

Rethinking Australia's Place in the World

At a transformative moment in human history

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Australia's troublesome past *

Australia's uniqueness remains one of the world's best kept secrets, not least among Australians. It is a land where paradox abounds – a country both old and new, large and small, barren and resource rich. A land where cultural dominance straddles cultural diversity, a land whose history is at odds with its geography, a land whose people exude self-confidence yet remain profoundly anxious about the future.

The only continental island in the world, Australia boasts the longest coastline of any nation (25,760 km) and a land mass (7,686,850 sq km) almost the size of the United States. Yet, its population reached 25 million only in 2018, making it the least densely populated continent (except Antarctica), but the most urbanized (with urban Australia accounting for nearly 90 per cent of the total population). In a land of deserts and bushfires, the newly arrived settlers introduced European farming and grazing methods developed for entirely different soils and climate.

Given its origins, it is not altogether surprising that non-Indigenous Australia should more than two hundred years later still be struggling to come to terms with its identity and sense of place in the world. European colonisation brought by use of force a relatively small group of convicts and free settlers of predominantly English, Irish and Scottish extraction to what they considered a vast and inhospitable continent. The frontier wars, which began with the arrival of the first colonists in 1788, did not officially come to an end until 1934, but violence and oppression have remained central to how non-Indigenous Australia relates to our First Nations. European settlers knew little or nothing of the traditions, lifestyles or wisdom of the original inhabitants, and had little or no affinity with the much larger Asian populations located in their immediate neighbourhood. White Australia felt as far as it is possible to be from kith and kin, whereas strangers and potential enemies appeared uncomfortably close.

Australia's sense of place from the earliest days of European settlement can be crudely but not inaccurately said to have rested on five myths:

- that Australia's 'whiteness' was crucial to its identity and attachment to Western (i.e. British) traditions and values;
- that with a small population and a vast territory to defend, our security ultimately depended on protection by the imperial power;
- that such protection required Australia to demonstrate loyalty to the protector;
- that the main threats to our security originated in Asia, where unfamiliar civilisations and huge populations could not but look with envy upon our economic prosperity; and
- that loyalty to the imperial protector and an effective response to external threats required a policy of forward defence, that is, a willingness to fight 'sooner rather than later' and 'there rather than here'.

Attachment to these five myths was the bedrock on which rested Australia's dependence on the British Empire.[†]

* I have not included references in this submission, but if it is thought useful, I would be happy to provide them.

† These highlighted sections are offered in lieu of an executive summary.

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Though Britain's decline in the wake of World War II was widely viewed at the time with dismay and alarm, the rise of the United States as the preeminent world power afforded much needed reassurance to the Australian psyche. The transition to dependence on US military protection was consummated with the signing of the Anzus treaty in 1951. Though not entirely painless, the transition to the US alliance would over time help to entrench all five myths with only minor adjustments along the way, of which the only significant one was the abandonment of 'white Australia' as the basis of our immigration policy.

Seventy years later, the balance sheet of the alliance is most striking for the negligible benefits it has brought Australia and the heavy costs it has imposed on our diplomacy, security, budgets, and importantly on the values we supposedly cherish, notably our commitment to civil liberties at home and human rights abroad. Perhaps the most damaging effect has been to strengthen the addiction to empire and the consequent failure to reconcile our history and geography.

Only by shedding their attachment to the five myths, will Australians be able to break free from the shackles of military alignment with the United State, move towards reconciliation with the First Nations of this land, and constructively engage with Asian and Pacific cultures and societies.

The key question that urgently needs to be addressed, but which progressive social movements and concerned citizens in this country often overlook, is this: What will it take for Australia to shed its attachment to these five myths. Is there a roadmap that offers some hope of achieving this objective? To be able to answer this question we must first carefully analyse the continuing power of these myths and the way they have impacted on Australian mindsets, institutions and policies.

The drivers of alliance politics

Since European settlement, our external relations, especially with Asia, have been largely a product of our dependence on two 'great and powerful friends': first Britain, then the United States.

Since the signing of the Anzus treaty, we have gone out of our way to align ourselves as closely as possible with US strategic and diplomatic priorities.

We have repeatedly despatched our forces in support of US military interventions – from Korea to Vietnam, Afghanistan, Middle East, and now the South China Sea. Our military procurement policies and the structure and function of our armed forces and intelligence services have all rested on the assumption that to safeguard Australian security our only option is to be America's faithful ally.

How do we explain this deeply entrenched mindset and what are its consequences?

Racism

One of the most important yet often overlooked drivers of our military alignments has been a generous dose of racism or at least cultural xenophobia – a deep-seated sentiment that our friends are necessarily located in the West and our enemies in the East. Governments have repeatedly justified this option by proclaiming their commitment to the West's democratic values, honoured as much in the breach as in the observance. Scratch a little below the surface, and racial prejudice soon rears its ugly head.

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The White Australia policy which encapsulated this view of the world has been largely, though not entirely, set aside when it comes to our immigration policies, but it remains alive and well in our foreign and security policies. As we shall see, this glaring failure to reconcile our history and geography is no longer sustainable.

Addiction to empire

Important as it is, this racially coloured view of the world only partially explains the strange reasoning behind Australian security policies. A related part of the answer is that our political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence elites have long been addicted to the military power associated with Western imperial centres. They see themselves as having privileged access to an exclusive and powerful club – once the British club, now the American club. They may have grasped the demise of the former but find it difficult to accept the slow but steady decline of the latter.

Threat syndrome

The third piece of the jigsaw puzzle has to do with the country's longstanding fixation on threats. The sources of these threats are usually considered to be external, but almost invariably the political and intelligence elites also turn their attention to so-called domestic dangers posed by those who dare criticise official policy, and who are then dismissed as ill-informed, gullible or sympathetic supporters of foreign interests. Scapegoating enemies, external or domestic, real or imaginary, serves to justify actions even when they are demonstrably harmful to both Australia's security and the very values it claims to espouse.

Cold War psychology

From the early 1950s right through to the mid-1980s, the 'Communist threat' theme would dominate the rationale of Australia's foreign and defence policies during . For much of this period the precise nature and source of the threat remained largely undefined. The official discourse stressed the aggressive, totalitarian aspects of Communist ideology. The 'Communist threat', the 'defence of the West', and 'loyalty to the protector' became widely accepted slogans. Insofar as the threat was given geographical expression, the tendency was to point to the expansionist policies of Mao's China, Kim Il-Sung's North Korea and Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam.

By the late 1950s 'the downward thrust of Communist China' provided the overarching rationale for the 'domino' theory and the military alliances – primarily ANZUS and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) – Australia joined in the 1950s, ostensibly to stem the revolutionary 'red' tide

The attempt by the Menzies Government to ban the Communist Party in Australia, the Petrov affair, the rise of the democratic Labor Party and its fanatical crusade against Communism at home and abroad, reflected the mood of the times, and the fixation on both domestic and external threats. The same strategic outlook underpinned the decision not to recognise the Chinese People's Republic for more than twenty years, military intervention in the Korean war, the despatch of combat forces to the war in Vietnam, and the hosting of US defence and intelligence facilities.

Post-Cold War anxieties

With the end of the Cold War, the Islamist and Chinese threats gradually replaced the Soviet or Communist threat. As in the Cold War years, foreign influences were seen as infiltrating, thereby also posing a danger from within. Not surprisingly, the threat posed by Jihadist elements and China sympathisers inside Australia would become integral to the national narrative.

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In the aftermath of September 2001, innumerable pieces of legislation were introduced over a ten-year period in order to prosecute Australia's contribution to the 'war on terror'. Several groups were designated as terrorist organisations, passports were cancelled or suspended, and steps taken to deny actual or potential terrorist cells access to financing. Other measures included detention orders and control orders, raids on homes and other premises, and interrogation warrants.

Yet, Australia has experienced relatively few terrorist attacks on home soil since 2001, with less than thirty deaths resulting from such attacks. As a point of comparison, the same period has witnessed many more Indigenous deaths in custody (well over 400 since 2008), and many more women have died as a result of domestic violence (the current annual average is over 50).

