An informed and independent voice

ASPI, 2001–2021

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About ASPI

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute was formed in 2001 as an independent, non-partisan think tank. Its core aim is to provide the Australian Government with fresh ideas on Australia's defence, security and strategic policy choices. ASPI is responsible for informing the public on a range of strategic issues, generating new thinking for government and harnessing strategic thinking internationally. ASPI's sources of funding are identified in our annual report, online at www.aspi.org.au and in the acknowledgements section of individual publications. ASPI remains independent in the content of the research and in all editorial judgements. It is incorporated as a company, and is governed by a Council with broad membership. ASPI's core values are collegiality, originality & innovation, quality & excellence and independence.

ASPI's publications—including this report—are not intended in any way to express or reflect the views of the Australian Government. The opinions and recommendations in this report are published by ASPI to promote public debate and understanding of strategic and defence issues. They reflect the personal views of the author(s) and should not be seen as representing the formal position of ASPI on any particular issue.

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A senior diplomat from one of Australia's close 'Old Commonwealth' partners tells a story about hosting an Australian visit from his country's defence minister, an aspiring political operator. The minister came to ASPI for a 90-minute roundtable with senior staff. Mark Thomson briefed on Defence's budget woes—this was one of those years when financial squeezing was the order of the day, and a gap was quietly appearing between policy promises and funding reality. Andrew Davies reported on the challenges of delivering the Joint Strike Fighter, the contentious arrival of the 'stop-gap' Super Hornet and the awkward non-arrival of the future submarine. Rod Lyon spoke about the insurmountable problems of Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and our own government's foreign policy foibles. It was, like many ASPI meetings, a lively and sustained critique of policy settings. Driving back to the High Commission, a somewhat startled minister muttered to his diplomatic escort: 'Thank God we don't have a think tank like that back home!'

The genius of ASPI is that it's designed to be a charming disrupter. Sufficiently inside the policy tent to understand the gritty guts of policy problems, but with a remit to be the challenger of orthodoxies, the provider of different policy dreams (as long as they're costed and deliverable), the plain-speaking explainer of complexity, and a teller of truth to power. Well, that's perhaps a little too grand. ASPI aims to be a helpful partner to the national security community, not a hectoring lecturer. But the institute ceases to have any value if it just endorses current policy settings: the aim is to provide 'contestability of policy advice'. Not always easy in a town where climbing the policy ladder is the only game.

The story of ASPI's creation has been told by several present at the creation[1] and, very enjoyably, by Graeme Dobell in the second chapter in this volume. With the release of the Howard government cabinet records for the year 2000, we now get to see that the National Security Committee of cabinet deliberated carefully over ASPI's composition, charter, organisational location, geographical location and underlying purpose. The annual expenditure proposed ($2.1 million) was, by Defence's standards, trivial even in 2000. What the government was chewing over was the sense or otherwise of injecting a new institution into the Canberra policymaking environment.

The case for a strategic policy institute was set out in a cabinet submission considered on 18 April 2000:

> There are two key reasons to establish an independent institute to study strategic policy. The first is to encourage development of alternative sources of advice to Government on key strategic and defence policy issues. The principles of contestability have been central to our Government's philosophy and practice of public administration, but

> these principles have not been effectively implemented in relation to defence and strategic policy, despite the vital national interests and significant sums of money that are at stake. The Government has found in relation to the COLLINS Class Submarines project for instance, and more recently in relation to White Paper process, that there are almost no sources of alternative information or analysis on key issues in defence policy, including the critical questions of our capability needs and how they can best be satisfied. The ASPI will be charged with providing an alternative source of expertise on such issues.
>
> Second, public debate of defence policy is inhibited by a poor understanding of the choices and issues involved. The ASPI will be tasked to contribute an informed and independent voice to public discussion on these issues.[2]

'An informed and independent voice'. There couldn't be a better description of what the institute has sought to bring to the public debate; nor could there be a more fitting title for this study of ASPI's first 20 years by Graeme Dobell, ably assisted by the voices and insights of many ASPI colleagues.

The April cabinet meeting agreed that ASPI should be established, but the government went back to Defence a second time to test thinking about the institute's organisational structure. In July, the department proposed several options, including that ASPI could be added as an 'internal Defence Strategic Policy Cell', or operate as an independent advisory board to the Minister for Defence, or be based at a university, or be a statutory authority, executive agency or incorporated company. Having considered other possibilities, the government accepted Defence's recommendation (endorsed by other departments) that ASPI be established as a government-owned incorporated company managed by a board 'to enhance the institute's independence within a robust and easy to administer corporate structure'.[3]

The most striking aspect of this decision is that the government opted for the model that gave ASPI the greatest level of independence. There were options that would have limited the proposed new entity, for example, by making it internal to Defence or adding more complex governance mechanisms that might have threatened the perception of independence. Those options were rejected. A decision to invite a potential critic to the table is the decision of a mature and confident government. It's perhaps not surprising that there aren't many ASPI-like entities. Prime Minister Howard was also keen to see that the institute would last beyond a change of government. ASPI was directed to be 'non-partisan', above daily politics. The leader of the opposition would be able to nominate a representative to the ASPI Council. ASPI would also be given a remit to 'pursue alternate sources of funding and growth', giving the institute the chance to outgrow its Defence crib.

Interestingly, the August 2000 cabinet decision to establish ASPI as a stand-alone centre structured as an incorporated company and managed by a board of directors also stated that: 'The Cabinet expressed a disposition to establish the centre outside of the Australian Capital Territory.'[4] By the time ASPI was registered in August 2001 as an Australian public company

limited by guarantee, the institute's offices were located in Barton in the ACT, where they remain to this day.

The government appointed Robert O'Neill AO as the chair of the ASPI Council, and the inaugural membership of the council was appointed in July 2001, meeting for the first time on 29 August 2001. That month, the council appointed Hugh White AO as the institute's executive director and Hugh set about building the initial ASPI team. A fortnight later, the world fundamentally changed. Terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon and one unsuccessfully aimed at the White House jolted the strategic fabric of the Middle East and the world's democracies. ASPI couldn't have started at a more challenging time for strategic analysis.

Writing in ASPI's first annual report, Hugh White reported that the institute in 2001–02 'did a small amount of work directly for government, including a substantial assessment for the Minister for Defence, Senator Hill, of the implications of September 11 for Australia's defence'.[5] ASPI's first public report was a study by Elsina Wainwright, *New neighbour, new challenge: Australia and the security of East Timor.* This was followed by the first of Mark Thomson's 16 editions of *The cost of Defence: the ASPI defence budget brief 2002–03*. This included a rundown of the top 20 defence capability acquisition projects. The slightly cheeky cartoon covers—state and territory seagulls pinching Defence spending chips is my favourite—didn't start until 2003–04, but the first *Cost of Defence* began the trend to report Defence's daily budget spend: $39,991,898.63. (The 2021–22 *Cost of Defence* records the daily spend at $122,242,739.73.)

Hugh White closed off his 2001–02 Director's report with 'Clearly the task of defining our role in the policy debate will take some time to complete, but we believe we have made a good start.' It was quite a foundation year: tectonic global security shifts, challenging regional deployments, defence budget and capability analysis. ASPI's course was set, and the rest, as they say, makes up the history that Graeme Dobell and ASPI colleagues cover in this book. Graeme's analysis makes sense of what, to the participants, might have felt from time to time like one damned thing after another. But patterns do emerge, and they coalesce into the realisation that ASPI's first 20 years have marked some of the most turbulent shifts in Australia's security outlook. All of which puts, or should put, a tremendous premium on the value of strategic policy, contestable policy advice, an informed and engaged audience and a new generation of well-trained policy professionals.

ASPI today is a larger organisation working across a wider area of strategy and policy issues. The annual report for 2019–20 lists 64 non-ongoing (that is, contracted) staff, of whom 45 were full time (22 female and 23 male) and 15 were part time (11 female and four male). The overall ASPI budget was $11,412,096.71, of which $4 million (35%) was from Defence, managed by a long-term funding agreement. A further $3.6 million (32%) came from federal government agencies; $0.122 million (1%) from state and territory government agencies; $1.89 million (17%) from overseas government agencies, most prominently from the US State Department and Pentagon and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Defence industry provided $0.370 million (3%); private-sector sponsorship was $1.241 million (11%) and finally, funding from civil society and universities was $0.151 million (1%).[6]

Behind those numbers is a mountain of effort to grow the institute and sustain it financially. Think tanks need high-performing staff, and high-performing staff need salaries that will keep them at the think tank. The nexus between money and viability is absolute. Around the world, there are many think tanks that don't amount to much more than a letterhead and an individual's dedicated effort in a spare room at home. The reality is that building scale, research depth, a culture of pushing the policy boundaries and a back-catalogue of high-quality events and publications takes money. In the early stages of ASPI's life, I recall the view expressed that the institute couldn't possibly be regarded as independent if the overwhelming balance of its resources came from the Department of Defence. More recently, the charge is that the 'military industrial complex' or foreign governments must be the tail that wags the dog. The Canberra embassy of a large and assertive Leninist authoritarian regime can't conceive that ASPI could possibly be independent in its judgements because, well, no such intellectual independence survives back home. ASPI must therefore be the catspaw of Australian Government policy thinking.

