

Stronger together

US force posture in Australia's north—a US perspective on Australia's strategic geography

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How has the global security environment changed?

For even the most casual observer, it's clear that over the past decade the global strategic security environment has become increasingly complex. With a rising and increasingly assertive People's Republic of China (PRC), a resurgent Russia and a growing number of capable non-state actors, the US finds itself needing to rely more on its allies than at any other time in the past 50 years.¹ This is particularly the case in the Indo-Pacific, where the US is trying to nurture greater cooperation with partners and allies. The good news here is that long-time allies such as Australia are both willing and able to work with the US, where their mutual interests align.



The commander of ESG7 delivers remarks during the closing ceremony of the 8th US and Australian exercise Talisman Sabre 2019, US Indo-Pacific Command, Flickr, 27 July 2019, online.

What has that meant for the US's force posture?

For more than two decades, the War on Terror in the Middle East distracted and bogged down the US Army. During that period, the emphasis of US military strategy on counterinsurgency operations oscillated between competing priorities. Agile and asymmetric enemies in the Middle East conflicts eroded the US military's comparative advantage in high-end war fighting. Those conflicts degraded the US force posture and the capability of the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) to quickly transition to crisis mode or to fight a large-scale conflict. Ultimately, the scale of US commitments to countering violent extremism limited the resources and investments the US made to reduce the impact of a rising China and a resurgent Russia.²

The US Army War College (USAWC) and its Strategic Studies Institute researched and subsequently published several in-depth transformational studies on the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility.³ The USAWC's initial study, together with the working papers and articles that followed, describes a new paradigm involving a significant shift to the asymmetrical thinking that's needed to change the decision calculus of the PRC. This work argues that '*Physically, conceptually, and in terms of deployed and anticipated capabilities*, the US Joint Force (including the Army) is out of position for hyper-competition with an innovative, aggressive, and transforming PRC.⁴ Illustrative of that finding is the US joint force's unbalanced force posture in the region, in which the force is heavily concentrated in Northeast Asia where the US has access to or maintains a permanent presence at several main operating bases and forward operating sites, dating back to World War II. This unbalanced force posture fails to address the complexity associated with the PRC's strategy.

There are four practical and tangible areas for US–Australian cooperation and growth

While Australia continues to value its independence and self-reliance, its defence strategy and policies are increasingly aligned with the US strategy addressing the rapid rise of China as a near-peer competitor.⁵ This paper first argues why, and then analyses how, Australia's defence capabilities and strategic geography can enable US force posture initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and promote greater regional cooperation in ways that advance US and Australian national interests. To that end, there are several practical and tangible areas for US–Australia cooperation and growth, which include:

- expanding the Australian defence industrial base while securing and hardening supply chains
- increasing the US Army force posture in northern Australia
- increasing multinational training opportunities
- expanding the defence partnership with Indonesia.

Those actions should be explored to counter the growing influence of the Chinese state as part of a broader national strategy.

Figure 1: US and Australian units participate in the 100 Years of Mateship celebration at Joint Base Pearl Harbor – Hickam



Source: US Indo-Pacific Command, *Flickr*, 18 September 2018, [online](#).

What's happening in the Indo-Pacific?

For the US and Australia to increase their national security strategy collaboration, the two countries must have a common understanding of the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. The following description of the regional context demonstrates how China has increased its aggressive behaviour, spread disinformation and negatively influenced the entire broader Indo-Pacific region. The US is fortunate that Australia has a similar view of the Indo-Pacific security environment.

The scale and speed of technological change increase the complexity of the strategic security environment.⁶ The US's most likely adversaries have fully embraced many of those changes, affording them proven capacity to operate in every domain: air, sea, land, space and cyberspace. For example, China has become a strategic competitor: it continues to disregard the rules-based international order, militarise features in the South China Sea and use predatory economics to intimidate those that stand in the way of its ambitions.⁷ China remains a national security challenge to the US and was one of the primary drivers for the US rebalance to the Pacific that occurred in 2011 during the Obama administration.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) actively exploits an effective whole-of-government approach using all levers of national power to gain strategic advantage within the Indo-Pacific. The CCP successfully pulls the informational and economic levers of national power while continuing its military modernisation program. The PRC engages in disinformation and cyber aggression and uses its economic leverage to shift the balance of power to benefit Beijing. The PRC's long-term strategy to become a regional hegemon and to attain global pre-eminence could become a reality if the US and its allies don't take a more active role to expand

the competitive space.⁸ The PRC's anti-access/area-denial capabilities continue to undermine the US's ability to project power into the Indo-Pacific. That undermining raises the risk that China could potentially use a small military force to achieve a limited victory before the US and its allies are able to respond.

