From Dependency to Armed Neutrality: Future Options for Australian National Security

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The views expressed here are the author’s alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defence or the Australian Army.
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Executive Summary

✔️ The power balance in the Western Pacific has entered a period of increased tension and risk as China asserts its growing power and its leaders gain confidence. Simultaneously, the relative power of the United States is declining while the Trump administration is sending inconsistent and confusing signals to its allies on its willingness to invest in the world order that America established.

✔️ While the rise of China has occasioned much debate from security commentators, they have been disappointingly silent on the other security risk that Australia must address: climate change. Without giving equal weight to climate change, any recommendations on the future security of Australia can only be incomplete and inadequate.

✔️ Australia’s future security can only be assured by adopting a more holistic methodology than previously practiced. Traditional security challenges, such as the management of state-to-state relations, should be addressed within a framework that includes the natural world. Only by being cognisant of humanity’s interaction with the natural world can true national security be achieved.

✔️ By considering both China and climate change this paper provides a more balanced assessment of Australia’s future security options. It concludes that the option that best meets the requirements of both challenges is a form of armed neutrality.

Suggestions for Further Action

✔️ The reality that human systems nest within natural ones should be recognised and the implications of this reality must be incorporated into planning for the future.

✔️ The challenge of climate change should be given equal footing with the challenge of China in any consideration of national security.

✔️ Research should be undertaken to test the validity of armed neutrality as the nation’s future national security policy.

Introduction: Framing the Problem(s)

It has been apparent for some time that the international security system is under stress. There is little doubt that if the factors causing this stress continue Australia will have to accommodate a new world order that is more dangerous and the nation’s leaders will have to act in an environment of much greater challenge and risk. The emerging situation is such that it is not going too far to say that Australia’s sovereignty is at stake. Its preservation will require leaders capable of making honest, decisive and difficult decisions in order to adjust to the new security environment. The era of Australian dependency on a great power partner as a security policy is coming to an end and that of armed neutrality is beckoning.
Australia’s future security policy will need to accommodate the challenges of China and climate change.

Most defence commentators and military professionals agree that the cause of the present stress is China. Its growing economic and military clout has enabled China’s leaders to seek to replace the United States as the dominant power in East Asia. What is unfolding is an oft told tale, one that has been played out many times in human history, of a rising power’s challenge to the existing order that the established power had created. It is a completely normal and predictable outcome of the shift in the power balance between China and the United States, one that is moving in China’s favour.

However, these commentators are focusing on only one of the present threats to Australian sovereignty. For such thinkers the tension of inter- and intra-state relations are their comfort zone. Unfortunately, by not broadening their vision to include other kinds of threats they do the nation a disservice. Such thinking is also comfortably linear and neglects the uncomfortable reality that linear human systems nest within chaotic natural systems. Nature is the ultimate arbiter of human survival on this planet, and in climate change humanity faces a threat that is rapidly reaching the point of having extinction level consequences.

China’s efforts to overturn the established international order and climate change’s threat to human existence mean that Australia will soon have to contend with a considerably more dangerous security environment. Since Federation, successive Governments have embraced a national security policy of dependency on a great power, initially the United Kingdom and now the United States. In doing so, Australia’s political leaders have escaped the hard and costly choices the heads of other countries have always had to make. Australia now needs to identify a new security policy, one that is relevant for new circumstances.

This paper has two objectives. The title identifies the first – to advance armed neutrality as the most suitable security policy to manage future risks. The second objective is less obvious and yet more important. What distinguishes this paper from those of other national security commentators is that it will not artificially isolate the human world from the natural world. It predicates that human security rests on a foundation of accommodation and interconnectedness with the natural world. Australian decision-makers must take into account the natural world if a new policy is to be built on a sound and durable foundation. Australia’s future security policy will need to accommodate the challenges of China and of climate change.

The Embrace of Dependency

Upon Federation in 1901, there was never any doubt where the new nation’s loyalties lay in the international system. Australian was a part of the British Empire and enshrined dependency as its security policy. This decision did come with obligations. At the time the nation was born, Australian forces were already fighting alongside British troops in South Africa, and on the outbreak of the First World War Australia was at war too. The onset of the Second World War also saw Australia willingly come to the mother country’s aid.