None of those contentions are borne out by looking at the content of ASPI products over the past two decades. There are plenty of examples (from critiques of the Port of Darwin's lease to a PRC company; analysis of key equipment projects such as submarines and combat aircraft; assessments of the Bush, Obama, Trump and now the Biden presidencies; assessments of the Defence budget; differences on cyber policy) in which the institute's capacity for feisty contrarianism has been on full display. In my time at ASPI, I haven't once been asked by a politician, public servant, diplomat or industry representative to bend a judgement to their preferences. It follows that, for good or ill, the judgements made by ASPI staff, and our contributors, are their views, and their views alone. ASPI is independent because it was designed to operate that way. Its output demonstrates that reality every day.

And as you will see in these pages, ASPI has views aplenty. It became clear several years ago that the institute needed to broaden its focus away from defence policy and international security more narrowly conceived to address a wider canvas of security issues. That's because the wider canvas presents some of the most interesting and challenging dilemmas for Australia's national security. We sought to bring a new policy focus to cyber issues by creating the ASPI International Cyber Policy Centre. This was followed by streams of work addressing risk and resilience; counterterrorism; policing and international law enforcement; countering disinformation; understanding the behaviour of the PRC in all its dimensions; and, most recently, climate and security.

Does ASPI's work have real policy effect? One of the curiosities of the Canberra environment is that officials will often go to quite some length to deny that a think tank could possibly shift the policy dial. To do so might be to acknowledge an implicit criticism that a department or agency hasn't been on its game. Changing policy is often more like a process of erosion than a sudden jolting earthquake. It can take time to mount and sustain a critique about policy settings before the need for change is finally acknowledged. And it has to be said that the standard disposition of Canberra policymakers is to defend current policy settings. That shouldn't be too surprising:

current policy settings in many cases will be the result of government decisions, and, at times, the role of the public service is to raise the drawbridge and defend the battlements. So, it's often the case that a department's response to the arrival of an ASPI report isn't a yelp of joy so much as the cranking up of a talking points brief for the minister that explains why current policy settings are correct, can't be improved upon and quite likely are the best of all possible worlds.

ASPI's influence is therefore more indirect than that of the Australian Public Service (APS), but, as Sun Tzu reminds us, 'indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.'[7] The institute has some natural strengths in this approach. ASPI has the advantage of being small and flexible; it has a charter to look beyond current policy settings; it can talk to a wide range of people in and out of government to seed ideas; it can engage with the media; it allows expertise to develop because more than a few ASPI staff have stayed in jobs for years and built a depth of knowledge not necessarily found in generalist public servants who frequently change roles.

Taking a longer view, I would suggest that ASPI has indeed managed to influence the shape of policy in a number of areas. The institute has helped to create a more informed base of opinion on key defence budget and capability issues. This has helped to strengthen parliamentary and external scrutiny of the Defence Department and the ADF. ASPI is really the only source providing detailed analysis of defence spending and has helped to lift public understanding about critical military capability issues, such as the future submarine project, the future of the surface fleet, air combat capabilities, the land forces, space, and joint and enabling capabilities.

ASPI has had substantial impact on national thinking about dealing with the PRC, and that has helped at least set the context for government decision-making on issues such as the rollout of the 5G network, countering foreign interference, strengthening security consideration of foreign direct investment and informing national approaches to fuel and supply-chain security. ASPI has sought to make policy discussions about cyber, critical and emerging technologies more informed and more accessible. The institute has offered many active, informed and engaged voices on critical international issues of importance to Australia, from the Antarctic to the countries and dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, the alliance with the US, the machinery of Defence and national security decision-making, the security of northern Australia and even re-engaging with Europe.

It's best left to others to judge the success or otherwise of the institute. Both from the approval, and sometimes disapproval, that ASPI garners, we can see that people pay attention to the institute's work. That's gratifying and motivates the team to keep doing more.

Coincidentally to ASPI's 20th anniversary, the Australian Parliament's Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee has been conducting an inquiry into funding for public research into foreign policy issues. In making a submission to that inquiry, I offered what I hoped was useful advice about the contours of what a notional 'foreign policy institute' should look like if the government wanted to promote in the field of foreign policy what ASPI seeks to do for defence and strategic policy. That led me to suggest the following seven approaches, presented here with minor edits:

1. **A foreign policy institute must be genuinely independent**, with a charter that makes its core functions clear and a governance framework that supports its independence. If the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) were to be the prime source of funding, it should be made clear that DFAT should not influence the policy recommendations of the institute's work. A government-appointed council, including a representative of the leader of the opposition, should provide overall strategic direction for the institute. Any entity that is part of a larger government department will inevitably come to reflect the parent. A clear separation between the parent department and the institute is essential.

2. **The institute should not be part of a university**, because university priorities would weaken the institute's capacity to retain a sharp focus on public policy. The committee might like to test this proposition by seeing whether it can identify any contemporary foreign policy research outfit that is part of a university which has substantially shaped Australian foreign policy. My view is that you will search in vain. This is true in the main because universities have priorities other than shaping public policy outcomes. How universities recruit, reward and promote, what they teach and the outcomes they regard as constituting excellence are shaped towards other ends than providing contestable and implementable foreign policy.

3. **The institute needs scale to develop excellence**. Successful think tanks—such as those at the top end of the University of Pennsylvania's 'Go To' index—attract people interested in policy ideas and with lateral thinking skills and with some entrepreneurial flair. The quality of their thinking is strengthened by being able to test their ideas with colleagues and collaborate on interesting policy work. Some scale is needed to bring a group of people like that together, offering terms and conditions that allow people to develop skills over a few years. This approach stands in contrast to the instinct of some departments to offer one-off, short-term, small funding grants. In my experience, multiple 'penny-packet' grants become difficult for departments to administer, produce reports that lack an understanding of how public policy is really done and do not develop skills.

4. **The institute will need some time to establish itself**. ASPI is 20, and every day is a story of how we manage the tasks of offering policy contestability, engaging with our stakeholders and sustaining ourselves financially. It took probably 15 years for an acceptance to be built in the rather tightknit defence and security community that ASPI was not simply to be tolerated but could add value and even be constructively brought into policy discussions. A foreign policy institute will take a similar amount of time to build an accepted place for itself. Hopefully, an institute would start producing good material on day one, but it will take years for such a group to be seen as a natural (indeed, essential) interlocutor in critical foreign policy discussions.

5. **The institute must be non-partisan**, reaching out to all parts of parliament. Because foreign policy is a public policy good, it is appropriate and likely that the bulk of funding for a foreign policy institute will come from the public sector. If it is successful, the institute will survive through changes of governments, ministers and senior officials. As such, it can't

afford to be partisan in the way that many private think tanks are. That will still leave scope for engaged debate on policy options, which leads to approach number 6.

6. **Accept that the institute will, from time to time, annoy you**. This is the price of contestability of policy advice. There is no question that ASPI has annoyed governments, oppositions and officials over the years on all manner of issues, from key bilateral relationships to defence equipment acquisitions, military operations, budgets and the rest. To advance policy thinking, it's necessary from time to time to question existing policy orthodoxies. The test for the institute's stakeholders is whether the value of contestable policy advice is worth the occasional annoyance. The test for the foreign policy institute will be whether the issue in question has been appropriately researched and thought through.

7. **A professional outfit needs appropriate funding**. To succeed, a foreign policy institute needs to be able to attract a mix of staff who can be remunerated in line with their skills. As in all walks of life, one gets what one pays for. Funding of between $2 million and $3 million would set up an institute able to build some critical mass, working out of offices fitted out to an appropriately modest APS standard. The institute should have a remit to grow its funding base through its own efforts. This would be sufficient to enable a promising start to a potentially nationally important organisation. ASPI was designed to place the executive director position at (approximately) the level of the APS Senior Executive Service Band 3 (deputy secretary) level. Salary and conditions are determined by the Remuneration Tribunal. The executive director, on direction from the ASPI Council, determines salary levels for ASPI's staff, who are recruited on contracts. The intent is to recruit people with the mix of policy skills and hands-on public policy experience who can realistically shape policy thinking. Government departments and agencies are, in general, willing to support staff taking positions at ASPI, using options for leave without pay from the APS. For more senior staff, the hope is that some time spent at ASPI will enhance their careers, perhaps enabling them to return to the APS with new skills and capacities. For more junior staff, the aim is to equip them with skills that will make them attractive new hires for departments and agencies.[8]

Of course, I was doing little more than describing the ASPI business model developed more than 20 years ago and validated through two decades of enthusiastic policy research and advocacy by many dozens of ASPI staff.

