

# As China Shapes Power and Discourse in The Indo-Pacific, How Can Australia Reinforce A Regional Rules-Based Order?

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the re-emergence of China as a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region is perceived as a threat by the United States and its allies in the region, including Australia. The article looks closely at how Australia should resist growing Chinese influence whilst maintaining important economic relationships with its largest trading partner. The article argues that Australia acknowledges China's strategic ambitions and considers China's growing military presence as a threat and it finds that despite the fact that China is Australia's major trading partner, however, China is not a strategic guarantor nor security ally. This article also analyses China's military presence in the region destabilised the regions stability. China's strategy, known as "Far Sea Defense", clearly demonstrates security and associated military materialisation is not limited to China's territorial waters. It is project building naval influence well into the Indo-Pacific region and potentially beyond. In order to enjoy decades long uninterrupted security and prosperity in the region, Australia should build a robust Indo-Pacific alliance to counter China's aggression in the region. Australia, as a middle power, successfully demonstrated its capability to play a leadership role in the international arena. The article concludes Australia's approach should be defending the rules-based order in the region by forming new agreements with regional allies under US leadership.

**Keywords:** *Alliance, Australia, China, Indo-Pacific, Trilateralism, United States*

## Çin, Hint-Pasifik'te Güç ve Söylem Şekillendirirken, Avustralya Bölgesel Kurallara Dayalı Düzeni Nasıl Güçlendirebilir?

**Öz:** Bu makale, Çin'in Hint-Pasifik bölgesinde egemen bir güç olarak yeniden ortaya çıkmasının, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Avustralya'nın da dahil olduğu bölgedeki müttefikleri tarafından bir tehdit olarak algılandığını tartışıyor. Makale,

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Avustralya'nın en büyük ticaret ortağı olan Çin ile önemli ekonomik ilişkileri sürdürürken Çin'in artan etkisine nasıl direnmesi gerektiği konusunu da ele alırken, Avustralya'nın Çin'in stratejik hırslarını kabul ettiğini ve Çin'in artan askeri varlığını bir tehdit olarak gördüğünü, aynı zamanda Çin'in Avustralya'nın başlıca ticaret ortağı olmasına rağmen Avustralya açısından stratejik bir garantör veya güvenlik müttefiki olmadığını da tartışıyor. Bu makale, Çin'in bölgedeki askeri varlığının bölgelerin istikrarını bozduğunu analiz ediyor. Çin'in "Uzak Deniz Savunması" olarak bilinen stratejisi, güvenliğin ve buna bağlı askeri materyalizasyonun sadece Çin'in karasularıyla sınırlı olmadığını açıkça göstermektedir. Hint-Pasifik bölgesi ve ötesinde potansiyel etki yaratma projesidir. Dolayısıyla bölgede uzun süre kesintisiz bir güvenlik ve refahın sağlanması için Avustralya, Çin'in bölgedeki saldırganlığına karşı güçlü bir Hint-Pasifik ittifakı kurmaya çalışmalıdır. Orta seviyede bir güç olarak Avustralya, uluslararası arenada liderlik rolü oynama yeteneğini başarıyla sergilemiştir. İşbu çalışma, Avustralya'nın ABD liderliğindeki bölgesel müttefiklerle yeni anlaşmalar yaparak bölgesindeki kurallara dayalı düzeninin korunması gerektiği sonuca varmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *İttifak, Avustralya, Çin, Hint-Pasifik, Üç Taraflılık, ABD*

## **Introduction**

The primary aim of this paper is to discuss the re-emergence of China as a dominant power in the Asia Pacific and how this is perceived as a threat by the United States of America (US) and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including Australia. The challenges for Australia are how to resist growing Chinese influence and therefore develop defense policies that protect Australia's national interest and values whilst maintaining essential economic relationships. The paper articulate how China leverages its economic superiority to influence the Indo-Pacific region; how the region is experiencing strategic warning period and how Australia faces a major power adversary for the first time since the Second World War. Moreover, China, as Australia's leading trade partner is a state that is not a strategic guarantor nor a security ally. The paper argues Australia acknowledges China's strategic ambitions

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and understanding and considers China's growing military presence as a threat.

