

The Looking Glass

Centre for Defence Research

Issue 1, September 2021

Australian strategy in an uncertain era: time for tough questions

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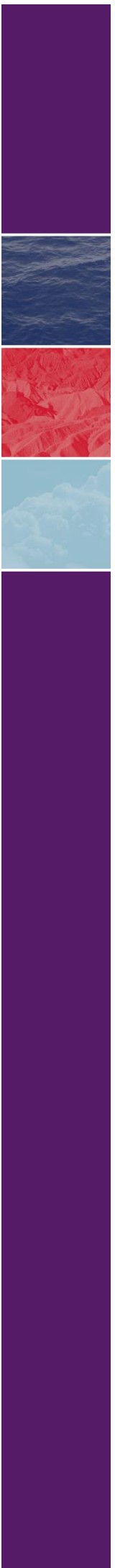
The need to [think and act more strategically](#) is now widely seen as being fundamental to safeguard Australia's future sovereignty, prosperity and independence. Achieving this will be difficult. It will involve navigating myriad external, internal and transnational threats, many of which are not even visible yet. But Australia's region has already transformed away from a system of rules underpinned by US power towards a more chaotic order in which competition is endemic, and the risk of conflict is much more likely. Ultimately this will be transformative for Australian strategic policy by necessity rather than by choice.

This brief – the first in a new monthly series – tackles the need to ask tough questions about what Australia wants, how it might seek to obtain it, and what choices will be necessary to realise its objectives. We argue that Australia needs to more clearly identify its national interests, and honestly appraise its weaknesses and strengths. In order to develop a clear roadmap for Australian strategy in an uncertain era, we then propose an Australian Strategy and Security Review, similar to other best-practice processes recently undertaken by our democratic friends and partners. We believe this will complement recent SSN acquisition decisions under the auspices of [AUKUS](#), as well as the opportunities for [technology sharing](#) that closer cooperation between like-minded nations.

Australia's delicate strategic policy dance

Australia's strategic policy debate can sometimes resemble a dance where many of the participants are earnestly trying to appear confident without embarrassing themselves, despite the fact that no-one is completely sure what the moves are. Because such discussions are often designed to appeal to important decisionmakers, they tend to be cautious, deferential, and risk averse.

This is understandable. After all, proposing solutions to highly complex problems is much trickier than carefully inspecting and admiring them from all angles. And the tried-but-tested approach of building on established truths and genuflecting toward precedent ultimately can and does enhance Australia's strategic outlook.



But the converse can also be true. Established patterns of thought can prompt any number of heroic assumptions about the 'correct' policy settings to adopt. A common feature of today's granular deep-dives, academic debates, and think-tank punditry is to propose 'new' ways to frame or contextualise Australia's strategic choices, despite having little to actually make them novel. At worst this can make them appear naïve and unworkable: strategic policy reduced to a series of impressive sounding yet jingoistic slogans.

The purpose of these briefs

In these briefs we deliberately try to avoid either approach. Our objective is to stimulate debate, not to be disruptive for the sake of it. We seek an outcomes-focused approach to best serve our national strategic objectives, offering up ideas with a freedom that the policymaking community often lacks. Each month we will tackle a 'wicked' problem affecting Australia's strategic policy choices. Some of them will be familiar. Others will be less well understood, either in Australia or internationally. And still others will examine future risks that require clear-eyed thinking now, even while they are still over the horizon.

We begin with a logical starting point: asking tough questions about what Australian strategy is, what it seeks to achieve, and how it intends to accomplish its objectives. An important observation here is that there is little overall clarity to Australia's strategic direction. This is despite making good progress towards preparing Australia for an international order that is more tumultuous (as the [2017 Foreign Policy White Paper](#) does, for example); identifying the parameters for Australia's Defence priorities (encapsulated in the [2020 DSU](#)); and how to posture the ADF (as detailed in the [2020 Force Structure Plan](#)).

Australian strategy as a nation-building opportunity

We appreciate the difficulties involved in making middle power grand strategy. More than that, we understand policy documents are aspirational, the products of many hands, and are frequently overtaken by events. But we nonetheless argue that the pace of change makes formulating a more cohesive sense of Australia's strategic mission a pressing task. One reason for this is that the contemporary threat environment routinely crosses conventional external-domestic boundaries, and sometimes leapfrogs them altogether. This makes great power competition and change in our geopolitical backyard not just a national security problem, but a whole-of-nation one as well.