Even allowing for the 2002 Bali bombings, it would be fair to say that Australia's legislative, institutional, financial and psychological response to the terrorist threat has exceeded that of virtually any other country of comparable size and level of threat exposure.

Mirroring and reinforcing Australia's sweeping domestic agenda has been its active regional involvement in countering Salafist-Jihadist movements, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. To this we should add the string of military deployments and training programs which have taken Australia to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as its active support for a range of other international counterterrorist initiatives.

Simply put, the terrorist threat became central to the entire architecture of Australia's domestic and foreign policies. The formulation and execution of Australia's counter-terrorist agenda reflected its longstanding preoccupation with external threats of non-Western provenance. Unsurprisingly, it closely mirrored Western, to wit American, interests and perceptions.

The curtailment of civil liberties and more generally the democratic deficit that became integral to the war on terror was rationalised as the price we had to pay in the interests of 'national security'.

In many ways, the China threat scenario serves a similar purpose. The threat posed by China is said to be multidimensional, but it is primarily the military argument which is adduced to fuel the public's phobias. Yet, despite its remarkable economic rise, China's capacity to project military muscle pales in comparison with America's global military reach.

The possibility, however distant, that the Chinese navy may gain access to port or basing facilities in the Indo-Pacific region, has been enough to raise eyebrows and provoke deep consternation. The fact that the United States, thirty years after the end of the Cold War, still had some 800 bases in foreign countries was regarded as normal.

The same holds for China's efforts to establish links with Australian institutions and political, business and community leaders. These have become the source of unrelenting suspicion verging on hysteria. By contrast, the longstanding networks of influence which the United States, Britain or Israel have developed across Australia's political, military and intelligence landscape are viewed with relative equanimity.

Obsessive threat perception, which looms large in the Australian psyche, merits close attention because it underpins the fourth pillar of Australia's military alignments. Carefully orchestrated threat scenarios that feed on public fears and anxieties become a potent force fanning the flames of militarism and heightening tensions in already troubled waters.

A ballooning security establishment

Since September 2001, successive Australian governments have used the terrorist and Chinese threats as the primary justification for an ever larger security apparatus endowed with vastly expanded powers and resources.

Security functions are presently spread across multiple government departments, agencies and statutory bodies. Apart from the Department of Defence and the three armed services that make up the Australian Defence Force (ADF), other well established players include the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

To this list must be added the vastly expanded Home Affairs Portfolio which now has responsibility for national security and law enforcement, counter-terrorism, cyber security, countering foreign interference, critical infrastructure protection, countering 'violent extremism', and transport security. Organisationally, the Portfolio includes the Department of Home affairs and several powerful agencies, including ASIO. A coordinating role of sorts is performed by the generously resourced Office of National Intelligence. The states and territories also perform important security and law enforcement functions, mainly through their respective police forces and cyber security agencies.

Two defining characteristics of this ever-rising edifice are its reach and cost. The single largest budget allocation is to the defence portfolio. For 2020-21 the budget allocation for defence and ASD is \$44.6 billion, a 15 per cent jump from last year's \$38.7 billion, and up from \$21.7 billion in 2009-2010. The 2016 Defence White Paper expected the defence budget to rise to \$58.7 billion in 2025-26, which would mean that in the space of twenty years (2005-2025), it will have doubled in real terms.

These projected increases are meant to fund an ambitious 10-year military modernisation program that was expected to cost some \$195 billion. The new capabilities include: a major naval shipbuilding program comprising 9 frigates, 12 submarines and 12 offshore patrol vessels; an enhanced strike and air combat capability, notably the F-35A Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter; and enhanced capabilities in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, space, and cyberwarfare.

In 2018, well before these purchases were consummated, Australia had already become the world's largest importer of arms, second only to Saudi Arabia.

Prime Minister Morrison recently announced a further investment of \$70 billion over the next six years. The aim is to acquire more lethal capabilities, including sophisticated maritime long-range missiles, air-launched strike and anti-ship weapons, as well as additional land-based weapons and offensive cyber capabilities.

Turning to the other agencies, between 2001 and 2010 ASIO experienced a threefold increase in its staff numbers and a sixfold increase in its budget. Its total budget currently stands at \$573 million (up from \$352 million in 2009-10). Over the same ten-year period the budget of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) has risen from \$1.1 billion to \$1.8 billion, and that of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) from \$202 million to \$586 million.

What is the justification for this vastly expanding security apparatus? When launching the Strategic Defence Update in July 2020, Scott Morrison spoke of 'a new dynamic of strategic competition', emphasising rising 'tensions over territorial claims' across the Indo-Pacific region, and 'regional military modernisation' that 'is occurring at an unprecedented rate'.

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The Prime Minister did not go on to explain how Australia's increasingly provocative security posture would ease regional tensions, slow down the regional arms build-up, or defuse the strategic competition.

The reason is not hard to discover. The stated objectives are not the fundamental objectives of our security policies. Revealingly, the Prime Minister described the Indo-Pacific as 'the focus of the dominant global contest of our age'. This can be taken as code for the unfolding US-China confrontation. Australia's security establishment is troubled by China's rise, and not reconciled to a less dominant role for the United States.

The upshot is that Australia's defence posture is intent on preserving a regional and global order in which the United States retains military supremacy. This means aligning ourselves with US strategic plans and priorities, and ensuring the highest possible levels of interoperability with the US military. In this sense, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update has reinforced a well-established trend.

Countering the Islamist threat: The Afghanistan debacle

Over the last twenty or more years the threat posed by Islamism has been repeatedly used to justify Australia's increasingly close alignment with US policies and military posture. Once the United States invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 in response to the September 11 attacks, Australia quickly followed suit. Indeed, John Howard justified the decision by invoking Article VI of the Anzus Treaty – the only time the Treaty has been invoked. This was the beginning of a twenty-year military engagement, easily the longest in Australian history.

At the height of Operation Slipper (2001-14), Australia committed 1,550 personnel. Over the course of the war, it despatched well over 25,000 personnel and spent close to \$10 billion.

However, once the United States finally set 11 September 2021 as the deadline for a full troop exit from the country, Australia immediately and predictably followed suit.

In this interminable war, it is the Afghans themselves who have borne the brunt of the human and physical cost. Of the estimated 241,000 people who have died as a result of the 20-year war, the overwhelming majority were Afghans. Of the people killed, 71,344 were civilians who died on both sides of Afghanistan's porous border with Pakistan. In the last ten years, the United Nations has recorded at least 7,792 children killed and 18,662 injured. At least 2.7 million of Afghanistan's population of 38 million have had to flee due to the war, and four million more are internally displaced. Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest places in the world.

Yes, there have been modest gains in education, health and women's rights. But measured across numerous indicators, women's wellbeing still ranks second last in the world, just ahead of Yemen. Most Afghans continue to live in poverty, and the country still produces record quantities of illicit opium, used to create the drug heroin. Since January of this year there have been more than 250 attacks against civilians, with the government controlling about a third of the country, and the rest contested or under Taliban control.

When it finally completes its military withdrawal, Australia will have little to show for its costly efforts. Australia's military expedition cost the lives of 41 of its soldiers, inflicted many more physical and mental injuries, several of these resulting in suicides. It provoked a number of war crimes, and cost upwards of \$10 billion.

In the process, it has been party to a war that has inflicted unimaginable devastation on the people of Afghanistan. At the end of it all it had to close its own embassy as it could no longer afford its staff the necessary protection. Australia leaves Afghanistan utterly humiliated.

A militarist mindset is taking hold

To sustain public support for these varied military ventures, Australian governments have consistently placed the spotlight on the sacrifices of Australia's soldiers.

The glorification of the role of the military on the battlefield has become critical to the task of justifying our participation in distant conflicts. The loss of life in the world's war zones, we are told, is the price we pay to protect 'our liberties' and 'our way of life'.

Against this backdrop the immense effort devoted to nurturing the Anzac legend acquires its full significance. This is an exercise which leaders of both major parties, government departments and agencies, ably assisted by media outlets, have consciously pursued over the last twenty years. The Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Australian War Memorial have been especially active in this regard.

