



# Australia and the Ukraine crisis: deterring authoritarian expansionism

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to explain Australia's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and how it has affected Australia's strategic decisions in responding to Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. Canberra's responses are consistent with the 'dependent ally' and the 'middle power' traditions in Australian foreign policy. The paper argues that these responses are framed by assessments that a competition and struggle between a democratic and authoritarian bloc is occurring; authoritarian values and approaches are key causes of instability and disruption to the post-World War II liberal rules-based order; and should Moscow achieve its objectives in Ukraine and beyond, there is an increased possibility that Beijing will be tempted to use similar coercive measures against Taiwan and other nations. Canberra is consequently putting even more emphasis on the US-Australia alliance, and groupings such as AUKUS and the Quad as central to collective democratic action to constrain and deter contrary authoritarian behaviours in the Indo-Pacific.

**Keywords** Australian foreign policy · Ukraine crisis · Quad · AUKUS

Some three weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping declared a 'no-limits' friendship. Both went significantly further than before in supporting each other on flashpoints of tension with the West. This included Russia's support for China's position that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and both countries taking a 'stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions' (Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022). Having met more than 30 times since 2013, the leaders of the two most powerful authoritarian countries openly pledged in their joint statement to oppose American global pre-eminence, weaken US alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and overturn the primacy of liberal democratic norms in place since the formal end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.

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Although the ‘no-limits friendship falls short of an alliance and does not impose formal obligations on either country to come to the assistance of the other, the Xi-Putin summit seemed to affirm the argument by then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison that a ‘new arc of autocracy’ is ‘instinctively aligning’ with the aim of challenging the regional and global order and remaking that order in ‘their own image’. As Morrison put it:

“We face the spectre of a transactional world, devoid of principle, accountability, and transparency, where state sovereignty, territorial integrity and liberty are surrendered for respite from coercion and intimidation, or economic entrapment dressed up as economic reward. This is not a world we want—for us, our neighbours or our region” (Morrison 2022).

Although the incoming Anthony Albanese government has not used the term ‘arc of autocracy’ to characterise the nature of competition and threat facing Australia and the world, the difference seems one of terminology rather than direction. In laying out his foreign policy vision for Australia prior to the May 2022 federal election, Albanese argued that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had ‘trampled fundamental principles which have made the world safer since World War II’, represented an attack on the ‘values free nations hold dear’ including ‘representative democracy, the rule of law and the right to live in peace’, and praised the ‘courageous resistance’ of the Ukrainian people and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s leadership in ‘rally[ing] the world to the cause of [the Ukrainian people’s] freedom (Albanese 2022).

Moreover, Albanese openly criticised China’s support for Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, stating bluntly that ‘China has failed in its special responsibility as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, whilst offering Russia relief from sanctions’ (Albanese 2022). Expressing concern about the ‘no-limits’ partnership between the two countries, he then went on to link the CCP’s ‘harsher authoritarianism and more strident nationalism’ at home to its growing assertiveness and aggression toward its neighbours (Albanese 2022).

Further, Albanese alluded to the distinct vulnerabilities of open democratic societies—to threats such as foreign interference, espionage and cyberattacks—that were ‘often exploited by autocratic countries seeking to increase their power’ (Albanese 2022).

The similarities between the previous and current prime ministers are striking. Both identify authoritarian countries, namely China and Russia, as the primary and most serious challenge to Australian interests and the liberal rules-based order which was cobbled together after the Second World War. Both see authoritarian values and approaches as a causal factor in terms of instigating instability, disruption, and lawlessness. Both also point to bilateral, multilateral, and institutional agreements and arrangements between democracies such as the Quad and AUKUS as a bulwark against, and the remedy for, halting and pushing back the authoritarian advance (Albanese 2022).

This is the framing through which one should understand the Australian perception of and response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whilst each conflict



and set of bilateral relationships have their own unique contexts and histories, the Russian disregard for international law governing the use of force, desire to address perceived historical wrongs through force and other forms of coercion, determination to revise borders and extend a sphere of influence, and commitment to undermining the interests of the USA, its allies, and the preferred order of the Western democracies is also common to China.

In these contexts, Australian support for Western sanctions against Russia and provision of arms to Ukraine is not just about offering support to and managing its alliance with the US. There is the belief that a competition and struggle between a democratic and authoritarian bloc is occurring, with the added implication that should Moscow achieve its objectives in Ukraine and beyond, the possibility that Beijing will be tempted to use similar coercive measures against Taiwan and other nations will increase.

The paper seeks to explain how and why Australia has reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the way it has, and how the latter has affected Australia's strategic decisions in responding to increasing Chinese aggression in its own region of the Indo-Pacific. These responses and strategies can be understood as consistent with two main traditions in Australian foreign policy: the 'dependent ally' tradition with its focus on the US-Australia alliance as a realist approach to its foreign relations; and the 'middle power' tradition which focuses on Australia's identity as an activist middle power whose foreign policy reflects liberal values and tools of statecraft. Whilst these traditions have been in conflict in prior historical periods, in the current one no such conflict exists.