Speaking personally, it has been the privilege of my professional life to spend almost a decade as the executive director of the institute since April 2012, and a few more years before that as ASPI's director of programs between 2003 and 2006. My commitment to the organisation comes about because of the value I believe it adds to Australia's defence and strategic policy framework. These policy settings matter. They're the foundation of the security of the country, the security of our people and the very type of country that Australia aspires to be. Australia would be better defended if we had more lively debates about the best ways to promote our strategic interests. ASPI has truly been a national gem in sustaining those debates.

At the core of this book is Graeme Dobell's sharp take on the intellectual content of hundreds of ASPI research publications, thousands of *Strategist* posts and many, many conferences, seminars, roundtables and the like. Graeme has done a wonderful job of breathing life into this body of work, reflecting some of the heat and energy that came from ASPI staff and ASPI contributors investing their brain power into Australia's policy interests. In these pages, you read the story of Australia's own difficult navigation through the choppy strategic seas of the past 20 years. It's a thrilling ride and a testament to the many wonderful people who have worked at or supported the institute.

We should all hope that ASPI reaches its 40-year and even 50-year anniversaries, because there's no doubt in my mind that Australia will continue to need access to contestable policy advice in defence and strategic policy. The coming years will be no less difficult and demanding than the years recounted here. In fact, Australia's future is likely to face even greater challenges. Never forget that strategy and policy matter. Profoundly so. That's why ASPI matters.

Notes

1 See, for example, Kim Beazley, John Howard et al., *ASPI at 15*, ASPI, Canberra, October 2016, online.

2 Cabinet memorandum JH00/0131—Establishment of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute—Decision, 18 April 2000, online.

3 Cabinet decision JH00/0216/CAB—Australian Strategic Policy Institute—alternate models to establish a strategic policy research centre—Decision, online.

4 Cabinet decision JH00/0216/CAB.

5 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Annual report 2001–2002*, ASPI, Canberra, October 2002, 10, online.

6 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Annual report 2019–2020*, ASPI, Canberra, October 2020, online; staff numbers are on page 10; funding data is on page 154.

7 Sun Tzu, *The art of war*, translated by Lionel Giles, Chapter V, 5, online.

8 My submission to the inquiry is available via the internet home page of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, Inquiry into funding for public research into foreign policy issues, online.

Strategy

The name is the game: the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

ASPI thinks about strategy. And the alchemy of dollars, deeds and dreams that turn strategy into policy.

To the threshold question—posed by wit or cynic—of whether Australia has a strategy, turn to the response 45 years ago of Professor Tom Millar, prefacing his book *Australia in peace and war*: 'Having written all these words, I would reply: if a policy has so much history, who can doubt that a policy exists!'[1]

On the Millar measure, ASPI's wordage over two decades proves the existence of Australia's effort to do strategy. The founding philosophy for those words, set by Robert O'Neill and Hugh White, was that:

- 'ASPI would only write on issues that had a clear Australian dimension.'
- Issues must be 'predominantly strategic in nature—in the narrower sense of that word.'
- The institute would deal with policy questions in which 'Australia was facing clear choices and would not shy away from giving a well-reasoned, evidence-based view of what choice should be made.'[2]

ASPI ponders 'guns or butter?', 'the uses and abuses of defence white papers', 'the roles of risk and threat in defence', and 'what grand strategy should do for you'. Each of those was a headline in the opening fortnight of ASPI's online journal, *The Strategist* (whether defence spending was like insurance gave the masthead its first intellectual stoush).[3]

The institute's discussion of what Australian strategy should *be* is spiced by argument about what strategy *is*.

An ASPI debate was sparked by a line from former Foreign Minister Bob Carr in his memoir: 'All foreign policy is a series of improvisations.'[4] In response, eight writers debated strategy as more than ad lib and scrambling. What was strategy's core business? Who should practise it? Is enough strategy being done in Canberra by Foreign Affairs, Defence and other parts of government?[5]

Peter Jennings pondered the difference between good crisis managers and poor long-term planners: 'Countries that invest in strategic thinking and planning have more capacity to deliver better quality policy. Countries that don't take strategy seriously risk policy drift and ultimately losing national advantage.'

Robert Ayson responded that strategy and planning aren't synonymous, and that strategy can be more a state of mind than a formal process. Rod Lyon thought Canberra's grand strategy was Australia's project for the world: 'No-one writes it down for the simple reason that it isn't the property of one person. Nor, I suppose, is it ever fulfilled, so there's no sense of the objective's being reached.'

Starting from the noun *strategos*, meaning 'general' (hence 'strategy', or the 'art of generalship'), Nic Stuart lamented the weight modern strategy has to carry: '[E]verything from the work of a commanding general right through to culture (making us all think correctly) and business (so we'll buy more widgets). It's now being expected to define the thinking work of politicians, too.'

Anthony Bergin was less dismissive of business, saying much could be gleaned from the best management gurus: good strategy is an educated judgement about what will work, while bad strategy is vacuous and superficial, tripping over its own internal contradictions.

Strategy's future, according to Peter Jennings, depends on the capacity to vanquish the four horsemen of policy apocalypse: 'short-termism; risk aversion; groupthink; and failures of imagination'.

A later offering from Peter Layton quoted the dictum that strategy is about ends, ways and means. The optimism of strategy, Layton wrote, is not realist nightmares of forever wars and failed world orders, but imagining better ends: '[T]he trade of the strategist is to focus on how to make better futures rather than map the descent routes into bad ones.'[6]

Robert O'Neill, ASPI's founding chairman, defined the qualities Australia needs from its think tanks:

> For meeting the security challenges to Australia today, we need good ideas, dialogue with government and a relationship which tolerates free expression of views, especially on differences with existing policies. None of these essentials comes easily. We, the analysts, need experience in practical work—diplomacy, war, business and politics—as well as intellectual quality before we have any notion as to what is a good idea. Once we develop some ideas we need to be able to discuss them with senior people in government so that our views are taken into account in the mix that goes into decision making. Our colleagues in government will not bother to listen to us if they do not respect the relevance and quality of our work. It is up to us to win their attention and hold it.[7]

Strategy is an attempt to think long term amid the noise and improvisation of events, and ASPI arrived on the scene amid big events.

The institute was registered as a government-owned company on 22 August 2001.[8] Three weeks later, the 9/11 decade was born as the planes struck the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon. As the institute was finalising its first strategic assessment, jihadist bombers struck in Bali in October 2002. The Indonesia attack meant the title of the assessment became *Beyond Bali*.[9] It identified three core challenges for the new decade:

1. Combat terrorism: 'We now face an unprecedented risk from terrorism, and our most urgent policy priority must be to respond effectively.'
2. Stop further deterioration in the Asia–Pacific security environment.
3. Maintain and possibly increase the defence capabilities announced in the Howard government's 2000 Defence White Paper (DWP).[10]

The 9/11 era

> A US decision to invade Iraq would be a clear demonstration that September 11 had changed the boundaries of US policy in fundamental ways, and perhaps even changed the US psyche. The long-term implications for US foreign policy could be profound.
>
> —*Australia's defence after September 11*, ASPI, Canberra, 2002[11]

The attacks on New York and Washington transformed US strategic policy. The 'war on terror' defined America's 9/11 decade, shifting Australia's understanding of the US–Australia alliance.

Australia's shock at the Bali bombings in October 2002 was an echo of what America felt in September 2001. Terrorism suddenly sat at the heart of Canberra's security thinking.

The US showed its extraordinary military power as it invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. As a committed ally, Australia played a meaningful role in the taking of Afghanistan and in the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq, earning the status of an occupying power.

Swift military victory could not be translated into peace, as America launched what it came to label 'forever wars'. Iraq was 'the first major geostrategic blunder of the 21st century', Allan Gyngell told an ASPI conference in 2006.[12]

For Australian strategy, new life was injected into old arguments about the defence of the continent versus the military expeditionary tradition: how were we to balance a regional focus against what was happening in the global system?

