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Brendan Sargeant

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PO Box 7917 CANBERRA BC ACT 2610 Tel + 61 02 6266 0352 Email cdr.publications@defence.gov.au

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Challenges to the Australian strategic imagination

Brendan Sargeant

Executive summary

In the face of historic changes, Australia needs a larger conception of strategy, a richer discourse and a more searching questioning of the assumptions that underpin the Australian strategic imagination.

Reviewing the major elements of Australian strategic imagination, such as geography, time, technology and partnerships, nostalgia and borders reveals discordant notes, many elements have served us well in the past but may not be fit for the reality we now emerge into.

How are we to live in the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century? This is not first a question of policy or strategy. It is a challenge to strategic imagination. Not only do we need to imagine ourselves into what we might be, but also what the world might be. Is our vision of our future large enough to accommodate and respond to the scale of change that we are seeing?

Introduction

Strategic policy at the national level is a collective endeavour, the work of many people over time. It expresses our collective imagination of who we are and who we are not. In this essay, I discuss aspects of Australia's strategic imagination and some of the challenges it presents for strategic policymaking and strategy. I have been prompted to do this for two reasons. The first is that Australia faces a challenge it has never experienced before – a changing strategic order that has governed the Indo-Pacific for decades occurring in conjunction with a change in the biophysical environment, of which climate change is the most visible manifestation. The second is that the conversation about strategic policy in Australia is narrowly framed and has only begun to comprehend the implications that flow from the major changes now occurring in the Indo-Pacific.

The question we might ask is whether our thinking about strategic policy and strategy is sufficient for the challenge we face as a country. In framing this discussion, I would argue the need for a larger conception of strategy, a richer discourse and a more searching questioning of the assumptions that underpin the Australian strategic imagination and continue to shape our strategic policy and the strategies that it mandates.

This essay is not seeking to develop a new strategic policy. Rather, it looks to identify major elements of Australia's strategic imagination in order to suggest how imagination establishes the framework for debates on strategic policy and shapes strategy. What is presented here is my provisional list, exploratory rather than definitive. I am also conscious that this essay focuses on strategic policy and defence, but a country's strategic imagination extends beyond these domains. My focus on strategy and defence recognises that these are an important part of a larger conversation that questions whether ideas and frameworks that have served us well in the past are fit for the future.

Crises, strategy and imagination

One feature of any crisis is that it highlights a need for change. When this is understood, the question becomes, how should this change occur? What are its costs and gains? How should we understand success? What is failure? Why does success or failure occur? One way of thinking about strategy is to consider it as preparation for a future crisis.¹ Yet, our capacity to envisage and prepare for a future crisis can be constrained by the limits of our strategic imagination, even as the crisis becomes visible and demands a response. My central proposition is that a strategic challenge of any magnitude is first a challenge to imagination. The quality of the imagination that responds to that challenge determines the shape of the strategy that follows. An understanding of the relationship between strategy and imagination can deepen our understanding of what strategy is and how we might assess the utility of strategy in specific circumstances.

What is imagination?

Imagination creates worlds – 'images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.'² Strategy finds its reality and derives its meaning and authority in the world; even as it labours to bring a new world to birth, it works within the sticky reality of the world as it is. It inhabits the world of experience. It is a tool, a process, a pathway. We judge the success or failure of a strategy by

1 I owe this insight to Dr Robbin F Laird.

2 Oxford Dictionary – The full definition in the Australian Shorter Oxford Dictionary is: 1a. mental faculty forming images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses; 2. the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful; 3. the process of imagining.

what it achieves, not by what it is. Our judgements in relation to strategy are utilitarian because the success or failure of strategy is what matters. We are not concerned whether it is beautiful or ugly, elegant or messy – only that it works. Even when the strategy is unproven, the framework for assessment is how it might shape and therefore change the world as it is.

What is imagination in strategy? Where do we find it? How does it become visible? Lawrence Freedman defines strategy as ‘the central political art’.

