



AUSTRALIA'S DILEMMAS

THEN AND NOW

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AUSTRALIA'S DILEMMAS: THEN AND NOW

INTRODUCTION

In July 2022, Queen's College at the University of Melbourne played host to a gathering of historians and foreign policy experts, including both scholars and practitioners from the professions of politics, diplomacy, intelligence, and business. The purpose of this Dialogue – convened by the Robert Menzies Institute with the support of Asialink - was to take stock of Australia's current moment in history by evaluating Australia's present policy challenges against those of approximately seventy years ago, when the Menzies government was in office and contending with the onset of the Cold War.

Grounding a foreign policy dialogue in this exercise of historical comparison served a number of purposes. Firstly, Australia's strategic challenges in the early 1950s share more than a passing resemblance with those confronting the current government of Anthony Albanese; making the period an apt point of reference to inform how current decisions might play out. The following statement is equally descriptive of Australia's position in the 1950s as it is in the 2020s:

“

Australia is in the early years of what is likely to be a protracted and delicate period of great power competition centred on its region; a competition that will test Australia's traditional partnerships, its diplomacy, its economic status quo, and its military preparedness. New institutions and agreements are being forged to replace or augment those inherited from a past era. Against this geopolitical backdrop Australian governments will have to recast the management of the Australian economy in order to make the most of new technologies, deftly exploit Australia's natural comparative advantages, and safeguard the on-going material well-being of Australians despite the heightened possibility of international shocks and crises.

”

Secondly, imbuing foreign policy discussions with an active historical consciousness encouraged participants to evaluate the realistic pace of change that Australia can expect in the decades ahead. It invited contemporary observers to disabuse themselves of misapprehensions that our present challenges are entirely novel or completely unpredictable. Finally, given the choices that Australia makes in the next few years are likely to resonate long into the twenty-first century, adopting a stronger historical framework encourages strategists to think about Australia's choices on a longer timescale than Australia's three-year national political cycle typically allows.

While the author alone is responsible for the views and recommendations expressed in this paper, they are significantly informed by the proceedings of the Dialogue, which included the participants listed in the appendix. While the Chatham House Rule prevents their individual remarks being expressly identified, RMI and Asialink owe them all a debt of thanks for the generous sharing of their wisdom and expertise.

This paper is structured around four grand strategic tasks that were identified as a result of the Dialogue. These are the overarching tasks that transcend domestic and foreign policy towards which Australia needs to direct its energies to find security and prosperity in a more volatile, treacherous era. These tasks were also what framed Australian grand strategy in the early years of the Cold War, and they came to define how Australia contributed to world affairs during the Menzies era and well into second half of the twentieth century.



To sustain and expand Australia's prosperity and security in our more hostile, multipolar world Australia will need to succeed in the following four grand strategic tasks:

1 **Navigating Ideological Contest**

The international system is being upended by an inherently ideological contest for the future of the global order. Different visions of international society are being advanced by competing groups of states, chiefly led by the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, respectively. Commonly described as a rivalry between 'liberalism' and 'autocracy', this contest will test the ability of Australia's political leadership to promote an international order aligned to Australia's values and to find security against threats to Australia's interests. It is recommended that success in this task of navigating ideological contest can be achieved by:

- The articulation of a revised, liberal vision for a twenty-first century global order that is attractive to the developing world;
- Outlining to the Australian people strategic objectives that help explain and guide new interventions by the state on the basis of national security;
- Reposition democracy promotion as a central task of Australia's international strategy.



2 Accelerating national development

The basis for Australia's power abroad, and therefore its capacity to shape the international system, is the prosperity and well-being of Australian society itself. If Australia is to have more agency over a less-permissive international environment, and find opportunities in that environment, concerted efforts to strengthen the wealth, size, and wellbeing of Australia need to be made. Success in this task can be achieved by the following measures:

- Reducing barriers to migration and rapidly expanding Australia's skilled migration intake;
- Implementing a new agenda for energy security predicated upon energy self-sufficiency; the development of Australia's renewable energy resources; and securing energy for the region;
- Reducing Australia's exposure to economic statecraft by prioritising 'trusted trade' partnerships.

3 Exercising new leadership

To head off other powers, curb economic inequality, and build a stronger basis for shared prosperity, Australia will need to seize opportunities to shape and lead its Southeast Asian and Pacific neighbourhoods in a more proactive manner than it has needed to do in recent times. This leadership will have to be exercised by a wider range of Australian actors. Success in this task can be achieved by the following measures:

- Creating opportunities for greater in-person diplomacy between Australia's leaders and parliamentarians;
- Pursuing a new compact with the South Pacific through a 'Pacific union' common security and economic area.

4 Reforming alliances and partnerships

Australia has long relied upon and shaped its 'great and powerful friends' to help exercise Western power in the Asia-Pacific. The United States is today the singular great friend upon which Australia's security most relies, as typified by the bold and intergenerational AUKUS pact. However, the United States' staying power – its resolve and focus – is being tested and strained by internal ructions that are unlikely to quickly evaporate. Australia must therefore engage in a new era of alliance management that seeks to shape America itself to be the ally we need, whilst also strengthening other partnerships to potentially lead without America. Success in this task can be achieved by the following measures:

- Pursuing a stronger, more reliable American partner by encouraging the United States to undertake democratic revitalisation whilst building more capacity for collective leadership among other democratic nations;
- Building consensus among the ecosystem of minilateral security groupings about the extent that they will contribute to a strategy of 'integrated deterrence' against the PRC, Russia and other authoritarian states.



President John F. Kennedy with Prime Minister of Australia, Robert G. Menzies. 25 September 1962. Photo: Abbie Rowe. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

NAVIGATING IDEOLOGICAL CONTEST

Like Menzies' time, whether it be through economic inducement, coercion, or helplessness, there are forces today pushing nations to encamp around one or other of two great powers: the People's Republic of China and the United States. This struggle by the PRC and the US to herald more nations under their respective banners is not simply about correcting perceived asymmetries in their available economic, technological, military, or cultural power. It is also a deeply ideological contest, and one that is made increasingly vivid when one examines the contrasting policies of China's Marxist-Leninist authoritarian state with the liberal democratic ideals of the United States and its allies. It is typically suggested that whichever great power can establish hegemony over the Indo-Pacific will be empowered to direct the rules and norms for much of international society – and the lives of most of humanity - for at least the remainder of the twenty-first century.