In mid-2002, ASPI issued a 'public debate initiative' titled *Australia's defence after September 11.* Reflecting the times, the guide had tentative answers to a cascade of questions:

> Five years from now, will we look back on September 11, 2001 as being the start of a new era in global security? Will the 'war on terror' involve more major military campaigns? Might terrorists use a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon? Where is the United States heading? Has the US psyche changed? Has the fighting in Afghanistan shown us a new way of war? Do we need different capabilities in our defence force, or a different defence philosophy?[13]

On whether global security had been redefined, the paper offered: 'Perhaps the long-term significance of September 11 will not be that it is the start of a new era in its own right, but rather that it has shown us more clearly the shape of the post–Cold War world in which we live.'

The problem with George Bush declaring a 'war on terror' was the implication 'that the fight against terrorism will be primarily military. This is not the case.'

Deep US outrage at 9/11 and determination to deliver punishment had 'greatly amplified' the Bush administration's policy instincts. A US invasion of Iraq would show a 'fundamental' change in the US psyche with 'profound' implications for US foreign policy.

Hugh White, ASPI's first director (2001–2005), reflected that within months of the institute being launched:

> ASPI staff were among those arguing against an invasion of Iraq for which the government was doing all it could to build support. It is worth noting that John Howard never, at least to my knowledge, made any criticism of the role ASPI staff played in the debates over Iraq, which is a telling testament to his commitment to the concept on which it was established.[14]

By the time ASPI issued its first strategic assessment, in November 2002, it reported an Australian public mood that 'a war in Iraq might be inevitable'.[15] The effect on strategy, Aldo Borgu wrote, was to turn Canberra's eyes away from its 'concentric circles' defence strategy, in which the circles radiated out from Australia in priority order:

- defending Australia and its direct approaches
- ensuring the security of our immediate neighbourhood
- promoting stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia
- maintaining strategic stability in the wider Asia–Pacific region
- supporting the UN and US in maintaining global security.

Australia might be turning from 'concentric circles' as the conceptual basis for defence planning towards having a 'global reach'. Our ability to support the US globally 'will be limited in military terms, as it should be'. Any backing for the US 'should not detract from our ability to ensure our security in the Asia–Pacific region, particularly in our immediate neighbourhood'. Any global deployments should be:

- specialised in nature
- short-term in duration
- small in numbers.

Australia's Defence Minister during ASPI's first five years, Robert Hill, was dismissive of concentric circles. Stressing the expeditionary history of Australia's military, Hill told the institute's 2005 Global Forces conference of a sea-change in strategic policy:

> We don't believe in isolation. We recognise the limitations of self-reliance and the inherent risk of continental defence. In an increasingly interrelated world, even policies of layered defence will not best protect Australians or Australian interests. As I said once before, we see the seas to our north not as a moat but as a highway to the world. The role of the expeditionary force might have changed, but the need to be able to project our military forces in meeting today's security challenges is as vital as ever—possibly more so.[16]

The Howard government's thinking 'moved away from the geographic determinism of the Defence of Australia school,' judged Peter Abigail, the retired major-general and former Deputy Chief of Army who was ASPI's executive director from 2005 to 2011.

Abigail described a more overtly outward-looking and proactive approach:

> In many ways this represents a return to our national strategic roots, our strategic culture if you like, which includes preferences for small but capable standing forces, an external focus for the Australian Defence Force, an interventionist approach to threats to our interests, working within a key alliance with the dominant maritime power and defending forward.[17]

ASPI developed an early habit of offering strategic overviews to Australia's political leaders ahead of federal elections. The election in October 2004 prompted *Scoping studies: new thinking on security.*[18] The 11 contributors found many pieces to puzzle over: the intervention in East Timor, the 9/11 attacks and the new perils of terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the future of the US alliance in a dynamic Asia–Pacific.

Rod Lyon described a transformation of the international security environment. Old enemies had been static and hierarchical. New enemies were dynamic, networked and evolving. Lyon saw conceptual shock:

> This deep-level change in the international system will have profound consequences for our security. We cannot continue in the same old way, treating interstate war as 'real war' and everything else as peripheral. We are at one of those rare historical junctures where decades of strategic continuity are unravelling. Our enemies are changing and our doctrines are breaking down.

In 2005, ASPI published a paper arguing that it was time for the Howard government to produce a new DWP to succeed / replace / build on its 2000 edition. Peter Jennings said the government must consider what had really changed in Australia's outlook because of 9/11 and where defence policy sat in the nation's emerging national security strategy. Jennings said the Defence Department had struggled to come to terms with a fundamental question:

> Australia's strategists continue to debate whether the terrible events of September 11, 2001 changed everything or changed nothing. The answer is far from trivial because it should shape the structure and roles of the ADF. Broadly, there are two schools of thought. Some argue that the threat from terrorism is so pervasive that it has undermined the traditional role of geography in strategy. A contending school argues that, especially in Asia, the potential for conventional war between states remains sufficiently high that we should still focus on the immediate region.[19]

Political and bureaucratic arguments would be raised against a new White Paper. Good-quality white papers demanded tough judgements, forcing governments to make difficult choices between competing options. By definition, that limited options for political flexibility, Jennings wrote:

> White papers also create losers as well as winners—equipment programs forgone, delivery dates delayed, and old programs cut so money can fund new priorities.

> These tend not to be popular decisions. Barbara Tuchman's wonderful line from her book *August 1914* is apposite: 'No more distressing moment can ever face a British Government than that which requires it to come to a hard, fast and specific decision.'

The arguments against a new White Paper prevailed. Thus, in a dozen years in office the Howard government had five defence ministers but only one DWP; the crucial constant element in all those years was the *über* Defence Minister, John Howard.

The Prime Minister / *über* Defence Minister was satisfied with the choices he made in the 2000 DWP and ensured that the promised cash kept arriving in the budgets that followed; job done, no need to revisit.[20]

The formal adjustments to policy settings were done via defence updates (1997, 2003 and 2007), two foreign policy white papers (1997 and 2003) and policy papers on terrorism (2004 and 2006) and Australia's role in fighting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs; 2005). The rolling commentary on Australian strategy was a task the *über* Defence Minister shared with each of his five defence ministers.

Asia–Pacific to Indo-Pacific

Australia has long used geography to refine strategy and to impose hierarchy and order on defence spending and structure. Yet in the first decades of the 21st century the geographical calculus was bedevilled by fundamental shifts in power.

As much else changed, so did Australia's sense of the world around our continent, transformed by a shapeshifting, expanding sense of region.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Australia helped build an ambitious geographical construct: the Asia–Pacific. Then the Asia–Pacific model gave way to an even larger defining geography: the Indo-Pacific.

India's growing importance had to be acknowledged, China's systemic effects had to be calculated, Japan's security evolution had to be embraced, and the traditional concentration on Indonesia and ASEAN had to be affirmed and made central to our expanded understanding.

Just as geography is remade by tectonic forces, geopolitics and geo-economics remade the policy frame to adjust to China's rise, India's arrival, and America's relative decline.

In 2005, one of the greats of Australian strategy, Coral Bell, weighed in with *Living with giants: finding Australia's place in a more complex world* on the 'unstoppable and accelerating' shift of global power eating away at the 'unipolar world of US paramountcy'.[21]

Two emerging patterns could advantage Australia, Bell thought. The first was a regional security community in the Asia–Pacific, starting 'with a simple resolution by a group of countries that they won't go to war with each other again'.

The second pattern was the need for a global concert of powers (a 'company of giants') to avoid hegemonial war as new great powers (China and India) arrived in the magic circle. If the concert of powers couldn't be reached, Bell wrote, instead it would have to be a balance of power:

> [T]he greatest world dangers and the most pressing demands on our ability to cope remain likely to come, just as they did in 1941, from conflicts between the great powers of the central balance, rather than from regional crises, however acute, or from the jihadists. A new Cold War, between the US and China, or between Japan and China, or between India and China, or between a Russia–China coalition and the US, with whatever allies it could recruit in Asia and the Pacific, would provide true nightmares.

Bell's nightmare was that of a strategist trying to peer ahead decades, to discern the future shape of big powers and the international system.