That many Australian soldiers exhibited in the Gallipoli campaign great bravery and inspiring selflessness there can be no doubt. Similarly with many of the military engagements of the last two decades. It is equally clear, however, that the Gallipoli campaign was a disaster, as is the case with so many of our recent expeditions conducted in the main to please our 'great and powerful friend'.

The Anzac legend is now overlaid by a politically motivated quasi religious narrative, and like all religious creeds the narrative is accompanied by pomp and ceremony, eloquent speeches, and moving commemorations that dominate the nation's airwaves.

The recent decision of the Australian Government to commit \$500 million to the redevelopment of the War Memorial is designed to feed into this on-going narrative. Significantly, the nine-year development envisages an underground exhibition hall that will house an array of weapon systems, including helicopters and jet fighters.

These plans are in line with the War memorial's recent willingness to have its commemorative functions funded by arms manufacturers. David Stephens has aptly labelled the process 'the military-industrial-commemorative complex', in which 'the arms maker provides, the ADF disposes, the Memorial commemorates, in a continuous cycle.'

Support for US doctrines, strategies and expeditions has inflicted heavy human, physical and financial losses on Australia and an even heavier toll on countries subjected to the onslaught of invading forces by land and air. But this is not all.

Military alignment has served to stunt our political discourse, diplomatic capital and bureaucratic skill and competence. And, as we shall see, it has distracted Australian governments from the demanding but essential task of cementing relations with Asia, especially with China.

A rapidly transforming international environment

Australia's obsessive threat mentality and consequent dependence on 'great and powerful friends' have exacted heavy costs, which are now compounded by a profoundly altered international landscape.

For some time, the economic, diplomatic and organisational dominance of the United States has been in decline. It no longer exercises the unchallenged supremacy of an earlier era. In the aftermath of World War II, it was able almost single-handedly to rebuild Japan's economy, oversee Europe's economic recovery, establish the most extensive network of peacetime

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military alliances in history, and lead the construction of a new multilateral order, of which the United Nations remains the most significant innovation.

Much has changed since the heady days of US unrivalled dominance. A quick comparison of America's and China's economic performance over the last twenty or more years is perhaps the most significant indicator of the shift that is now under way.

China's rising presence on the world stage is first and foremost an expression of its economic modernisation, which the Chinese Communist Party has pursued with relentless zeal over the last four decades. Since the introduction of market reforms in 1979, China's real annual gross domestic product (GDP) has averaged an annual growth rate of 9.5%; its GDP has doubled every eight years. China has thus been able to raise an estimated 800 million people out of poverty. China is now the world's largest economy (on a purchasing power parity basis), manufacturer, merchandise trader, and holder of foreign exchange reserves. Its manufacturing output overtook that of Japan in 2007 and that of the United States in 2010. All of this amounts to what the World Bank has described as "the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history."

By contrast, total US trade which had a favourable balance of \$12.4 billion in 1975, recorded a succession of deficits, thereafter rising to \$121.9 billion in 1985, \$369.7 billion in 2000, and \$681.7 billion in 2020. The perennial US federal budget deficit, exacerbated by tax cuts under the Trump Administration, reached a staggering \$3.1 trillion in fiscal year 2020, more than triple the deficit for fiscal year 2019. It amounted to 15.2% of GDP, making it the greatest deficit as a share of the economy since 1945.

Rapidly increasing trade and budget deficits coupled with declining trade and production as a fraction of the world total have contributed to America's diminished moral stature on the world stage. Several other trends point in the same direction. None more so than the proclivity of US policy making elites to embark on highly debilitating military interventions across the globe. In the 19th century the US participated in 18 international armed conflicts, that is, on average one every 5.5 years. In the course of the 20th century, the number rose to 38 wars, or one every three years, and the period since 2000 has seen the United States engage in 10 wars, the equivalent of one every 1.7 years.

Notable among these wars are the Korean conflict of the 1950s (close to 1 million battle deaths), the Vietnam War of the 1960s and early 1970s (1.6 million battle deaths), the Iraq War (some half a million deaths since the 2003 US invasion), and hostilities in Afghanistan and Pakistan (well over 150,000 deaths since 2001). In these and other conflicts, huge military outlays, high levels of technological sophistication and the constant flexing of military muscle have not delivered the United States either military victory on the ground or sustained political influence. The stalemate in Korea, the humiliating defeat in Vietnam, the protracted and costly war on terror, the disastrous war in Iraq, the punishing conflict in Afghanistan, and the unholy mess in Libya and Syria attest to a reality US policy makers seem unwilling to acknowledge. Put simply, the power of the American state is more fragile than appears to the naked eye.

The US dilemma of seeking to project power on a global scale while expecting friends and allies to carry a substantial part of the cost, euphemistically described as burden sharing, has simply led to heightened tensions within American alliances. Nowhere is the blowback effect of this clumsy strategy proving more costly than in Europe.

As for NATO's unrelenting expansion to Russia's doorstep and the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems in Romania and Poland, they have simply led Putin's Russia to confront US power, whether it be in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria or in the upgrading of its own nuclear arsenal.

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And in Asia-Pacific, relentless US efforts to contain the expansion of Chinese influence, often justified by reference to China's militarisation activities in the South China Sea, have strengthened Beijing's determination to break through the US containment perimeter. This it is doing in part through enhanced military capabilities, but it has also become more adept at using the tools of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Contrary to the mantra of many Western governments which emphasise China's recourse to coercion, the Chinese leadership has now developed an impressive array of soft power resources that rely much more on attraction and persuasion, supported by an extensive and strategically applied mix of investment and aid incentives, of which its 'One Belt, One Road' (B&R) initiative, is by far the most ambitious.

Some Asian governments are no doubt wary of China's expanding influence, though less so than is often intimated in Western media. For many, China is their largest trading customer and a source of much needed infrastructure support. Some 68 countries and international organisations across Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East have already signed up to the B&R,

Another comparison tells an important story. The United States has vehemently criticised China for its incompetence and negligence in its handling of the Covid outbreak. Leaving to one side the pros and cons of China's initial response – it was certainly less than ideal – its subsequent performance in terms of stemming the spread of the virus stands in stark contrast with that of the United States.

<u>Country</u>	<u>Confirmed Cases</u>	<u>Deaths</u>	<u>Vaccine doses administered</u>
United States	33,449,200	599,472	308,112,728
China	103,320	4,846	863,513,000

Data drawn from Johns Hopkins Corona Virus Resource Center, 13 June 2021
<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region>

The United States with one quarter of China's population has recorded over 300 times more confirmed cases than China. If nothing else this comparison points to the glaring inadequacy of US political, economic and cultural institutions.

Economics and geopolitics are no doubt at the heart of the seismic shift now under way. In this sense a multi-centric world is rapidly emerging in which several major centres of wealth and diplomatic and organisational clout – some rising, others declining – are furiously competing to continue their ascent or arrest their decline.

There is, however, another dimension, often overlooked yet crucial to the shape of things to come. We are inexorably moving towards a multi-civilisational world. The West-centric world, in which first Europe and then the United States held sway, is slowly but steadily giving way to a new world in which other civilisational centres are emerging or re-emerging.

Three such centres, the Sinic, Indian and Islamic cultural spheres, each with its uniquely rich and long history, have already made a dramatic appearance on the world stage. This is no way to foreshadow a 'clash of civilizations'. It is simply to highlight the shifting pattern of civilisational currents that is fast producing new ways of seeing and acting in the world. This new reality brings with it immense challenges and opportunities, .

Further complicating matters, the multi-centric, multi-civilisational world we have entered is confronted with threats to humanity and planet Earth, unparalleled in their complexity and destructive potential. Apart from the twin existential threats posed by nuclear war and irreversible climate change, the world confronts the souring of great power relations, the

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devastating impact of foreign military interventions in the Middle East, Africa and West Asia, the poisonous relationship between Islam and the West, continuing fragility of the international financial system, highly destabilising inequalities of wealth and income within and between countries, the destabilising effects of pandemics, population displacements of unprecedented scale, and transnational organised crime,

In this period of profound transition divisive military alliances are a costly distraction impeding the development of adequate multilateral institutions and processes needed to address these multiple complex threats to the human future. They are especially counterproductive in Australia's case, because they drastically curtail our capacity to fashion appropriate responses to the multiple national and international challenges we presently face.