The failure of the Singapore Strategy following Japan’s entry into the Second World War did not end dependency. Australia simply shifted its main reliance to a different protector. Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Australian Government had agreed to provide the United States with transit and basing rights in its territory. With the start of the Pacific War that association deepened. The signing of the ANZUS Alliance in 1951 formalised Australia’s reliance on the United States, a relationship that remains the cornerstone of the nation’s national security. The most recent Defence White Paper describes the alliance with the United States as the core of Australia’s security and defence planning.

From Federation, adopting dependency as its security policy was wise and it has served the nation well. Australia has received security on the cheap, as well as access to the great power’s weapons and intelligence, which allowed its leaders to allocate monies elsewhere. With the onset of the nuclear age, Australia received the ultimate guarantee of protection – a place under the US nuclear umbrella. Hugh White is not off the mark when he states that the ‘benefits of dependence have far outweighed the cost.’

1 Hugh White is not off the mark when he states that the ‘benefits of dependence have far outweighed the cost.’
Defining the Challenges

No security policy lasts forever. Power is relative, and as China’s power grows that of the United States wanes. China’s construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and their subsequent militarisation, is representative of this power shift. Twenty years ago, China would not have dared to build these islands; the risk of US pushback was too great. Yet today it is the US that recoils, ceding the competition to its rival. Every time China has tested US resolve, America has conceded. The only reasonable conclusion is the one offered by Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith, ‘Australia’s strategic outlook is deteriorating’.2

Australia professes its adherence to a rules based order, but it is an order that is under serious threat, if it still exists at all. The 2017 Asian White Paper notes that ‘major powers are ignoring or undermining international laws,’ while the 2016 Defence White Paper explicitly links Australia’s security to a ‘stable, global raised order.’ Yet the rules Australia wants to defend are not a product of the natural world, nor are they inalienable rights of humankind imposed by divine ordainment. Rather, a friend, the United States, set them out. As Chinese power grows, it is reasonable to assume that its leaders will want to modify the existing rules or impose their own to their own benefit. The election of Donald Trump and his undisguised contempt for internationalism has only made the survival of the existing rules less likely. Allan Gyngell is correct when he concludes that ‘the order we have known of the past seventy years has ended. It’s not being challenged. It’s not changing. It’s over’.3

The environmental situation is also deteriorating as climate change continues its relentless progress. Collectively, humanity has failed to agree on a workable plan to slow or halt the assault on the atmosphere. One scholar has characterised the political reaction to climate change as ‘near total futility, featuring prodigious grandstanding and hypocrisy, centred on how to make other people reduce emissions without doing much oneself.’4 Because of such ineffective action, environmental tipping points are being breached that threaten runaway catastrophic climate change. The destabilisation of the natural systems that underpin life for much of the planet has begun.

Climate change is already a recognised risk to national security. The Australian Department of Defence has called climate change a threat multiplier and warned that it could ‘exacerbate the potential for conflict’ and ‘lead to an increase in demand for a wide spectrum of Defence responses.’5 Australia is a signatory to the Boe Declaration that calls climate change the ‘single greatest threat to the livelihood, security and wellbeing of Pacific people.’ In the United States, Defense documents employ even more alarming language to describe the threat posed by climate change, while the United Kingdom calls it one of the greatest challenges for the future of the planet.

There is a growing body of literature on the effect on humanity of past climate events, of which there were many. The results of these were uniformly catastrophic, and featured widespread instability, state and population collapses, and in numerous cases the complete destruction of the affected civilisations. Those who make predictions of dire consequences for our global civilisation do so with considerable evidence. As climate change accelerates, it will cause the natural systems on which humanity depends for its essential resources to change. When humanity’s production systems decouple from the natural ones, the availability of critical inputs to human survival, particularly food and water, will be reduced. The effect will be as it has always been – societal collapse, intra- and inter-state war, pandemics, famine and rapid population reduction as humans resort to violence and mass migration to obtain what they need. While the decision for war will remain a choice deliberately taken, it will be a choice made in an environment of much greater necessity.
The rebalancing of power between China and the United States is a serious matter and the outcome holds significant challenges for Australia's continued sovereignty. Climate change is also a threat to sovereignty, but it is also an existential threat to global civilisation. Together, China and climate change threaten to shatter the international system's foundation. Either of these threats on their own would be sufficient to necessitate a re-examination of Australia's security policy. Together they mandate it.