In January 2021, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) demonstrated its negative influence in the region through its increased aggression towards Taiwan. The PLA sent warplanes near the Taiwan Strait almost every day in January, as a warning against Taiwan's desire for independence. According to the *Global Times*, PLA warplanes entered Taiwan's self-proclaimed southwestern air defence identification zone three times on 31 January alone.⁹ The timing of such provocations in the Taiwan Strait isn't a coincidence, as the world was focused on the global Covid-19 pandemic recovery and the US administration was focused on the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration and on Covid-19. This example illustrates how the PRC remains hyper-focused on its national interests, showing less consideration for the rest of the world.

The US and Australia have a common understanding of the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific

The strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific recently released by the US National Security Council (NSC) aims to counter Beijing's negative influence in the region. Examples from the NSC framework include preventing China's unfair trading practices (which ultimately harm the US and its partners' competitiveness), deterring China's use of military force against the US or its allies, and promoting values within the Indo-Pacific to counterbalance the negative examples of Chinese Government practices.¹⁰ Yet, all potential allies in the Indo-Pacific might not perceive the US shift, pivot and rebalance to the Indo-Pacific in the same way. There has been growing concern across the region about the difference between US policy and practice (a feeling of abandonment) and a potential concern over antagonising China. *The state of Southeast Asia: 2021 survey report* published by the ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore predicted an increase in support for US regional engagement.¹¹ The report's authors predicted that a Biden administration would be more reliable than the previous administration. US actions in the region must align with the US strategic communication messages spoken to US allies and partners.

Recent USAWC research identified Australia as one of six 'anchor partners' that enable US joint forces to be successful in competition and possibly in conflict within the Indo-Pacific. Australia maintains a strong cultural connection, proud military history, formal security relationship and strong defence cooperation with the US, and is therefore likely to maintain or expand US posture initiatives in the region.¹²

In response to the quickly changing strategic environment and competition in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia made significant adjustments to its defence policy and strategy in 2020.¹³ The Defence Strategic Update (DSU) and the accompanying Force Structure Plan (FSP) outline a significant financial commitment over the coming decade to modernise Australia's defence capabilities.¹⁴ The FSP is a menu of those future defence capabilities overlaid across all domains and highlights plans to enhance the defence industrial base inside Australia. The DSU and FSP reorient the ADF so that it can 'shape', 'deter' and 'respond' to threats in the region.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Morrison government is planning to increase the defence budget by approximately 87% (nominal) over the next 10 years.¹⁶ The DSU also identified new capabilities to hold adversaries at a distance, such as long-range strike weapons, munitions, cyber measures and area-denial systems.¹⁷ Australia is striving to maintain small, agile and deadly forces despite not having the scale and capability of a large world power. However, it has unique strategic geography that places it at the heart of the Indo-Pacific. In addition, Australia's long-term commitments in the region, summarised in the DSU, provide predictability for Australia's defence planning and modernisation to counter growing PRC capabilities and threats. This level of long-term commitment contrasts with the US's continued defence budget unpredictability and continuing congressional resolutions that place US modernisation priorities at risk.

According to the 2020 DSU, strategic competition between China and the US has become of increasing concern. This new strategic context led Australia to expand its area of interest from the northeastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland Southeast Asia to Papua New Guinea and the Southwest Pacific while reducing its focus in the Middle East.¹⁸ The US and Australian defence strategies and policies are aligned in the Indo-Pacific, and the national interests of each country are easier to achieve through the cooperation of like-minded allies and partners. The future of the US–Australia alliance looks strong, and there are opportunities to enhance US–Australian military cooperation.

Figure 2: A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket launches from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida, 7 April 2021



Source: US Department of Defense, 'Rocket launch', [online](#).

Is the current US defence strategy working in the Indo-Pacific?