The decisions of smaller 'third countries' across Asia, Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and the Middle East in how they choose to navigate this ideological contest, and whether or not to align themselves, will be fundamental.

To describe it in terms that would have been familiar to the Menzies Cabinet, these third countries are the great frontier for the competition between authoritarianism and liberalism.

Given all this, the absence today of a clear ideological 'mission' at the centre of Australia's international strategy is arguably a significant limitation on its capacity to influence this great geopolitical contest. Since coming to power in 2012, Chairman Xi Jinping has sharpened the focus of the PRC's policies to not simply expedite China's economic prosperity, but to also establish the PRC as a more definitively communist-authoritarian society. This has meant exporting the PRC's authoritarian norms and pursuing measures to 'make the world safe' for Xi's vision of an idealised Chinese communist society.

What is potent about the PRC's international strategy is a revisionist narrative designed to appeal to other authoritarian states and smaller developing nations. The PRC suggests that the extant Western-led international order was established so as to exclude the involvement of non-Western states, and ignore their interests.ⁱ

Subsequent economic inequalities, wars, and other security crises are pointed to as evidence of an inherent structural inequality for these states. The PRC argues therefore that the international system needs to be revised so that China and those other states are given greater power over how international institutions operate and more sway over setting the rules and norms of international society. As a communist, authoritarian state the PRC naturally expects that a more just and favourable international system will be one that promotes centrally controlled, one-party states where the liberties of individual citizens are arbitrated by the government, rather than determined by any system of universal human rights.

By contrast, Australia subscribes to a general narrative shared by other liberal democracies that the post-war liberal international order should be sustained because it has been conducive to rapid and widespread economic development, peace, and a historic improvement in individual rights and human wellbeing. For Australia, this has been typically expressed as a desire to “promote the rules-based international order”ⁱⁱ with the qualifier that that order be ‘liberal’ rarely actually stated. In fact, the word ‘liberal’ or ‘liberalism’ simply doesn’t appear in two of Australia’s guiding strategic documents, the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2020 Strategic Update.ⁱⁱⁱ It is mentioned in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper but often in an ambivalent manner, as the following somewhat contradictory statement shows:

“

Australia is pragmatic. We do not seek to impose values on others.

***We are however a determined advocate of liberal institutions,
universal values and human rights.***^{iv}

”

This focus on Australia’s strategic vocabulary might seem pedantic, but a hesitancy to acknowledge the ideological principles behind our policies is reflective of a characteristic that present Australian strategy has little sense of long-term international objectives beyond a generalised desire for a stable status quo. However, the perceived ‘status quo’ of a stable rules-based order has demonstrably passed us by.

The post-Cold War liberal international order arguably reached its apogee sometime between the 9/11 terror attacks and the 2008 global financial crisis. Since then, the capacity of multilateral international institutions to effectively solve problems of economic inequality and insecurity has steadily declined. Most importantly, those smaller and developing states that are the frontier of our present contest can understandably be forgiven for not sharing a desire for this 'status quo' of the 1990s and 2000s: a period in which the spoils of economic liberalisation and technological improvement may not have reached them in the same way they impacted Western states in the so-called 'global North'. Accordingly, Australia needs to accept that 'more of the same' is an unviable objective. Instead, Australia needs to adopt a strategy of its own to 'revise' the international order.

Australia's values of international liberalism need to be rediscovered and recast for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

For this task, Menzies' experience is instructive. He is one of a small number of prime ministers who came to office in possession of what one might describe as a comprehensive vision for systemic reform of Australia's domestic and international policies. Alfred Deakin, Gough Whitlam, and Bob Hawke are arguably the only others who entered office with similarly comprehensive visions for the redesign of Australian life and the increasing of Australia's international status.

Menzies' had worked in concert with a diverse range of civil society organisations to form the Liberal Party as a response to the increasingly interventionist and socialist policies of the Curtin-Chifley Labor government, which he perceived as unsustainable and unjust. The Liberals were also motivated by an acceptance that the world had changed irreversibly as a result of the Second World War and that a new plan for Australia's economic and social development was required in order to find security and prosperity in the second half of the twentieth century.

While there is a common characterisation today of the Menzies government being statically conservative, the policies of the time instead point to a strikingly revisionist agenda both for Australia's domestic and international policies.

Most importantly for this discussion, the international agenda of the Menzies' government by necessity had to be revisionist because the Second World War had erased the previous order in Australia's Asia-Pacific region. Decolonisation, post-war reconstruction, Soviet-backed insurgencies, declining British power, and uncertainty about America's regional presence meant that Australia had to seek the creation of a new international order, rather than merely sustain one that had already been in place. The order that Australia worked towards was one in which Britain and America would both sustain an enduring presence in the region to help exercise Western hegemony over the Asia-Pacific so that the region's economic and political development would progress (as much as possible) along liberal democratic lines. The repurposing of old institutions, like the Commonwealth of Nations, and the creation of new ones, like the ANZUS pact, was key to pursuing this.



Queen Elizabeth II, Robert Menzies and other Commonwealth leaders, 1953. Photo: Special Collections, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne.

This mission under Menzies – of building an Asia-Pacific comprising free markets and free societies - was critically important to justifying to the Australian people important shifts away from Australia's traditional approach to the world, such as new trade with Australia's previous adversary Japan and Australia's greater security collaboration with the United States at the expense of its traditional partner Britain. It also provided a moral framework that the government could apply to questions concerning Australia's participation in warfare (for example in Korea and Vietnam), its contributions to America's system of nuclear deterrence, its restrictions of civil liberties (such as against communists), and even its engagement in foreign espionage (the Menzies government created the Australian Secret Intelligence Service in 1952). In the rhetoric of Menzies and his ministers there were constant references to advancing democracy, growing free trade and nurturing individual liberty.^v Local and overseas audiences were left in no doubt that Australia was seeking to build a world that was very much in contrast to that being advanced by the Soviet bloc.