Strategy is the art of acquiring power; it is the ability to get more out of any given situation that the starting conditions would suggest are possible.³

This definition suggests that strategy has two elements – a desired future state and a process to achieve it. Freedman discusses the contrasting qualities of *bie* and *metis* (strength and cunning) and the contrast between their expression in the characters of Achilles and Odysseus. Odysseus, a ‘man of twists and turns,’ was, as Freedman notes, a kind of a strategist in action. The contrast between Odysseus and Achilles is between cunning and brute force. Freedman notes that brute force was not sufficient to bring the Greeks victory over the Trojans. Odysseus’ cunning employment of the deception of the wooden horse was the decisive factor in victory.⁴

Odysseus’ cunning personality and his creativity represents a type of practical intelligence, a strategic intelligence that could see a path from the present moment through obstacles to the future. Freedman notes that this intelligence is ‘largely intuitive, or at least implicit and at moments of a sudden danger and crisis, this might be all that could be relied upon.’⁵ Freedman notes that some writers were uneasy with Odysseus’ qualities, with the implication that his success was at some level unethical, for this success relied on lies and deception.⁶

Odysseus has the capacity to imagine his way into the future, to see more in any situation than those around him. He possesses a strategic imagination. It is the capacity to reconcile two powerful and often opposing forces to create a path into the future. These forces are experience, manifested in the world as it is, and imagination, manifested in the world as it might be. The act of making strategy seeks to resolve these forces. The resolution, always contingent on future events, is a strategy. Imagination in relation to experience establishes the boundaries for strategy creation. This tension sets the initial conditions out of which strategy emerges as a course of action.

3 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015, p xii.

4 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, pp 23–28.

5 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, p 29.

6 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, pp 29–30.

Countries possess a strategic imagination

A country is an imagined community – it possesses an identity created by the people who live within it, the stories these people embody and tell, both as individuals and communities.⁷ A country is a larger and more complex entity than any individual human being, but as an imagined community, a country does not exist without the people who have created it out of their actions, stories, desires, and their sense of who they are and where they belong. A country will possess a strategic imagination which will have evolved over time in response to the influence of geography, history, culture, and the many other tangible and intangible forces that go to create a community and its vision of itself. A country's strategic imagination is a living thing, dynamic and evolving in contact with the world, and full of contradictions. In those rare moments in a country's history where a genuine choice must be made and action taken, a country's strategic imagination becomes most visible.

A country's strategic imagination develops over time and takes expression in many different forms. No decision, no document or plan can exist independently of the context established by past decisions or of desires concerning the future. The artefacts of strategy are documents, plans and decisions. Some are more central than others, and the degree of centrality may change over time. A strategic imagination establishes itself and becomes visible in a pattern of decisions that build a framework for current and future decisions. To consider the artefacts of strategy as acts of imagination enables us to ask questions such as: what is excluded and for what reason? What are the constraints that it assumes and what are those that it has not understood or been aware of? What has been forgotten or not seen? What would other perspectives reveal?

The quality of a country's strategic imagination may be judged by how it responds to the world – the space it creates for action. Political leadership embodies or gives expression to a country's strategic imagination and orchestrates its realisation in policy and action. The gap between the latent potential in a country in terms of possible futures and the capacity of leadership to create and deliver a strategy to harness this potential is one way by which we might judge performance at the highest levels of political leadership.

National crises that give insight into Australia's strategic imagination include but are not limited to settlement and the war of Indigenous dispossession, exploration, Federation, the First World War, the Second World War, Korea and Vietnam, and the post-Vietnam strategic reorientation. Each crisis was a moment of discontinuity that required an act of imagination large enough to envisage a

7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 2006.

future different from the continuities mandated by the past, and powerful enough to generate a strategy sufficient to chart a path towards this future. Each was a moment of transition. Each represented an enormous challenge because responding meant understanding and overcoming the forces of continuity and all that they represent in tradition, culture, practice, and established and settled institutional relationships.

In the response to crises, we can see Australia's strategic imagination at work, how it shapes understanding and the broad framework for responding to crises. In a crisis, the strategic imagination's contours become visible. We can begin to get a sense of its architecture, and we can begin to understand the nature of the challenge to imagination presented by a major crisis.