The paper will argue that Australia has drawn a direct parallel between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the potential for China to follow suit in Taiwan, putting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific at grave risk. In policy terms, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is causing Canberra to put even more emphasis and reliance on democratic groupings such as the Quad and AUKUS—albeit with some important differences between the two entities. Australia sees these entities and arrangements as being essential when it comes to the institutionalisation, operationalisation, and (in the case of AUKUS) militarisation of collective democratic action against contrary authoritarian intentions and behaviours. In doing so, the paper will look at the purpose of the Quad and AUKUS from the Australian viewpoint, and why they are increasingly seen as entities that exist on the front line of constraining and deterring the assertive march of authoritarian states such as China. But before doing that, it will outline Australia's bilateral support for Ukraine as a demonstration of solidarity with a democracy under existential threat from its authoritarian neighbour.

## **Democratic solidarity with Ukraine**

Whilst the response of states in the Indo-Pacific to Russia's invasion has been mixed, from the outset Australia firmly supported Ukraine and condemned Russia's use of force as a grave assault on core norms of the post-World War II rules-based order and an attempt to return to the era of Great Power spheres of influence. Canberra unequivocally framed the invasion as an unprovoked, unjustified and illegal



aggression under international law and committed Australia to ‘playing our part to ensure Russia pays the high price this invasion warrants’ (Payne and Morrison 2022). Prime Minister Morrison dismissed Russian justifications as based on disinformation and propaganda, stating that ‘Vladimir Putin has fabricated a feeble pretext on which to invade’ (Evans 2022). The then opposition Labor Party framed the invasion in very similar terms (Australian Labor Party 2022) and expressed its full support for the ‘most comprehensive and heaviest sanctions that Australia can and should take’ (Jervis-Brady 2022).

Mirroring the united front of the major political parties, public opinion polling has reflected a largely unambiguous view of the invasion and strong active support for Ukraine. In an April 2022 Ipsos survey 78 per cent of Australians believed Australia should support sovereign countries when attacked and 76 per cent thought that doing nothing in Ukraine would encourage Russia to take military action elsewhere (Ipsos 2022). Whilst in June 2022, the *Lowy Institute Poll* found that government policies had broad appeal with 89 per cent of respondents saying they supported ‘keeping strict sanctions on Russia’ and 83 per cent saying that they supported the provision of military aid to Ukraine (Kassam 2022). Twelve months later, these views remained similar with the 2023 poll showing that 87 per cent of respondents ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ support keeping strict sanctions on Russia, and 76 per cent supporting the provision of military aid to Ukraine (Neelam 2023). Finally, both the 2022 and 2023 Lowy polls showed that 56 per cent of respondents were ‘very concerned’ by China-Russia cooperation (Kassam 2022; Neelam 2023).

The lack of political division on the issue, supported strongly by the Australian public, has allowed Australian governments to take diplomatic and political steps to support Ukraine. Australia was one of a number of countries who co-sponsored the 2 March 2022 UN General Assembly Resolution which deplored the Russian invasion as an act of aggression in violation of article 2(4) of the UN Charter (Tiezzi 2022) and joined with the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand in supporting the international investigation and prosecution of Russian nationals for war crimes in Ukraine via the International Criminal Court, the UN and OSCE processes (Osbourne 2022; Belot 2022). Australia was also one of 93 nations who voted in favour of suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council in April 2022 (UN Affairs 2022).

After the change of government in May 2022, the new Labor Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese became one of a small number of democratic leaders to personally visit Ukraine in early July 2022, touring three towns in the Kyiv region now infamous as the sites of civilian atrocities (Rankin 2022). There he stated that his visit to Ukraine and ‘visits by other world leaders sends a clear message that democratic nations like Australia will stand side-by-side with the Ukrainian people in their time of need’ (Office of the Australian Prime Minister 2022).

Beyond diplomatic support, Australia has provided a substantial amount of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and instituted a range of sanctions. Up until July 2023, Australia’s total military assistance to Ukraine came to AUD\$710 (approximately US\$455 million) including 120 Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles, 28 M113AS4 armoured vehicles, AUD\$33 million for Uncrewed Aerial Systems, de-mining equipment, and the deployment of a Royal Australia Air Force E-7A Wedgetail surveillance aircraft to Germany as part of allied early warning



systems against threats to humanitarian/military assistance corridors to Ukraine from NATO countries. In terms of humanitarian needs, AUD\$75 million has been given to Ukraine in direct humanitarian assistance, 10,000 visas have been granted to Ukrainians seeking shelter in Australia and 80,000 tonnes of thermal coal worth over AUD\$33.5 million has been granted to support energy security. Finally, Ukraine was given duty free access to the Australian market, with Ukraine exporting close to \$122 million worth of goods and services to Australia in 2021 (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023; Australian Minister for Trade and Tourism 2022).

Australia has also joined the US and EU/G7 nations to isolate and impose costs on Russia by imposing a range of trade, financial and diplomatic sanctions. This has included financial sanctions and travel bans on 1100 individuals and entities supporting the invasion, including members of the Russian government, the Wagner mercenary group and entities responsible for supplying the Russian armed forces and producing and disseminating Russian propaganda and disinformation (Payne 2022; Wong 2023a, b). On trade, Australia has imposed an additional tariff of 35 per cent on imports from Russia and Belarus, and prohibited the import of Russian gold, oil, petroleum, coal and gas and export of alumina, bauxite and luxury goods to Russia (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023).