The Rudd Labor government that won office in 2007 set to work on a new DWP. When the policy was delivered in 2009, geography was in the title: *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century.*

Rod Lyon and Andrew Davies wrote that media reporting of Labor's policy statement tended to focus on the hardware acquisition ('And that is not surprising—there is a lot of it'); just as important was a 'significant re-positioning of Australia's declaratory strategic policy' and 'a firm geography-based line' amid the shifting sands of the Asia–Pacific:

> That emphasis on geographical determinism is reinforced in the White Paper's acknowledgement that, while Australia has four major strategic interests—a secure Australia, a secure neighbourhood, a stable Asia–Pacific and a rules-based global order—only the first two of those interests will actually shape the Australian force structure. Given that, one could be forgiven for wondering why the power balance shifts in the wider Asia–Pacific engendered by the rise of China are given so much prominence elsewhere in the document. Indeed, there seems to be something of a disconnect here. If developments in the wider region are not force structure determinants, why the emphasis on a larger fleet of long-range submarines with strategic strike capabilities? The revival of the Defence of Australia strategic orthodoxy suggests a narrowing of Australian strategic policy focus under the Rudd government.[22]

In one sense, the 2009 DWP was 'ground-breaking', Peter Abigail observed:

> It was the first public policy statement by a US ally that attempted to come to terms with the power shifts underway in the Asia–Pacific and raise questions about the durability of US strategic primacy. It lifted what had been academic, commentarial and officials' discourse into the realm of declared policy and, therefore, attracted quite a bit of attention, particularly in Beijing and Washington.[23]

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Andrew Davies and Mark Thomson considered the regional 'state of flux' and saw two futures. The key unknown was whether economic cooperation or strategic competition would take precedence:

> The optimistic possibility is that Asia will evolve into a region in which cooperation trumps strategic competition—something akin to how Europe operates today. The more pessimistic possibility is that strategic competition will grow into mounting tensions and that Asia will face the same bleak prospects that Europe did a century ago.[24]

When Rod Lyon mapped the 'strategic contours' of Asia's rise in 2012, he couldn't separate those futures of competition or cooperation. The region faced a strange blend of both—what business calls 'coopetition'. Lyon saw transformational change characterised by interlinked phenomena: 'the relative decline of US power in Asia, and the "return" of Asian great powers to the international system'.[25]

In the 'coopetitive' Asia–Pacific the regional security order was fraying, Lyon wrote:

> [A]s multipolarity grows in Asia, regional perceptions of US primacy are becoming more blurred. That blurring weakens the interlinked systems of reassurance and deterrence that underpin the current order. As Asian coercive power grows—and coercive power is the power to intimidate as well as the power to do actual physical harm—the region as a whole is entering a new era of reassurance worries.

After Julia Gillard deposed Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister and narrowly won the 2010 election, she ordered two white papers: the *Australia in the Asian century* foreign policy White Paper issued in 2012, and the 2013 DWP. The government produced two policy statements that were, if not at odds, certainly engaged in a series of debates about the nature of the region and its future—and even the name for the region.

Gillard asked for the *Asian century* study for policy, political and even personal reasons; she had to put her own stamp on foreign policy, not least because Kevin Rudd was her Foreign Minister. Thus, the *Asian century* paper was written in the Prime Minister's Department by former Treasury secretary Ken Henry.

Peter Jennings worried at the puzzling absence of the US from Henry's terms of reference, despite the centrality of the US to the strategic picture.[26] The omission of the US certainly concerned the Department of Defence, shaping its approach to its own White Paper.

The Henry report blended liberal internationalism with an optimistic view of Asia entering a new phase of deeper and broader engagement, with this opening vision:

> Asia's rise is changing the world. This is a defining feature of the 21st century—the Asian century. These developments have profound implications for people everywhere. Asia's extraordinary ascent has already changed the Australian economy, society and strategic environment … The Asian century is an Australian opportunity. As the global centre of gravity shifts to our region, the tyranny of distance is being replaced by the prospects of proximity. Australia is located in the right place at the right time—in the Asian region in the Asian century.[27]

Defence's response to the Asian century was to embrace the Indo-Pacific—a concept that hadn't been mentioned in the previous 2009 DWP. The 2013 DWP used the term 'Indo-Pacific' 58 times, while giving minimal linguistic obeisance to the Asian century (10 mentions).[28]

Defence's strategic outlook pointed to two defining regional characteristics:

- the 'critical importance' of the US–China relationship
- 'a new Indo-Pacific strategic arc' that was emerging, connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans through Southeast Asia.

When the Liberal–National coalition won the 2013 election, four months after the DWP was published, the Asian century White Paper was purged from the website of the Prime Minister's Department. The Asian century faded from Canberra usage.

Defence had given Canberra the new construct for the region: the Indo-Pacific was central to the Coalition government's 2016 DWP and the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.[29]

The move from Asia–Pacific to Indo-Pacific was more than geographical broadening—this was about mood swing and geopolitical forces.

The foreign policy White Paper's chapter on 'A contested world', under the heading 'Power shifts in the Indo-Pacific', described the contest:

> The compounding effect of China's growth is accelerating shifts in relative economic and strategic weight. In parts of the Indo-Pacific, including in Southeast Asia, China's power and influence are growing to match, and in some cases exceed, that of the United States. The future balance of power in the Indo–Pacific will largely depend on the actions of the United States, China and major powers such as Japan and India.[30]

Troubling times, changing strategy

When ASPI was launched, intense argument raged between Australia's regionalists and globalists.

Old arguments took on new life as government wrestled with the balance between the defence of Australia and contributing to the global balance.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the globalists were on the up, as Australia joined the US 'war on terror' and our expeditionary history was reworked in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the second decade, the vision of region grew to become the Indo-Pacific. Great-power competition returned and the Indo-Pacific was where the global balance would be set.

Over two decades, the globalist/regionalist difference morphed and, increasingly, merged.

Power shifts remade strategic settings and stoked security fears.

Leadership changes in Australia produced three DWPs, in May 2009, May 2013 and February 2016. Three white papers in less than seven years was policy churn at notably shorter intervals than in previous eras. Australia's government was worrying more about strategy—but not necessarily doing a better job.

Andrew Davies commented that the 2009 and 2013 efforts failed to be as influential as might have been expected: 'DWP 2009 promised big and delivered little, while DWP 2013 was more an exercise in treading water for political purposes than a serious attempt at matching defence resources to the strategic challenges of the day.'[31]

Reviewing the history of DWPs since 1976, Peter Edwards saw the 'short and unfortunate shelf-lives' of the 2009 and 2013 documents as the result of challenging international times and domestic political turbulence:

> It's little wonder that analysts this century have found it hard to make confident assessments of the next generation's strategic threats. Moreover, Defence White Papers have been caught up in the severe political tensions between and within the major political parties. The rapid turnover of defence ministers and more recently prime ministers has further impeded long-term planning. Defence budgets have been raided for electorally popular policies.[32]

The transformation of major-power relations was having a 'profound effect' on Australia, Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith wrote in 2017:

> Australia's strategic outlook is deteriorating and, for the first time since World War II, we face an increased prospect of threat from a major power. This means that a major change in Australia's approach to the management of strategic risk is needed.[33]

Malcolm Davis judged that an assertive China directly challenging US primacy in Asia meant Australia was now a state in the front line, geographically, strategically and politically:

> The geographical barriers and the 'tyranny of distance' are being eroded with the onset of technological innovation in new military domains, such as space, cyberspace and across the electromagnetic spectrum. Add to this the new ability to reach more easily into the domestic affairs of states through technology and the Chinese state's investment in organs of state designed to covertly influence others' policies and decision-making. A mindset of assuming we can defend the sea–air gap is becoming less and less credible.[34]

The ADF must play a greater role throughout maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, Davis advocated, to 'extend our defence in depth far forward'.

On the traditional strategic agenda, pandemics and other health emergencies are listed in the same category as climate change and bushfires—posing security threats rather than changing strategic orders. The reason, as Rod Lyon observed, is because strategy and war are about politically motivated violence, not sickness and death. Then came Covid-19.

The geopolitical impact of the pandemic, Lyon said, was to accelerate the existing trends of a strategically competitive world, weakening US leadership and struggling multilateral institutions:

> If Covid-19 is accelerating those changes—magnifying their intensity and compressing the time taken for them to work through the system—we will emerge from this pandemic to a sharper, more competitive world, where our main ally is less influential and where multilateral institutions are increasingly under the sway of other great powers that believe in hierarchy, and not in equality.[35]

In the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the Morrison government pronounced that Australia's strategic environment had deteriorated:

> Our region is in the midst of the most consequential strategic realignment since the Second World War, and trends including military modernisation, technological disruption and the risk of state-on-state conflict are further complicating our nation's strategic circumstances. The Indo-Pacific is at the centre of greater strategic competition, making the region more contested and apprehensive. These trends are continuing and will potentially sharpen as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.[36]

The update ditched 50 years of strategic theology: Australia no longer believed it had 10 years of warning time of a conventional conflict, based on the time it would take an adversary to prepare and mobilise for a major attack on our continent:

> This is no longer an appropriate basis for defence planning. Coercion, competition and grey-zone activities directly or indirectly targeting Australian interests are occurring now. Growing regional military capabilities, and the speed at which they can be deployed, mean Australia can no longer rely on a timely warning ahead of conflict occurring. Reduced warning times mean defence plans can no longer assume Australia will have time to gradually adjust military capability and preparedness in response to emerging challenges.