Seeking Options

The challenge for Australia's leaders is that they must find a solution that addresses both China and climate change. An answer that fixes one but not the other, or creates a contradiction between the two would be self-defeating. A way to visualise the problem is with a Venn Diagram. These diagrams use two or more circles to illustrate the relationship between data sets. The most accurate way to represent the relationship between China and climate change would be to place a circle labelled China entirely within a much larger climate change circle. As a human system, China's relationship with other countries can only be a subset of the planet's natural systems with which humanity interacts. This representation makes it clear that Australia can ignore neither challenge.

To support armed neutrality's advancement as Australia's future security policy, this paper will consider a number of other popular options. They are, continued dependence; going nuclear and doing nothing. The paper will then make the case for armed neutrality.

Continued Dependence

The framework for determining a security policy's utility is based on two factors: having an understanding of the context of the time and being rigorously honest in one's analysis. In light of the dual challenges of China and climate change, the question that Australia needs to answer is whether dependency is still a valid response to today's security environment. Interwar political leaders refused to ask whether the continued dependency that the Singapore Strategy represented remained a useful policy. An honest answer could only have led to the conclusion that the Royal Navy's arrival, if it sailed at all, would be inadequate to counter the potential threat. The second order consequences of such a realisation would have been the need for a massive increase in defence spending. Today's political leaders face a similar dilemma, the resolution of which risks having to choose between the economic benefits of engagement with China or the security benefits of loyalty to the United States. Hugh White has been the most explicit in his assessment of the government's fear of having to make a choice, because such a need can only confirm that China and the United States are strategic rivals. White speculates that Australia is not fooling anyone, except perhaps itself.

Making a choice, however, is not the solution. Continued alignment with the United States will only maintain the present dependency and postpone Australia's full independence as a sovereign state. It will also be a security policy that like the Singapore Strategy is based on faith rather than rational judgment. Nor is choosing China a better option as it would only reinforce dependency, but a dependency on a nation with which Australia shares no natural affinity. Instead, Australia must follow an independent course that provides the benefits of economic engagement while moving to a more neutral posture between the two great powers.

If America's waning strength and declining interest in the outside world are insufficient to convince the dependency-faithful of the need for a new security policy direction, climate change should. Climate change is global in its effects, as sea levels rise, rain patterns shift and food production declines, societies will come under tremendous pressure, with great risk of collapse. The resulting chaos across the Indo-Pacific, and the migrations it causes, will be Australia's problem, not the US's. Distant Washington will have more than enough crises to respond to domestically and closer to home than to assist a beleaguered Canberra. Dependency no longer meets Australia's needs. The conclusion is irresistible - it should be replaced.
Going Nuclear

Australia has never had nuclear weapons, although it has thought about it. In 1958, the Commonwealth made inquiries with the British Government regarding their procurement. While the idea was rejected, it has never gone away either. Most recently there has been considerable debate on the ASPI Strategist blog regarding the nuclear option, spurred on by uncertainty over the continued availability of US extended deterrence.

Nuclear weapons do offer the possibility of deterrence. Even a great power would have reason to pause before engaging with a lesser adversary that possessed a nuclear capability. However, large segments of the Australian public are against the use of nuclear weapons, or any form of nuclear technology. Even if the Government pressed ahead against voter opposition, the argument on its usefulness would be undercut because nuclear weapons have utility only against one of the security challenges that Australia faces: China. These weapons would have no relevance in a region destabilised by climate change. Australia can ill afford to invest the considerable treasure needed to implement a security solution that addresses one security challenge while doing nothing for an equally pressing – and overarching – one. Despite the arguments of its advocates, when consideration of Australia’s security requirements accurately factors climate change into the equation, nuclear weapons become a non-starter.

Doing Nothing

Doing nothing may not sound like a policy but in the right context it is a valid option. Australia could decide to let its present state of dependency gradually fade away as US power wanes, and not seek a replacement. Accompanying this inertia would be a repurposing of the ADF, a step that might appeal to voters due to defence savings. Existing capabilities would not be replaced when they became obsolete and new acquisitions would be optimised for less than war operations. The RAN would become a coast guard without a need for submarines or frigates, the Army would become a humanitarian and disaster relief force, and, like New Zealand, Australia could dispense with the great expense of maintaining fast jets.