So then, why has Australia been such an unequivocal supporter of Ukraine and opponent of Russia? Perceptions of the conflict among Indo-Pacific countries have varied considerably, with many either being indifferent to Ukraine's fate or sympathetic to Russian justifications and framing of the conflict as being instigated by NATO expansion since the end of the Cold War (Reeves 2023). Canberra's rhetoric suggests a clarity based on principle and demonstrated by practical action. In the Indo-Pacific, Australia is among the few material supporters of Ukraine, ranked as the equal second highest bilateral aid donor to Ukraine (equal to South Korea and behind Japan) measured as a percentage of GDP, and the highest military aid donor based on commitments made up to 31 July 2023 (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2023). It is true that Australia faces little economic cost in supporting the Western sanctions regime. It has a negligible trade and investment relationship with Russia and is insulated from Russian energy weapons given that it is the second largest exporter of gas after Russia and the world's largest exporter of coal (Hurst 2022). Nevertheless, using Walt's balance of threat framework (Walt 1981), Australia could have got away with doing much less for Ukraine. It is geographically distant from the conflict and concomitantly falls very low down on the list of targets for Russia's offensive military capabilities. Political pressure to do significantly more for Ukraine has come from domestic critics, rather than external pressure applied by its alliance partner, the USA (Shoebridge 2023).

What then is most significant is the connection drawn by Australian leaders between the European and Indo-Pacific theatres—with the latter being Australia's primary theatre of interest—and the identification of authoritarian actors and their behaviours as the primary threat to what has been a benign and peaceful regional order operating under liberal principles. In his speech to the NATO summit in July 2023, Prime Minister Albanese made these connections clear when he said, '[b]y supporting peace and sovereignty in Europe, we are underscoring our iron-clad



commitment to these norms in our own region, the Indo-Pacific’ (Harris 2023). A year earlier, in an address to the Shangri-la Dialogue in June 2023, Defence Minister Richard Marle argued that a failure by democracies to support Ukraine and allow an easy Russian victory had direct implications for East Asia. There he stated that ‘an imbalance in military power’ encouraged Moscow to conclude that ‘the benefits from conflict outweighed the risks...It is why Australia is standing with Europe...to reject the idea that any power has a right to dominate its neighbour’ (Marles 2022). Even more tellingly, his message to China was blunt:

“It is therefore reasonable to expect China make clear it does not support the invasion of a sovereign country in violation of the UN Charter, and China’s own longstanding commitment to the Charter’s founding principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. That China has not done so should give us cause for concern, especially given the investments it is making in military power” (Marles 2022).

The Ukraine crisis has injected a sense of urgency in Canberra about the need to deter China from being tempted to use force to achieve its territorial aims and to do so in partnership with the USA and other fellow democracies. This emphasis is consistent with two enduring historical traditions in Australian foreign policy: alliance dependence and middle power diplomacy.

## Australian foreign policy frameworks

Whilst past foreign policy behaviour does not determine future behaviour, existing traditions in foreign policy thinking provide foundations from which current events are interpreted, debated, analysed and acted upon. Australian foreign policy has been marked by two consistent frameworks or traditions that are still applicable today, the ‘dependent ally’ and the ‘middle power’ traditions (Taylor 2020: 97). On the first, Australia’s longest serving Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, observed in 1950 that ‘no country in the world more than ours needs great and powerful friends’ (Gyngell 2017). Going back to Australia’s origins as a British colony, and then from the time of Federation in 1901 until the fall of Singapore in 1942, Australia depended on an alliance with the United Kingdom to achieve security in Asia. Coral Bell described the relationship as a ‘mutual defence alliance so automatic and unconditional that it had never required a written form’ (Bell 1984; Taylor 2020: 97). With a relatively insignificant population compared to its Asian neighbours (Keyfitz 1965)—estimated to be 6.9 million people in 1939 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1939)—its leaders were acutely aware of their inability to defend such a large and resource rich continent without the help of a friendly and reliable great power. This was made especially clear with the surrender of British forces in Singapore in February 1942, and Japan’s rapid penetration into Australia’s northern reaches (New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomon Islands for example) which was only defeated with superior manpower and resources of the USA. That mantle was formally transferred to the USA after World War II, another culturally similar, Anglo-Saxon, democratic, non-resident great power in Asia with the capacity to maintain open sea lines of



communication and to balance against and deter expansionist tendencies by any rising great power in the Far East (Bell 2016). Whilst the alliance dependency tradition is most obviously informed by realist principles, it is also influenced by Australia's liberal democratic identity i.e. seeking alliance with powerful states with the capacity to oppose the rise of a regional hegemon and maintain a balance of power, but a careful choice of alliance partner based on common culture and commitment to liberal democratic values. One might describe this tradition as a form of liberalism with teeth.

The US-Australia alliance relationship was formalised in the 1951 Australia New Zealand United States Treaty (ANZUS) which commits the parties to 'meet the common danger' in the case of an 'armed attack' on either country's armed forces or territory in the Pacific (ANZUS Treaty 1951, Article IV and V). Whilst this does not meet the NATO standard of a security guarantee, the relationship between the two sides is strong with considerable expectations on both sides that the US will come to Australia's aid in the event of a major attack. The alliance also provides Australia with opportunities to influence US decision-making in Washington, high level intelligence sharing through the 'five-eyes' arrangement, access to and joint development of advanced military technology (AUKUS being the latest and most significant example), and training opportunities that it would not be able to replicate independently (Australian Department of Defence 2016: 122; Bisley 2016: 405–406; O'Neill 2017). In return, Australia has fought with the USA in every major US military action in the last century, however controversial, including the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq wars, often playing niche roles. Further, Australian defence capabilities are structured not only around the defence of Australia but also to further US force projection into the Asia-Pacific and support a regional balance of power, including through US access to Australian bases and US force rotations.

