, while China is a continental power. The capacity for the USAF to defeat the PLA is contingent on the unlikely prospect that it can conquer the Chinese homeland (Keating). This reaffirms that Australia cannot rely on the US to continue providing its security, and it is against Australia's national interest to do so.

All in all, given the decline of US power and the rise of China, the basic assumptions of the US-Australia alliance—that the US would be willing and able to defend Australia from attack—are no longer viable (Dibb).

The Detriments of the US-Australia Alliance

Supposedly, Australia's greatest security challenge is the pre-eminent rise of China as a global superpower and its accompanying antagonism and intimidation. Certainly, as China has a history of unprovoked non-military attacks on Australia through cyber attacks, election interference, and economic coercion, these should involve Australia's cooperation with the US and other democratically-minded states. However, Australia's alliance with the US has made it a prominent target of Chinese bullying. Assertions that China would treat Australia with more cordiality if it discontinued its observance of ANZUS have credibility. China's strategic

imperative and new wolf warrior diplomacy primarily involve countering US global predominance (Hillman). A significant factor behind Beijing's hostility toward Canberra is its interest to put pressure on the Australia-US alliance (Feng). Geostrategically, China sees Australia as a threat because it constitutes a stable and defensible American military outpost in the Pacific during wartime, just as was the case during the War in the Pacific during WWII. Part of the PLA's military strategy involves inhibiting the US from possessing a defensible garrison like Australia in the Pacific, which enables the US Navy to project its sea power (Grant). Accordingly, Beijing is pursuing the construction of a military base on Vanuatu and instituting its soft power in Southern Pacific states like Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Fiji to restrict America's access to the Pacific from Australia (Zhang). It is certainly feasible that China would refocus its attention away from Australia if Beijing no longer perceives Canberra as a significant threat to its security imperatives. New Zealand, which is less aligned with the US because its treaty obligations to ANZUS were suspended in 1986, maintains a conciliatory diplomatic relationship with China despite disagreements over Hong Kong and the treatment of Uyghurs (Young). Accordingly, China has not been belligerent toward New Zealand like it has toward Australia. To have Beijing act more peacefully, Canberra should consider mirroring Wellington's position, which does not embrace the anti-Chinese rhetoric of the US. Just as New Zealand has achieved, Canberra can still maintain a strong relationship with China while cooperating diplomatically with Washington on issues of mutual interest surrounding China, such as upholding human rights and cyber security.

Likewise, as Australia preaches the US position that China is a threat, it is "determinedly casting China as an enemy – and in the doing of it, [Australia is] actually creating an enemy of China where none exists" (Keating). Former Prime Minister Paul Keating argues, "the notion that Australia is in a state of military apprehension about China, or needs to be, is a distortion and lie of the worst and most grievous proportions" (Keating). While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pushes intrusive foreign policy involving tariffs against Australian imports, intolerance to political opposition in Hong Kong, and island-building in the South China Sea, these represent no real military threat to Australia. Furthermore, while all great powers desire the development of buffer zones, China does not attack other sovereign states (Keating). Even if it did turn expansionist, Australia has a defensible continent that is not remotely within any territorial claim by China. Australia is not within the strategic purview of China; it is only made an adversary by the Australian government's own doing. Abandoning Australia's treaty commitments to ANZUS and refusing to participate in American anti-China rhetoric are both in

the nation's security interests. Such actions would nullify the CCP's aggressive posture toward the Australian homeland and any possibility that China could be belligerent toward Australia.

Even outside of just China, the involvement of the ADF in American interventionism has been detrimental to Canberra's security interests. Australia's participation in the War on Terror has endangered Australia's national security because it has made it a greater target for terrorist groups and has worsened the global crisis of terrorism (ABC News). Following the beginning of the War on Terror after the 9/11 attacks, Australian citizens were heavily targeted by terror cells, Jemaah Islamiyah and Al-Qaeda in the Asia-Pacific. The most notable attacks were the 2002 Bali Bombing and the 2004 Australian Embassy bombings, in which 211 Australians were killed and were largely motivated by Australia's involvement with conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (BBC News; Jeffrey & Oliver) . Furthermore, the War on Terror as a whole has worsened the international crisis of terrorism. Declassified intelligence material has demonstrated that the War on Terror created a breeding ground for extremist networks such as Islamic State and galvanized jihadist motivations for violence against the West (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). In this case, Australia's alliance with the US has made its citizens less safe. Similarly, the costs of Australian collaboration with the US on acts of foreign interventionism have also been significant, and the outcomes of its participation in US-led conflicts have not shown any meaningful importance to Australia's strategic imperatives. In the Vietnam War, for example, 521 Australians were killed, costing approximately \$218.4 million (Australian War Memorial). Australian involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which is without any discernible benefit to the Australian national interest, cost the lives of 45 Australian servicemen (Australian War Memorial), and \$10 billion and \$5 billion, respectively (Davis & Correy). Australia's alliance with the US is based on its willingness to support the USA in its conflict; however, this has been shown to make Australia less safe in addition to having an exorbitant cost (Shortis).