The contours of the Australian strategic imagination

But what does the Australian strategic imagination look like? What are its contours? How and where does it become visible? For purposes of analysis, I have extracted and discussed what I consider to be major elements. I do so with two caveats. First, a strategic imagination is an integrating force. Different elements relate to each other to create a whole greater than the parts. It is, to use a metaphor, a living and dynamic reality that changes as it both shapes and is shaped by the world. Second, my list is provisional, a reflection of my views and experience. I expect some agreement, but also different perspectives and areas of emphasis as others bring their own frames of reference.

Fear of abandonment

In his history of Australian foreign policy in the twentieth century, *Fear of Abandonment*, Alan Gyngell explores how fear of abandonment was embedded in the Australian imagination from the earliest moments of settlement and has shaped our attempts to influence and manage the larger strategic systems in which we participate.⁸ The tension that Australian strategic policy has sought to respond to is that of being a nation in command of its own destiny, while at the same time needing and wanting the support and protection of larger powers. The attempt to resolve this tension has been one of the major drivers of Australian foreign policy and it has shaped strategic and defence policy decisively. With the rise of an authoritarian China that seeks regional hegemony, and a United States that is diminishing in power and influence, we are seeing the emergence of a strategic environment that is new. In the not-too-distant future and for the first time in our history, we may, as Australians, find ourselves in a strategic environment where we may not be able to assume the protection of a

8 Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne, 2017.

friendly hegemon who broadly shares our values and outlook on the world. Or we may find ourselves in a strategic environment where China has not been able to manage effectively the stresses created by its economic growth and domestic political management.

There are many possible futures, but a future that has strong continuities with our historical experience seems increasingly unlikely. The capacity to envisage a future where we may have to chart a more independent and lonelier course, where we may have to exercise leadership and act with less support from a friendly hegemon, or where we need respond to a world where the strategic order is more fragmented, will be a major challenge to our strategic imagination. At the heart of this challenge is overcoming, or at minimum learning to live with either the reality, or potential reality of abandonment. This has profound implications for our diplomacy, our relationships with our neighbours, our strategic and security role in the Indo-Pacific, our defence, and our capacity to manage relations with great powers and the tensions between them. These are major policy and strategic challenges, but what lies behind them is a challenge to Australia's strategic imagination.

Geography in the Australian strategic imagination

Geography haunts Australian strategy and will continue to do so. The role of geography in the Australian strategic imagination is very complex. One way of thinking about Australian strategic policy is to consider it as a meditation over decades on the relationship between time, space and security. Our strategic geography is a source of enduring security and forms one of the pillars of the Australian strategic imagination. It has shaped thinking about defence policy and strategy for decades, and it has established the framework for understanding the nature of Australia's defence challenge. For Australia, geography has created time and space – time to prepare and space to exhaust potential adversaries. The assumption that our geography is a source of security that gives us time and space has flowed through to planning cultures, decisions concerning capability priorities, levels of defence expenditure, and logistics and industry engagement and policy, to give some examples.

Time

One salient feature of the contemporary strategic environment is that time is a diminishing resource. To understand and recognise this is a major challenge to our strategic imagination because it requires a profound repositioning of relationship between the defence systems that we have built, the policy frameworks that sustain them, and the reality of a strategic environment that does not necessarily support those frameworks. To rethink the role of geography in Australian defence requires a profound reimagining of not only our relationship

with the continental landmass, but also a relationship with our near region. At the heart of this is a need to reimagine the role of time in our strategic imagination. It is not the abundant resource that it once was. This is first a challenge to imagination because it requires the need to imagine a world different to the one that we have assumed. The strategic policy challenge becomes one of creating more time – to prepare and to respond.

Strategic space

Australian strategic policy and strategy have always grappled with the profound influence of geography as both a constraint and an opportunity. Australia's geography provides challenges in communications, logistics and force disposition. From a strategic perspective, it provides both the luxury and the challenge of distance. In a strategic environment of reducing strategic space, the challenge for Australian strategy is to determine which force disposition and design is going to provide the most flexibility and embody the best recognition of the reality of our strategic environment.⁹

In this context, how we conceptualise our strategic geography in the context of a changing strategic order is a challenge to strategic imagination at many levels and in many ways. We live in a maritime environment, but on a continent sized island. Australia has a history of sending expeditionary forces to other parts of the world as part of a larger alliance or coalition engagement on the basis that Australian security is often best served by participation and maintenance of larger global strategic systems from which Australia benefits. Yet Australia is also an island continent, which brings with it a concomitant obligation to provide for its defence, but also creates a sense of security because any invading adversary would face almost insurmountable obstacles.