Military critics and scholars question the effectiveness of the US defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Even though the US National Defense Strategy of 2018 prioritises the Indo-Pacific, the US failed to resource and operationalise that strategic guidance. Analysis by the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney illustrates this point:

Although the past 18 months have seen renewed efforts by the US Department of Defense to prioritise the requirements for great power competition with China—a key objective of America's 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*—Washington has so far been unable or unwilling to sufficiently focus its armed forces on this task or deliver a defence spending plan that fits the scope of its global strategy. The result is an increasingly worrying mismatch between US strategy and resources that jeopardises the future stability of the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹

The USINDOPACOM area of responsibility (AOR) stretches a vast distance from the west coast of the US to the eastern coast of India and is colloquially described as 'from Hollywood to Bollywood'. USINDOPACOM is the largest of the US's geographic combatant commands and stretches across 11 time zones. There are 36 countries in the region and more than 4 billion people, accounting

for more than 60% of the world's population. The region only has 17% of the world's landmass, as oceans make up most of the USINDOPACOM AOR. US forces must travel long distances to maintain their operational relevance. Due to the vast oceans of the region, the USINDOPACOM AOR is often seen as primarily a Navy and Air Force–centric AOR. US Navy and Air Force capabilities conduct freedom of navigation operations and flyovers in the vicinity of the South China Sea as a deterrent to the PRC. Due to the heavy reliance on US Navy and Air Force capabilities, the US Army can find itself in somewhat of an identity crisis about how best to employ its capabilities in support of the USINDOPACOM strategy.

Studies of the US Army's role in the Indo-Pacific range from the perspective that the Army will play a significant role, to opinions that it will play a small role, in potentially defeating China in a large-scale conflict. Research published in the *Military Review*, the professional journal of the US Army, suggests the problem the US Army faces in the Indo-Pacific is that:

if the United States were to enter a war against China, the Army would necessarily assist the other military services greatly by acting as a supporting entity to the joint force in the ensuing conflict. Thus, we should expect that the US Army will play a significant role at a minimum as a joint force enabler, securing joint freedom of action. Consequently, the Army, while shifting focus toward modernization and joint integration, should emphasize preparation for scenarios in which it will play a supporting role in the Pacific against a near-peer adversary.²⁰

That perspective articulates an important role for the Army in the Indo-Pacific that might not align with its war-fighting culture and emphasis on land power. The Army needs to change its culture (or have the change directed by Congress) to embrace this supporting role in the Indo-Pacific.

The US Army Pacific has elevated its headquarters to a four-star command and supports the USINDOPACOM strategy through power projection, forward postured forces and a strong network of allies and partners.²¹ Key initiatives, such as Pacific Pathways and the Defender series of exercises, along with a new multidomain taskforce, are methods the US Army forces can use to expand the competitive space and provide options for the USINDOPACOM commander. The ability to support the USINDOPACOM strategy and respond to increasing PRC aggression requires a new method of thinking. USAWC researchers advocate a potential paradigm shift by recommending four transformational roles for the US Army to consider for future operations to support the USINDOPACOM strategy. Those controversial four roles could assist the US Army through the potential identity crisis described above.

Figure 3: USINDOPACOM area of responsibility



Source: US Pacific Command, [online](#).

The US Army requires a transformational military strategy with an accompanying agile force posture design

The US Army requires a transformational military strategy with an accompanying agile force posture design, if it's to gain and maintain a competitive military advantage in the Indo-Pacific's vast and diverse geography. USAWC research recommends four transformational roles for the US Army over the next 10 years. Those roles are defined as follows:

- *The 'Grid'*. The Army establishes a multilayered and self-reinforcing expeditionary base network in the Indo-Pacific region that commanders use to control joint operations.
- *The 'Enabler'*. The Army animates the Grid with command and control, sustainment, protection, movement, intelligence and information.

- *The ‘Multi-Domain Warfighter’.* The Army leverages the Grid to posture the Army’s multidomain war-fighting capability in the region.
- *The ‘Capability and Capacity Generator’.* The Army uses a key advantage of the US—its strong network of allies and partners—to draw on their unique strengths in joint and coalition operations.²²

These four transformational roles describe the US Army being likely to act in a supporting role to the rest of the joint force. A military planner may assume that a high-intensity conflict with China would initially be led by air and sea power, rather than ground forces. The vast distances involved in travel across the USINDOPACOM AOR support that assumption. The US Army supporting the joint force with a grid base network as described above, to enable air and sea power, would act as a central nervous system, enabling the rest of the US joint force and its allies and partners in competition or conflict with the PRC.