It is a commonly held belief, Australia has enjoyed decades of uninterrupted prosperity, Arguably, key to this prosperity is the fact Australia has strengthened the financial alliance and increased the security relationship with the US. A quandary remains as to whether Australia should consider building a robust regional security alliance outside of or in partnership with, the US, to counter China's emergence in the Indo-Pacific. To address these issues, the paper will discuss the reasons for escalating diplomatic clashes between Australia and China. In conclusion, the paper will demonstrate Australia should be considering to enhance the capacity of the Australian Defense Force (ADF) whilst reinforcing existing security cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations while at the same time working collaboratively towards building greater multilateral interoperable alliance in the region under the US leadership in order to defend the rules-based order.

### **Rise of China as dominant power in the Indo-Pacific**

Historically, Australia's foreign and defence policy was determined by Whitehall as Australia was never in a political, economic or security position to reconcile contesting economic and strategic interests for its first few decades as a Federation (Bisley, 2014, pp. 297-298). From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until World War Two (WW2), Australia's economic and security interests were strongly linked with the United Kingdom (UK). With the decline of UK political and economic superiority post WW2, the US emerged as Australia's closest economic and strategic ally (Bisley, p.298). Australia sought to enhance its economic and security relationship with the US, culminating in the Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty of 1951. Due to the strategic value of ANZUS, the US was able to formalize a geostrategy policy for the South Pacific (Samuels, 2005, p.30). US strategic and economic predominance ideally suited Australia, as Australia shares similar culture and language values with the US (Bisley, p.299). Prior to ANZUS, Australia had not been active militarily in the Asia Pacific. However, Hugh White argues Australia also remained disconnected from the diplomatic affairs of the Asia Pacific until early 90s. After the Cold War, Canberra began to pay close attention to its strategic relationship in Northeast Asia

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as China's economic growth generated a significant new dynamic in regional strategic affairs (White, 2007, pp.103-104).

With the end of the Cold War, and economic turmoil in Japan, China became the second-largest economy in the world after the US (White, 2011, p.82). Australia and China developed a robust resource based economic relationship; a relationship that became even more important to Australia when China surpassed Japan as Australia's largest trading partner in 2007 (Terada, 2004, p.134). In order to influence domestic politics and political institution in a foreign country, China uses economic coercion by reducing overseas trade and tourism (U.S. Department of Defence, 2020). For example, the Chinese Ambassador to Australia, Jingye Cheng, suggested Chinese citizens may choose to boycott Australian products if the Australian government continued its push for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. The Australian government has described Mr Cheng's comments as "threats of economic coercion" (Wiggins & Fegan, 2020). China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013; the initiative features foreign policy and strategy of China (Wade, 2019). BRI was developed by China to increase economic relationships with other nation states but also to use that soft power to strength China's political influence abroad.

Canberra is concerned that the initiative is a strategic play by China to dominate the region. Former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, has stated that the BRI initiative is China's vehicle for strategic and political influence in the region (Wrote, 2018). Bishop was proved to be right in her claims with the Victorian State government signing the BRI Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in October 2018 (Government of Victoria, 2020). China was successful in disrupting the Australian US alliance by signing the MOU with the Victorian government. The US Secretary of State has warned Australia that the US could simply disconnect from Australia if Victoria's BRI trade deal with Beijing proceeds, as it potentially affects Five Eyes and therefore US telecommunications systems. Secretary Pompeo said Victoria's agreement could impact on Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partnership with Australia (Murray-Atfield, 2020). According to the Global Times, under the CCP's auspices, China accused the US of starting the new cold war and warned Australia that it should distance itself from a possible new US-China cold war (Global Times, 2020). Arguably, China is

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perceived as taking advantage of its trade relationship with Australia by threatening Australia with an economic boycott.