A second reason is that more agencies with multiple different competencies will be part of high-level strategic policy discussions, especially since 'grey zone' threats are increasingly becoming normalised. At the same time as the ADF will encounter traditional military-security confrontation, we will also be required to protect Australians from state actors using proxies to sabotage critical infrastructure; and from efforts to undermine confidence in our democracy, our society and our economy. Attempts to influence and constrain our choices, to reflexively control our decision-making, and to polarise our politics from within are already occurring. So far our countermeasures have been suboptimal, which is at least partly due to siloed decision-making and information gathering.

Encompassing cyber security, information warfare, espionage, lawfare, coercive statecraft, geoeconomics, and conventional warfare, the contemporary threat environment necessitates a cross-domain strategy that is agile, and yet also consistent. This is no mean feat in a seemingly ever-changing threat environment. But a coherent and above all *adaptable* Australian strategic framework is required to bring a sense of purpose, reassurance and direction to government, as well as to Australian civil society. Given that

how nations respond to crises and perturbations is also a marker of their unity and strength, making such an effort is an important nation-building opportunity.

Back to basics: the building blocks of national strategic policy

The first step in outlining a new Australian strategic framework is to ask some basic but critical questions about the nature and scope of Australian strategy:

- What are Australia's national interests?
- What role does Australia seek to play in global and regional affairs?
- What capabilities are required to protect Australia and realise its ambitions?

Each of these naturally overlap, yet that should not preclude us from seeking clear answers. Doing so is crucial because our interests and objectives often tend to be assumed rather than selected on the basis of evidence. For instance, should we define our interests broadly or narrowly? Either path has implications for the shape of Australian strategic policy, as well as the resources required to deliver on it.

Defining our interests and objectives also means assessing them honestly rather than conflating them with bombastic narratives about values. This has long been a problem in strategic policy formulation. For one thing it can lead to overreach when values are relied on too heavily as force multipliers or scare away potential partners who do not endorse them. Likewise, defending 'values' can range from tokenistic efforts (like sending strongly worded letters to rule-breakers) to counterproductive ones (like waging war against a more powerful adversary). Finally, a values-based strategic policy opens states up to charges of hypocrisy whenever they act in contravention of them: for instance, by not abiding by the same human rights principles that they preach to others; by using trade or aid for strategic purposes; or by using military capabilities to safeguard critical national interests.

This is not to say that values are unimportant – on the contrary, they are core to our democracy – but it is crucially important to distinguish between sociological questions about what Australia is and what it stands for, with national security policy questions about the types of interests we need to defend.

The second logical step after defining Australia's interests, objectives and capabilities is to examine how to design and implement a whole-of-nation strategic policy. Such a document would need to identify key points of strength in Australia's defence, diplomacy and economy, as well as the tasks necessary to bring about a more coherent national plan of action. We have in mind here a similar process to the [UK Integrated Review](#) of Security, Defence and Foreign Policy, developed for Australian conditions. An Australian Strategy and Security Review might follow a pillar-based concept similar to that pursued by [Singapore](#), which encompasses military, civil, economic, social, digital and psychological defence components. Or it could be looser, such as the Swedish distinction between military and civil arenas, as outlined in its 2021-2025 [Total Defence](#) concept.

One of the benefits of learning from others will be the ability to look at how Australia can examine the threats and opportunities it faces. New ways to understand strategic risks in relation to the rise of China, for example, might enable more confident decision-making if Australia were able to develop its own capability to perform [net assessment](#). By the same token, finding new ways to combat information operations from hostile actors such as Russia could potentially be assisted by standing up a [sovereign counter-hybrid fusion cell](#). This would provide more nuanced pathways for Australia to deal with the challenge of foreign interference. It would also turn Australia into a knowledge broker, able to share its

experiences with both vulnerable nations in the region, and amongst its partners across the Five Eyes and Quad networks.

Conclusions

Australia is at a crossroads in its strategic destiny. It faces powerful forces competing for influence in what it has traditionally understood as its immediate sphere of geopolitical interest. These forces are capable of reaching into societies – especially democratic ones – to manipulate their resources and preferences in a way that strategic planners have not previously had to respond to. As we have argued here, continuity is a false comfort in the face of these challenges. If Australia is to preserve its enviable security and prosperity, we need to start adapting to new realities more swiftly and thinking much more strategically than we have needed to in the past. In that context, asking tough questions about our interests and our objectives is not something we should shy away from. On the contrary, it offers a unique opportunity to develop a coherent Australian strategic concept that prepares us to meet tomorrow's threats today.