What does this new strategy mean for the US–Australia relationship and interests?

The US Army’s muscle could be used during any stage of conflict against the PRC. It could enable the offensive operations of air and sea power with its command and control and sustainment capabilities, as defined above, as the ‘Enabler’. In a protracted conflict, the US Army and potentially the Marine Corps or other allies and partners could prove decisive in an island-hopping campaign—for example, reclaiming Taiwan, the Ryukyus or islands in the Philippines—like the island-hopping campaigns in the Indo-Pacific during World War II.

The inclusion of allies and partners, such as Australia, can help the US Army achieve its transformational role both as the ‘Enabler’ and as a ‘Capability and Capacity Generator’. Australia’s new defence strategy, outlined in the 2020 DSU, reinforces each potential US Army transformational role. The 2020 FSP details the capability investments to implement Australia’s new strategy and provides a long-term funding plan to improve defence capabilities.²³ Australia’s leadership demonstrates its willingness to enable US objectives within the Indo-Pacific against a common threat: China.

The Australian Minister for Defence who oversaw the production of the 2020 DSU and FSP, Senator Linda Reynolds, publicly commented about the recent Australia–US Ministerial (AUSMIN) talks in Washington, where the two countries discussed their bilateral relationship, noting that it’s built on mutual respect and backed by a long history. Reynolds reinforced this by saying:

Importantly, in Washington we are seen as a reliable and respected partner, who is prepared to share the burden of maintaining global and regional security, especially in the Indo-Pacific. As partners, we don’t always have to agree, but our shared values, history and interests ensure our alliance and close friendship will endure in the future.²⁴

The USAWC’s four transformational roles are used in this paper as a framework to analyse how Australia’s defence capabilities and updated defence strategy may enable US force posture initiatives.

Areas of potential US–Australia cooperation and growth

The US–Australia alliance dates back to World War I, and, since then, the two countries have fought alongside each other in every major conflict. Given that their interests regarding China align, continued security collaboration is likely. Consequently, USINDOPACOM should explore the following four recommendations for how Australia can enhance a reimagined US force posture through its strategic geography and by supporting the four transformational roles recommended for the US Army.

Figure 4: Talisman Sabre 2019



Source: 'TalismanSabre', *Twitter*, 24 July 2019, [online](#).

First, a US–Australia joint venture to manufacture critical ammunition in Australia

The first way in which Australia could contribute to US force posture initiatives is an expansion of its defence industrial base through a US–Australia joint venture to manufacture critical ammunition within Australia. Australia currently produces small arms and training mortar rounds, providing an ideal baseline for rapid expansion to more complex weapon systems.²⁵ Expansion from small arms and training rounds to weapons, such as advanced precision kill weapons systems and other precision guided missile capabilities, is a necessary step in growing the capacity to compete against near-peer competitors such as China. Additionally, the creation of an ammunition manufacturing plant or plants would generate Australian jobs and counter recent economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and Chinese economic coercion. Similar critical munitions requirements are shared between the US and Australia and across like-minded Western governments, which would benefit from additional munitions produced into the market. The positioning of critical munitions in Australia supports US force posture initiatives, and the expansion of Australian capabilities would enable a future 'Grid' concept location in northern Australia that could be operated and sustained by either the US Army or the Australian Army.

For Australia to support the role of 'Enabler', supply chains must become more secure. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for even the most industrialised economies to maintain self-reliant supply chains. The worldwide shortage of personal protective equipment, such as masks, eye protection, gowns, splash guards, shoe coverings and other key medical supplies, was considerable, since most of those items are manufactured in China. Australia took notice, refocused its efforts to be more self-reliant and demonstrated the need to shore up space in its existing defence industry manufacturing base.²⁶ Investment in the defence industry is part of Australia's A\$270 billion, 10-year investment plan outlined in its 2020 FSP.²⁷ A portion of Australia's future investment into defence capabilities could be spent on critical munitions to support mutual US and Australian defence priorities. On 31 March 2021, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that the Australian Government will 'accelerate the creation of a \$1 billion Sovereign Guided Weapons Enterprise, boosting skilled jobs and helping secure Australia's sovereign defence capabilities'.²⁸ ASPI's Dr Marcus Hellyer suggests that the ADF should seek approval from the Australian Government for an initial portfolio of guided weapons that will be manufactured in Australia as soon as possible. An indicative initial portfolio of high-priority weapons for production in Australia would include Spike LR2 missiles; a family of tactical loitering drones; air-delivered laser-guided bombs, JDAM-class weapons, or both; the Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile; and hypersonics.²⁹

Additionally, Australia's future investment further enables the ADF's ability to support the role of the 'Capability and Capacity Generator' in the framework described by USAWC researchers.