By comparison, today Australia's approach to the world arguably lacks a similarly clear sense of mission. The Australian government is on a weaker footing to explain and justify contentious security interventions, restrictions on civil liberties, and higher risk defence and intelligence activities.

The absence of proactive strategic objectives at a time when the government needs to respond to a world of heightened threats exposes Australians to the potential risk of undue securitisation of their national life. Policymakers must contend with a wicked confluence of threats: the prospect of war in our region; the impacts of destructive climate change; a spike in foreign interference and espionage; as well as the persistence of new forms of terrorism and organised crime. The result has been the adoption of unprecedented new powers and interventions by the Commonwealth justified on the basis of national security. This includes expansions in Australia's electronic surveillance laws, new penalties for foreign interference, the imposition of special obligations on critical infrastructure companies, record high defence spending, and new market interventions like the government-backed purchase of the Pacific telco Digicel.

Australia is also ramping up the mobilisation of economic statecraft and offensive cyber operations; activities which blur traditional distinctions of conflict and peace. This is not to suggest that these measures are necessarily disproportionate to the threats posed. However, it is important that given Australia is likely to live in this condition of heightened risk for some time to come, considered strategy-making needs to prevail over reactionary securitisation. New and extraordinary security measures are better explained to Australians, their allies and their adversaries, when it is clear what new world these measures are seeking to bring about and how they accord with that ambition. A set of ideological principles at the heart of Australia's international strategy could be used by policymakers to better assess the proportionality or otherwise of new security interventions. Arguably this has been lacking from contemporary strategic guidance documents.

For these reasons Australia should reposition proactive democracy promotion to the centre of Australia's international strategy. The PRC and other authoritarian states want smaller and developing nations to believe that democracy is ill-suited to rapid economic growth and incompatible with achieving stability in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, Australia should be emphasising democracy's resilience and advocating ways individual states can gradually adopt democratic reforms tailored to their circumstances. As will be addressed later, such advocacy should also be directed to Australia's allies.

ACCELERATING NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Assessing Australia's challenging outlook, Australia's Treasurer Jim Chalmers recently wrote that



our economy is not productive enough, not competitive enough, or resilient enough and for too long there hasn't been a strategy to grow it strongly enough.^{vi}



Like Arthur Fadden, Chalmers finds himself in that small and odious club of Australian treasurers who must navigate the Australian economy simultaneously through wicked systemic reform as well as looming geopolitical strife. Chalmers is not only staring down the potential of a pandemic-induced global recession in the short term, but also a range of internal and external forces that threaten Australians' long term material wellbeing and security. Migration to Australia is sluggish at a time of increasing demand for critical skills. The prospect of conflict in Australia's region is pushing defence and national security spending to new heights that will crowd out other services. The cost of natural disasters is growing as bushfires, floods, and destructive weather becomes more frequent. Meanwhile, Australia's primary industries and main export industries are acutely vulnerable to geopolitical shocks whilst also lagging in productivity. Australia itself needs to undergo a drastic reform of its economic management in order to safeguard high standards of living for future generations. It must also do so to build sufficient national power to endure and shape a less-permissive world. This was Menzies' observation when he explained to the US Congress in 1950 that "paradoxical as it may seem, our duty in Australia is to develop our own country to the full as the pre-condition of our rendering any real benefits to these other countries who are less fortunately placed"^{vii} As this section will outline, three of the key elements to accelerating Australia's national development in this context include adjusting Australia's approach to free trade, overhauling its approach to migration, and pursuing a new agenda for multifaceted energy security.

Migration

Australia's immigration rate is slowing at a time when the country urgently needs an influx of highly skilled workers and new Australians to support the growth and transformation of the Australian economy, as well as the fulfillment of essential

strategic initiatives, such as the AUKUS program. Geopolitical risks, including the heightened possibility of conflict and ongoing pandemic disruption, mean that the flow of migrants to Australia will not be as steady and predictable as in the past. The demands of aging populations and industrial modernisation the world over also means that Australia will be competing with other countries for critically skilled workers for many years to come.

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented measures to sever Australia's migration flows and slow the spread of the disease. The effect was that Australia's foreign-born population experienced a sharp decline of 88,000 people between 2020 and 2021, resulting in net migration losses from which Australia is yet to properly recover.^{viii} Migration has always been an essential force behind Australia's economic growth, hence it is alarming that despite the lifting of pandemic restrictions Australia's population is not recovering as hoped. Simultaneously, current forecasting by the Australian government suggests that Australia's fertility rate will remain stubbornly low in the decades ahead at around 1.6 babies per mother; well below the rate of 2 per mother required for generational replacement.^{ix}

If positive estimates are to be correct that Australia's population will grow by around 23 million in the next forty years, 75% of this growth will have to come through migration.^x The 2021 Intergenerational Report suggests that for Australia's economy to continue to grow at close to its modern rates, and for Australia to sustain a healthy balance of old and young, the annual net migration program intake will need to be at least 235,000 a year for the next twenty years. This represents a significant increase on pre-pandemic levels of migration that typically remained below 200,000 annually.

However, it is not simply a question of numbers. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and the internet-of-things, hold out the prospect of positively disrupting the Australian economy and boosting productivity as part of a so-called fourth industrial revolution. But only if Australia has the requisite talent to embrace this revolution. As will be discussed, Australia is also being pushed towards an unrealistic transition to renewable energies and battery storage, which will demand an alternatively qualified engineering, manufacturing, and scientific workforce. Meanwhile, through the AUKUS pact Australia is undertaking what will be one of the most complex national capability uplifts in its history as the government seeks for Australia to operate, maintain and build nuclear-propelled submarines - without having a prior civilian capacity to build nuclear reactors.

Australia needs to do more than simply raising the permanent migration cap, it needs to undertake bold ventures to target and attract migrants with key education and work experience; migrants that will presumably be desirable to other developed democracies.

These ventures could include programs that involve cash or reimbursement incentives for relocation, requalification, and similar costs. Reducing the cost of visa sponsorship to businesses and universities for key skills or removing them entirely should also be considered.