Launching the update, Morrison several times compared the deterioration in Indo-Pacific security to the slide to global war in the 1930s: 'That period of the 1930s has been something I have been revisiting on a very regular basis, and when you connect both the economic challenges and the global uncertainty, it can be very haunting.' Pointing to those words, Peter Jennings commented:

> The biggest change in the strategic update is temporal, not geographic. The Indo-Pacific—now defined for defence planning purposes as the northeastern Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste and the Pacific islands—has been at the core of Australian strategic thinking for decades. What is new is the realisation that the risk of conflict is upon us right now, not a comfortably distant 20 years away.[37]

Geoffrey Barker called the update 'a pivotal moment in modern Australian military history', marking an 'unambiguous return' to the defence-of-Australia policy:

> Of course, the new policy has evolved from earlier defence white papers and updates. But it just as clearly represents a new (or rediscovered) way of looking at the strategic order and finding policy and acquisition solutions that offer new ways of addressing China's authoritarian arrogance.[38]

The expanded geography of the Indo-Pacific acknowledges that key elements of the central balance have arrived much closer to Australia.

The main game has come to us. The tectonic ripples of shifting power lap at the concentric circles.

At the start of ASPI's life, the 9/11 attacks changed the shape of the post–Cold War world. Two decades later, Covid-19 accelerated the new era of strategic contest in the Indo-Pacific.

Notes

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2 Hugh White, 'Robert O'Neill and the birth of ASPI', in Daniel Marston, Tamara Leahy (eds), *War, strategy and history: essays in honour of Professor Robert O'Neill*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2016, 262, online.

3 See papers from *The Strategist*: Natalie Sambhi, Andrew Davies, 'Welcome to The Strategist', 17 July 2012, online; Peter Jennings, 'The uses and abuses of defence white papers', 17 July 2012, online; Mark Thomson, 'Guns or butter?', 18 July 2012, online; Paul Monk, 'Think of insurance rather than threat', 19 July 2012, online; Rod Lyon, 'Reader response: defence is not an insurance problem', 20 July 2012, online; Peter Layton, 'Grand strategy? What does that do for me?', 23 July 2012, online; Hugh White, 'Reader response: risk, threat and insurance', 24 July 2012, online; Peter Layton, 'Reader response: risk, strategy and luck', 26 July 2012, online.

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12 Allan Gyngell, 'Balancing Australia's security interests', in *Global Forces 2006: Proceedings of the ASPI conference, Day 2*, 2006, 53, online.

13 Borgu, *Australia's defence after September 11: a quick guide to the issues.*

14 White, 'Robert O'Neill and the birth of ASPI', 262.

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16 Robert Hill, 'Australia's defence and security: challenges and opportunities at the start of the 21st century', in *Global Forces 2005: Proceedings of the ASPI conference, Day 1—Global strategy*, ASPI, Canberra, 2006, 8, online.

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18 Coral Bell, Peter Edwards, Robyn Lim et al., *Scoping studies: new thinking on security*, ASPI, Canberra, 2004, online.

19 Peter Jennings, *Time for a new defence white paper*, ASPI, Canberra, February 2005, 3, online. Barbara Thuchman, *The guns of August*, Robinson, London, 2000, 116.

20 Prime Minister Howard's injunction on the defence budget was: Don't touch defence! His memoir, *Lazarus rising*, refers to the defence mantra in discussing how he shaped his government: 'From the beginning I made it clear that there would be no cuts to the Defence budget … As the years went by, spending by the Howard Government on Defence would increase greatly.' When he left office, Howard 'pointed with some pride' to the fact that defence spending had risen by 47% in real terms.

21 Coral Bell, *Living with giants: finding Australia's place in a more complex world*, ASPI, Canberra, 2005, online.

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27 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, Australian Government, November 2017, online.

28 Department of Defence (DoD), *Defence White Paper 2013*, Australian Government, 2013, online.

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The Department of Defence: kit, cash, capability—and contestability

Cabinet created the Australian Strategic Policy Institute as a small body with a big brain—and, most importantly, a strongly independent voice. That independent eye would be directed, in the first instance, at the Department of Defence.

Defence would pay for ASPI, yet be the subject of the institute's constant inquiry.

Two decades ago, the Howard government knew why it needed ASPI. Defence was a monopoly provider of advice and expertise. Cabinet wanted fresh perspectives on big equipment headaches such as submarines and, more broadly, on Australian strategy.

Taking office in 1996, the Howard government found that defence was one of the last policy areas without a sustained contest of ideas between the bureaucracy and outside experts. 'Well', said John Howard's first Defence Minister, Ian McLachlan, 'we must change that'.[1]

ASPI came to be born so that the defenceniks at Russell could no longer win arguments and drive policy because they held most of the knowledge and much of the history.

Amid the tangle of kit, costs, complexity and strategy, the Department of Defence is the most inquiry-prone creature in Canberra. In Canberra-speak, Defence can serve as subject, verb, object or oath. Defence has been the subject/object of about 50 reviews since 1973, when Arthur Tange created the Defence structure that still stands.[2]

Sharp Canberra logic drove the counterintuitive ambition that Defence would pay for an institute designed to make life tougher for Defence: institutional design must ensure the mission couldn't be mugged by bureaucratic bastardry or strangled by money.

As a deputy secretary in the Defence Department and then ASPI's first director, Hugh White, said, the government's act of creation reflected a commitment to 'policy contestability' and also ministers' experiences of dealing with Defence:

> For reasons that would be hard to pin down, and although relations between ministers, individual officers, and officials were professional, respectful, and even at times warm, it might be said that the Howard Government never established an easy relationship with the organisation. A few specific issues, especially on questions of defence material and acquisition, and most particularly the troubles of the Collins-class submarine, led ministers to be impatient and even suspicious of defence advice, and thus increasingly eager to find alternative ideas and arguments to test that advice against.[3]

At the 1998 election, the Howard government's defence policy promised to establish an institute of strategic policy.

In April 2000, McLachlan's successor as Defence Minister, John Moore, brought to cabinet a proposal for the creation of ASPI.[4]

The purpose of the institute, Moore told cabinet, was to 'provide a centre of expertise of direct value to government by providing independent policy relevant research and analysis that will enhance the quality of policymaking on defence and strategic issues'.

The need for independence was repeatedly stressed: 'The credibility of the ASPI will be substantially determined by the reality and appearance of the independence of its operation and outputs from government.'

Moore offered cabinet two key arguments for ASPI.

First, the institute was to develop alternative sources of advice to government on strategic and defence policy:

> The principles of contestability have been central to our Government's philosophy and practice of public administration, but these principles have not yet been effectively implemented in relation to defence and strategic policy, despite the vital national interests and significant sums of money that are at stake. The Government has found in relation to the Collins Class Submarine project for instance, and more generally in relation to the [Defence] White Paper process, that there are almost no sources of alternative information or analysis on key issues in defence policy, including the critical questions of our capability needs and how they can best be satisfied. The ASPI will be charged with providing an alternative source of expertise on such issues.

The second argument was that defence policy was inhibited by a poor understanding of the choices and issues:

> The ASPI will be tasked to contribute an informed and independent voice to public discussion on these issues. These roles will take some time to develop, but there are significant advantages to launching the ASPI now, at a time when public interest in defence issues is high. It is intended that the foundation of ASPI should be seen as a long-term investment by the government in good strategic and defence policy, and as such it fits in well with the White Paper process.

How to structure a new, nimble, noisy beast was one puzzle in this protracted five-year gestation from perceived need to election promise to cabinet debate to establishment.

In April 2000, cabinet liked the idea but asked the Defence Minister to do more work on 'alternative structuring arrangements' for the institute. By August, the minister was back with seven options: an internal Defence strategic policy cell; an independent board within Defence; a university-based research centre; a special research centre also based in a university; or a stand-alone centre, which could be a statutory authority, an executive agency or an incorporated company.[5]

Cabinet went with the original proposal, establishing ASPI as a wholly Commonwealth-owned company.

In the words of the Defence Minister, endorsed by cabinet, the institute would maintain a small staff; 'the centre would not publish views in its own name, it would publish views of the authors of particular research without endorsement'; and ASPI 'would be required to publish a range of views on contentious issues'.

ASPI has lived out those principles, making it a marvellous place for any analyst—or, indeed, a journalist fellow of the institute. As instructed, ASPI embraces its independence by giving its people the freedom to think and write.