Second, an increase in the US force posture in northern Australia would be in the strategic interests of both nations

The second area of cooperation is an increase to the US Army force posture in northern Australia to take advantage of the region's strategic geography. Strategic geography has always been important, but now that the possibility of a peer conflict has increased, it has taken on an all new importance in the Indo-Pacific. This is a point not lost on the PRC as it continues to build and enhance island bases across the South China Sea. The recommended increase in force posture in northern Australia would act as a strong grey-zone deterrent to the PRC during a time when Australia has been subject to economic coercion by the Chinese Government, apparently for Australian decisions made in Australia's national interest over recent years. Any increase in US Army Pacific forces in northern Australia could be rotational, with the capability for rapid expansion during a crisis to a semipermanent presence if conditions warrant that. The geographical location of northern Australia is of high interest to the US and is strategically important because the sea lines of communication are open to the Indo-Pacific in multiple directions and adequate infrastructure exists in northern Australia for future expansion. Additionally, immediate access to the bordering Indian and Pacific oceans offers strategic access to South Asia. The additional rotational US forces could conduct military exercises to test the concepts of the transformational roles suggested by USAWC research for the US Army as the 'Grid' and the 'Enabler'. A joint-use port and expanded military facilities in northern Australia could be used for Australia's national interests as well as to enable a greater US presence if required in the future. The US Army exercise framework already exists to test these recommendations within the Pacific Pathways and Defender Pacific exercise framework, which exercise multidomain operating concepts in support of USINDOPACOM objectives.

Australia can support USINDOPACOM force posture initiatives by allowing US Army pre-positioned stocks in northern Australia, which would complement the US strategic fuel storage projects at RAAF bases Darwin and Tindal.³⁰ US Army pre-positioned stocks could include small training sets for rotational forces, pre-positioned stocks of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief equipment to augment Australia's or other partner nations' capabilities, or a full US Army brigade combat team equipment set. An increase in pre-positioned stocks within the geographically and strategically important northern part of Australia would support both US and Australian national interests while also providing a strong deterrent during the competition phase with China.

By supporting the transformational role of 'Capability and Capacity Generator', another force posture initiative in northern Australia could include land-based non-nuclear medium/intermediate-range ballistic missiles and a networked ballistic missile defence system to protect critical capabilities. The US has been testing such missiles since December 2019. The US and Australian Army entered into an agreement to partner on air-launched hypersonic cruise missiles under the bilateral Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment. The R&D from that partnership may produce an air-launched Mach 5-class precision

strike missile that's propulsion-launched and powered by an air-breathing scramjet engine that could enter service in the next 5–10 years.³¹ Technology from the partnership to develop hypersonics can be harvested to support the capability of ground-based missiles in northern Australia. Australia could own and operate a land-based missile network in northern Australia to enable the alliance with the US. A ground-based missile network would be potentially more politically charged than traditional posture initiatives, but the effect on future security in the Indo-Pacific would be likely to outweigh any political costs.

Figure 5: Australian and US ships during Talisman Sabre 2019



Source: Department of Defence, Defence Images, [online](#).

Third, the expansion of multinational training opportunities to Quad countries in northern Australia as a strong grey-zone deterrent

A third area in which Australia could contribute to US force posture initiatives is an expansion of multinational training opportunities to additional US forces and those of other like-minded democracies, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue members. That seems feasible, given the more than A\$747 million recently announced as an investment in training facilities in the Northern Territory.³² The Quad comprises the US, Japan, India and Australia and attempts to ensure a rules-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific.³³ In November 2017, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade stated that the Quad would address challenges that included 'upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight; increase connectivity; coordinate on efforts to address the challenges of countering terrorism and upholding maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.'³⁴ Constructive dialogue between the Quad members has increased as the corrosive and aggressive actions of China continue to proliferate throughout the Indo-Pacific.