The second consistent tradition in Australian foreign policy, and evident since the end of World War II, is that of 'middle power diplomacy' or 'middle power activism' (Ungerer 2007; Cooper et al. 1993: 17–19; Ravenhill 1998: 317–318). Whilst various Australian foreign ministers have identified Australia as a middle power, its brand of middle power diplomacy is most commonly associated with the self-conscious construction and promotion of such an approach by Gareth Evans, who was Australia's foreign minister from 1988 to 1996 under a Labor government (Carr 2014: 76). In Evan's words:

"The characteristic method of middle power diplomacy is coalition building with "like-minded" countries. It also usually involves "niche" diplomacy, which means concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field. By definition, middle powers are not powerful enough in most circumstances to impose their will. Still, they may be persuasive enough to have like-minded others see their point of view and to act accordingly" (Ungerer 2007: 547; Evans and Grant 1995: 344).

In this period, Australia became a keen diplomatic practitioner of multilateral coalition-building, pursuing liberal internationalist interests and values such as trade



liberalisation, WMD non-proliferation and post-conflict diplomacy (Ungerer 2007: 547; Ravenhill 1998: 315).<sup>1</sup> Liberal governments have not publicly framed their foreign policy positions within a ‘middle power diplomacy’ framework, yet they have taken strong positions defending a rules-based order even prior to the adoption of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic framework from 2017 onwards (Lee 2023). This includes Australia’s use of its position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from 2013 to 2014 to advocate for a firm international response to the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, and Russia’s invasion of Crimea (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2014). From September 2014–2018, Australia played a strong role in the US-led military coalition formed to provide collective self-defence of Iraq whilst it faced the ISIS insurgency (Hurst 2014).

Australia’s historical practice of middle power diplomacy or activism could be said to form part of a foreign policy identity, with two key characteristics. Firstly, it is pragmatic insofar as it is based on a realistic assessment of the relative material capabilities of middle powers as compared to great powers. It accepts that unlike the great powers of the day, middle powers lack the material capacity to effect change at the global level independently but often must rely on the power of persuasion to build consensus within multilateral forums. Where consensus is unobtainable in these forums of wide membership, Australia has turned to building ‘coalitions of the willing’ among states with similar interests and values, particularly but not exclusively, with liberal democratic states. Secondly, Australia’s brand of middle power activism uses these liberal methods—multilateralism and building consensus within coalitions of the willing as just mentioned—to champion a liberal international world order that constrains the powerful according to the rule of law, supports liberal trade values as well as ‘good governance’ (rather than democracy). Whilst these aims and methods are ostensibly liberal in character, Australian foreign and defence policy has deliberately avoided values based or what could be perceived as ideological language to avoid alienating neighbouring countries that are not necessarily *liberal* democracies, or democracies at all (Smith 2017). The most recent Defence and Foreign policy white papers for example repeatedly mention challenges to the rules-based order, rather than a *liberal* rules-based order (Australian Foreign Policy White Paper 2017).

Australia’s alliance dependency/commitments and its identity as a liberal middle power activist has at times pulled in opposite directions, especially where US foreign policy has taken a unilateralist turn (Beeson and Higgott 2013). This is not so, however, in the current period. Both the US and Australia have adopted ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategies predicated on a shared assessment that the post-World War II international order is being actively undermined by Chinese economic, political, technological and military policies and approaches (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017; The White House 2022a). Particularly under the Biden Administration, both are committed to using multilateral institutions and building coalitions among like-minded, and largely democratic states to oppose these trends

<sup>1</sup> Op cit Ungerer (2007, p. 547), Ravenhill (1998, p. 315).





(e.g. AUKUS, the Quad, the G7 and NATO), approaches consistent with Australia's brand of middle power diplomacy. Similarly, a common refrain since the war on Ukraine by Australian leaders is the indispensability of the USA for Australian security and defence in a deteriorating regional security environment, as China's unprecedented and rapid military modernisation continues without 'transparency or reassurance about its strategic intent' (Wong 2023a, b). Defence Minister Richard Marles has said that 'Australia's seventy-year-old Alliance with the USA has never been more important to our nation. And deep US engagement has never been more important to stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific' (Marles 2022). It is the USA that Australia continues to rely upon as an essential partner when it comes to urgently building sovereign deterrent capabilities, whilst also actively supporting US force projection into the Indo-Pacific to maintain what Australian Foreign Minister Wong describes as 'strategic equilibrium' (Wong 2023a, b).

## **Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy and the Ukraine war**

Australia's response to the Ukraine crisis, and the connections drawn to the Indo-Pacific theatre, should be understood within the context of its deteriorating relationship with China. Since 2016, the Australian government has taken some hard—and in some cases world-leading—decisions actively challenging Chinese policies. Australia, for example, was one of the first countries to publicly describe the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision on the South China Sea dispute as legally binding and to call on China to abide by it (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016). It was the first country to bar Huawei from participating in the rollout of 5G networks citing national security concerns. This set a global precedent for the characterisation of Huawei and ZTE as instruments of a foreign government (Zhong 2018). In 2018, Canberra also raised Beijing's ire by enacting foreign interference laws that implicitly acknowledged Chinese covert influence and (dis)information campaigns in Australia over public debate, media, educational institutions and politicians from both major parties (Borys 2018). What tipped the relationship to a poisonous level was Australia's leading call in April 2020 for an independent international inquiry into the origins of the Coronavirus pandemic (Bagshaw 2020).