It is worth noting that the US was able to demonstrate its strategic commitment by preventing strategic competition between Japan and China. Australia welcomed the effort by the US as it was considered the most significant contribution that the US made to Australia's security, and Australia's reliance on the United States increased (White, p.104). Australia continuously supports US engagement in the western Pacific, with the ANZUS alliance vital for both Australia and the US in the face of fluctuating dynamics in the region. More importantly, Australia's strategic location is essential to the US to display a presence in the Pacific (Brown & Bretherton, 2016, p.4). The rise of China caused the global shift of power to Asia, and the US allies are even more interested in deepening their strategic engagement with the US against the emerging power in order to balance the power in the Indo-Pacific (Cook et al, 2010, p.15). The term "Indo-Pacific" in which constantly used by the Australian government, captures the wider region spanning the Indian Ocean through to the western Pacific Ocean, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has emerged more recently and moved from geographical to a geopolitical (David, 2013, p.425-448). To balance the power in the region, the Obama administration launched President Obama's signature policy "Pivot to Asia" which requires alliance partners to renew their commitment to the US supremacy in Indo-Pacific (Kelton & Rogers, 2020, pp.94-96). The Obama administration's pivot to China was reorientation strategy to preserve the power balance in order to dissuaded China from becoming a hegemony in the region (Silove, 2016, p46). With China's rise impacting the region, neighboring countries are increasingly concerned with the changing dynamic.

Australian politicians have begun to acknowledge China's growing strategic weight and they also understood that if China becomes too strong, it will not fit the established US-led rule-based order (White, p.82). White argues no country ever threatened the dominant US position since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, China posed the most significant challenge the US has ever faced. Because China has a significantly higher population than the US, it has a growing security apparatus, and it is the second-largest economy in the world (White, p.83). Although scholars postulate China is

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unlikely to surpass the US as the most powerful country in the world any time soon, it will continue to increase influence on the regional order in the Indo-Pacific (Bisley & Schreer, 2018, p.311). Most countries in the Asia Pacific feel uncomfortable with China's military rise. They began to perceive China as the greatest threat in the region while they view the US as the greatest source of peace (Cook, Malcolm, et al, p.22). Therefore, as countries in the Asia Pacific began to invest in the military, China's surging military investments resulted in the region surpassing Europe for the first time in modern history in terms of defence spending (Liff & Ikenberry, 2014, p.53). By in large, China is trying to be the single dominant power in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Development of the Indo-Pacific Alliance**

Most Indo-Pacific nations are developing their military capacity and are strengthening security alliances. White evaluates that the major powers in the region, including India and China, are experiencing rapid growth in the economy and military, and equally the US allies Australia and South Korea also developing their military capabilities and becoming active players in regional security (White, p.55). Conversely, China's military presence in the region was having an impact on the evolving political and security order (Raine & Christian, 2013, p.17). China's strategy, known as "Far Sea Defense", clearly demonstrates security and associated military materialisation is not limited to China's territorial waters. It is project building naval influence well into the Indo-Pacific region and potentially beyond (Wong, 2010, p.3). One of the reasons that caused the tension in the region was the territorial disputes between claimants in the East China Sea and South China Seas (Defense White Paper, 2016). The Chinese navy has shown its aggressive behavior to its neighbors; for example, China posed a maritime threat for Vietnam for the third time in just a few years (Dy, 2020). China is enhancing its military power in the region to regional power equivalent to the US (Nye, 1997, p.70). The US Department of Defense (DoD) reports China heavily invested in its navy force in the South China Sea (SCS), According to the Chinese official military budget, the budget grew at an average of 10% each year between 2006 to 2015 (Cronk, US Department of Defense). China's increasing military investment is alarming to the US; the regions' most trusted allies could face the prospect of exclusion