The symbolism of such an action would be that Australia was abandoning any effort to maintain its place as a middle power. Instead, it would join the ranks of the small powers, becoming a country that was unable and uninterested in generating sufficient power to shape world events in its favour. When faced with undesirable options, doing nothing does not mean that what Australia does not like will not happen. It just means that some other country decides the option that Australia will have to accept.

Under such a security policy Australia would have to take events as they came. In a world where the global rules are favourable to Australia and in which they are maintained by a benevolent and distant great power, that might not be such a bad thing. However, if Gyngell is right, then the favourable existing order no longer matters, and when the new order emerges – or is imposed – Australia may not find it so beneficent. The winds of fate (and power) may see Australia reduced to the status of a Chinese client state or even a satrapy.

Doing nothing, apart from posturing, is already the policy with regard to climate change. A laid-back security policy of not taking action may be of some utility within a benign world order, but the planet will not be benign. Rather climate change will trigger events that are likely to require a security response. Unless Australia prepares the ADF for a climate changed world – as well as readying other areas of government responsibility – the nation’s ability to adapt and to safeguard its people will be seriously compromised. Doing nothing may have some appeal for traditionally defined national security situations but as a response to climate change it is a high-risk, low pay-off option.

Adopt Armed Neutrality

The security policy of armed neutrality is most commonly associated with Switzerland, where it is long-standing practice. As a policy, armed neutrality does not mean military weakness. Instead, it requires a practicing state to be strong enough that it has no need for alliances to provide for its security.
It is at peace because it is powerful enough to remain neutral. Or, as Niccolò Machiavelli phrased it, "the Swiss are strongly armed and completely free." W T Bridges, the Australian Army’s Chief of Intelligence, toured Switzerland in 1906 to investigate the Swiss Army’s reliance on compulsory military service, and to determine whether it had any relevance for Australia. Bridges’s findings contributed to the design of Australia’s 1909 Conscription Scheme.

Armed neutrality as a defence policy for Australia has received periodic attention by security commentators. At the height of the Vietnam War, Michelle Grattan published a paper on armed neutrality as a response to Australia’s participation in that conflict. In 1984, David Martin released *Armed Neutrality for Australia*, a book-length examination of the policy’s suitability for Australia. The 1987 White Paper, *The Defence of Australia*, advanced self-reliance as the goal for security planning. This was not the same as armed neutrality, since Australia remained within the US orbit, but it was recognition of the need for greater investment in defence.

None of these previous considerations resulted in armed neutrality’s adoption, although self-reliance is a reoccurring policy theme. The main reason for its inability to gain traction is that dependency on the United States remained a better option, even if it did require the periodic commitment of forces to a US-led war. It was cheaper and easier to rely on the United States, rather than for Australia to accept the greater expense and hard thinking necessary to provide security on its own. However, as the authority of the United States retreats and commentators question the reliability of the alliance, armed neutrality as a security option gains in relevance. Australia may not even have the choice of keeping the status quo if Trump’s anti-internationalism results in a US return to isolationism.

Recent technological advances also increase the viability of armed neutrality as a defence policy for Australia. Long-range precision strike and sensor capabilities have reached the point that some countries have implemented potent anti-access and area denial (A2AD) systems. The range of these weapons is such that they can reach out from a country’s borders to distances that are measured in the thousands of kilometres. Theatre-wide killing zones are coming into existence, and, with such missiles, the previous constraints of time and distance in war are becoming greatly contracted. China’s A2AD system threatens to prevent the US fleet from sailing within the second island chain, and coming within the first island chain is even more prohibitive. Even smaller players, such as Iran, have begun to implement systems of their own as the barriers to the acquisition of these technologies decline. Since Australia does not have any land borders, it is more suited than most countries for an A2AD barrier. The Australian Army is in the process of obtaining the HIMARS missile system, which has a range of several hundred kilometres, but platforms with ranges that could reach the island chain to Australia’s north exist.