Those principles are the basis for the sentence this writer puts on any submission to a parliamentary inquiry: 'As ASPI does not offer institutional views, this is my personal submission.' The day-to-day lived experience is that in nine years penning a weekly column for *The Strategist* I have never once been told what to write. As importantly, I've never been warned off by being told what not to write. Independence, indeed. (And, just quietly, a weighty freedom, depriving the writer of all excuses—the only person responsible for my words is me!)

Cabinet's plan has worked. ASPI has a distinct identity, clearly separate from the Defence Department. One secretary of Defence told me ASPI could say things to the minister that he couldn't. Another was so enraged by ASPI criticism of a Defence position that he declared hostilities and froze contacts (a difficult thing to do simultaneously).

In 2000, cabinet was told that the initial cost to Defence of paying ASPI's total budget would be $2–3 million a year. In the latest five-year funding agreement, running to 2023, the annual payment by Defence is $4 million; ASPI is a far smaller slice of Defence's overall budget than when it started. These days, though, ASPI gets only 35% of its budget from Defence and 32% from other federal government agencies. The rest of the cash comes from state and territory governments, overseas governments, defence industries, the private sector, universities and civil society.

ASPI has worked as designed: to be close to Defence, yet judge clearly what Defence does.

In 2010, in that spirit, Andrew Davies gave the thumbs-down to Defence because of the lack of 'contestability' inside the department. Defence's job was to produce military capabilities for the government to use, to match military means with strategic ends. Yet the results more often reflected the preferred structures of the three services. Alternative or transformational options had no champion, Davies wrote, and professional military judgement prevailed:

> The previous balance between the military world view on one hand and the analysts who could provide different perspectives, and who do not share the service ethos brought to the table by their military counterparts, has been lost.[6]

Defence needed to revive something like the old Force Development and Analysis (FDA) division, which was wound down in the 1990s as part of the Defence Reform Program. Davies had worked

for FDA and its descendants and had 'the scars to prove it': inside Defence, the initials had come to mean Forces of Darkness and Acrimony.

Five years later, the First Principles Review of Defence made 46 references to contestability in phrases such as 'arms length contestability', 'internal contestability', 'strategic, financial and technical contestability', 'a robust and disciplined contestability function', and the need to 'introduce greater transparency, contestability and professionalism'.[7]

One outcome was the creation of a Contestability Division providing independent assessment and advice to the Vice Chief of the ADF. The division was described as an effort to rebuild the trust of ministers and central agencies (primarily the Prime Minister's Department and Finance) in Defence's ability to deliver budget outcomes. The first head of the Contestability Division, Michael Shoebridge, would follow Andrew Davies as the director of ASPI's Defence, Strategy and National Security Program.

Writing for *The Strategist*, Gary Hogan, a former director-general of scientific and technical analysis at the Defence Intelligence Organisation, said achieving contestability in intelligence judgements was 'easier said than done':

> The challenge of contestability is compounded by the very nature of the intelligence community workforce. While aspiring analysts may enter the recruitment funnel from diverse backgrounds, offering a wide range of knowledge and experiences, the excruciatingly involved security vetting process sees many fall by the wayside, with a disturbingly like-minded cohort dripping from the tube's end. Under such circumstances, groupthink becomes a very real issue.[8]

Hogan said analysts in think tanks outside the government bubble would assume added significance as Pentagon-style 'murder boards', to ask the toughest of questions:

> Organisations like the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Lowy Institute could perform such a function for most strategic analysis, complemented by academics and commentators with unique expertise in arcane areas of growing importance to Australia.

As Andrew Davies noted, contestability—civilians testing what the services desired—could turn to acrimony and bickering in Defence. A process for dispassionate debate could often be decidedly passionate. Standing outside Defence, ASPI tried for precision without the passion in its contestation, deeply interested in the many issues that confront a huge and complex department. Sharp analysis starts with an understanding of the magnitude of Defence's job.

When a Defence management review was launched in 2007, Mark Thomson wrote that more fixes were needed in central management and leadership:

> Defence management is of a scale and complexity unparalleled in Australia below that of the state and federal governments themselves. Not only is Defence one of the largest employers in the country—comparable with the Coles and Woolworths retail chains—but it maintains a diverse range of technologically sophisticated military equipment

> valued at more than $32 billion. Defence is also the country's largest single land owner with more than 30,000 buildings spread across the length and breadth of the continent. In addition, Defence undertakes complex operations at short notice ranging from disaster relief through to peacekeeping and conventional war-fighting. No other entity in Australia has to deal with the diversity and complexity of missions allocated to Defence.[9]

The complexity reflected the importance of what had to be delivered. Prime Minister John Howard told an ASPI conference in 2007:

> I recently remarked to the Defence leadership group that the ADF's current operational tempo is greater than at any time since the Vietnam war, but also that the complexity and global character of the security challenges we face, make them even more serious.[10]

At that time, Mark Thomson published a special report posing the question: Are our defence forces overstretched? Concurrent operations were being conducted in Iraq, Afghanistan, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands, coupled with recent shorter missions to Fiji and Tonga. Had we reached the point where the scale and diversity of ADF deployments were no longer sustainable?

As always, Thomson analysed the numbers. He noted that the burden was far from shared evenly, and that some parts of the ADF were called upon more often than others to deploy in a rolling program of six-month tours:

> This churn of personnel and units disrupts peacetime training and exercises in many quarters of the ADF. As a general rule, to maintain a unit overseas for six months entails three such units; one deployed, one preparing to deploy and one reconstituting.[11]

The geographical spread of operations imposed multiple policy and intelligence demands. The operational tempo, though, needed to be seen in the context of an ADF that was hardworking even in peacetime—a small force maintaining a large range of high-tech military capabilities. There'd been no discernible increase to the rate of separations from the ADF compared with historical norms. The operational burden was commensurate with historical precedents since World War II and was far less than was being faced by the US and Britain. Thomson's conclusion: '[W]hile the ADF is busy and under some pressure, it is not yet overstretched.'

With the election of the Rudd government in 2007 and its 2009 DWP, Labor placed its stamp on strategic policy. ASPI produced a set of papers to judge what it meant and what it said about the habits of the Department of Defence.[12]

Rod Lyon was struck by how much 'uncertainty' was built into the DWP's portrayal of the future international security environment, writing: 'The paper frequently depicts multiple "futures". Moreover, the paper's authors often provide more than one judgment on key issues, generally at the price of confusion and contradiction.'

On the world view of Defence, Lyon offered the shrewd view of a thinker with long experience as a Canberra practitioner: 'Australian defence planners remain realists: they trust power

and military hardware as the principal means of securing Australia's interests close to its own coastline, but advocate rules-based order and institutions further away.'

Andrew Davies said despite media reporting of new efforts in 'Australia's military build-up', most of the initiatives built on existing plans and capabilities:

> Looking out twenty years at the mooted ADF of 2030, we find that it will be a lot like today's force with half a dozen extra submarines. And today's force is itself very similar to that of twenty years ago. Indeed, give or take an aircraft carrier and a few battalions, we can trace the essential shape of the ADF still further back. So this White Paper in many ways perpetuates the force structure that's been in place since the Menzies Government went shopping in the 1960s. This strongly hints that the strategic discussions in White Papers over the years has been less closely linked to the development of our forces than is purported to be the case. Governments and White Papers come and go, but the ADF marches on.

The strategic argument of Labor's White Paper, Davies wrote, could be paraphrased as 'The rise of China may upset the power structure we're very comfortable with, and we don't want that.' The ADF Australia wanted to have by 2030 indicated 'that we've chosen, at least in principle, to side with the US—or, at the very least, to retain the option to do so'.

The Abbott Coalition government tackled the tangles of Defence with the 2015 First Principles Review. An ASPI Strategic Insights paper, with 10 contributors, called the report 'the most significant review of the defence establishment since the 1973 re-organisation led by Sir Arthur Tange'.

The review recommended a radical streamlining of decision-making, cutting senior management roles, slashing the number of committees, and abolishing the Defence Materiel Organisation to subsume the semi-autonomous organisation into Defence's central structure.[13]

Allan Behm wrote that the review highlighted critical organisational imperatives:

- simplify processes to emphasise decision-making as the core function of the Defence leadership
- rebalance accountability and responsibility by cutting the number of committees
- get internal alignment right—'a problem that has frustrated chiefs of the defence force and secretaries for the past two decades'
- behavioural change driving cultural change—'an issue on which gender considerations have a direct impact'
- the fundamental need for trust between the Defence Minister and the Defence organisation—'the ever-changing procession of secretaries has generated a civilian organisation that lacks capacity, cohesion and consistency'.