But is this changing? We have always thought about geography as providing us with space. But in a world where space as a strategic resource is diminishing, do we need to reconceptualise our strategic geography to take us beyond, for example, the demarcation of continent versus archipelago, or do we need to see that geographical space as a single continuous environment? In this context, recent developments in Australian strategic environment have emphasised the need to focus on our near region as an arena for strategic contestation.¹⁰ This has given a renewed prominence to the question of our strategic geography, our capacity for self-reliance and the terms of our participation in larger regional and

9 For a discussion on Australia's reducing strategic space, see Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith, 'Australia's management of strategic risk in the new era', *Strategic Insights*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, December 2017.

10 Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2020.

global strategic systems. How we understand and conceptualise our geography is an imaginative challenge before it becomes a challenge for policy and strategy.

Technology and partnerships

Technology and alliances promise the potential to liberate defence capability from the constraints of geography. For decades, Australian strategic policy has sought to increase defence capability through technology and partnerships. This is one of the major ways in which the constraints and opportunities of geography might be either mitigated or leveraged. Australia is now in an environment where technological advantage is reducing. Part of this is a function of size – Australia is too small to be a major technology provider, even to itself. More broadly, the technology advantage that Australia gained through its relationship with United States is diminishing because the gap between United States technological preeminence and that of its rivals is narrowing.

We are also seeing an environment where the alliance, other partnerships, and other forms of international cooperation are likely to be more conditional and contingent upon specific circumstances. This challenges those elements of our strategic imagination that ground Australian strategic policy in a relatively enduring alliance and in partnership arrangements that have been a major feature of our historical experience. Partnerships, including the alliance, that are more conditional means that conceptions of the value of those partnerships will be more contingent on circumstances. At one level, this has always been the case – partnerships are a means to an end, not an end in themselves – but the public rhetoric around partnerships, particularly the alliance, is often sentimental and at variance with this reality. Developing a conception of the alliance and other partnerships that embodies this contingency and reflects the volatility of the Indo-Pacific strategic environment is a challenge for Australia strategic imagination because it reduces the sense of security and certainty that alliances and partnerships can provide.

The forces discussed above are, in their totality, changing our strategic environment in fundamental ways. In doing so, they are changing our relationship to and understanding of the strategic significance of geography. This is a challenge to strategic imagination because it embodies a challenge to our sense of our relationship with our strategic environment and the expression of that relationship in policy and action.

Borders

Australia is a sparsely populated country. One theme that runs through Australia's strategic history and which is a feature of the Australian strategic imagination has been an anxiety about the attractiveness of Australia to potential invaders

along with a lack of confidence about the capacity to defend the continent. After the experience of the Second World War, where there was a genuine fear of a Japanese invasion, and where the Australian mainland was attacked, there was a concerted effort to populate or perish. We have seen debates about what the desirable population for Australia might be, and one element of this debate has been the relationship between population size and security.¹¹

One area where we have seen a recent strong focus on policy has been in the development of the border. One element of Australia's strategic imagination is that as an island continent we have the capacity to establish a hard border and exclude intrusions from the world. The COVID crisis has reinforced this perception. Yet if one feature of our strategic imagination is that geography brings security, another, perhaps contradictory feature is that participation in the world brings prosperity. This contradiction – between the desire for isolation because the world is threatening, and the need for participation in global systems because they bring prosperity – is most clearly embodied in policies associated with the establishment and maintenance of the Australian border.