Such inducements were a part of the suite of policies that sparked Australia's post-war immigration boom. A key component of Labor's migration strategy, instigated by Arthur Calwell and expanded under Menzies, was the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme which subsidised the cost of migrants from Britain. Under the Menzies government it was expanded to include migrants from select parts of Europe.^{xi} The Menzies government also sought to make Australia a modern and attractive place for migrants to settle by prioritising policies that would expedite homeownership, the growth of stable families, and access to education.

In a modern context it may seem extravagant for the government to pay for large numbers of migrants' flights, waive their visa fees, or otherwise fund their relocation, but the utility and cost of such inducements should be considered against the overall financial benefit of skilled migrants to Australia's economy. Treasury modelling suggests that employer-sponsored visa holders contribute up to \$557,000 to the Australian economy in their lifetime, compared with \$85,000 for the general population.^{xii} The individual cost of migration inducements pale in comparison to the overall financial benefit they bring.

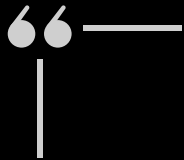
In addition to needing to do more to proactively attract high-skilled migration, Australia should also prepare its migration system to handle a larger influx of humanitarian migrants and increase the humanitarian intake cap accordingly. Climate change-induced displacement of populations is likely to acutely affect South Pacific neighbours, and the geopolitical future for Southeast Asia looks uncertain. It should be assumed that Australia will more regularly confront humanitarian crises – and displacements of people – arising from regional conflicts and state-fragility similar to the 2021 Myanmar coup, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan.

For the purposes of expediting humanitarian migration in times of crisis, the Australian government should evaluate the potential value of a dedicated statutory agency with the responsibility and powers to manage such operations.

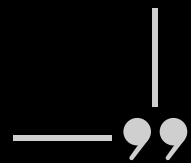
At present responsibility for the extraction and processing of humanitarian migrants as well as expatriates straddles a multitude of Commonwealth entities. This includes both the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Home Affairs (which is responsible for immigration) as well as the Australian Border Force with occasional contributions from the Australian Defence Force and intelligence agencies. As demonstrated by the sudden need to rapidly extract refugees and Australians from Afghanistan in 2021, procedural delays can be the difference between life and death and can restrict how many people Australia is able to save. An agency that sits across the portfolios of Home Affairs and DFAT would be able to draw together, plan, and coordinate resources that are currently diffused, namely to DFAT's consular services and Home Affairs' humanitarian program operations. A statutory basis would give such an agency a clear remit and sense of mission as well as the powers to exercise decisive command and control in times of international crisis.



Potential contingencies in which such an agency may prove essential could include any outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula, warfare over Taiwan, and a wide range of natural disasters that may trigger mass displacement in the South Pacific or Southeast Asia. To quote Menzies in 1958:



There are periods in the history of the world, periods of flux, periods of movement, periods of great social change or upheaval, or the aftermaths of great wars, in which people look abroad, and begin to say, 'I should like to make a life in a new world and in a new place'. And it is when that happens, that the people who desire to have migrants must be ready and make themselves able to receive them.^{xiii}



Trusted Trade

The global rules-based trading system in which Australia has operated since the end of the Second World War has transitioned to a phase of comparative ineffectiveness. Some even suggest that the world is entering a period of deepening deglobalisation.^{xiv} This deterioration has been driven by the weaponisation of trade-dependencies by China; the breakdown of trade arbitration bodies to resolve disputes; and many governments' moves to decouple strategically important supply chains from 'unfriendly' markets. This is a dire situation for Australia. As Jeffrey Wilson explains, Australia's "trade openness relies on a permissive external environment." Australia's leaders need to recognise that not only has this permissive environment disappeared, but that it stands a good chance of getting considerably worse.

Australia's approach to trade and economic management therefore needs to undergo a historic reconfiguration if we are to properly confront the implications of this new reality.

The globalised economy has given great powers, and groups of smaller states, opportunities to exploit unprecedented economic interdependencies for coercive purposes. A renaissance of economic statecraft is underway as states mobilise tariffs and embargoes to engage in geopolitics. Trade tribunals and regulatory agreements that were built in-part to ameliorate international conflict are now being repurposed for punitive effect. The PRC is by far the most belligerent state in its willingness to use arbitrary embargos or tariffs to punish and coerce other states, but it is by no means the only state to do so. Under the Trump administration the United States engaged in its own trade brinkmanship to solicit better deals for itself and to punish China. More recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in an ongoing campaign by Western states to dislocate Russia from the global economy with wide-ranging and unprecedented economic sanctions. The viability of continuing to engage in this heightened economic statecraft is debatable, given that now states recognise that this weaponisation of trade is occurring they can begin to lessen their exposure to it. This, along with a desire on the part of many countries to increase their sovereign control or independence of key resources, is accelerating an apparent trend towards deglobalisation.

This is a starkly different trading environment than that of 70 years ago. The Menzies' government presided over one of the most dramatic and wide-ranging reconfigurations of the Australian economy, including its trading relationships. The rapid post-war industrialisation of economies in Australia's region presented its producers with new markets. But it also placed increasing strain on the viability of Australia's traditional protectionism, which had been feasible in an earlier pre-war era when a system of tariffs and 'Commonwealth Preference' could hold back competition with the wider non-British world. The shift the Menzies government was confronted with was one where Australian protectionism looked increasingly unsustainable in a liberalising marketplace.

Today, the tide of trade liberalisation is receding, but Australia cannot return to a protectionist model even if it wanted to. The solution, Wilson argues, will have to

involve finding a new way to succeed as “a free-trader in a protectionist world”.^{xv} He suggests that Australia will need to pivot to engaging in ‘trusted trade’ – the prioritisation of trade partnership for Australia based on strategic alignment and political affinities as well as basic market compatibility.

A policy of trusted trade would not exclude trade with less-friendly nations, but it would likely mean that the production of strategically vital goods would be shifted to more politically favourable states.