Beijing's response has been furious, threatening and at times unrelenting. At the end of April 2020, China's Ambassador to Australia issued a thinly veiled threat of impending economic coercion by publicly suggesting that the Chinese public would no longer visit Australia or buy Australian beef and wine. Over the course of the year, China introduced a range of prohibitive tariffs, behind the border restrictions, and imposed opaque and unexplained customs delays on a range of Australian exports including barley, beef, wine, lobster and timber, as well as blocking the unloading of Australian coal at major Chinese ports (Sullivan 2020). Australia's gross losses due to Chinese economic coercion for nine restricted commodities in the Chinese market have been estimated at AUD\$59 billion (approx. US\$37 billion) from 2020 to 2022, with net losses (taking into account re-direction to third country markets) estimated at AUD\$31 billion (approx. US\$20 billion) (Adams and Wickes 2023). In November 2020, China's embassy in Australia issued a list of fourteen



grievances about Australian policies—including all of the above—that it demanded Canberra reverse as a precondition of any improvement in the bilateral relationship (Hitch and Hayne 2020).

Australia did not, however, back down and instead initiated cases against China at the World Trade Organization and used global platforms such as the G7 to warn of the dangers to democracies if Chinese economic coercion remained unopposed (Hawley and Hawke 2021).

This stance was taken despite the fact that China has been Australia's largest trading partner and biggest export destination for some time, and it is this trading relationship that until 2020, helped Australia avoid economic recession for nearly 30 years.

Canberra has taken these forward-leaning positions, and withstood considerable blowback from Beijing, because of two main factors. First, it has embraced a strategy aimed to defend a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' region (FOIP) on the view that China is no longer content to accept and work within the prevailing US-led liberal order. At the same time, it recognises that the continued dominance of the USA is no longer assured, and as such, the longevity and strength of this order are uncertain (Australian Department of Defence 2016). Second, rather than accepting that Chinese regional hegemony is inevitable, and with it, the demise of the liberal order, Australia aims to do what it can on its own, with the USA and other like-minded democracies, to defend and promote that order. Canberra believes it has agency to actively 'shape the character of our region' into the future (Australian Department of Defence 2020).

Australia's FOIP strategy has initially been reactive, focused on countering or blocking specific Chinese policies/initiatives assessed to have adverse effects on the liberal order. However, over the medium to long-term, to achieve the objective of shaping the regional environment, Canberra's strategy seeks first to deter further moves by Beijing to change the status quo by altering the latter's cost/benefit calculations. New initiatives to strengthen deterrence capabilities rely heavily on the US alliance. These include plans to develop new sovereign capabilities, enhance joint capabilities within the alliance, and augment support for US power projection all initiated in 2023 via AUKUS and a comprehensive Defence Strategic Review (Australian Department of Defence 2023a) (discussed below). AUKUS brings together Australia's two historical and current 'great and powerful friends' in the service of deterring major conflict in the Indo-Pacific and restoring 'strategic equilibrium'. Secondly, Canberra seeks to build and join coalitions of democratic states with the resolve and capabilities to compete with China for influence over smaller regional states by offering a more beneficial and attractive alternative to a Sino-centric world. Third, it aims to assist smaller states in maintaining an independent foreign policy by helping them to build their military capabilities and supporting the resilience of their domestic institutions from foreign interference. Joint initiatives under the Quad are key to both of these aims. And fourth, to build consensus among democracies, within and beyond the Indo-Pacific, to defend liberal institutions and norms and impose costs on Beijing where needed. Since the war on Ukraine, Australia has been far more active in joining the deliberations of the G7 and as one of NATO's four Asia Pacific Partners (AP4) (Moriyasu and Tsuji 2023). In joining the NATO



summit in July 2023, Prime Minister Albanese remarked that ‘This seat at the table is one that’s a recognition of Australia’s contribution and the fact that we are a significant player when it comes to defending democracy, defending the rule of law’ (Associated Press 2023).

## **The Defence Strategic Review, AUKUS, the Quad and the Ukraine factor**

In the very early days of the Russian invasion, many in Australia shared the pessimistic assessment that Ukrainian forces were unlikely to survive the onslaught for more than several days. Indeed, prior to Russian forces entering Ukraine, the nightmare that many in the Australian strategic community feared most was the US and its allies fighting a war on two fronts against China and Russia over Ukraine and Taiwan respectively (Dibb 2022). Early parallels were drawn that if Russia were to succeed in swallowing its neighbour relatively painlessly, then this could raise temptations in China to do the same vis a vis Taiwan. Whilst this dark assessment has not come to pass, and Russia has paid a greater price than it anticipated for its invasion of Ukraine, the crisis has reinforced to Canberra the urgent need to prepare for a potential war against China in the Northeast Asian theatre. Reflecting this urgency, in August 2022 the new Labor government ordered a six-month Defence Strategic Review of force posture and preparedness, and also force structure, to ensure that Australia has the right capabilities to deter conflict in the region and defend Australian territory (Greene 2022).