Australia's toxic relationship with China: A casualty of the 'five myths'

For those familiar with the excesses of Cold War rhetoric and the hyped-up, at times deliberately misleading fears used to justify ill-fated interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the current China bashing is a case of déjà-vu. But the latest bout of politically contrived anti-China hysteria is especially troubling.

The steady souring of relations stems from Australia's continuing adherence to the five myths discussed above. Australia's nostalgic attachment to the US-led regional and global order of earlier years has made it difficult, if not impossible, for Australia to adapt to a rapidly changing environment,

The souring of relations, it should be stressed, is driven not just by prime ministers, foreign and defence ministers, or even Cabinet. It is the product of something bigger, converging interests with immense reach and influence, namely the greatly expanded security establishment. As we have seen, it comprises some of the more powerful government departments, the armed forces, and an array of security and intelligence agencies, all in close contact with their American counterparts. It is actively supported by a range of think tanks that see themselves as the guardians of orthodoxy on security matters, to which must be added the most influential media chains in Australia, and the growing defence industry.

Over the last several years, the security establishment has articulated with increasing frequency its alarmist view of China's global and regional ambitions. They have repeatedly criticised China for its "continued construction and militarisation of disputed features in the South China Sea" while stating with ever greater force that Australia "sees the United States as the indispensable power throughout the Indo-Pacific."

The 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper placed the US military alliance front and centre of Australia's security policy. Then came a succession of inflammatory condemnations of Chinese actions in the South China Sea side by side with effusive support for the forward projection of US aerial and naval power in the Pacific.

In a major address delivered in Singapore in March 2017, Julie Bishop declared that China could not be trusted to resolve its disagreements in accordance with international law and rules because it was not a democracy. A few months later, Turnbull spoke of the dangers of "a coercive China", and openly entertained the prospect of its neighbours becoming resentful and looking for alliances elsewhere.

In line with these pronouncements, Australia stepped up participation in a series of bilateral and multilateral military exercises, port visits, maritime surveillance operations and ship transits in

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the region. In April 2018, Defence sources confirmed that three Australian warships, HMAS Anzac, HMAS Toowoomba and HMAS Success had been challenged by the People's Liberation Army just before they were due to arrive for a three-day 'goodwill visit' in Ho Chi Minh City.

These military manoeuvres were complemented by diplomatic efforts to establish an anti-Chinese regional forum. Australian officials joined their US, Japanese and Indian counterparts in quadrilateral security talks ostensibly to uphold respect for international law and freedom of navigation and overflight on which, it was argued, depended maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. Lofty phrases could not, however, conceal the underlying intent of this initiative. Widely seen as an aspiring Asian NATO, its underlying aim was to contain China's rise.

What, then, drives Australia's megaphone antipathy to the Chinese Government? It is not so much its commitment to so called liberal values, as it is to America's continued predominance in the Asia-Pacific region. This helps explain why Australian criticism of China's Taiwan policies has become increasingly vitriolic.

Yet, little in China's stance on Taiwan has changed over the years. Ever since October 1949, Beijing has steadfastly proclaimed that there is but one China, and that Taiwan is part of China. The projection of US military power right across the Pacific rim has been the principal obstacle to the achievement of that goal.

It is worth noting that former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, speaking in August 2004 at a time of heightened tension across the Taiwan Strait, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was unambiguous about his reading of Australia's commitments under Anzus. Australia, he explained, would not feel obligated under Anzus to help US forces defend Taiwan if China tried to regain the island republic by military force.

In the same speech, Downer went on to warn 'that any move towards independence by Taiwan would be provocative and would create substantial upheaval in the region'. He even contemplated 'a stronger and much fuller relationship' with China, encompassing 'many of the challenges of the Asia-Pacific region, of a political and security nature, not just an economic nature'.

Much of this rests on the obsession with the 'Chinese threat', even though China's capacity to project military muscle pales in comparison with America's global military reach.

China, it is true, now has the world's second largest military budget, as part of an extensive modernisation program. Its current defence spending has risen steady year in year out over the last two decades, and is estimated by SIPRI to have reached US\$240 billion in 2010. It remains nevertheless well below the \$693 billion allocated to the US Defence budget for FY2019. Over the last decade the US military budget as a percentage of total government spending has hovered between 12 and 9 percent. China's has fallen sharply from 12 percent in 2001 to 5.5 percent in 2018.

As for claims that China is about to gain a string of military bases from Southeast Asia to the Middle East, little has yet come to pass. As of now China has just one military base on foreign soil, in Djibouti which also hosts US, French and Japanese bases.

The more likely outcome is that China will secure access to port facilities in various host countries that benefit from large infrastructure investments associated with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

None of this approaches America's overwhelming military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Its alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia are complemented by extensive security arrangements with Taiwan, Singapore, New Zealand,

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Afghanistan and Pakistan. The forces of these countries are now closely enmeshed with the US military, having adopted common weapons, strategic doctrines, and training programs.

The Pentagon currently has some 25,000 troops stationed in South Korea and close to 54,000 military personnel and some 8,000 Department of Defense civilian employees in Japan, for which the Japanese Government provides some \$2 billion per year to offset the cost of these deployments. Some 5,000 US troops are permanently stationed in Guam, with the Andersen base home to B-1 bombers and a squadron of F-16 fighters.

In recent years China has built artificial islands around several reefs in the disputed Spratlys over which it claims territorial sovereignty. The United States has responded with Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea, which Chinese authorities regard as violating Chinese territory. The US in turn insists that its navy and air force are transiting through international waters, a stance foolishly supported by Australia.

There is a clear need for tension reduction measures in the South China Sea, but no evidence exists of a direct or even indirect military threat to Australia. Even with regard to Taiwan, where China considers the reunification objective to be non-negotiable, Xi Jinping's strategy is to rely primarily on economic and diplomatic rather than military levers.

Rather than dispassionately consider the evidence, Australian ministers and senior bureaucrats have chosen to beat the drums of war. In a keynote address delivered on 15 April to India's premier geopolitical conference, Prime Minister Morrison stated that Australia was seeking to build "a strategic balance that favours freedom", leaving his audience in no doubt that freedom was codeword for the West generally and the United States in particular.

A strategic competition, he went on to say, was under way between authoritarian regimes (read Russia and China) and liberal democracies (read the United States and its allies and friends).

These prime ministerial utterances reflect the thinking of the newly invigorated Quad group. At their first ever summit held in March, the four Quad governments made it clear that their objective was to contain China's rise. They pointedly agreed to collaborate in maritime security "to meet challenges to the rules based maritime order in the East and South China Sea". Which order, one may ask? The order which a dominant America had created in the aftermath of World War II, and which has sustained its dominance ever since.

Another clear signal of what was to follow was given by the Pentagon in early March with its submission to Congress requesting more than \$27 billion over the next six years to bolster capabilities across the Pacific region.

This expansion of what is now known as the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, or PDI, uses the language of deterrence to mask an increasingly antagonistic containment policy based on forward-deployed long-range weapon systems. These will include armed ground-based cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles, more advanced missile defence systems, new space-based and terrestrial sensors, and enhanced access to airfields, ports and other facilities needed to support these deployments.

The undisguised aim is to acquire highly survivable, precision-strike networks along the "First Island Chain", a wide area across China's immediate maritime periphery that includes the disputed South China Sea and the increasingly tense Taiwan Strait.

It is now known that Australia and the United States have been consulting closely about contingency plans in relation to Taiwan. Against this backdrop of heightened tensions, former defence minister Christopher Pyne made a surprising public intervention in April of this year, naming Taiwan as the most likely next flashpoint.

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Leaving little to the imagination, he spoke of the prospect of a “kinetic war”, offering the following graphic description:

Not a cyber war, but a real one involving loss of life, destruction of military platforms, with aggressors and defenders on different sides.

“This isn't rhetoric, this is something that you and I may well have to confront in the next 5 to 10 years.