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from parts of the Asia Pacific region (Leszek, 2012, p.152). To counter China's military rise in the region, the Obama administration had little choice but to affirm its interest in the SCS; the administration announced that the US would deploy 60 percent of its Navy fleet to the region by 2020 (Silove, p.69). Australian scholars postulate that Australia would support the US-led coalition against China's revisionism in the region, and this coalition will be based on common interests such as the prevention of Chinese hegemony in the Asia Pacific (Bisley & Schreer, p.312). Strategically, Australia should encourage the internal balancing effort by the US and support the strategy whilst keeping mindful of the economic relationship with China. To maintain a military advantage in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia could strengthen the alliance and thereby increase access to highly sophisticated military equipment (Dibb, Brabin-Smith, and Seargant, 2018, p.5). The US has begun to build up its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, with regional shared military training, budgeting and acquisitions on countering A2/AD capabilities (Silove, p.73). The aggressive behavior posed by the Chinese military in the Asia Pacific leads the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to resist the Chinese belligerence.

China expanded its influence in Australia, especially in the last few years. Medcalf postulates that if China can silence dissenting Chinese voices in Australia, an outspoken and independent middle power in the Indo-Pacific, then they can be silenced anywhere (Medcalf, 2019, p.110). China was successful in infiltrating Australian politics by using the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) supporters in Australia. According to the investigation by the ABC, Labor Senator Dastyari strongly supported the Chinese government's stance on SCS by stating that "*The Chinese integrity of its borders is a matter for China*" (McDermott, 2017). Without deference to the US and ANZUS, it has been suggested Australia should focus on developing an independent, self-reliant defence policy to prevent China's influence in Australia. Medcalf argues Australia has demonstrated its independent foreign policy by pushing back against China (Medcalf, p.111). As it is stated in 2016 Defense White Paper, the most basic Strategic Interest is a secure, resilient Australia. *'The priority of Strategic Defense Object is to deter, deny and defeat any attempt by a hostile country to attack, threaten or coerce Australia. The government is providing the defense with the*



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*capability it needs to be able to independently and decisively respond to military threats, including incursion into Australia's air, sea and northern approaches'* (Defense White Paper, p.17). Therefore, Australia needs to focus more on its region of primary strategic concern, which includes Southeast Asia (including the South China Sea), the eastern Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific (Dibb, Paul, et al., p.5). But Australia lacks the population and manufacturing base on which to build a standalone defense system capable of defending such a large landmass.

### **Australia's rules-based order approach in the region**

The relationship between economic security and maintaining military alliances based on commonalities of language and culture is complex. Reliance on China for economic security and the US for military security is problematic at best. Dibb criticized Australia's level of economic dependence on China and advised that Australia should diversify its trade, investment, tourism and international student with the Indo-Pacific nations (Dibb, Paul, et al., p.6). Depending on one country and lack of diversity can be problematic. The recent diplomatic tensions with China proved this point. Queensland Federal MP George Christensen, Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Trade and Investment Growth, said the committee is already conducting an inquiry into "*whether there is a need to diversify Australia's trade markets and Australia's level of reliance on foreign investment*" (Hurst, 2020). The response by the Chinese Government toward the Australian government arguing for independent inquiry into the COVID-19 origin, is but one example of how China is weaponizing trade (Hitch & Hayne, 2020). The fact that Australia has allowed itself to be drawn into a significant commodities-based trade relationship with China indicates short-termism by successive Australian governments and has contributed to the ability of China to weaponize trade.

Based on this analysis. Australia should build-up long term defense planning for Australia's strategic future. According to the 2016 Defense Industry policy statement, the new approach to defense innovation outlined as follows; Next Generation Technologies Fund, Defense Innovation Hub, Defense Innovation Portal and Changed culture and processes (Department of Defense, 2020, p.30). It is stated in the Defense Annual Report 2016-17, the Pacific Partnership continued its soft-power mission to help