In this age of globalisation, of virtual reality, of shared space that does not reflect the demarcations of time and distance and physical boundary, the border can and does move. The border can exist in different places and in different modes at the same time. It is to our peril that, as individuals, because of government fiat, we may find ourselves on the other side. Our relationship with the border, and therefore to ourselves and our community, is not only defined by where we are, but also by who we are. Who we are may also shift with the community's conception of its identity and who it will accept as being a part of it. The status of our identity has become increasingly contingent on social, political and technological forces that we as individuals cannot control.

One consequence of current policy has been an enormous expansion of conceptions of potential threat and an increasing anxiety about security. Current policy has focused on trying to maintain a hard border and governments have developed a plethora of legislation and seen enormous growth in intelligence capabilities that in their totality seek to define and manage this expanded conception of the border. Much of this thinking is embodied in the concept of the 'Extended State', a set of ideas that argue for a very expansive conception of

11 Arthur A Calwell, in a Ministerial Statement in the House of Representatives on Thursday, 2 August 1945, commenced his speech as follows: 'If Australians have learned one lesson from the Pacific War now moving to a successful conclusion, it is surely that we cannot continue to hold our island continent for ourselves and our descendants unless we greatly increase our numbers. We are but 7,000,000 people and we hold 3,000,00 square miles of this earth's surface... much development and settlement have yet to be undertaken. Our need to undertake it is urgent and imperative if we are to survive.' Arthur A Calwell, *Immigration – Government Policy: Ministerial Statement*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1945. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2657258408>

security and a commensurate expansion of the state's security role into almost every aspect of national and social life.¹²

We have expanded the scope and reach of security in policy discourses. We have made border security a primary manifestation of sovereignty, notwithstanding the reality that sovereignty is traded every day in our interactions in the global community as we seek national benefit or to maximise our economic and geostrategic position. We have also seen the development and implementation of border administration arrangements which in their totality serve to isolate Australia and in the reality of implementation are cruel. It is not obvious that strategic policy has been able to reconcile the fundamentally optimistic imperatives of openness to the world with the pessimism and fear that drives a hardening of the border. Are we seeing in the development of border policies and the associated expansion of intelligence capability a failure of strategic imagination at both political and bureaucratic levels?

Nostalgia

Nostalgia, in its sentimental attachment to and overvaluing of the past, its refusal or inability to understand contemporary realities, its refusal to respond to the future on its own terms, is a failure of imagination. One feature of the contemporary conversation on strategic policy is a strong thread of nostalgia that runs through it. Two examples will suffice. The first is the prominence given to Five Eyes arrangements in the public discourse. The Five Eyes origins in a set of intelligence sharing arrangements and a convenient nomenclature for identifying a particular set of shared strategic interest deriving from the Cold War, is now being positioned as a major international architecture, with proposals to extend it into other spheres of cooperation such as economic policy and strategic diplomatic interventions.¹³ This makes limited sense in terms of the practical reality of policymaking across international boundaries. Economic and political interests are divergent and countries for domestic political reasons or economic imperative will make decisions in their own interests, often at the cost

12 A discussion of the idea of the extended state was presented in a speech by Michael Pezzullo AO on 13 October 2020, 'Security as a Positive and Unifying Force'. This important speech repays close and careful reading. Available as embedded video and as a transcript via the Department of Home Affairs website: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/news-media/speeches/2020/13-october-security-as-a-positive-and-unifying-force>

13 For a discussion on possible future options for Fives Eyes, see William A Stoltz, 'A 2020 vision for Five Eyes: new structures for new challenges', *National Security College Policy Options Paper*, Australian National University, December 2020, no. 16 <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/publication/18469/2020-vision-five-eyes-new-structures-new-challenges>; and Simon Benson, 'Five Eyes expanded to focus on economic pact', *The Australian*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/five-eyes-expanded-to-focus-on-economic-pact/news-story/31ee5e37f1942a8188535d4f7585daa1>.

of partners. The strategic value of the Five Eyes arrangements resides in its focus on intelligence which provides goal clarity and focus.

The second is the ANZAC mythology. Others have discussed how recent Australian governments have sought to establish the ANZAC experience as a foundational myth in the development of Australian national identity.¹⁴ But the reality of the modern Australian Defence Force (ADF) is that it is a complex, managerially sophisticated, and technologically advanced force led and operated by skilled professionals. The ADF is embedded in and draws capability from larger national systems, including the Australian Public Service. With the ADF in recent years we have seen the development of an operationally capable force able to work independently, but drawing capability from larger strategic systems, in particular the US alliance system.