This was not a surprising foray into the public arena. Having occupied the defence industry and then defence portfolios between 2016 and 2019, Christopher Pyne was well versed in the mindset of the security establishment. Upon retiring from Parliament, he has reinforced these connections by establishing a lobbying firm that advises several defence industry clients, as well as by serving as a director or advisory board member of multiple defence related companies.

Within days of Pyne's carefully timed intervention senior government figures issued a series of broadsides with China as the implicit and often explicit target.

A day later, Assistant Defence Minister Andrew Hastie told military personnel their “core business” was “the application of lethal violence”, a position closely aligned with the directives which newly appointed Defence Minister Peter Dutton had issued to the ADF's top brass.

Interviewed on ANZAC Day on the ABC program *Insiders*, Dutton spoke of the possibility of conflict erupting between China and Taiwan. He based that assessment on “the rhetoric that is coming out of China, from spokesmen particularly in recent weeks and months” and the “significant amount of [military] activity”, which one must assume was a reference to China's military exercises near Taiwan.

On the same day came the intervention by Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo. Reminding his audience that this was the 70th year of Australia's principal military alliance, he left little doubt that China, though not mentioned by name, was the target of his comments:

In a world of perpetual tension and dread, the drums of war beat – sometimes faintly and distantly, and at other times more loudly and ever closer. . . We must search always for the chance for peace until we are faced with the only prudent, if sorrowful, course – to send off, yet again, our warriors to fight the nation's wars.

Two days later during a visit to Darwin the Prime Minister unveiled the \$747 million spending package on four key training bases in the Northern Territory. This, we were told, was not a signal to China. But since its primary purpose was to enable more joint exercises with US forces in the region, it is difficult to see how else it could be interpreted?

Adding further grist to the mill Peter Dutton subsequently declared in comments to *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* that Australia is “already at war” in the Cyber world. From this hypercharged premise he went on to argue that Australia “needed to be in a position to defend its waters in the north and west as a clear priority.” For added dramatic effect we were told the ADF was prepared for action. .

To reinforce these dire warnings of China's “wolf warrior” diplomacy, the Australian government sought to highlight the risks associated with China's presence in Australia. In 2016, Prime Minister Turnbull ordered an investigation into the extent of foreign interference in Australia, The classified report leaked to the media suggested that the Chinese Communist Party was attempting to influence Australian politics at all levels. Rumours soon spread that Chinese students in Australia were promoting the policies of the Chinese government, while Australian universities were said to have entered compromising contracts with their Chinese partners. For its part, the US administration was pressing hard for Australia to toughen its stance against China.

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In June 2018, sweeping national security legislation stiffened penalties for leaking classified information, broadened the definitions of existing crimes like espionage, and added 38 new crimes to the record. China, though not named, was clearly the intended target.

In August 2018, then acting Home Affairs Minister, announced that the Chinese telecom giant, Huawei, would be blocked from bidding to build Australia's 5G network on security grounds. Huawei, it was argued, could not be relied upon to adequately protect Australia's 5G network 'from unauthorised access or interference'. In line with Washington's firmly expressed wishes, national security concerns were used to justify the ban, as well as the blocking of takeovers by Chinese companies and the refusal to participate in China's signature Belt and Road initiative (BRI).

Earlier this year, the federal government went one step further by exercising the Commonwealth's recently acquired power to veto deals between states and territories and foreign entities which "are not consistent with Australia's foreign policy." It cancelled two arrangements relating to Victoria's BRI agreement with China, namely the Memorandum of Understanding signed in October 2018 and the Framework Agreement signed in October 2019.

Andrew Hastie, chair of the influential parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security and other Coalition backbenchers were vocal advocates of such measures, which they portrayed as vital to the defence of Australian sovereignty. They were also supported and abetted by influential centres and think tanks with close links to their counterparts in Washington and by elements within Australia's intelligence and military establishments. Other willing contributors included the Murdoch newspapers and a motley group of journalists, academics and commentators, few of whom were acknowledged China experts.

It is worth noting in passing that China's alleged efforts to wield political influence in Australia and elsewhere are but a pale imitation of what the United States has been doing for decades. The reach of its defence establishment, security agencies and other institutions within Australia is hardly denied and seldom questioned.

The upshot of all this has been a rapidly deteriorating relationship between the two countries. To convey its displeasure with the words and actions of Australia's political leaders, China took a number of retaliatory measures. It froze diplomatic contact with Australian ministers, suspended the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue, and imposed a series of trade restrictions targeting primarily Australian shipments of beef, barley, coal, cotton and wine worth billions of dollars. The agreement struck in 2013 between then prime minister Julia Gillard and President Xi Jinping to hold annual leaders' meetings is now a distant memory.

An alternative security policy

It is reasonable to conclude that Australia's security is at the crossroads. One option is to persist with the habits and mindsets of an earlier epoch, accept the primacy of the 'great and powerful friend', and continue to rely on military alliances and give pride of place to military solutions. There is, however, a more promising option, which is to chart a course based on independent analysis, wide-ranging consultation within and between countries, intellectually coherent policy making, and a willingness to promote coalitions and initiatives that privilege dialogue over confrontation. This requires much deeper thinking and greater attention to detail than is the usual practice of many who oppose the US alliance.

Principles

What might be a more promising direction for Australia? Formal abrogation of Anzus is a valid long-term objective, but it is not feasible in the short term. A radical and constructive two-pronged approach is nevertheless within reach.

The first prong involves demoting the alliance from its present status as the centrepiece of Australia's security policies.

This will mean:

- *reducing current military and intelligence links with the United States, which inhibit the peaceful settlement of disputes, not least in relation to the South China Sea;*
- *scaling back the US military presence on Australian soil;*
- *ending all overseas military deployments which are not explicitly authorised by the UN Security Council; and*
- *shifting the authority to commit Australian military forces overseas from the executive to the Australian parliament.*

The second prong requires Australia to determine the policy positions it needs to adopt on the most pressing international challenges to security as well as the most useful relationships and forums through which these positions can be collectively advanced, regionally and globally.

A high priority in this context is the comprehensive renewal of multilateral institutions, notably the UN Security Council, the G20, and the Asia-Pacific security architecture. All of this needs a culturally sensitive and consultative approach aimed at developing effective diplomatic coalitions of the willing, in which well disposed national governments closely coordinate their efforts with those of civil society and international institutions.

There is, however, little prospect of Australia moving in this direction without first coming to some national consensus on the principles that should guide Australia's place in the world. Such a consensus, arrived after extensive community consultation, would give voice not to outdated notions of 'national' or 'military' security, but to a richer understanding of human security. The accent would be on protecting persons, communities (local, national and international) and the environment, and on reconciling divergent histories, interests and grievances within and between countries.

In short, we must aim to construct an ethically based Australian narrative that reinterprets our past and reimagines our future.

Such a narrative holds immense promise for the future. It can begin to heal the wounds of Indigenous dispossession and colonial violence, endow Australia with a deeper appreciation of the value of cultural difference, and provide the basis for a coherent policy framework that integrates economic needs and environmental values, security and immigration, education, culture and policy.

Important as it is, integration can go only so far. To be effective policy making must also be inclusive. Australia cannot secure for itself a peaceful environment by focusing just on its own security, especially if this means acting in ways other nations perceive to be at the expense of their security. With almost every actual or potential conflict of concern to Australia, the key to its resolution lies in reconciling the competing security interests of different actors. This applies equally to the Korean conflict, Sino-Japanese tensions, rivalries in the South China Sea, energy

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security, and refugee flows. In short, an underlying objective of Australian policy must be to achieve the 'common security' of all stakeholders.

Of course, to arrive at an understanding of common security is a painstaking exercise. It is made all the more difficult by the fact that no single voice or authority, no government can realistically claim to represent the diversity of security interests of their respective societies. To illustrate, the 'official' Indonesian view cannot be taken as a faithful representation of the security aspirations of the people of Papua, any more than the 'official' Australian view can be accepted as the final word on the security interests either of our First Nations or of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

It follows that if Australia is to play a part in advancing human security prospects in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Myanmar or elsewhere, it cannot afford to limit its dialogue to the governments of those countries. Ongoing links with diverse communities and organisations is needed if conflict prevention, resolution or mitigation strategies are to have any chance of success.