Trusted trade wouldn't entirely inculcate Australia from the potential negative effects of deglobalisation – higher prices, lower quality goods, and less availability of some products – but it would provide Australia with a path to a limited trading ecosystem that could offer stability and a reduced risk of economic interference. While trusted trade is likely to be best pursued on a bilateral basis, multilateral groupings may be useful vehicles for establishing new, secure markets in essential areas.

A New Agenda for Energy Security

Significant state intervention in Australia's energy industry was pivotal to Australia's post-war national development and was an issue around which there was notable continuity between the Chifley and Menzies governments. Key examples of initiatives that transcended the two governments include the Snowy Hydro Scheme, research into nuclear energy, and government investment and ownership of enabling infrastructure. The growth of a strong Australian energy export industry – primarily coal - was also viewed by the Menzies government as a key way to not only increase Australia's wealth but to also make important geopolitical contributions to the development trajectory of the Asia-Pacific. For example, agreements in the 1950s to export coal to Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were perceived as important measures to make these countries prosperous and Western-aligned. Today, a similar confluence of national transformation and geopolitical imperatives once again demand careful state intervention in the Australian energy industry. Australia requires a new agenda for energy security that focuses government intervention and policy settings towards achieving greater sovereignty and self-sufficiency whilst also advancing important geopolitical objectives; namely energy decarbonisation and reduced international dependence on China.

Two forces are compounding pressures on Australians' energy security and material wellbeing. One is the accelerating decarbonisation of global energy supply-chains, which is increasing the demand for renewable energy sources as well as battery storage. While aiming to reduce our impact on the environment, this energy decarbonisation process has the potential to subject Australians to a painful transition period of more expensive and less reliable energy as there are risks of prolonged delays in building renewable sources and storage to sufficient levels. The second force is the likely continued deglobalisation of the international economy, driven by a (relative) decoupling of the Chinese economy from Western markets. As strategic competition between the PRC and America has intensified, and as China has demonstrated a willingness to weaponise its economic interconnectedness with Western markets, the two countries and their allies have been steadily disconnecting strategically important supply chains from each other's economic systems, including electronics and fabricated materials. However, this pressure to 'de-risk' Australia from exposure to the PRC cuts against the simultaneous pressure for energy decarbonisation because of the importance of China as a producer of renewable energy and battery storage systems.

To achieve energy security in the decades ahead, the Australian government needs to chart a course for Australia to rapidly increase its uptake in renewable energy and battery storage, while reducing the exposure of this cleaner energy supply chain to foreign interference and disruptive great-power geopolitics.

Australia is imbued with an abundance of lithium, graphite, cobalt, uranium as well as numerous rare earths that are essential to the manufacturing of renewable energy technologies and larger batteries. While global demand for these minerals is accelerating private investment in Australia's capacity to extract these critical minerals, a combination of regulatory and cost barriers is limiting the growth of Australia's onshore capacity to refine and process them.

State intervention is also long overdue to increase Australia's capacity to refine and store liquid fuels, both for civilian and military purposes. Australia can only refine 13% of its aviation fuel needs onshore, and less than half of its diesel and petrol requirements.^{xvi} Such low-capacity leaves consumers, industry, and the

ADF acutely vulnerable to disruptions to international shipping lines. Investment incentives, public-private partnerships, and direct state interventions are all options that will need to be considered to bring Australia's liquid fuel reserves to a minimum, resilient standard.

On-shoring more of Australia's energy and battery supply chains as well as refinery operations would help Australia realise a new agenda for energy security comprising three complementary outcomes:

- providing increased energy self-sufficiency for Australia;
- establishing Australia as an alternative, reliable source of clean energy for Southeast Asia and the South Pacific; and
- decarbonising the energy systems of Australia and its clients.



The Port of Gladstone, Queensland, May 1957. Photo: Queensland University of Technology.

EXERCISING NEW LEADERSHIP

Australia needs to exercise new degrees of international leadership in order to fulfill the grand strategic tasks outlined in this piece. Achieving this will include adapting Australia's approach to diplomacy to match the scale and complexity of its international tasks. Key to this will be finding new avenues for effective personal diplomacy at the leader level. It must also involve overhauling Australia's objectives in the South Pacific – the primary region in which Australia is expected to exercise international leadership.

Personal Diplomacy

Despite the rise of digitally enabled public diplomacy, the time-sensitive and increasingly fragile nature of world events has given leader-to-leader diplomacy a premium that perhaps it lacked in easier times. New measures must be undertaken to strengthen Australia's capacity for personal diplomacy at the leader-to-leader and inter-parliamentary level.

On the 24th of May 2022, barely more than 24 hours after being sworn in as Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese was in Tokyo to meet with Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US President Joe Biden for the second Quad Leaders' Summit. The priority placed on Albanese's attendance at this meeting results from the delicacy of the Quad's future. India's tepid response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a sharp contrast to the full-throated admonishment of Russia by America, Australia, and Japan. It was also a clear exposure of how India's international priorities, if not values, differed from those of the other Quad nations.



Quad leaders meeting in Tokyo 2022. Photo: Office of the Prime Minister of Japan.

It is clear that if the Quad is to make good on its “resolve to uphold the international rules-based order” it will need the four countries’ leaders to, if not agree with one another, at least hold a resounding trust and respect for each other.^{xvii} For this, recurrent personal engagement between heads of government and other political leaders will be essential.

Leader-to-leader diplomacy is a visceral thing, more art than science, and relying on a high degree of luck that at times of greatest import the affected nations will be governed by individuals who can share some basis for mutual regard as well as professional affinity.

Australia has entered into a period where leader-to-leader personal diplomacy will be an even more important tool for the management of international crises.



Robert Menzies and Nobusuke Kishi in Japan, April 1957. Photo: Special Collections, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne.

Vladimir Putin’s threats to use nuclear weapons in his botched invasion of Ukraine has the world teetering on a precipice akin to that experienced in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. These are moments where the bluff and counterbluff of nuclear posturing is determined by the proclivities and frailties of individual world leaders. It has similarly been suggested that personalised engagement with

China's Xi Jinping has never been more important now that the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, having secured a third term, has cocooned himself in a regime of sycophancy. In this context, face-to-face engagement with other leaders is likely to be one of the only ways that Chairman Xi may encounter alternative advice or critical assessments of China's policy choices.