However, the context within which the ADF is discussed in the public sphere is volatile. What stays unresolved and represents an increasing tension is the gap between what the ADF is and the continuing ANZAC mythology that surrounds it. The myth of the Digger is of a self-sufficient warrior, sceptical of authority, bonded to his (and they are always male) mates and ready to sacrifice his life for his mates. He embodies the Australian virtues, and his lineage can be seen in the 'Australian Legend' described by the historian Russell Ward.¹⁵ His monument is the War Memorial, which a former director, Brendan Nelson, has on many occasions said is where the soul of the nation resides. This mythologising is backward looking and seeks to create a glorious past and project it into the future. This conception of the ADF, arguably an element of the Australian strategic imagination, perhaps blinds us to the reality of what the ADF is and the nature of the work that it does. The ADF that Australia requires in the future is likely to be very different to the one that has served in the past. To develop this ADF to meet the scale of potential future challenges is not just a capability development task, but a challenge to Australia's strategic imagination. It involves moving beyond the ANZAC mythology to an understanding of what the ADF is, and what it can and cannot do in Australia's emerging strategic environment.

The Indo-Pacific challenge

The Indo-Pacific is in a period of transition as great powers assert their prerogatives and seek to negotiate a new, potentially post-American, strategic order. It is a system where the potential for conflict or other problems is high.

14 James Brown, *Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2014; Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, "'It was really moving, mate': The Gallipoli pilgrimage and sentimental nationalism in Australia", *Australian Historical Studies*, 2007, 38(129): 141–151.

15 Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1958.

Many states are fragile or have political systems that are in transition or are finding it difficult to manage the challenges that they face. It is an area where the impact of climate change will be felt, potentially in future disasters, along with major changes to regional environments that will affect the food and economic security of major populations.¹⁶ From a strategic perspective, there is a mismatch between the emerging economic order and the geostrategic order that has been in place since the post–Second World War settlements. Arguably, the institutions of governance for the management of the Indo-Pacific strategic and economic order are not yet mature or capable of delivering the strategic stability to provide assurance around strategic and economic decision-making.

Learning to live in the Indo-Pacific will also be a major domestic challenge to Australia and will reshape some of our political and social institutions in ways that are difficult to foretell. In recent decades, the alliance system, technological fluency, the operational capacity of the ADF, and the relatively benign strategic environment, has meant that Australia has not had to face the reality of diminishing size and power. The focus of current debate is China, but the question of Australia's relative power is a much larger discussion about the nature of the strategic environment more broadly.

How are we to live in the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century? This is not first a question of policy or strategy. It is a challenge to strategic imagination, to the ability to conceive of a different order and a different Australia within that order. In time this challenge will become the challenge for policy and to the strategies that we might pursue to give expression to that policy. But first it is a challenge to imagination, and this is where the quality of imagination is vital. Not only do we need to imagine ourselves into what we might be, but also what the world might be. Is our vision of our future large enough to accommodate and respond to the scale of change that we are seeing? How does our vision of the future relate to what I have described as enduring tensions in our country's strategic imagination? How will the tension between what we imagine and what we experience play out? How do we ensure we do not concede too much to the world of experience and the forces of continuity and therefore set the conditions for future strategic failure?

The world is not more complex than it used to be. Every generation faces its own challenges in the world in which it lives. The achievement of the post–Second World War era was the building of institutions and the establishment of policy frameworks that strengthened Australia's capacity to manage its

16 Defence White Papers from 2009 through to the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* have referred to these challenges with varying emphasis.

strategic interests both globally and regionally in a time of great change and in ways that strengthened our prosperity and strategic position. Alan Gyngell has shown that this work displayed deep continuities with a longer historical tradition in foreign policy.¹⁷ We saw a response to the world that, while observing the continuities that have underpinned Australia's foreign policy over decades, also recognised and responded to a world that was in many respects new. It was in this period that we saw the establishment of the ANZUS alliance, the building of international institutions, and the opening of new and exciting trade relationships with countries such as Japan. As the Second World War receded and with the legacy of the Korean and Vietnam wars becoming visible, we saw a much more aggressive assertion of Australian national identity in defence policy that came to fruition in the 1990s.¹⁸