Conversely, if we are to develop effective security policies, civil society in Australia must be fully engaged. This should include not only think-tanks congenial to government thinking, but also development agencies with a presence in those countries, religious, humanitarian, professional, educational and other institutions with relevant insights, expertise, resources and contacts. Beyond this, incentives must be created and regulations devised for media to play their part. Without the consistent airing of factual information, analysis and ideas, policies are likely to falter in the longer term.

If engagement with Asia is to be more than a slogan or a mere codeword for expanding trade links, then that engagement must be freed from the emotional vestiges of Western dominance and the psychology of dependence on the US military alliance. It must instead be sustained by familiarity with the histories, cultures and languages of our Asian neighbours, and attuned to the opportunities for cultural, religious and political dialogue.

At the same time, Australia can together with other small and middle powers play an imaginative and influential role in the radical reform of the UN system. The management and resolution of armed conflicts, hence reform of the UN Security Council – its composition, structure and accountability mechanisms – should be regarded a high priority. Equally pressing is the establishment of new agencies, or reorganisation of existing ones, with a view to effectively monitoring military budgets and deployments and verifying compliance with arms control and disarmament agreements.

Little of this will come to pass unless small and middle powers and the wider international community are prepared to curb hegemonic tendencies wherever they appear, and as far as practicable to insulate local and regional conflicts from great power intrusion. This objective runs counter to the Australian ethos of dependence on 'great and powerful friends', and especially on the paramount role of the US alliance in Australia's external relations. This mindset is now in need of urgent review.

Over the next ten to twenty years Australia will have every opportunity to distance itself from subservience to US interests and priorities. The narrative of the United States, as the only superpower, delivering protection against the ultimate threat to 'national security', and enabling Australia to speak and act in its neighbourhood with a louder voice may have been reassuring in the past. But it is rapidly losing whatever credibility it may have once had.

In any case, if carefully and respectfully handled, the progressive demotion and eventual termination of the Anzus alliance, should in no way obstruct a close and constructive economic,

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political and cultural relationship with the United States. Nor should it lead to new forms of dependence, whether on China or any other centre of power.

Regional co-operation offers a more fruitful option, so long as it is not premised on military alliances or coalitions. Instead, Australia could join with the likes of Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, perhaps the Philippines (under a saner government) and South Korea to press for the establishment of nuclear weapons free zones, the denuclearisation and eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula, a comprehensive settlement of the Taiwan dispute, and the development of regional peacebuilding and peacekeeping capabilities in close association with the United Nations.

Side by side with middle power diplomacy, Australia must maintain regular and effective consultation with the governments of China, Japan, India and the United States and even Russia. There is little to be gained from serving as Washington's 'deputy sheriff' in the region, and much to be lost from joining diplomatic and military initiatives aimed at containing China or for that matter any other great power. The same logic should lead Australia to question the wisdom of Japanese rearmament or forward projection of Japanese military power. It should do all it can to support the public consensus in Japan, which is to retain and, where possible, strengthen the peace clause in the constitution.

One thing should be clear. The civilisational shift now in full swing is not an invitation for Australia to exchange one alliance for another, to wit the current alliance with the United States for an alliance with an emerging Asian centre of power, be it China or India. It is rather an invitation to do away with the tendency to side with one great power and against another.

This is a time for active consultation and cooperation with all centres of power, while reserving the right to take issue with and oppose any of their actions or pronouncements when these are contrary to the principles and purposes of the United Nations.

There is every reason why we would wish to maintain a cooperative relationship with the United States, consult extensively with US administrations, and engage in a range of mutually beneficial economic, cultural, educational and other links. However, consultation does not necessarily mean agreement. Where the positions of the two countries differ, they have to agree to disagree. The relationship with the United States will remain an important one for Australia, but its form and content should be set more by the needs and aspirations of the two societies and the international community as a whole than by the narrowly defined interests of their respective political and security establishments. Henceforth, Australia cannot allow itself to be dragged by the United States in any further military expeditions. Military engagement should proceed only if authorised by the United Nations Security Council.

Needless to say, the proposed reshaping of Australia's security policies will require substantial reallocation of scarce resources. The huge and dubious investment in state-of-the-art military platforms and advanced weapon systems needs scaling back. So does the ever expanding, multi-pronged and largely unaccountable intelligence apparatus. This would allow for adequate funding of development assistance, humanitarian aid, climate change initiatives, more sustained engagement with multilateral institutions, and a sustained contribution to innovative confidence-building, conflict resolution, peacekeeping and mediation efforts.

Laying the foundations for a healthy relationship with China

The regional and global power shift that is irreversibly underway presents Australia with a new set of choices. The decline of US power and influence in the world and in the Asia-Pacific region has been apparent for some time, as has the Asian renaissance, and especially China's rise.

The first step, admittedly a challenging one, is to recognise that Asia generally, and China in particular, will play an increasingly influential role in every facet of life in this country, including the economy, immigration, education, culture, and environment.

For this if for no other reason Australia has to develop a cooperative, comprehensive and respectful relationship with a part of the world from which, despite its geographical proximity, it remains relatively distant, culturally and politically.

We need to think carefully about how we will balance our ties with the West and with the East. This means, in part, rethinking our current strategic alignment with and dependence on the United States. The degree of safety provided by the Anzus alliance was always open to question. Continuing reliance on a security system that gives pride of place to US control of the seas across the Indian and Pacific Oceans is now dangerously flawed. To seek to construct a new ring of alliances designed to contain China and prolong US predominance in the Western Pacific and beyond would be foolish in the extreme. As noted before, the only prudent option for Australia is to inject a measure of balance in its relations with the world's main centres of power and influence.

Australia cannot afford to see China just as its major trading partner. China has to be one of its principal security interlocutors. Australian ministers, officials and diplomats have to engage in active and patient consultation with their Chinese counterparts across all key policy areas. The point of such consultation is to minimise tensions and misunderstandings on the one hand and maximise the prospect of collaborative efforts on the other.

A comprehensive and mutually respectful Sino-Australian dialogue, however, cannot be conducted purely at government level. Australia has to find ways of engaging with a polity, indeed a civilization, that feels it is gradually resuming its rightful place in the sun after a period of prolonged humiliation. To this end, Australian governments and civil society have to equip themselves for a dialogue that is as much intercultural as it is geopolitical.

Australia needs to convey in both words and actions to the people of China and their leaders that it does not support efforts to contain China's rise on the world stage. On the contrary, the clear message, and accompanying practice, should be that we greatly value close consultation with China on how we can address the many pressing regional and global challenges we currently face.

To be able to communicate this message at all credibly, Australia has to act in concert with interested Asian and South Pacific neighbours and other like-minded governments. Collectively, such a grouping can use the many diplomatic and cultural levers available to it to impress on China the need and opportunities for collaborative action on several fronts.

The United States, China, Russia and to a lesser extent India and Japan are presently engaged in a troubling arms race involving a range of advanced weapons technologies, including ballistic missile defence, conventional prompt strike missiles, and anti-satellite and cyber capabilities. Reversing this trend should be one of Australia's high priorities, one that features prominently in the Australia-China dialogue. To this end, Australia, in consultation either with ASEAN as a whole or some of its members as well as other like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific region,

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should propose a series of arms control and confidence building measures as part of a phased demilitarisation program.

Nor can arms control and disarmament be limited to conventional weapons. The Asian nuclear order is anything but orderly. While much attention has centred on the Korean peninsula, the United States, Russia, China, India and Pakistan have all been busy modernising and in some cases expanding their nuclear arsenals. They are intent on developing more sophisticated warhead technologies, longer missile ranges and larger and more capable sea based nuclear forces.

The Asian nuclear disarmament agenda is pressing. Australia should, together with others, make it clear that it is time for China and other nuclear armed states to support, and preferably initiate, concrete nuclear disarmament proposals. For its part, Australia should join the nine out of ten ASEAN states, New Zealand and the Pacific Island states that have signed the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty, and encourage other regional non-nuclear weapon states to do likewise, as a prelude to exerting collective pressure on all Asian nuclear weapon states to follow suit. Such steps would greatly strengthen Australia's hand as it seeks to make demilitarisation and nuclear disarmament key elements of its ongoing dialogue with China. At every opportunity, Australia should explain how a proactive engagement in this area would enhance China's own security and leadership credentials.

