DANGEROUS PROXIMITY

The collapse of Australia's
defences in a contested Asia

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Modern Australia is the product of the first truly global conflict. The Seven Years' War, fought between a British-Prussian-led coalition and a French-Austrian-Spanish-led coalition, raged across Europe and North and South America, and in Asia and Africa, between 1756 and 1763. When hostilities ended, Europe's balance of power had been transformed and a new system of imperialism had risen. Empire was no longer about trade; it was about territory. Colonies would be garrisoned, and taxed heavily to pay for the privilege. During the war, Britain had seized some of France's and Spain's colonies in North America and Asia, its success demonstrating how potentially vulnerable its own overseas possessions were. Only a dominant Royal Navy could knit the far-flung Empire together, and to be dominant it needed a global string of bases. Australia, at the

hinge of the Indian and Pacific oceans, was chosen as such a base.

Before the British, no empire had shown the slightest interest in invading the great southern land. Not Java's Majapahit kingdom (1293–1500s), nor China's maritime-minded Yuan (1279–1368) or Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, nor the Spanish or the Dutch adventurers who found its coasts long before James Cook. The strategic value of Australia only became apparent with the complete transformation of power politics wrought by the Seven Years' War. Before the advent of the British Admiralty's truly global planning, Australia's indigenous inhabitants had benefited from a unique geopolitical trifecta. The coasts of their continent closest to the rest of the world looked barren and unremittingly hostile to potential settlers, traders and invaders. Their continent was so big that to find the lush, inviting south-eastern coastlines would require prodigious sailing skills and determination. And compared to Australia's northern and western coasts, the islands of South-East Asia were much more enticing: they were laden with spices and precious metals, and were home to the world's most enterprising maritime traders.

The British were also the last empire to contemplate invading Australia. Despite Australia's periodic scares in the nineteenth century about American, French, German and Russian activities in its environs, none of them had even the most rudimentary designs on the continent. Imperial Japan invaded Australia's mandate territories of Papua and New Guinea in 1942, from where it bombed northern Australia and infiltrated some of its ports, but it never seriously

considered invading its sovereign territory.

To observers from the world's more conflict-prone regions, the security Australia has enjoyed sits anomalously with its obsession with its own defence. The reason for this is the enduring Australian anxiety about our mismatch between numbers and territory. We have always felt we are too small a population to defend such a vast landmass and such a long coastline. But in the two centuries since the last invasion, Australians have never felt insecure for long enough to change that equation. Neither our immigration policies nor our defence budgets have permitted the sort of sustained demographic or military expansion that would make us feel more secure in our ability to protect ourselves from sustained attack.

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Yet for a nation that doubts its ability to defend its territory, Australia has been remarkably willing to send its soldiers overseas to fight. It is *because* Australia can't protect itself that it has always extended its security interests far beyond its coastlines, from South Africa at the time of Federation to Iraq and Syria today. Australia's strategists have believed that the safety of their indefensible continent depends on a favourable global and regional configuration of power. Australia is safest when the world's rivalries are playing out far from its shores, and has always feared that a resolution in favour of

its allies' challengers could bring unwanted attention to its own surrounds. In the nineteenth century, when the most powerful countries in the world were jockeying for supremacy in Europe, none of Britain's rivals had the capacity or the motivation to seize its antipodean colonies. In the late twentieth century, the superpowers competed around the rimlands of the Eurasian supercontinent, leaving the Soviet Union little capacity to make trouble south of the equator.

For more than a century, Australians have fought and died abroad to help preserve a global power configuration that consigns their homeland to the status of a strategic backwater. Our calculations of when and where to become involved in war have followed the imperatives of our English-speaking allies: first Britain, then the United States. There have been two rationales for this, one prudential, one geopolitical. The logic of the prudential alliance operates on an insurance metaphor: if we consistently pay our premium by fighting alongside our larger ally, this ally will help us in our times of need. The logic of the geopolitical alliance reasons that as long as our larger ally remains the most powerful maritime power in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific, no hostile power can muster the sea control to launch an attack on Australia; that any diminution of our ally's global power will endanger its reassuring naval dominance in our sea approaches; and that therefore our ally's power is a value for which Australia is willing to fight. So far, so good. But a strategy dependent on everyone else looking the other way is vulnerable to those sudden shifts in wealth and technology that drive history and reorder the world's distribution of power.

Is Australia worthy of attack?

Canberra's attentiveness to global power configurations has not absolved it from the task of attending to the defence needs of the Australian continent. Our pervasive anxiety about the dynamism, difference and poverty of our Asian neighbours has made Australians much more fearful and defence-minded than New Zealanders. Despite our reliance on powerful allies and our distance from global rivalries, Australians harbour a deep dread that one day we might be left on our own to deal with an aggressive Asian neighbour. So planning for our own defence, despite concerns about the inadequacy of our military capabilities – and at times to the irritation of our allies, when our approach was at odds with theirs – has been a major preoccupation of Australian governments since before Federation.

Over a century of planning has seen the rise and fall of a series of Australian defence doctrines, but all have worked on three assumptions about Australia and its neighbourhood.

First, Australia is difficult to attack effectively – its major population centres, economic heartlands and government infrastructure are hard to strike and occupy. Australia has "strategic depth" unlike that of any other country on earth, in that an attack that comes from its northern or western approaches would have to cross thousands of kilometres of uninhabited and inhospitable territory before reaching its goal of the continent's south-eastern corner. A direct attack on Australia's south-eastern coastline faces no less daunting logistical challenges: water-borne attack forces are vulnerable to defensive

action by opposing navies and to shore-based firepower. Any hostile country intending to mount a direct amphibious attack on Australia's south-eastern coast would need to establish sea control and command of the air, while suppressing shore-based defence systems, an almost impossible task in waters thousands of kilometres from possible bases of resupply.

Second, Australia is not valuable enough to justify the effort and cost of invasion. Countries are invaded most often because they are regarded as strategically or economically valuable, either in themselves or as a component of a rival's power. Australia's territory and ports have been useful to its two major allies: to Britain during the apogee of its empire-building, and to the United States in World War II and during the nuclear age for its ground stations at Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape. But none of their rivals envisaged an equivalent role for Australia in their own strategic objectives, or regarded Australia as particularly vital to Britain's or America's maintenance of power. And while Australia is a major producer of minerals, energy and food, these resources are freely available on global markets. The staggering difficulty of invading and occupying Australia far exceeds the possible economic benefits that would accrue from doing so.

Third, Australia is a difficult opponent to size up. Its fighting forces are small, but highly trained and generally well-equipped. Having been involved in overseas conflict for the past fifteen years, they are battle-hardened, and cognisant of the most up-to-date

military doctrine. They have access to a global intelligence capacity through the "Five Eyes" partnership of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Also, Australia's strategic doctrine has a built-in "scalability", meaning that long-term threats can over time be met with a build-up to much more capable forces. Then there is the question of its ally, the United States, with which it has a mutual defence treaty. The treaty is vague on the circumstances in which America would come to Australia's aid, and at times its assistance has fallen short of what Australia expected.

The certainties that have underpinned Australia's defence outlook . . . have shifted

Washington chose not to support Australia's objections to Indonesia absorbing West Papua in the early 1960s, and was initially reluctant to contribute to the East Timor intervention at the end of the 1990s. But no power contemplating an attack on Australia can be sure that it wouldn't be buying a substantially bigger fight than it wants.