The US alliance is no longer acting in Australia's interest, not just because there is no assurance that it would assist Australia if it were to be attacked, let alone if Washington could successfully guarantee Australia's security, but also because it is actively harming Australia. As such, continuing to rely on the US alliance would be irresponsible and in opposition to its national interests. For this reason, Australia must consider a new strategic posture that can provide for its national security interests.

Australian neutrality

Many other US allies fear that they are investing in an alliance in which the primary security guarantor has a renewed focus on retrenchment and isolationism. While Americans do not want to retreat from their position of global leadership, the political and economic model that enabled the US to compete and lead in a contested world is declining (Halpin et al.). The high social cohesion and wealth of the American middle class that propelled it to the role of global superpower following World War II is vanishing (Magsaman). Domestically, the US is marred by rancorous social, economic, and political divisions involving race, partisanship, and inequality. The nation has significant governance problems ranging from poor fiscal discipline, political corruption caused by poorly regulated donations, and gun violence (Magsamen). Foreign policy derives from domestic policy, and to remedy these internal woes, the US needs leadership underpinned by broad-based public consensus. This consensus does not currently exist, nor does it look like it is coming to fruition in the future. The United States is a fraught ally. Hence, it is time for current American allies, such as Australia, to consider decreasing their alliance commitments rather than becoming embroiled in a chaotic situation.

The greatest threat to Australian security is its complacency through remaining in the fraught American alliance. The risk is that Australia, as a US ally, will become ensnared in the Thucydides Trap as China surpasses America as the ruling regional hegemon in Asia (Grant). If nothing changes Australia will be mired in this emerging Great Power conflict. Departing the alliance will mean that Canberra will be exempt from any involvement in a dispute between Washington and Beijing. This means that a neutral Australia will be safer by avoiding the security complications that derive from participation in a possible great power conflict. Even sans a large-scale showdown, it very likely would save Australia from the current attacks on its democracy as well as potential economic shocks inflicted by China.

Ostensibly, becoming a neutral state without an alliance to safeguard security and deter external threats appears dangerous. Yet, this can often be a safer foreign policy decision as security alliances are antagonistic to non-aligned states and can draw those with relatively little stake in a conflict into full-scale war (Snyder). This situation was demonstrated in the outbreak of World War I, when the assassination of a relatively insignificant political figure caused the escalation of a continental war in Europe. During this time, Switzerland displayed the efficacy of neutrality and abstinence from military alliances. Switzerland managed to remain unharmed during the First and Second World Wars. This was despite being entrapped amongst battling belligerents which surrounded it geographically. In fact Switzerland has not been at war since

1815 due to a combination of factors including its impartiality, geographic defenses, and Zurich's effective use of its armed forces on its borders to deter potential inquest (Smallwood).

Canberra should explore the impartiality to warfare embodied in the neutrality of the Swiss. While Australia has a relatively small population of 25 million, it is not impossible to guarantee its security needs independently. Drastic changes to Australia's military force structure, foreign policy, and regional stance will be needed in the interim (Henry). Essential changes to the ADF's force structure and composition include possessing naval warships that utilize a sovereign technological capability. The Royal Australian Navy will struggle to operate autonomously when some warships employ the American AEGIS combat system. Similarly, Australia cannot sustain the incoming nuclear-powered submarines acquired in the new trilateral defense pact without a domestic nuclear industry (Lowe). This deal only entrenches Australia's military alliance with the US and should be reconsidered. Ultimately, the structure and composition of the ADF must function not to fit in a larger US-led force as a 'fleet unit' but for the immediate defense of Australia and its borders.

The Swiss demonstrated that natural geographic defenses combined with mobilizing a small, purpose-built, and independent fighting force could prevent intervention from militaristic neighbors. Accordingly, Australia does not require American military assistance to fulfill its national security needs. Canberra should rely upon its geographic isolation, coastline, and large landmass along with a national defense primed to safeguard the security of Australia's borders and its immediate sphere of influence.

Conclusion

In summary, Australia should sever the ANZUS pact with the US. Continuing to observe the terms of the alliance are no longer in Australia's interests given the rise of China and the retraction of American power globally. These factors mean the US may not be willing or able to provide for Canberra's security needs. The adoption of a neutral and non-aligned foreign policy will make Australia safer as a neutral Australia will not antagonize Beijing, which is currently countering the power of the US and its allies. If Australia is not an American ally, it will be outside the PRC's strategic purview, thus warranting no threat from China. Similarly, as demonstrated by Switzerland, Australia does not need a superpower to safeguard its security; it can fulfill its security needs independently. Should Canberra not act upon these propositions,

Australia will be less safe by relying upon a fraught alliance that makes Australia a target for American adversaries and does not provide for Australia's most basic security needs.

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