The expansion of multinational training opportunities to Quad members hosted by the ADF in northern Australia and throughout the waters of the Pacific and Indian oceans would send a strong message to China, acting as another strong grey-zone deterrent. Each member of the Quad would require its own bilateral actions and policies to counter Chinese corrosion, but there's one

common lever of national power that each Quad country can pull—the military lever—through the demonstration of military exercises. Through its strategic geography and economic leverage, Australia can be an important part of the connective tissue needed to bring Quad members together. Additionally, Australia could perform the USAWC’s recommended fourth transformational role of ‘Capability and Capacity Generator’ by complementing a key advantage of the US—its strong network of allies and partners—to draw on their unique strengths to command and control joint and coalition operations.³⁵ Australia also has a strong network of strategic partners within its immediate region that should be leveraged to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Figure 6: Prime Minister Morrison addressing the Quad



Source: Scott Morrison, *Twitter*, 13 March 2021, [online](#).

Fourth, the strong defence partnership between Indonesia and Australia is important to the US and the region

The final area of cooperation is the expansion of the strong defence partnership between Australia and Indonesia. The ADF’s growing relationship with its Indonesian counterpart can only benefit US engagement to maintain a stronger defence cooperation relationship with Indonesia. The Australia–Indonesia Defence Cooperation Arrangement was signed in early 2018, and shortly afterwards, in August, the two countries elevated their official ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership.³⁶ The Australia–Indonesia strategic partnership complements each country’s mutual security concerns and increases interoperability. Recent studies from the Lowy Institute make the case for a recalibration of Australia’s Defence Cooperation Program, with a focus on increased maritime security operations and defence industrial collaboration.³⁷ A renewed focus on Indonesian maritime security operations also complements US defence cooperation priorities with Indonesia.

In addition to increased military cooperation, Australia maintains growing economic ties to Indonesia. In 2018–19, total two-way trade in goods and services between Australia and Indonesia was worth A\$17.8 billion, and, by some estimates, Indonesia is projected to be the world’s fifth-largest economy by 2030.³⁸ The Indonesia–Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, signed on 5 July 2020, creates a framework for Australia and Indonesia to unlock the potential of a bilateral economic

partnership, fostering economic cooperation between strategic partners and the two largest economies in the southern Pacific region.³⁹

Additionally, the strategic geography of Indonesia is mutually beneficial to US and Australian interests because of the direct sea lines of communication to the South China Sea. A potential starting point for further discussion on cooperation is a US–Australia military exercise with Indonesia to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in the region. The US could benefit from Australian assistance to grow its relationship with Indonesia. Through future defence cooperation, Australia will build trust with Indonesia, which, together with the changing strategic environment in the region, can encourage Indonesia to re-evaluate its future defence policy. Future uses of Indonesia's strategic geography would also complement the transformational role of the 'Grid'. Australian forces could establish an expeditionary base or hub that commanders could use to control or sustain multinational operations from within the grey zone. The establishment of a grid location is a goal that can be achieved only by continued diplomatic and military cooperation among the three countries, but Australia could lead that effort.

To conclude

The strategic security environment in the Indo-Pacific has become more complex in recent years and will only become more complicated as competition within the grey zone continues between near-peer competitors China and the US. Each of those major powers will continue to modernise its defence capabilities and attempt to dominate across all domains. The US now relies on increased cooperation from partners and allies to regain the initiative from the PRC in the Indo-Pacific. Australia's defence strategy and policies are better aligned to US defence strategy and policies today than ever before. The 2020 DSU presents a clear role for Australia in the Indo-Pacific, and that role directly aligns with US interests.

The recommendations for US force posture and Australia–US defence cooperation put forward in this paper require further research and warrant a detailed feasibility assessment. Military modernisation alone won't effectively expand the competitive space and disrupt PRC grey-zone decision-cycles. Thinking asymmetrically, Australia can further enable US force posture initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. Australia can expand its defence industrial base while securing and hardening its supply chains, increase the US Army force posture in northern Australia, increase multinational training opportunities, and expand the defence partnership with Indonesia. Those innovative recommendations demonstrate how Australia's defence force capabilities and its strategic geography can be employed to enable US force posture initiatives in the Indo-Pacific to promote greater regional cooperation and, through greater deterrent posture and capability, reduce the risks of conflict.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AOR	area of responsibility
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DSU	2020 Defence Strategic Update
FSP	2020 Force Structure Plan
NSC	National Security Council (US)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
Quad	Quadilateral Security Dialogue
R&D	research and development
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
USAWC	US Army War College
USINDOPACOM	US Indo-Pacific Command

About the author

Todd C Hanks is a US Army War College Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. He is slated to command 599th Transportation Brigade, based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in June 2022.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense or the US Government.

