

# Defence white paper gets AUKUS muscle

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*The three strategic objectives listed in the 2020 defence update looked like overreach. They now look credible thanks to Australia's new partnership in AUKUS.*

Not many people know that the marching song of the 1st Marine Division of the United States Marine Corps is *Waltzing Matilda*. They picked it up in 1942 when training in Victoria for World War II.

What other Australian tunes might US units adopt when training in Australia in the future?

Four recent events have dramatically changed Australia's strategic calculus.

First, the United States' much-delayed pivot away from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific is materialising.

Second, the United Kingdom, in search of a [post Brexit foreign policy](#), surfaced in the Indo-Pacific.

These two events have provided the genesis for the AUKUS security partnership.

Third, Australia has got off the fence and decided on security with the US over economic prosperity with China.

Fourth, the Quad, has gained substance and purpose.

These four events give depth and credence to the strategic objectives listed in the 2020 *Defence Strategic Update; Shape, Deter and Respond*. All three objectives smacked of overreach when announced. Now they look credible.

Australia's strategic culture has favoured a great and powerful friend. First the UK and then the US. Now we have joined both in a trilateral security partnership. At the same time, we are strengthening our strategic relationships with India and Japan. Common membership across AUKUS and the Quad adds strength and consistency.

These developments highlight a new alignment in the Indo-Pacific. It is based on pushback against an increasingly authoritarian, and coercive China.

Beijing has brought this shift upon itself by aggressive actions, especially in the South China Sea. The Chinese leadership has miscalculated and faces the prospect of becoming isolated in the region.

US President Joe Biden has said the US is in a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century. Attempts at co-operation and collaboration have faltered. The alternate is starting to look like containment.

The competition for the 21st century is broader than China. It is about rejecting authoritarianism and fundamentalism. It is about promoting liberal democratic values, freedoms and liberties.

At the same time the fight against religious fundamentalists and new forms of terror will continue. Rather than seeking to win the war on terror the objective will be to manage the danger and strike when and where the risk becomes intolerable.

While the early attention is on submarines the focus of AUKUS, over time, is likely to be about the pursuit of scientific, technical and industrial breakthroughs such as artificial intelligence, space, cybernetics, quantum physics, missile defence, hypersonics and autonomous systems.

AUKUS is also about geography.

In a 2013 report from the American Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment the authors said Australia, sitting astride the Indian and Pacific Oceans, was in a "geographic sweet spot". It also noted for the first time, since World War II, that Australian and American areas of strategic priority overlapped.

Apart from covering the sea lines of communications across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and with easy access to the choke points into and out of the South China Sea, Australia's position provides strategic depth to any Indo-Pacific campaigns.

Much of the US military capability is forward deployed in vulnerable places such as Japan and Guam. All are exposed to China's increasing militarisation and growing sea, air, cyber and space capabilities.

While the north of Australia can be reached by Chinese missiles much of the country is out of range of conventional weapons. Referred to as the aircraft carrier of the Pacific during World War II, Australia provided a base for training, logistics, repair, sustainment and command and control.

As AUKUS unfolds expect Australia to perform a similar role. The US already has a presence in Australia, although we have been rather coy about calling them bases.

The US is currently undertaking a global posture review to ensure the footprint of American troops worldwide is correctly sized and supports strategy. Expect Australia to be asked to help redress the imbalance in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia should expect requests for bases, forward deployments and substantial prepositioning of equipment, stores and ammunition. Priority will be afforded to air and naval assets.

Aside from the military implications Australian industry should also benefit with high levels of technology and industrial transfers, the sharing of innovations and contributions and access to supply chains and critical raw materials.

As the details of the partnership emerge, we need to be alert to the cost. Expect a much larger defence budget. With all the recent talk about sovereign defence capabilities and sovereign national interests we need also to be alert on how to maintain our independence and freedom of thought and action within the developing partnerships.

AUKUS is a security partnership backed by trust, resolve and shared values. It will be of enormous benefit to Australia and support peace and security in the Indo-Pacific.

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