Perhaps the deep purpose of strategic policy is to help create Australia by charting a future and giving meaning to the past. Strategic policy and its expression in action through strategy builds national identity; national identity validates strategy. Yet our language can lack authenticity. We use terms such as 'creative middle power' to describe ourselves – or we 'punch above our weight.' These are clichés, a tired rhetoric designed to mobilise political support and unlock resources, provide talking points for politicians and officials. Our policy and strategic documents repeatedly reference the 'rules-based global order' and of the US Alliance as the foundation of our security.¹⁹ We avoid the arduous task of self-creation and instead deploy these clichés as a shield against our anxieties. Yet the Indo-Pacific asks us: how long will this rhetoric, increasingly nostalgic in tone, make sense?

The limitations of experience

Two decades of ADF deployments to the Middle East and Afghanistan has built operational capability but perhaps at the cost of narrowing our ability to think strategically about our interests. This has been recognised, and recent policy statements such as the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* have begun a process of reorientation to the Indo-Pacific as the area of our primary strategic concern. There have been the beginnings of an outreach towards other strategic relationships in our region, notably Japan and India, though this work is slow and will be very challenging. We have struggled to develop a confident position in relation to China, and we have perhaps been more optimistic than we should have been about China's strategic ambition. This argues for a much more

17 Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*.

18 This story is charted through Defence White Papers from 1976 through to 2000.

19 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2016.

agile policy and a much more aggressive approach to the construction and management of our strategic interests. Others have framed this in terms of a stronger, more geographically centred regional focus in our policy and activity that might manifest itself in a much greater engagement with Indonesia and other South East Asian countries. I agree with this approach, but I would frame it also in terms of a much richer imaginative engagement with the Indo-Pacific more broadly, with a recognition that even as we have our own distinctive Australian identity, we are part of this community and that the nature of the community also shapes our identity and the way in which we might live in this world. Such an imaginative engagement might lead us to see what we might learn from the strategic traditions across the many Indo-Pacific countries if we allow them to challenge our strategic imagination. We might also question why, as a community, we have in recent years made border protection the overriding policy and institutional imperative for the construction of our national security system, when the much larger and more strategically pressing issue is how we engage with the Indo-Pacific during a period of major change to the global strategic order? We might ask whether this preoccupation with the border constitutes the major contemporary failure of our strategic imagination.

At the beginning of this essay, I wrote about Odysseus, the Man of Twists and Turns, a 'complicated man' as Emily Wilson in her recent translation of the *Odyssey* describes him,²⁰ a man not trusted in the thinking of some subsequent schools of strategy because he seemed to embody deception.²¹ I would prefer to describe him as an imaginative, but pragmatic realist. Thirty years ago, Australia was the largest and richest country in our region. In this sense Australia was like Achilles, who could rely on force to impose his will. He did not need much imagination. Perhaps Australia in the future needs to be more like Odysseus.

The work of policy, an art of desire, is to say what the world might be. The work of strategy is to create the path towards that world, responding to all the known and unknown impediments that are likely to emerge. Policy lives mostly in the world of imagination; strategy lives mostly in the world of experience. The art of the policy maker and the strategist is to bring imagination into the world of experience and through this to create strategy that can change the world. In times of great change, the challenge is to imagination, for continuity in strategy is likely to lead to failure. Sir Arthur Tange, an important figure in Australian foreign and defence policymaking and strategy, once said that strategy without

20 Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey*, W.W. Norton & Company, London and New York, 2017, p 1.

21 For an illuminating discussion of Odysseus' ambiguous reputation in the ancient world and in the present day, see Madeline Miller, 'False Counsellor', *TLS*, 12 October 2018. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/odysseus-madeline-miller/>

resources is no strategy. In my professional life those words were a touchstone. My argument now is that as we learn to live in the Indo-Pacific, strategy without imagination is sterile.

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