Furthermore, if America's stated objective of managed strategic competition is to work, regularised engagement between Chinese and American officials, and their allies, will be essential to managing potential crises and miscalculations. For this reason, Xi's meetings with President Jo Biden and Albanese on the sidelines of the Bali G20 summit signalled a readiness to engage constructively but also produced encouraging statements of Chairman Xi's mutual desire to place guard rails around our new era of great power contest. Sadly, the continuation of these constructive interactions is exceptionally delicate, as demonstrated by the cancellation of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's trip to Beijing in response to China's use of surveillance balloons to breach America's airspace.

Given the world's increasingly contested information environment, leader-to-leader diplomacy will also be important to countering disinformation and dispelling falsehoods about Australia's intentions and behaviour. For example, China's false narrative that the AUKUS pact, which will equip Australia with nuclear submarines, is a sign of looming nuclear weapons proliferation by Australia could do serious harm to Australia's relationships in Southeast Asia and the Pacific if not thoroughly debunked. For this, assurances communicated at the leader-level can be especially useful.

Granted, Australia's Prime Minister is quite unlikely to be engaged in talking down Vladimir Putin from a nuclear strike, but these instances are illustrative of the stakes at play in our volatile international environment. However, the PM's capacity to act as the nation's diplomat-in-chief is practically constrained by the other essential demands on their time. Other ministers are therefore enlisted to represent Australia abroad, but this alone is not sufficient to meet the demands for greater personal diplomacy between Australia and key governments.

Parliamentary diplomacy is a greatly underutilised tool in Australia's approach to international engagement. Funding allocations for overseas Parliamentary travel is slim and inconsistent. Individual MPs and Senators might accompany the PM or ministers on official travel, but these instances are the rare gift of government, rather than a regular part of Parliamentarians' work. Key bodies such as the joint committees on treaties; intelligence and security; human rights; law

enforcement; and foreign affairs, defence and trade would benefit immensely from a regular rhythm of overseas engagement. Sending these committees abroad in a more regular and targeted way would bolster the cadre of senior Australians advocating the national interest overseas and building vital personal networks into foreign governments. As such, the Australian government should create a Parliamentary International Engagement Plan that outlines the rationale for increased funding for parliamentary travel and prioritises which countries and international groupings should be the target of improved inter-parliamentary engagement. Key bilateral relationships like those with the United States, Indonesia, Japan, and India should be prioritised. Meanwhile, specific programs should be created for the Five Eyes, AUKUS, the Quad, the Pacific Islands Forum, and ASEAN.



New AUKUS partners meet to announce details of their nuclear submarine deal in San Diego, March 2023. Photo: White House

A New Pacific Compact

The South Pacific is a vital region for Australia's security but is also the bellwether of how well Australia is exercising its capacity for positive international leadership. Australia's contemporary relationship with the countries of the South Pacific continues to be affected in part by the fraught legacy of Australia's post-war engagement with the region, including under the Menzies government. While the end of the Second World War initiated a general trend towards decolonisation, in the South Pacific in particular this was a much more gradual process. This can be partially attributed to the fact that Menzies, and his Coalition successors, maintained a policy of "managed decolonisation" for Australian and British territories in the region, such as Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Their theory was that economic development needed to be a prerequisite for self-determination and that therefore the road towards independence would be a question of many decades, rather than the swifter transition experienced by other states. As Menzies explained "the process of fitting native inhabitants for self-rule must be relatively slow if it is to be relatively sure."^{xviii} This policy occasionally put Australia at odds with the United States and even with Britain's wider reordering of the Commonwealth of Nations; so much so that by the late 1960s Australia's approach to colonial governance had become a significant drag on its international reputation. While the policy of managed decolonisation was abandoned by the Whitlam government, which initiated rapid processes for self-government of Pacific territories, Australia's past role as colonial steward for these territories has continued to affect relations with Australia. It has entrenched a persistent sensitivity from Pacific Island countries to perceptions that their sovereignty and independence could be being once again subjugated by Australia. What has resulted is what might be described as a somewhat bipolar approach by Australia towards the region. On the one hand Australia has inextricably linked interests and responsibilities to the South Pacific which compel it to make interventions to improve the stability and well-being of Pacific states. But on the other hand, Australian officials and politicians are typically reluctant to explicitly assert those interests for fear of offending South Pacific governments or driving them closer to less-favoured partners, namely China. Australia's engagement has therefore been characterised by a timidity that has stifled efforts to confront the hard tasks of improving the economies and governance of Pacific states. And the task is still immense. Despite successfully obtaining independence many decades ago, many Pacific Island countries are still financially dependent on Australia and other donors. The PNG budget, for example, continues to be underwritten by Australia. Rates of poverty are stubbornly high as foreign investment remains limited, and often subject to

redirection by corrupt local officials. Education levels and employment opportunities for the Pacific's growing youth population are insufficient to support longer term development needs. The treatment of women and girls, especially their exposure to communal and sexual violence, remains acute. Exclusion and inequality for those with disabilities or mental illnesses is widespread. While Australia has advocated the continuation of a status quo international order, the South Pacific has been one of those regions left behind.

In the face of these persistent challenges, Australia should show new leadership by accepting greater responsibility to address these developmental challenges, rather than the established piecemeal approach.

A key way to do so would be to work with Pacific governments to create a comprehensive security and economic common area for the South Pacific - a Pacific Union as it has sometimes been described.^{xix}

The effect of a Pacific Union would be to make it far easier for people in the region to find work and study across the region by lowering present visa barriers. A commitment to collective security could improve the territorial security of countries' vast economic exclusion zones, especially against illegal fishing. A joint Pacific regiment or Pacific fleet could be created to support disaster response and peacekeeping. Standardised regulations and procedures across the Pacific Union would make it easier to attract investment in those services and pieces of critical infrastructure that need to span multiple Pacific states to be viable, such as telecommunications infrastructure.