The extension of modern war into the cognitive domain means that in the case of cyber, information or social media attacks, the zone of conflict is truly global. Distance is irrelevant in these kinds of attacks because they can strike virtually anywhere. Time to target also largely no longer matters. Unfortunately, the US’s ability to protect Australia from such attacks is not high. Therefore, as war evolves and cognitive weapons gain in capability, Australia’s dependency on the US as its protector will become less militarily effective.

There is no doubt that in order to adopt armed neutrality the ADF will have to undergo a major transformation. Platforms that are designed to operate within a US naval or air task group, for example, may no longer be practical or even suitable for armed neutrality. The Army’s perception of itself as an infantry-centric force may need to undergo a radical revision, with the status of the gunner moving to the fore as coastal defence again becomes the land force’s primary role. Australia will also need to review its preference for a just-in-time supply chain and greatly increase the scale of holdings in defence warehouses. Lastly, the defence budget will need to grow considerably to accommodate a necessarily larger defence force. In fact, Australia may need to reintroduce national service and develop plans for the mobilisation of the nation in case of threat.
Armed neutrality, however, does not mean complete disengagement from the world. As climate change causes destabilisation across the region, the ADF will need to play a greater role in intervening on the ground in order to help hold fragile countries together. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlights the danger in a just released report. It predicts increasing risks to ‘health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth.’ Societies facing desperate situations will make desperate decisions, including the use of violence to obtain what they need or to move to somewhere that is more conducive to their survival. Because of climate change, we can expect wars to be more frequent and more violent – and more decisive – because the stakes will be higher. The ADF may find itself responsible for guarding the nation’s borders not just from organised incursions but also from large-scale migration.

While these adjustments may seem daunting, even radical, there are advantages to adopting armed neutrality, in addition to becoming a nation that is finally responsible for its own sovereignty and ending questions surrounding the future reliability of the United States. Unlike the other defence policies considered, armed neutrality provides a solution to both the threat of China and the threat of climate change. In forcing Australia to focus on the security of its own region, it will require the security aspects of climate change to be incorporated into defence planning.

It is not clear what form-armed neutrality will take or what capabilities Australia will need. That is for a future discussion. What is clear, however, is that as a defence policy it offers a means to compensate for the waning of US power and interest while also addressing the security risks posed by climate change. It also will allow Australia to make decisions for itself. If Australia is interested in remaining a sovereign state, a form of armed neutrality provides a way forward. If not, perhaps Australia can bank on remaining the lucky country and everything will work out in the end, although past great power transitions and previous climate change events suggest that depending on luck is not a recipe for success.
Conclusion

It is unfortunate that Australians have to address the challenges of China and climate change simultaneously because this complicates any response. That this has happened is purely coincidental, but it was foreseeable. The warnings signs for both have been apparent for some time. For example, 23 June 2018 was the 30th anniversary of James Hanson’s appearance before the US Senate, when he warned of the coming warming unless humanity reduced the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Yet in those 30 years, little has been done to prevent his prediction from coming true. The same can be said for China. There was nothing remarkable in its rise, nor in its leaders’ desire to remake international rules. This is what powerful states do. What is remarkable is the determination of politicians and security analysts to convince themselves that this time things would be different.

For Australia, geography remains the most important aspect of its security. In a future in which the US retreats from being the global leader, Australia should seek security in maximising the most important advantages of its geography – its relative isolation and its lack of land borders. Australia’s geography would be a very powerful fit for a security policy based on armed neutrality. Moreover, armed neutrality is a policy that addresses both of Australia’s critical security concerns.

Switzerland has managed to maintain its sovereignty despite being surrounded by powerful states. Swedish citizens enjoy an enviable lifestyle even with the close proximity of a powerful and sometimes aggressive Russia. What these states have in common is a belief in being strong in order to be safe. The willingness of their citizens to pay the price required for sovereignty holds lessons for Australia. We will have to make choices on how we safeguard our future. We can be strong and have a hand in shaping our own destiny or we can continue to treat security as someone else’s responsibility. We are running out of time to make a decision.

Suggestions for Further Action

♫ The reality that human systems nest within natural ones should be recognised and the implications of this reality must be incorporated into planning for the future.
♫ The challenge of climate change should be given equal footing with the challenge of China in any consideration of national security.
♫ Research should be undertaken to test the validity of armed neutrality as the nation’s future national security policy.

Endnotes

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