## **Post the Ukraine invasion: Australia prepares for conflict**

In the period between 2016 and 2023 Australian defence assessments of the risks of conflict in our region have taken a downward turn. The 2016 Defence White Paper assessed that ‘there was no more than a remote prospect of a military attack on Australian territory by another country in the period to 2035’ (Australian Department of Defence 2016: 40) and that ‘major conflict between the United States and China is unlikely’ (Australian Department of Defence 2016: 43). Four years later the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU) stated that ‘while still unlikely, the prospect of high-intensity military conflict in the Indo-Pacific is less remote than at the time of the 2016 Defence White Paper’ (Australian Department of Defence 2020). It went on to up-end the long-standing assumption in defence planning that Australia would have a ten-year strategic warning time for major conventional attack against Australia and instead stated that Australia no longer had time to ‘gradually adjust military capability and preparedness in response to emerging challenges’ (Australian Department of Defence 2020: 14). The latest 2023 Defence Strategic Review, written after the invasion of Ukraine, is significantly starker still, noting that the strategic circumstances and risks Australia now faces is ‘radically different’ to those of the previous 80 years as a result of the decline in US relative power, the emergence of intense China-US competition, and an increased risk that this competition may



result in military conflict. It confirms the DSU's view that the concept of 'warning time' for a major attack was no longer valid in the contemporary strategic era, given the ability of more countries—read China—to project combat power over greater ranges in all five domains (Australian Department of Defence 2023a: 25). These reassessments of 'warning time' are officially based on advances in Chinese military capability but must also have evaluated Beijing's intent to use military force following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a consequence, the DSR issued an 'urgent call to action, including higher levels of military preparedness and accelerated capability development' (Australian Department of Defence 2023a: 25). In other words, Australia and the ADF now needed to be prepared for the possibility of becoming involved in conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, including an attack on Australian territory, at any time.

Whilst Canberra avoids speculating about the precise circumstances in which Australia may be involved in military conflict, in a speech to the Shangri-la Dialogue in June 2023, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese spoke of Australia's intent to build its defence capabilities 'not to prepare for war but to prevent it—through deterrence and reassurance...' with specific mention given to Taiwan, the South China Sea and East China Sea (Albanese 2023). Of the three theatres, the escalation in China's military, economic and diplomatic harassment of Taiwan since then US House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan has significantly increased fears of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. This is especially so given US intelligence showing that Chinese President Xi Jinping has instructed his country's military to 'be ready by 2027' to invade Taiwan (Yen 2023). Whilst this timeline is not inevitable, given the developments in the PLA modernisation program that have prioritised building the capacity to take Taiwan by force (US Department of Defense 2022), the Australian government appears to be taking this prospect seriously. Other less likely scenarios involve military escalation arising from increasingly dangerous and aggressive challenges to US military patrols in the South China Sea (Martinez and Seyler 2023).

With the assessment that Australia needs now to prepare to be involved in a conflict in Asia at any time, the DSR has endorsed a deterrent by denial strategy in response to the greater likelihood of Australia's involvement in major conflict. In pursuing this strategy, the ADF's primary area of military interest is defined as Australia's immediate region i.e. 'the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific' including its northern approaches (Australian Department of Defence 2023a: 28). It involves the development of anti-access/area denial capabilities (A2/AD) to deny an adversary's ability to militarily operate against or coerce Australia without its forces being held at risk at a greater distance, particularly via long-range strike, undersea warfare capabilities and surface-to-air missiles.

Significant changes to force structure for each service have been recommended to give effect to deterrence by denial. The navy will need to develop enhanced lethality via the acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (AUKUS Pillar 1) and a larger number of tier 1 and tier 2 surface combatants to contribute sea denial, air defence, long-range strike, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities. In March 2023 the AUKUS partners announced that Australia would



purchase three US Virginia class submarines, with the option to purchase two more (subject to US Congressional approval) by the early 2030s, whilst the UK and Australia would begin industrial collaboration to produce a new nuclear propelled submarine—SSN-AUKUS—using UK designs and advanced US technology by the early 2040s (The White House 2023). The army is to be transformed to conduct littoral manoeuvre operations by sea, land and air from Australia, with enhanced long-range fires (land-based maritime strike). In turn, the air force must be configured to provide air support for joint operations in Australia's north by conducting surveillance, air defence, strike (maritime and land) and air transport (Australian Department of Defence 2023a: Chapter 8).

As part of the review, the government has allocated AUD\$1.6 billion to acquire more long-range strike systems, including accelerated delivery of HiMars launchers and Precision Strike Missiles (Australian Department of Defence 2023b), whilst the US has previously agreed to sell Australia up to 220 Tomahawk land-attack missiles (TLAM) to equip the RAN's three Hobart class destroyers, and LRASMs for Australia's two fighter jets (the FA-18F Super Hornet, and the F-3A lighting II strike fighters). A further \$2.5 bn is set aside to develop a domestic missile production capability, known as the Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise (GWEO) (Blenkin 2023). Australia is essentially upgrading its military capabilities to independently (of the USA) defend the air and sea approaches to Australia, project integrated maritime and air power in our region, and provide meaningful augmentation to the US Navy to close shipping routes.

Further, the review calls for a focus on asymmetric advantage in relation to pursuing a strategy of denial, that is, 'the application of dissimilar capabilities, tactics or strategies to circumvent an opponent's strengths, causing them to suffer disproportional cost in time, space or material' (Australian Department of Defence 2023a: 71) The government has accepted the Review's recommendation that the development of critical technologies as part of AUKUS Pillar II (autonomous underwater vehicles, quantum technologies, AI enabled systems, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare) should be urgently prioritised, with a senior official or officer to be given sole responsibility for expediting capability outcomes.