Such an ambitious and complex initiative as a Pacific Union may be dismissed by some as overly complicated and diplomatically fraught. However, a region-wide approach is essential to significantly improving the development prospects of the South Pacific. Region-wide solutions are something the Pacific Island Forum has shown a preference for, especially in relation to mitigating climate change and responding to recent crises such as Covid-19. This has been recognised by China, which is offering PICs potential region-wide solutions. In 2022 the PRC's foreign minister Wang Ye visited the South Pacific with a bold (albeit under-detailed) proposal to offer PICs a region-wide security and economic comprehensive partnership. The proposal appears to have stalled, after disagreement among Pacific Island Forum members, but the episode served to expose Australia's

ambitions for the region as being limited and lacklustre by comparison. There is also no guarantee that the PRC won't be more successful in the future. This should focus the mind of policymakers to shore up Australia's influence and access to a region that is not only the key arena of Australia's international leadership but is also inescapably vital to Australia's own territorial security.



REFORMING ALLIANCES & PARTNERSHIPS

Australia has always relied on partnerships with larger like-minded powers to support its national security, namely partners whom it encourages to enforce a more stable and favourable order in Australia's Asia-Pacific region. Accordingly, Australia has been anxious about the endurance of these 'great and powerful friends'. It has constantly sought reassurance that any apparent wavering in their so called 'staying power' is merely momentary or imaginary. Australia's first national governments experienced this anxiety when they worried that the power of the Royal Navy was not sufficient to sustain British hegemony over its region. Menzies too was concerned in his time about the capacity of a war-weary Britain and a globally engaged America to sustain in Australia's neighbourhood an order based on Western liberal institutions. And today in response to a muscular and revanchist PRC, talk of America's relative decline, and the liberal order it supports, is again commonplace.

The PRC's military modernisation has been stunning in its speed and scope, and China's capacity to influence and coerce its neighbours is demonstrably greater today than it has previously been. China undoubtedly possesses a deep capacity to intervene in international society and its decisions will be determinative for how the twenty-first century unfolds. However, using the extent of China's power as the yard stick against which to measure America's capacity to sustain the liberal international order yields only a general, incomplete picture.

Instead, the more definitive factor as to whether American power can underwrite the liberal order or not, lies within America itself. G. John Ikenberry tells us that "the secret of its power and influence," has always been America's "ideas, institutions, and capacities for building partnerships and alliances,"^{xx} However, whether or not America's leaders will actually wish to sustain these institutions and exercise this power will continue to be an open question.



President Kennedy poses with Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies at the White House, 8 July 1963. Photo: Abbie Rowe. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

For American allies like Australia there has never been a moment in the post-war period in which America's own commitment to the international system it has established has been so uncertain.

Menzies' establishment of the ANZUS Treaty, his staunch commitment to the alliance, and his passionate faith in America's capacity for ideological leadership helped embed a totemic reverence for the US-Australian alliance as a mainstay of Australian foreign policy. This reverence has persisted not just as a feature of Coalition politics but as a Labor Party tradition as well. Arguably the manner in which Menzies repeatedly cornered Labor leaders H. V. Evatt and Arthur Calwell on the question of support for America – despite the failures of the Vietnam War – contributed to the establishment of a firm bipartisan norm. Some have suggested that this norm has risked the creation of a kind of uncritical relationship between Australia's leaders and the topic of US foreign policy.^{xxi}

The future of the United States, and by extension the role America should play in the world, has always to some extent been a contested ideal. When the Menzies' government brokered the ANZUS pact, America was riven by the politics of racial segregation and McCarthyism, as opposing visions of post-war America collided with one another. Despite these internal ructions and America's past turn inwards following the Great War, Menzies and many of his colleagues sustained a firm belief in the positive role America could play in the world, especially in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the ANZUS pact was as much a measure to bind the United States to the interests of the region as it was an expression of confidence that America had arrived as an activist, outward looking great power. (Afterall, it is always best to get these things in writing.)

Today, American politics is subject to a noisy, occasionally violent, tribalism. Agitations concerning race, sexual identity, wealth, education, and religion are atomising the American polity and making it harder for many Americans to recognise a shared civic identity that transcends such differences. This fracturing of American culture has been compounded by structural frailties in America's democracy – such as non-compulsory voting, the absence of an independent electoral commission, and a politicised judiciary – which have exacerbated declining respect for democratic processes, most importantly President Donald Trump's refusal to accept the result of the 2020 election or commit to a peaceful transition of power.

While America's strong military and large economy will give a certain ballast to American power despite these internal ructions, the question of how much America will exert this power in order to lead globally will be highly subject to how its internal politics evolves. A particularly important case study in this regard will be how America's political elite respond to the war in Ukraine as Russia's invasion of the country continues, potentially into a third year. A vocal minority of Republican politicians and right-wing commentators have persistently questioned the Biden administration's decisions to back Ukraine in a variety of ways, including massive financial aid as well as military and intelligence assistance. Most in this group have criticised the scale of financial aid given to Ukraine, others have questioned whether Biden's support risks provoking a nuclear response from Russia, while a smaller segment have even challenged whether Russia's invasion should be opposed at all.^{xxii} To see those on America's right, albeit a minority, questioning the necessity to defend a mostly white, majority Christian, democracy against America's historic adversary is an alarming indication of the appeal of parochial isolationism.

If it is inherently in Australia's interests to live in a world that is safe for democracies and predominantly governed by liberal rules and norms, then Australian governments should actively encourage America to be as democratic and outwardly powerful as possible.

Advocating for America to undertake transformative institutional improvements to its democracy should be an elevated priority for Australian governments in the years ahead.

Australia should encourage the adoption of institutions that have been essential to the effective functioning of our democracy, namely:

- independent electoral commissions that oversee elections at the national and state levels;
- compulsory voting (and the holding of elections on weekends or public holidays);
- preferential or 'rank-choice' voting;
- independently appointed judicial officials.

America's record of international leadership and its formal commitments to its allies, including under the San Francisco System, provide a degree of assurance that America will exert itself to uphold security in the Asia-Pacific. That said, it would be imprudent for Australia to not simultaneously deepen the readiness of other democracies to exercise so-called 'collective leadership' alongside the United States and potentially without it.