As for the South China Sea disputes, Australia should actively support the proposed Code of Conduct which China and the ASEAN countries have been negotiating for close to twenty years. But final agreement on the Code, expected in 2022, is unlikely to cover the thorny question of territorial disputes and maritime delimitation issues, and should therefore be seen as a stepping stone to a new set of negotiations on dispute settlement mechanisms.

A durable solution to tensions in the South China Sea, however, is unlikely in the absence of an integrated approach to Indo-Pacific security. Only such an approach holds the prospect of a phased program of demilitarisation. All the more important, then, for regional players to avoid actions that contribute to the militarisation of the South China Sea. For Australia this means actively advocating the wisdom of this path, and itself refraining from committing ships and planes in support of US 'freedom of navigation' operations.

On the thorny question of Taiwan, a good starting point for the main protagonists and for all countries striving for a more stable and secure regional environment would be to honour the spirit and letter of the [Shanghai communiqué](#) agreed to by China and the United States during Nixon's historic visit to Beijing in February 1972. The United States acknowledged that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. It undertook to abide by this position and reaffirmed its support for a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.

Translated into the present context, this would mean that the US and its allies, including Australia, would restate their support for the one-China policy and strongly discourage Taiwan from taking any unilateral moves towards independence. For its part, China would be expected to reaffirm its commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question.

In addition, Australia, together with ASEAN or some of its members, notably Indonesia and Malaysia, and perhaps one or more of ASEAN's dialogue partners, could convene regional discussions that include China to explore confidence-building measures, including active collaboration on climate change, the Covid pandemic, cyber security, organised crime, human trafficking and other transnational challenges to security. Over time, these efforts could pave the way for concrete steps towards the creation of a more effective regional security architecture.

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None of this is to suggest that achieving a workable consultative and culturally sensitive partnership with China is a simple task. Australia will at times wish to take issue with a number of Chinese domestic and foreign policies. The human rights issue is likely to prove especially challenging.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, Chinese authorities appear determined to maintain the absolute dominance of the Chinese Communist Party, and ensure that no voice or minority group within the country can question its pervasive control or commitment to a fully integrated China.

In Xinjiang and Tibet we see a coercive treatment of China's minorities, and in Hong Kong the steady erosion of democratic processes and increasing use of force to contain the protest movement. Within China the heavy-handed silencing of artists, intellectuals and other critical voices continues unabated.

China's introduction of a social credit system based on behavioural data gathered through an elaborate system of surveillance is also cause for disquiet. Such behaviour violates individual and collective human rights enshrined in international covenants.

This said, there is little to be gained from using human rights as a stick to beat China with, and even less from projecting Australia as a great human rights champion. Let's not forget, our own record on Indigenous rights, treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, restrictions on civil liberties, and support for the human rights of oppressed minorities, not least in our own neighbourhood, is far from exemplary.

This does not mean lowering our sights when it comes to human rights in China. But in aiming high, we need to approach the task with a healthy dose of humility – we ourselves need to do better.

When it comes to a human rights dialogue with China, periodic denunciations of Chinese actions will not get us far. First, we need to engage in an ongoing conversation with China about fundamentals, about the key principles that should govern an effective international human rights regime.

We can do this in multiple international forums, in government-to-government dialogues, societal exchanges, and importantly through the educational and intellectual institutions of the two countries.

Highly instructive in this regard are the partnerships the Danish Institute for Human Rights has established with Chinese institutions, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, university law schools, legal firms, and civil society organisations. The value of doing this is twofold: it avoids settings conducive to unhelpful confrontation, and it invites Chinese interlocutors to reflect more deeply on their own positions.

China, it is true, has been traditionally protective of national sovereignty and reluctant to endorse international intervention. Yet in practice China has conceded that human rights are not universally respected. How else are we to interpret its willingness to serve on the UN Human Rights Council? It has already served four three-year terms since its establishment in 2006, and has just been appointed to the Council's Consultative Group. As everyone knows, one of the key purposes of the UN Human Rights Council is to identify countries where performance is unacceptably low. Moreover, China has in recent years supported the important principle of the international community's 'responsibility to protect'.

By implication at least, China has recognised the principle that national human rights policies and practices are universally subject to international review. This being so, Australia is entitled to ask whether China accepts the proposition that its own performance must also be open to

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international monitoring? Such line of argument would carry much greater weight if Australia could demonstrate that it welcomes international scrutiny of its own human rights regime, and that henceforth it stands ready to refer UN and other international criticisms and recommendations to parliamentary and public debate before making a considered response.

At the same time, we should take care not to single out China for special treatment. We must be prepared to denounce human rights violations wherever they occur, and as part of that draw attention to the serious failings of America's human rights record both at home and abroad.

One other commitment, important in its own right, would greatly strengthen Australian human rights advocacy with regard to China. For too long Western liberal democracies have privileged civil and political rights over social, economic and cultural rights. It is time for Australia to try and redress the balance and place human rights at the centre of its social and economic agenda at home and its international trade and diplomacy abroad. It should also recognise that China's performance regarding the social and economic rights of its people, though not perfect, has much to commend it.

As Australia moves to put its own house in order, it will be better placed to propose concrete action designed to stem the accelerating trend towards authoritarianism in many parts of the world, including China.

While doing so, the Australian interlocutors need not be shy of acknowledging that political stability is a worthy objective for any society. But we can legitimately pose the question: will recourse to the iron fist, whether in the securitisation of life in Hong Kong, the re-education camps in Xinjiang, or use of the death penalty, are conducive to stability? In other words, attachment to western liberal values do not offer the only legitimate grounds for questioning the wisdom of using the iron fist.

Here, a closely related strand of thought may be particularly useful. Strong arm tactics designed to bring dissenting views into line are at odds with the principle of harmony which lies at the heart of Confucian wisdom and now features prominently in contemporary Chinese discourse. Indeed, 'harmony but not uniformity' has become an important element of Xi Jinping thought. The harmony principle requires that we discard practices likely to foment resentment, grievance, hatred and violence. China in line with its own best instincts and Confucian heritage should be able to maintain stability without doing violence to the dignity of the human person.

Enough has been said to indicate how complex and painstaking will be Australia's role in developing a durable dialogue with China. As intimated more than once, its task will nevertheless be made much easier to the extent it can act in concert with interested Asian and South Pacific neighbours and other like-minded governments.

We need to convey to our Chinese interlocutors the simple message that we oppose the trend towards authoritarianism not because it offers us an opportunity to wax lyrical about our superior liberal values, but because we believe that a China that is at peace with itself can more effectively assume a crucial leadership role on the world stage.

How do we get there?

Ours is a transformative moment. Australia, like other countries, needs to think long and hard about how it will respond to the immense risks and opportunities before us.

Changes in policy direction and resource allocation will not come about by waving some kind of magic wand. They require the will and capacity to execute them. In other words, an institutional

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shift. We need a substantial overhaul of the structures, processes and personnel that presently shape Australia's security policies.

Needless to say, an institutional shift of this magnitude cannot happen overnight or by accident. It must be accompanied and sustained by a cultural shift. The Australian public needs to reflect on the profound regional and global changes under way, the strategic choices before us, and the human and material assets at our disposal. Leadership of various kinds and from many sources will be needed to ensure a mature and respectful national conversation.

Leadership will not come from the obvious sources, at least not in the near future. It will not come from our mainstream media. They are generally content to echo the official line. As the current wave of China bashing painfully shows, even the ABC and SBS are careful not to rock the boat. At the same time, some media outlets are prepared to provide a platform for populist and extremist views. The net effect is to stifle critical inquiry, and help legitimise paranoia and fake news.

As for the political class, it is ill-equipped and disinclined to provide the necessary leadership.

The governing coalition has neither the appetite nor the intellectual skills to move in new directions. Many in its own ranks are wedded to a cold war mentality and deeply sceptical of the value of international institutions. They see Australia's future as located largely within the orbit of the English speaking world.