The AUKUS partnership is based on the view that building such capabilities in a shortened timeframe will require cooperation and assistance from the USA and the UK. This is a partnership that Australia was instrumental in instigating (Giannini 2023) and could not have been concluded without long history of intelligence sharing through the 'five-eyes' intelligence partnership, which in turn is made possible by the deep cultural and political ties between Australia and its 'great and powerful friends'. The so-called asymmetric capabilities to be pursued under AUKUS Pillar II are needed by Australia to contribute to a US-led military action in Northeast Asia *within this decade*, unlike nuclear propelled submarines which will serve as strategic assets from the mid-2030s onwards at the earliest.

Finally, these planned advances in defence capabilities should also be understood within the context of Australia's greater commitment to burden sharing within the alliance and enhancement of allied force projection for the purposes of deterrence. Both of these strategic policies highlight Australia's dependence on the US alliance



as an essential means to maintain ‘strategic equilibrium’ in the region as Chinese military build-up continues.

Australia currently serves as a logistics hub for the alliance. Up to 2500 US marines rotate through Darwin for six months a year during which military exercises are conducted with Australian forces and other partner countries like Japan. At the conclusion of the September 2021 Australia-United States 2+2 ministerial conference (AUSMIN) announced a range of measures to advance force posture cooperation in all domains to support ‘high-end warfighting and combined military operations in the region’ (Governments of Australia and the United States of America 2021). In regard to the latter Australia is expanding its contribution to allied capacity for the rapid mobilisation of US and Australian forces by expanding arrangements for the stockpiling of fuel, inventories and munitions, communications and upgrading of military bases and training facilities (Governments of Australia and the United States of America 2022).

### **The Quad and the broader authoritarian challenge**

The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper committed Australia to working with other democracies to support a balance of power favourable to the liberal order (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017: 37). If realising the potential of AUKUS to enhance and accelerate Australia’s military capabilities is being put forward as an even more urgent priority due to events in Ukraine, Australia has been quieter about the relevance of the Quad in the same context largely due to India’s reluctance to criticise Russian actions and join in the Western sanctions against Moscow (Tamkin 2023). Nevertheless, both entities are seen as essential arrangements as part of a collective democratic pushback and reassertion of democratic power, relevance, and strategic agency. Events in Ukraine will only have strengthened Australia’s perspective and approach in this sense. For example, commenting after his first Quad leader’s summit Prime Minister Albanese stated that the four leaders had discussed how to ‘push our values in the region at a time when China was clearly seeking to exert more influence’ (Martin 2022).

Canberra then continues to see competition with China as being based on competing political systems, with implications for the future foundations of international order. From the Australian perspective, the objective of the Quad is to help win the ‘hearts and minds’ of smaller regional states in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific order. The grouping also seeks to demonstrate that liberal democracies are superior to authoritarian systems in their capacity to solve the region and world’s most important and pressing common non-military problems. This includes showing that their open and competitive economic systems are most capable of producing the most advanced and innovative technological solutions to global problems, that they are able to collaborate effectively and capitalise on the comparative advantages/strengths each may have, and that they are willing to share these advances with the region through the provision of public goods.

One sees this in the Quad’s 2021 focus on two of the greatest challenges of our time, namely the COVID-19 pandemic (via an ambitious vaccine partnership)



and climate change (e.g. clean energy supply chain development and green shipping), as well as its infrastructure and connectivity agenda (The White House 2021). It includes the promotion of standards and support for private sector funding of regional infrastructure, with an emphasis on quality, sustainability, and national benefit, in response first to fears of ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ and now wide-scale ‘debt-distress’ among borrowers (The Editors 2022; Lu 2023). In the same vein, the Quad’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) provides public goods—near-real time, integrated maritime domain awareness using commercially-available data—whilst building the capacity of regional states to monitor intrusions into their EEZs by Chinese vessels (civilian and military) (The White House 2022b). At a systemic level, these practical initiatives attempt to give substance to the broader messaging that a liberal order provides greater benefits and opportunities to smaller states than the hierarchical authoritarian capitalist order promoted by Beijing.

In this sense, Australia views the Quad as an essential safeguard against the advancing authoritarian powers in a mainly non-military context, even if the Indian reticence means events in Ukraine have not been used to openly accelerate the military activities of the Quad. The only quasi-official military activity of the group is India’s Malabar naval exercise which was expanded to include Australia in 2020, following China’s aggressive actions along the disputed border at Galawan Valley (Ladhakh) (Reynolds 2020). Nevertheless, it would have been noted in Canberra that whilst New Delhi was not prepared to criticise Russia for invading Ukraine, it was more forthcoming in mirroring other Quad members in calling for restraint, de-escalation, and avoidance of unilateral actions to change the status quo as the PLA conducted live fire exercises around Taiwan in August 2022 (Wang 2022). This demonstrates the key difference between India’s relationship with Russia and China respectively. India views China as a direct security threat – given its aggressive posture on their undemarcated border and support for Pakistan - that is in no way replicated when it comes to Russia. In the long-term, India has good reason to reduce its dependency on Russian arms given the latter’s likely inability to deliver on orders and supplies, and the lasting effects of US sanctions (Waldwyn 2023). Hence whilst Australia sees the Quad as a democratic grouping against authoritarian challenges and threats, it additionally sees it as a vehicle through which it can gradually coax India into becoming a more enthusiastic and proactive member in helping to push back on the authoritarian advance in the Indo-Pacific. Australia would likely welcome a greater military dimension to the Quad if India were more amenable to doing so.