In the years ahead, Australia will need to alter how it engages with the United States and what it provides to the bilateral relationship in order to sustain the alliance as an effective relationship that both improves Australia's security and shapes the regional order according to our common values.

The immediate response of Western nations to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a reassuring glimpse at the capacity of small and middle powers to act together, potentially without America's primary leadership. In the initial phases of the war Australia, the UK, and most EU nations moved instinctively to impose both unilateral and joint sanctions on Russia. Importantly, this occurred without overt insistence from the US or central direction from Washington or a US-led institution. However, whether like-minded democracies will possess this same unity and shared purpose in future crises – for example, in relation to Taiwan's security – is an open question.

To strengthen the inherent capacity of small and middle powers to exercise collective leadership, Australia should find ways to build new mechanisms for joint action that can function effectively with or without the United States.

Australia's relationships with Japan, India, South Korea, Canada, the UK, France, and Germany will all be particularly essential, as these are democracies with degrees of economic and military power that, when variously combined, could be decisive at deterring or resolving international crises. Acting together with these nations in alternating combinations and for differing purposes (diplomatic, military, humanitarian, law enforcement etc.) will require complex prior negotiation and groundwork, presumably including new agreements or institutions. A larger, more capable diplomatic service is therefore required for Australia to help build up this capacity for collective leadership among the world's free nations. To this end, the Albanese government has commenced a review into the capabilities of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which may be an opportunity to instigate essential reforms if it comprehensively assesses workforce, funding, as well as the efficacy of Australia's overseas posts.

CONCLUSION

To describe the present moment as being likely to be more historically decisive than most other periods is a potentially risky trope. For most of recorded history observers have believed themselves to be at the precipice of a decisive tipping point. However, in the case of Australia's contemporary position this genuinely does not appear to be a hyperbolic characterisation.

Consider the facts. For the past eight decades Australia's wealth has significantly relied upon selling unprocessed minerals to a relatively stable international market, hungry for fossil fuels and metals. Australia's security has been underpinned by a great and powerful friend that has been able to exercise practically uncontested military power over Australia's region.

In the economic realm, external forces now compel Australia to transition to building wealth in a politically less stable, and more technologically disrupted international marketplace. Australia and its trading partners are simultaneously pursuing a comprehensive energy transition to progressively decarbonise traditional energy supply chains. Meanwhile past assurances of the military primacy and resolve of Australia's great protector are less certain, now that America faces a China that appears willing - if not increasingly able - to use force to achieve its aims.

In this context the nearest allegory to Australia's present strategical position is that of the early 1950s, when the new government of Robert Menzies grappled with the task of preparing Australia for a potentially imminent third world war whilst also overseeing the far-reaching reorganisation and modernisation of the Australian economy. These twin imperatives to expand the basis of national power by altering the economy and while building new insurances for Australia's security must once again be the overriding objectives of the Australian government.

Informed by Menzies time, this paper has sought to chart a course for achieving these objectives. It has broken the challenge into four grand strategic tasks: navigating ideological contest, accelerating national development, exercising new leadership, and reforming alliances and partnerships. Identified against each of these have been a range of corresponding policy recommendations.

While the scale of the challenges to Australia's future prosperity and security are daunting, resolve can be drawn from knowing past Australian leaders have successfully responded to similar tests to our national strength, ingenuity, and leadership.



Inaugural meeting of the Advisory War Council, 28 October 1940. Photo: John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of the Curtin Family.

APPENDIX

Attendees at 2022 Conference

Allan Behm, Director, International & Security Affairs Program, Australia Institute

The Hon. Julie Bishop, Chancellor, the Australian National University

The Hon. George Brandis KC, Professor in the Practice of National Security, the National Security College at the Australian National University

Dr. Elizabeth Buchanan, Head of Research, Sea Power Centre, Department of Defence

Dr. Andrew Carr, Senior Lecturer, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University

Grace Corcoran, Diplomacy Project Coordinator, Asialink

Prof. James Curran, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the University of Sydney

Prof. Peter Dean, Director, Foreign Policy and Defence at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

Prof. Phillip Deery, Victoria University
Georgina Downer, CEO, Robert Menzies Institute, the University of Melbourne

Geraldine Doogue, Host of Saturday Extra, Radio National, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Dr. John Edwards, Senior Fellow, Lowy Institute

Dr. Peter Edwards, Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University

Prof. Gordon Flake, CEO, Perth USAsia Centre at The University of Western Australia

Prof. John Fitzgerald, Swinburne University of Technology

Daniel Flitton, Managing Editor, The Interpreter, the Lowy Institute

Dr Stewart Gill, Master of Queen's College, the University of Melbourne

Dr Zachary Gorman, Academic Coordinator, Robert Menzies Institute, the University of Melbourne

Dr Meg Gurry, Academic Fellow, Australia India Institute

Allan Gyngell, Adjunct Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University

Dr. Benjamin Herscovitch, Research Fellow, School of Regulation and Global Governance at the Australian National University

Colin Heseltine, Senior Adviser, Asialink

Leigh Howard, CEO Asialink Business

Paul Kelly, Editor-at-Large, The Australian

Prof. John Langmore, Melbourne School of Government, the University of Melbourne

Martine Letts, CEO Asialink

Prof. David Lowe, Alfred Deakin Professor and Chair in Contemporary History, Deakin University

Prof. Timothy Lynch, Associate Dean International, Faculty of Arts, the University of Melbourne

Peerson Lynch, Research Assistant, Robert Menzies Institute, the University of Melbourne

John McCarthy, Senior Adviser, Asialink

Helen Mitchell, Sir Roland Wilson Scholar, the Australian National University

Assoc Prof. Wayne Reynolds, Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales

Dr. Emma Shortis, Lecturer, RMIT University

Dr. William Stoltz, Visiting Fellow, Robert Menzies Institute, the University of Melbourne

Merriden Varrall, Director, Geopolitics Hub, KPMG

Prof. Michael Wesley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor International, the University of Melbourne

Dr. Jeffrey Wilson, Director of Research and Economics, Australian Industry Group

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