Commentary
Why Australia needs an Integrated Review

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Why Australia needs an Integrated Review

Matthew Sussex

The United Kingdom's (UK) recently released Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, published under the title *Global Britain* in a *Competitive Age*,[1] is an ambitious document. It seeks to navigate a pathway for the UK's role in the world in the aftermath of its withdrawal from the European Union, stresses the need to harmonise its approach to defence and security, and attempts to identify priority areas for investment and development. It is, in effect, a grand strategy for the UK at a time of global upheaval and regional discord.

Attaining a more clear-eyed and holistic vision about precisely what the threat and opportunity landscape looks like – as well as the types of capabilities needed to address them – is precisely the kind of activity Australia's strategic and security community should be engaging in. After all, it is not as though Australia is encountering a strategic future that is fixed or on which there is consensus between agencies, much less experts outside government working on the topic.[2] For the first time in many decades, Australia faces the prospect of great power competition on its doorstep. It must also meet the challenge

1   UK Government Cabinet Office, *Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, UK Government March 2021, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy.

2   On this point see for instance Jason Israel, 'Indo-Pacific Strategy: before justifying the means, identify the ends', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 27 August 2020 10:00, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indo-pacific-strategy-before-justifying-means-identify-ends.

of a rising tide of autocracy and worrisome democratic backsliding.[3] Looming environmental dangers over the longer term and a global pandemic in the short term both serve to highlight significant current and future vulnerabilities in our trade and development postures.[4] And liberal democracies like Australia must also confront hybrid security concerns, including foreign influence and insecurity in cyberspace. These challenges cut easily across state borders and seek to weaken societies and economies from within via disinformation, encouraging mistrust of government and engendering politically fragmented communities.

Amid this flurry of challenges, conventional policymaking clearly cannot keep pace, much less operate adaptively and with agility. A good example here is Australia's *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, which did an excellent job of preparing the nation for a more uncertain future.[5] But its emphasis on ensuring the maintenance of a rules-based order with the United States as the main anchor underpinning Indo-Pacific security made it almost instantaneously a backward-looking document. After it was published, it was swiftly surpassed by a range of events that included: the Trump Administration's effective abrogation of a global leadership role; the failure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership; and the emergence of a much more assertive Chinese approach to defence and foreign policy, which was backed up by large reservoirs of investment funding from its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to woo regional actors.

Put simply, we have entered a period that will shape the futures of not just the next generation of Australians but several more to come. As the Lowy Institute's 'Power Index' makes clear, Australia may well be less influential, more vulnerable and poorer in the future than in the past.[6] That is why an honest reassessment of Australia's national interests – who Australians are, what Australia seeks to protect and what hard choices will accomplish that – is also overdue. In foreign policy, it is abundantly clear that simply adapting what has worked before in periods of strategic stability is insufficient. So too are soothing but woolly slogans about 'shared values', or a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. In fact, the

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3   See *Australian Foreign Affairs,* Issue 11, 'The March of Autocracy', February 2021, which is devoted to the topic, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/essay/2021/02/the-march-of-autocracy.

4   For a useful overview of systemic disaster risk for Australia – which predated the COVID-19 pandemic – see the National Resilience Taskforce report on the topic: Department of Home Affairs, *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: the interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster risk*, Australian Government, 2018, accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.aidr.org.au/media/6682/national-resilience-taskforce-profiling-australias-vulnerability.pdf.

5   Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, Australian Government, 23 November 2017, https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/index.html.

6   'Lowy Institute Asia Power Index: 2020 Edition' [website], Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2020, accessed 16 April 2021, https://power.lowyinstitute.org.

UK's Integrated Review essentially abandons the notion of an international rules-based order in favour of a focus on adaptation to meet messy competition,[7] and stresses that, although it will seek to protect and promote democratic values, it will also work equally comfortably with others that do not share them.

This is a good starting point for a more pragmatic Australian approach, which will need to build partnerships with like-minded states that in many respects – especially in continental and maritime South-East Asia – will not be democracies. By the same token, like the theme of flux central to the Integrated Review, the broad challenges Australia faces in the Indo-Pacific mean its defence, foreign and security policies must assume uncertainty. That will require more flexibility, more agility and evaluating risks more strategically. Even the smallest choices can cut across all facets of Australian societal, economic and political life. Indeed, we have already experienced the tip of the iceberg on this. How, for instance, should Australia insulate itself from foreign interference when the main peddlers of disinformation are often already inside the country, their false messages amplified (but generally not devised) by hostile powers?[8] How does Australia ensure an empowered and cyberliterate Australian society without accusations of indoctrination or inadvertently causing Australians to mistrust government further?[9] Who gets to choose what Australia's 'values' are? And how can decision-makers be better held accountable for upholding them consistently?