How is it that the government can get away with such dangerous ineptitude? Here, the recent role of Labor, both in government and opposition, cannot be overstated. Its virtually complete silence on some of the most pressing issues of our time is nothing short of mind-numbing. Its meek acceptance of the government line on the gamut of security policies at home and abroad is not a pretty sight.

The major sin is one of omission – a systematic failure to articulate a coherent set of policies on our future relationship with the United States on the one hand and China on the other. Yet, at no point over the life of Anzus has there been a more urgent need to review the military alliance in its entirety, including the hosting of military facilities and personnel on Australian soil, the despatch of Australian military forces in support of US interventions, the intelligence connection, and the demands placed on the structure and capabilities of the Australian defence force, often in the name of interoperability.

Oddly, neither the organisation of the Labor Party nor its parliamentary caucus, and certainly not its leadership have had much to say about how Australia is to adapt to this period of profound transition. Neither the Leader of the Opposition nor any of the relevant shadow ministers has shown the slightest disposition to articulate peacebuilding, peacemaking, or conflict resolution initiatives as an alternative to government or US policies on Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Korea, or the South China Sea.

Equally striking is Labor's failure to question the drift of Australia's handling of the terrorist threat, with its obsessive emphasis on symptoms rather than causes, and on the application of force at home and abroad, regardless of the implications for civil liberties and international humanitarian law.

The ALP seems singularly unwilling or unable to develop a humane and plausible national and multilateral response to the ever growing number of displaced peoples across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. And this filters through to its compliant stance on asylum seeker and refugee policy. And when it comes to UN reform or the need to rethink the regional security architecture, a deafening silence. Its security agenda has become the prime casualty of the politics of expediency.

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The Greens may have their hearts in the right place, yet neither the parliamentary leadership nor the party organisation seems at all disposed, intellectually or organisationally, to take the public into its confidence, spell out the critical challenges facing Australia, or propose detailed solutions, let alone concrete initiatives. Human rights abuses are regularly condemned, but little is said about Australia's place in Asia, its relations with China, or its engagement with other small and middle powers. No discernible ideas on what to do about Australia's sprawling security establishment, and little inclination to help energise a national conversation.

As for the Senate cross-bench, the less said the better.

All of this is but a reminder that those who seek to engage in an informed, fruitful and sustained conversation about Australia's future and its place in the world need to look beyond the Parliament and its occupants. Their priorities lie elsewhere.

In such a climate, it is for the concerned citizenry with access to constructive educational and media sites to develop an alternative narrative. This has to be a narrative that addresses the profound transformation of Australia's economy, society, culture and environment against the backdrop of a dramatically changing international landscape. Such a narrative needs to give due weight to promising new directions, but also to the costly wrong turns and political sclerosis that currently grips the Australian political class

Engaging a wider public is now an urgent task. How to do it? A scatter gun approach is unlikely to work. A carefully thought out and systematic engagement with key sectors of society offers a more promising route.

One way of proceeding immediately suggests itself. It includes those organisations and networks whose line of work is directly affected, often negatively, by our current security policies. An obvious example is the development and overseas aid sector confronted as it is by a steadily declining ODA budget and the devastating impact of wars in which we participate and oppressive regimes which we support.

Another example has to do with the highly problematic national security laws, policies and operations that bear directly on the work of many others. This includes organisations and projects, small and large, which variously focus on civil liberties and human rights more generally, violence against women, forced displacement, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, conventional and nuclear disarmament, environment, public health, cultural diversity, and much else.

The urgently needed conversation on security can also profitably gain from the insights and expertise of professional networks and organisations (e.g. in education, law, medicine, nursing, media, communications), trade unions, businesses and their peak bodies, farmer organisations, religious bodies, think-tanks and research centres. The key to success in this large and complex undertaking lies in knowing how to connect with their respective concerns, priorities and programs. Approaching a group working on social housing requires that we connect security issues with the experience of homelessness, its causes, effects, and needed solutions.

A new security discourse needs to take account of the different interests, circumstances and capacities of each sector. It needs to be done in diverse settings ranging from rather informal to highly structured conversations, face-to-face and online forms of communication, small and large groups, and use a wide range of resources, including discussion papers, fact sheets, podcasts, a range of other audio-visual materials, and extensive use of social media.

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Use of the new media has become contentious. There is no denying that they can often be used to propagate lies and misinformation. They often appeal to the basest instincts. However, they can also be used, as the current pandemic has amply shown, to share reliable information, insights, and proposals, and to plan and act collaboratively and at speed. Skilful use of social media enables us to connect across the boundaries of age, gender, nationality, culture, status, occupational background, and even political ideology.

Where possible these resources should be prepared with input from the communities that make up multicultural Australia, and made accessible in languages other than English. Importantly, the program should incorporate the rich resources of the visual and performing arts (art workshops exhibitions, music, theatre, film and much else), as well as fiction, poetry, and even sport.

There are encouraging trends on which it is possible to build. Many, young and old, of diverse backgrounds in Australia and elsewhere, feel disillusioned by media hype, empty political noise, and unaccountable institutions. They are searching for answers. Though still only a minority, their numbers are growing.

A re-energised younger generation is keen to address the ravages of climate change. People in all sorts of spaces are beavering away on environmental problems, Indigenous rights, civil liberties, animal rights, war, nuclear weapons, poverty, global inequality, cross-cultural dialogue and ethical approaches to professional engagement.

Regrettably, in much of this activism, the single-issue mindset is still all too prevalent. Many groups still tend to operate in silos, in the sense that in their day to day practice contact with groups working on other issues is at best spasmodic. Only occasionally do they make connections between issues, except for the most obvious and immediate connections (e.g. homelessness and areas of economic and social policy directly impacting on access to housing).

Conversely, it is unusual for groups engaged in advocacy or support for refugees and asylum seekers to make sustained connections with security policy, even though border control policies are justified by government almost entirely on security grounds. Similarly, it is unusual for climate change groups to dwell on the carbon footprint of war and the day to day operations of military facilities, training exercises, and the transport systems on which they rely.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests a growing appetite for more holistic ways of thinking about society, economy, environment, culture and politics. This presents those troubled by the present drift of Australia's security policies with a unique opportunity to connect people and organisations and the issues they are working on. To do this well will require a sustained outreach program with appropriate timelines, monitoring and evaluation processes, and the necessary human skills needed to establish confidence in holistic thinking and develop multi-issue, multi-disciplinary conversations and projects. Skilling programs can play a valuable role. So can a new, energising and positive language that breaks with the stock phrases of the past, and strikes a chord with a younger generation.

IPAN's Public Inquiry is a useful step in this direction. Much will depend on the follow up, on whether creative new ways are found to connect with diverse audiences, in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and cultural background.

It is worth noting that roughly half of Australia's population was either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. Two questions need to be urgently addressed: what proportion of those actively engaged in rethinking Australia's policies on questions of war and peace, military alliances and relations with China is aged below 35 or of non-Anglo background? This

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leads to a further question which needs careful and sustained attention: what will it take for these two sectors to be adequately represented in the national conversation?

One final suggestion. The report of the Public Inquiry could be used as an effective launching pad for a series of nationwide consultations on the findings and recommendations of the report. Ideally, these consultations should take place in every capital city and regional centres across the country. The outcomes of these consultations can then be distilled into an attractive, accessible, widely distributed document. The consultation process might run for about six months with at least six months by way of preparation. The key here is to set up a consultation process which effectively reaches parts of the community that so far have had little or no direct engagement with issues of peace and security.

Community consultations could then be followed late next year (or more likely first half of 2023) with a large national assembly/conference that allows for both face-to-face (preferably in Sydney or Melbourne) and virtual participation. Its purpose would be to review where we are at strategically, and map out the most promising directions and concrete steps that we can pursue over the next several years. A five year time frame may be appropriate. Such an event would encourage involvement across the country – as well as international participation from both experts and practitioners in Asia, Europe and North America. A large project of this kind will require a substantial partnership involving a good many organisations across diverse sectors.

The stakes are high. The urgent task before us is to reshape the national conversation. For this we need a widely supported, well crafted road map that captures the imagination of the Australian public. Daunting but doable.