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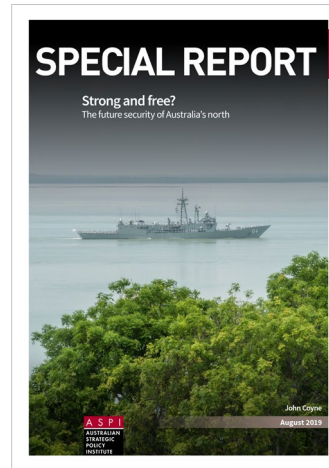
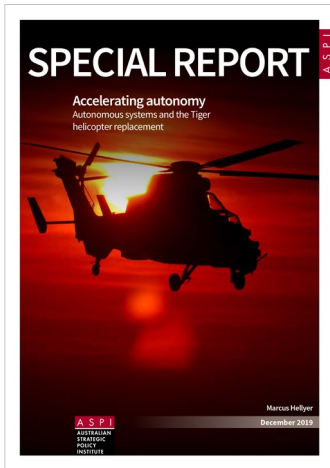
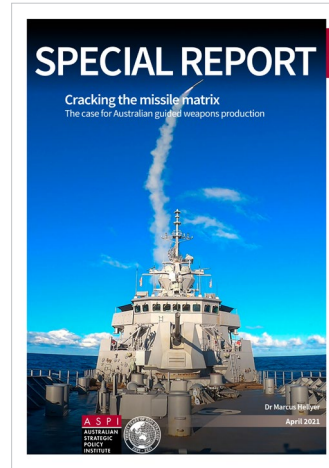
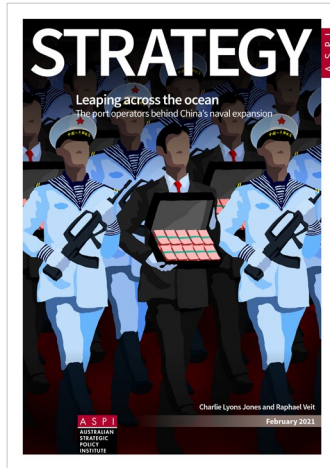
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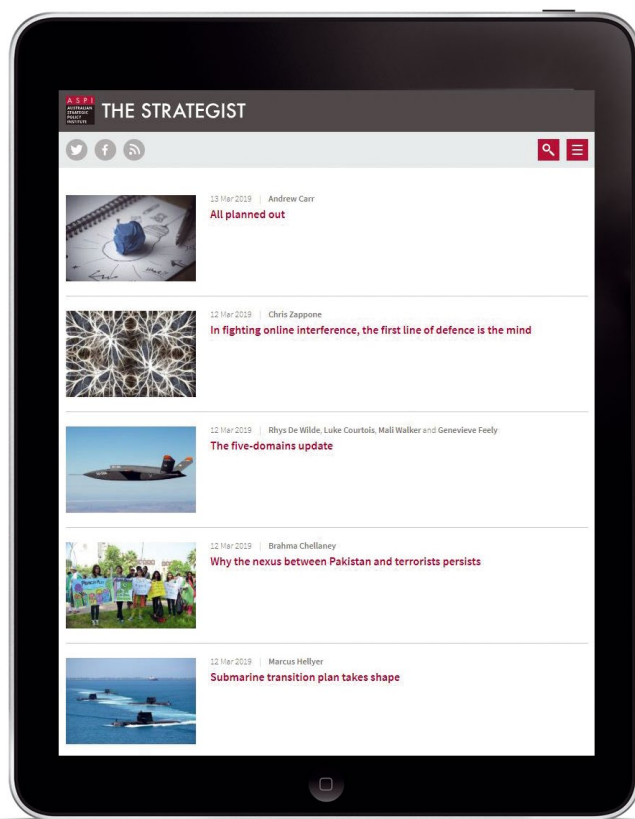


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