We can find the need for a clearer focus on consistent and coherent strategic thinking in other arenas too. If it is in Australia's interests to lead the international charge for a robust enquiry into China's and the World Health Organization's handling of COVID-19, it must be prepared for a flurry of opprobrium from Beijing that accuses Canberra of racism and seeks to make an example of Australia by targeting key trade sectors. In other words, Australia needs to be more assured about the potential consequences of its policies and not merely content that they are virtuous.

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7   UK Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, March 2021.

8   On this topic see for instance Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation', *International Affairs*, 2018, 94(5):975–994, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy148; Herb Lin, 'The Existential Threat from Cyber-Enabled Information Warfare' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2019, 75(4):187–196, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1629574; and Susan Morgan, 'Fake news, disinformation, manipulation and online tactics to undermine democracy', *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 2018, 3(1):39–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2018.1462395.

9   See Adam Henschke, Matthew Sussex and Courteney O'Connor, 'Countering foreign interference: election integrity lessons for liberal democracies', *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 2020, 5(2):180–198, https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2020.1797136.

The same issue can be found in the oft-quoted desire to build resilience by diversifying supply chains. This is a significant undertaking that will require a balance between onshoring and boosting capacity in alternative regional and global trading hubs. The onshoring component will necessitate turning cottage industries into manufacturing centres again, with the double-edged sword that while such activities will create jobs they will also be generally low-paid ones (by nature of the need to be globally competitive). Meanwhile, diversifying trading hubs will mean investing in overseas ports, often in nondemocracies. That task alone will be enormous. COVID-19 has taught us that everything can be a strategic resource depending on the circumstances, from elastic and paper for masks to plastic vials and chemical reagents for test kits.

What would an Australian Integrated Review look like? Here it is instructive to examine the UK document, which could provide a useful comparator for a similar Australian exercise. As with most strategies of its type, it is unlikely to be completely successful. In many cases, it does little more than update past rhetorical flourishes from political leaders, alongside thought bubbles about how to best serve British interests. Yet that is also entirely normal when it comes to big-picture policy papers, which are at least partly aspirational in nature and are the products of many hands and agencies. Various iterations of the US National Security Strategy – for instance – have ranged from conservative assessments of the threat landscape facing the US and how to address it, to transformational documents that have sought to recast the way Washington conceptualises threats and opportunities in the first place.[10]

The Integrated Review sits somewhere in the middle between the traditional and the transformative. It explicitly identifies Russia as a potent security threat across all domains of strategic competition.[11] But it also seeks to decouple its approach to Russia from the way it views the People's Republic of China (PRC), which it identifies as an economic and potential strategic competitor.[12] In doing so, it achieves two objectives. Firstly, it distances the UK from potential resets on Russia, from either EU nations or the US. Secondly, it signals that the UK will not play a central role in any arrangements aimed at balancing the PRC. Its Indo-Pacific tilt is largely a commercial rather than a strategic one, brought about by the need to forge new trading partnerships in the aftermath of Brexit.

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10 For a comprehensive assessment of different US National Security Strategy documents see Stanley A Renshon, *National Security in the Obama Administration: reassessing the Bush Doctrine*, Routledge, New York, 2010.

11 UK Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, March 2021.

12 Natasha Kuhrt, 'Why the Integrated Review treats Russia and China differently', *News Centre,* Department of War Studies, Kings College London, 19 March 2021, accessed 16 April 2021, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/why-the-integrated-review-treats-russia-and-china-differently.

Yet, the review clearly anticipates areas for future demand by further advancing Britain's force modernisation process in order to ensure it is the leading non-US military in NATO.[13] It also seeks to beef up investment in space technologies as well as artificial intelligence and STEM (that is science, technology, engineering and mathematics); and it centralises the UK's cyber power, counterintelligence capabilities and its dual-use science and technology research innovation agenda.[14] Further, in pushing a long-term strategic vision for the UK out to 2030, the review establishes a strategic framework for 2025. This is based on the Fusion Doctrine that emerged from the *2018 National Security Capability Review*, which sought to bring national security capabilities together to enhance faster decision-making and smoother, more adaptive policy implementation[15]. The new framework incorporates an Integrated Operating Concept for the UK's armed forces and cross-agency capabilities such as a National Cyber Force, a Situation Centre and a Counterterrorism Operations Centre.[16]

Obviously, an Australian Integrated Review would operate under a different set of geopolitical drivers; rather than Russia, Australia's relationship with a more muscular PRC will clearly provide the most complex set of challenges for decision-makers in the future. But many of the niche capabilities the UK has identified as opportunities to build prosperity also apply to a developed liberal, maritime-trading state such as Australia. So too does the need for more agile and holistic policymaking, where Australia is an outlier in terms of its reluctance to embrace a less siloed approach to defence, security and foreign policy.[17] This is in spite of the fact that many of the challenges it faces will require a much more coordinated approach.