Finally, the Australian sense of increased urgency to balance against, counter, and deter authoritarian advances resulting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could lessen the Australian interest in ASEAN even if Canberra will continue to pay lip service to ‘ASEAN centrality’, i.e., the notion that ASEAN reserves the right to set the diplomatic conversation and agenda. The Australian support for an ever more expansive and robust Quad agenda, as well as the elevated emphasis on the AUKUS partnership stands in contrast to the Australian assessment that ASEAN is unable to meaningfully actively contribute to a favourable balance of power and influence in the region, is unable to accept the existence of an increasingly important



ideological competition occurring in the region, and comprises members who are either virtual client states of China or else unprepared to make decisions that result in the abandonment of their hedging strategies. For example, responses among individual ASEAN states to AUKUS and the Quad reflect the group's lack of consensus (Li 2022; Storey and Choong 2023). Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines have offered implicit support for AUKUS as a net contributor to the strategic balance in the region, whilst Malaysia and Indonesia have been critical of AUKUS raising concerns that it would trigger an arms race, undermine regional stability and involved nuclear proliferation risks. Whilst most ASEAN members have warmed to the Quad, any further moves to militarise the latter entity or even simply robustly push back against Chinese policies will not be unanimously supported by ASEAN countries. If Australia moves further and more quickly to create a favourable democratic balance of power and influence—including with some of the more forward-leaning South-east Asian nations—there is an increased likelihood that Canberra will be prepared to leave ASEAN behind.

## Conclusion

In the lead-up to the Australian federal election in May 2022, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison characterised the then Shadow Defense Minister Richard Marles as a so-called 'Manchurian candidate', or a politician being used as a puppet by an enemy power (Murphy and Hurst 2022). In the heat of an election campaign Marles was being criticised for a speech delivered to Beijing Foreign Studies University where he said Australia must 'respect China' (Paterson 2022). Fears that the new government would seek a 'reset' in its relationship with China, which implied a retreat from previous policy positions, have been dispelled by the robust response of the new government to the war in Ukraine.

In June 2023, in a speech to the Shangri-la Dialogue, Marles gave a strongly worded statement explaining that Australia's stance on Ukraine went much further than the immediate conflict and had direct implications Chinese behaviour in the Indo-Pacific:

Australia believes it is vitally important for our collective future that the world concludes from Ukraine's inspiring resistance that Putin's gambit failed, and that the costs of military aggression far outweighed any perceived benefit. But the world won't arrive at this conclusion without effort and investment from us all. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a broader failure of the global system to deter the use of force in pursuit of strategic goals. And we must not allow this to become a dangerous new precedent for our region" (Marles 2023).

Indeed, the combination of Russia's disregard for international law, China's refusal to condemn Russia, the enormous and rapidly increasing Chinese spending on its military, and the existence of outstanding territorial claims over Taiwan which Beijing reserves the right to use force to resolve in its favour, led Marles to conclude that the US-Australia alliance has never been more important to Australia.





Statements by Australian leaders and Australian defence policy documents such as the Defence Strategic Review are consistent with the alliance dependence tradition in Australian foreign policy, which views the US as indispensable to safeguarding peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, and the US-Australia alliance as the bedrock of Australia's security. Without the US alliance—and the AUKUS partnership bringing Australia's old and newer great and powerful friends together—Canberra would be unable to achieve its goals of urgently building advanced deterrence by denial capabilities or contribute to the collective deterrence of war. And without US presence and commitment to the Indo-Pacific neither would 'strategic equilibrium' be possible.

Australia's liberal middle power tradition too has come into play in the selection of objectives, methods and partners by Canberra in response to the assault on the post-Second World War rules-based order represented by both Russia and China. The Quad is an exemplar of Australian middle power diplomacy as a flexible, action-orientated partnership among like-minded democracies with formidable national capabilities, with each member offering uniquely important geo-strategic positions and assets on China's periphery. The Quad provides the platform for cooperation among these democracies to counter China's determination to set regional discourse, promote its own authoritarian norms and values, dominate the technologies of the future and create a hierarchical economic order with the middle kingdom at the centre.

Finally, in this dangerous world brought forth by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the deepening strategic cooperation between the two most powerful authoritarian countries in the world, one observes an emerging and implicit hierarchy in terms of the countries with whom Australia will seek to fast-track strategic, military, economic and geopolitical cooperation.

Most broadly, countries at the top of the hierarchy are those who view China in similarly challenging and threatening terms as Australia and have formidable national capabilities to add to a favourable balance against China. The USA, Japan, India, and the UK—the oldest ally—are the four leading nations falling into this category. It is no coincidence that all of these countries are democracies.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reminded Australia that turmoil and eventually conflict becomes more likely and even probable when the liberal rules-based order is fraying, militaristic authoritarian countries are advancing, and democratic allies demonstrate weak resolve and offer little resistance. For this reason, action-orientated and mission-based groupings such as AUKUS and the Quad will become more important to Australia whilst there will be less emphasis on and interest in other entities that are becoming less effective as checks against countries such as China and Russia. Ukraine's plight has demonstrated that the time for collective deterrence is now and there is no time to lose.

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