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improve the disaster preparedness of Australia's Indo-Pacific neighbors. This initiative is strengthening the alliance and promoting multilateral disaster management resilience (Department of Defense, p.57). Re-emergence of China and uncertain future crises in the Indo-Pacific required the Alliance to be re-examined (Dibb, Paul, et al., p.6). The leaders from both sides of the Australian Federal divide, continuously reassure that the Australia-US alliance is strong. Admiral Davidson underlined the importance of the Australia - US alliance by stating that the alliance is unbreakable, and it is more profound than security cooperation or the military (Davidson, 2020, p.2). Australian defense minister Linda Reynolds acknowledged at the Hudson Institute that the unbreakable alliance has just entered into the second century. Minister Reynolds also affirmed that Australia is seeking to cooperate with China to enhance the security of the Indo-Pacific. However, Minister Reynold clearly outlined in her speech that the values are what define us as a nation, and the maintenance of these values is non-negotiable (Reynolds, 2019, pp.2-5). Australian and the US diplomats frequently reassured that both countries are actively working together towards the stronger alliance to ensure the continued stability and prosperity of the two countries.

Australia, as a middle power, successfully demonstrated its capability to play a leadership role in the international arena. In the midst of the global pandemic, Australia started an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, which is now supported by 62 countries, including Indo-Pacific major powers like India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea (Dziedzic, 2020). So many countries supporting Australia, and China has no choice but to be part of the inquiry. Even though China signed on the historic motion, to establish an independent review of the coronavirus has passed the World Health Assembly, led by Australia and the European Union. However, China has imposed an 80 percent tariff on Australian barley while signaling to the US, it would be increasing Barley purchase (Galloway, Anthony et al., 2020). The Chinese officials also had compiled a list of Australian products to be targeted such as wine, dairy, as well as using state media to drum up consumer boycotts. China's Commerce Ministry announced that Australian wind importers will pay temporary tariffs range between 107-200 per cent, this action followed months of trade uncertainty and deteriorating relations between the two countries

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(Sullivan, Birtles et al., 2020). These heavy tariffs came after Australia's public stance about human rights abuses in Xinjiang (aka East Turkistan) and Hong Kong. The Chinese embassy handed a list of 14 key areas of disputes with Australia, the CCP view as sensitivity issues (Hurst, 2020).

Nevertheless, Australia demonstrated how a middle power could play a more prominent role on the world stage against a superpower.

To resist China's aggressive behavior, Australia needs to cooperate with its security allies such as ANZUS and UKUSA. The ANZUS alliance has a great chance to shape the regional order over the next few years ((Dibb, Paul, et al., p.6). The US Ambassador Arthur Culvahouse Jr said recently that *'Australia sits on the frontline of the great strategic competition of our time.* The US Ambassador also stated that if the Indo-Pacific region to continue to enjoy security and prosperity, we should win this competition (Greene, 2020). *Australia's* recent military achievement should deter China's aggression. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has announced two significant military developments; the first development is that there would be a \$1.1 billion upgrade to the Royal Australian Air Force base at Tindal. The second development is that the US State Department announced that Australia had been cleared to purchase long-range anti-ship missiles (LRASM) which can be launched from our Super Hornets (Dibb, 2020). It is essential to note that these two developments occurred at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a conceivable regional security crisis. The paper discussed how China uses its economy to influence the Indo-Pacific countries, including Australia. Canberra is concerned China's increasing military presence in the region as the threat, and it could stimulate a new policy. The paper analyzed that in order to continue decades of uninterrupted security and prosperity that the Indo-Pacific region enjoys, Australia along with security partners in the region should maintain the alliance and priorities the security relationship with the United States even though China's aggression in the Asia Pacific does not involve Australia directly but impacts on Australia's interests profoundly. The paper suggested that in order to counter Chinese aggressive

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behavior, Australia should consider building a robust regional security coalition and develop a more significant, far-reaching defense force.

It is essential to acknowledge that we are entering a strategic warning time. Australia must recognize that Australia faces the major power adversary for the first time since the WW2, with whom we do not share fundamental values. Therefore, in strategic orientation, Australia should consider planning for expansion of the Australian Defense Force and also reinforce its existing security cooperation with its neighbors while at the same time encouraging to work together towards building greater multilateral interoperability in the Asia Pacific. To conclude, Australia's approach should be defending the rules-based order in the region by forming new agreements with regional allies under the US leadership.

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