13 UK Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, March 2021.

14 See for instance the comprehensive RUSI analysis on this. 'UK Integrated Review 2021', RUSI commentary and analysis, March–April 2021, accessed 16 April 2021, https://www.rusi.org/projects/uk-integrated-review-2021.

15 UK Government, *National Security Capability Review*, March 2018, accessed 16 April 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf.

16 UK Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a competitive age*, UK Government, March 2021, accessed 16 April 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf.

17 See for instance Ewan Levick, 'The way we think about national security needs to change', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 11 September 2019, accessed April16, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-way-we-think-about-national-security-needs-to-change/.

Broadly then, an Australian Integrated Review could seek to:

- identify areas where it lacks the information to make confident longer-range strategic policy plans
- identify the agencies that will need to work together more closely, in order to respond to particular threats
- address implementation bottlenecks
- develop a coherent strategic plan for the development and deployment of economic, diplomatic and military-security capabilities.

Some examples of what this might include follow.

Enhancing the quality of analysis around strategic trends, both in terms of relative capability assessments as well as integrated analysis of hybrid security threats

Australia currently lacks the capacity to conduct net assessments, which would considerably enhance its ability to plan for future contingencies as well as identify priorities for defence and security capability development. It is instructive that the UK has recently added net assessment to its toolkit for performing long-range trends analysis.

Harmonising Australia's approach to combating cyber-enabled information warfare, as well as nonlinear tactics by hostile actors

These could incorporate a combination of:

- societal capability enhancement (including education and awareness campaigns around points of vulnerability, such as election security, fringe narratives and disinformation campaigns)
- economic and technological capability enhancement (public-private partnerships and targeted investment such as the Defence STarShots program)[18]
- counterintelligence capability enhancement (swifter information sharing on threats will be vital, in spite of Australia's traditional reticence here)
- defence capability enhancement (including clearer strategic planning over when grey-zone threats spill over into the kinetic realm).

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18 Department of Defence, *More, Together: Defence Science and Technology Strategy 2030*, Australian Government, 2020. https://www.dst.defence.gov.au/strategy/star-shots.

Developing a National Strategy Statement

Such a document could identify how to make best use of Australia's core economic, diplomatic and military-security strengths, outline a vision for the next 20 years, and be regularly updated based on rolling strategic trend assessments.

Tying Australia's aid and development goals more centrally to its national interests

With significant investment flowing into the South Pacific subregion from the PRC's ambitious BRI,[19] an Australian Integrated Review should seek to plan how to maximise benefits from Australia's development agenda, recognising that maintaining the same strategic leverage Australia has enjoyed in the past is unlikely to endure without increased investment that maximises national benefit as well as aid outcomes.

A common counterargument here is that any nation smaller than a great power cannot engage in grand strategy, for the simple reason that it lacks the economic, military-security and raw resources required for such a whole-of-society undertaking. But how we understand grand strategy is changing too. Sweden, for instance, has had a society-wide 'Total Defence' concept in place for some time now, which is entirely concerned with the same project we associate with major power grand strategies: mobilising national energies to accomplish a broad overarching set of objectives.[20] Singapore too has what is effectively a grand strategy through its 'pragmatic adaptation' framework for addressing defence, security and foreign policy challenges.[21] Critics might charge that Australia is bigger than Sweden and more democratic than Singapore, which makes a more harmonised approach futile; but that leaves Australia in an especially unhelpful middle power subcategory – a state defined by what it is not, rather than what it is.

A root-and-branch strategic review of our national priorities would add clarity to Australia's strategic thinking. It would also better align Australia's interests with its policies, and join up its defence, foreign and security policy planning. Blessed by abundant natural resources and the stopping power of water, Australia has in the past benefited from its geography and its ability to pick history's winning

19 See for instance Jonathan Pryke, 'The risks of China's ambitions in the South Pacific', *Global China*, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 20 July 2020, accessed 16 April 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/.

20 Gerhard Wheeler, 'North composure: initial observations from Sweden's 2020 Total Defence exercise', *RUSI Commentary*, 3 September 2020, accessed 16 April 2021, https://rusi.org/commentary/northern-composure-initial-observations-swedens-total-defence-2020-exercise.

21 Ang Cheng Guan, 'Singapore's conception of security', in Barry Desker (ed), *Perspectives on the security of Singapore: the first 50 years*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU, Singapore, 2015, pp 1–12.

side. With an era of intense Sino-US competition likely to shape strategic interactions in the Indo-Pacific for the foreseeable future, and with the outcome of that competition unclear, it is even more crucial that Australia develops a better capacity for strategic planning. Above all, the messy future that awaits will reward boldness over comfort zones. It will benefit nations with a clear-eyed agenda about what is to come, rather than a misty-eyed one about what has gone before. Australia should seize this opportunity, not just for renewal but to better understand itself as well.