Paddy Gourley harrumphed that, beneath a welter of cliché and bamboozling modern management mumbo jumbo, much sound advice lurked in the First Principles effort.

To the question posed by the review as to why Defence had been unable to change itself, Gourley answered that 'reform' had been largely outsourced to dozens of reviews, which confused and distracted managers. Too many people at senior levels with narrow divisions of responsibility and the associated need to consult had coagulated management and restricted action.

Reform had to be pushed by leaders at the top, Gourley wrote, and that led to the defence ministers:

> Few have taken a strong interest in the proper workings of the organisation. Indeed, a number have succumbed to the insidious notion that they are 'customers' of Defence. They aren't, but when they pretend to be, management stasis is usually just around the corner.

Michael Clifford wrote that Defence, like all large organisations, needed a good pruning from time to time, and the last one was in 1997 with the Defence Efficiency Review. Clifford, too, argued that government and ministers were not blameless. The growth in top-line staff numbers had all been agreed by government to meet operational needs, or in response to previous reviews ordered by government:

> Successful reform is led and driven by the Minister—not just through media conferences and press releases. Defence is at its best when the Minister of the day regularly engages with the Department and mutual respect can be developed. While they may prefer to, Defence Ministers can't stand back and point fingers—they need to get their hands dirty. Even if this may result occasionally in some political mud sticking.

Kit, complexity and capability

The military needs kit. Cash builds capability. Such plain propositions to describe such expensive complexity.

What do we get for what we pay? And we're paying billions. How capable are we with the capability we buy? Getting the kit and capability wrong means taking chances with what chance might throw at us.

Delay and difficulty and soaring dollars are a tough mix.

Peter Jennings lamented that no story seemed more enjoyable to an Australian audience than one telling us that our defence equipment purchases are all duds:

> It's beyond understanding why an Australian Defence Department that's able to make such sensible decisions on equipment is so chronically unable to explain them. It's not sustainable to treat Australia's biggest ever defence investments like secret projects never to be discussed or explained. In the absence of those explanations, we will continue to be subjected to an endless stream of critical commentary about the F-35 and future submarines that ranges from the mildly plausible to unhinged conspiracy theories.[14]

When Andrew Davies stepped down after 12 years as director of ASPI's Defence and Strategy Program in 2018, he reflected that this period involved seven defence ministers, three DWPs (though we still hadn't finished delivering the force structure from the 2000 version), two and a bit national shipbuilding plans, two wars and the approval of over $100 billion in major projects. Andrew penned a piece with a typically apt Davies headline, 'A farewell to (writing about) arms':

> One of the challenges to a job like this is to not slip into a persistently negative mindset regarding defence policy and procurement practices. After all, ASPI's job is to question the prevailing wisdom, and to be Jiminy Cricket to Defence's Pinocchio.

The trick was to be constructive while being critical, to put forward a way ahead when discussing even the poorest outcomes of previous decisions, and to remember that, despite all the missteps along the way, the ADF was much more capable than it was in the years when ASPI started:

> There are many things that could (and should) have been done faster, cheaper or better—and some that shouldn't have been done at all—but the average outcome has been an improvement to the nation's defence capabilities. Of course, it would be alarming indeed if that weren't the case, given the size of the defence budget and the number of skilled people involved in the enterprise.[15]

Major ASPI case studies tracked the history of kit, big and small:

- Rearming the Anzacs: how the Navy's Anzac-class frigates—once regarded as second-tier warships 'fitted for but not with' key weapon systems—were upgraded to become pound for pound 'probably the best warship of its size in the world'.[16]
- The game change of building the air warfare destroyer: 'The AWD procurement was like none other. It involved the reluctant departure from office of two defence ministers; it fell into almost every organisational pitfall imaginable; it ran wildly over budget and schedule; yet it laid the foundation for a continuous naval shipbuilding industry for the first time in Australian history.'[17]
- The Steyr rifle: the ADF's assault rifle, in service since 1988—how it became a unique weapon developed and manufactured in Australia: 'Gun debate can clamour like an angry mob, with noise and passion surging at the forward edge while reason and logic shrink to the rear. This may in part explain the polarity of opinion on Australia's service rifle, the Austeyr.'[18]
- The Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle: an ugly duckling—an 'armoured Winnebago'—transformed swan-like into the vital lifesaver for Australian and Dutch troops on combat operations in Afghanistan, in a role it was never designed to play.[19]

In the puzzle of kit and cash, here's one of those simple questions: How much should the government disclose about its plans for equipping Australia's military?

Wondering about that, Defence contracted ASPI to offer an answer. The resulting 2009 report found tangible benefits in increasing the level of disclosure, and that the risks were manageable.

Despite a discernible decline in capability-planning transparency over recent years, Australia was still more open about its plans than most countries.[20]

Apart from military operations, no area of Defence got more attention than the procurement of capability, Mark Thomson and Leigh Purnell commented. Billions of taxpayer dollars were involved, and defence industry was a major enterprise employing around 30,000 Australians.

As a monopoly customer, they wrote, the more that Defence told the market about its plans, the more likely that its needs would be met efficiently.

The more that the public knew about defence planning, Thomson and Purnell wrote, the more likely was an informed public discussion of those plans and the more readily Defence could be held to account for delivering them.

Disclosure about kit in all its complexity is a key way to tackle the dollars-for-duds dirge about Defence.

Off-the-shelf overseas or on-shore ourselves

Why does Australia build its own military kit? Why not just buy it off the shelf?

If Australia buys its military planes overseas but builds its own ships and submarines, what's the return for jobs and the economy versus the capability created for Defence?

The F-35 and the submarine are giant case studies that show the complications that entangle the simple question. The subs are built in Australia with an overseas partner. The F-35 is a US plane but Australia is part of the production chain.

Such giant purchases illustrate the lack of easy answers in the juggle of cost, risk, and capability.

Considering build here versus buy over there, Andrew Davies and Peter Layton looked at the strategic implications of pointing to the shelf and saying, 'We'll have six of them and four of those.'[21]

The overseas-off-the-shelf answer should offer firm price, scheduled delivery and interoperability with allies, Davies and Layton said:

> The clear trend in post-WWII Australia has been towards the outsourcing of our military research and development, retaining in-country only those elements of defence industry required to support equipment that is, for the most part, designed elsewhere. This is consistent with an ongoing evolution of the Australian economy as a participant in an increasingly globalised free-market. These choices can have strategic consequences and have the potential to diminish Australia's self-reliance.

The argument against off-the-shelf is that Australia buys overseas kit that isn't designed for Australian purposes. Rather, the case runs, do the research here and do the work here. Buy in knowledge as needed, and use it to buy here. Do defence as industry policy. Build our own

industry and build our economy. Protect sovereignty and protect jobs. The capability must have Australian content. The bumper stickers would read: 'Buy Oz, Build Oz' or 'Think for yourself, make it yourself'.

The Defence version of 'Build Oz' became 'sovereign industrial capability'—a concept hammered at with more than 30 references in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and Force Structure Plan.

Key ASPI studies in the think-for-yourself dimension of the Oz debate were *Defence science and innovation: an affordable strategic advantage* in 2015 and *Defence and security R&D: a sovereign strategic advantage* in 2019.[22]

So, what economic benefit will Australia get from spending hundreds of billions of dollars on building our own kit wearing that 'Buy Oz, Build Oz' badge?

In answering, Rob Bourke's *Defence projects and the economy* was sceptical about defence as a major source of 'jobs and growth', remarking on how little supporting evidence there is for the claimed economic benefits.[23] At best, Bourke wrote, the projects appear to have a small positive impact on economic activity:

> Paying high price premiums to have Defence capital equipment assembled in Australia has in the past been associated mainly with military–strategic imperatives. In future, under the banner of defence industrial sovereignty, it seems that the expectation of offsetting economic gains will play a more prominent role than before—giving sovereignty a broader remit than the term implies. However, in the absence of those gains, the cost of sovereignty has its limits. It can be argued that sovereign status shouldn't entitle an industrial capability to unfettered levels of government assistance unencumbered by critical analysis.

Australia's choice to build our own warships was subject to a strategic and economic analysis by Andrew Davies, Henry Ergas and Mark Thomson. High rates of assistance to domestic shipbuilding, they wrote, distorted the allocation of economic resources but also the choices Defence made about capability:

> Given that the excess costs, calculated over the entirety of the future fleet program, could amount to many billions of dollars, the loss to Australian society from protecting domestic military shipbuilding could be extremely high. There is also the loss, more difficult to quantify but no less real, should the high cost of building ships in this country force us to settle for a smaller fleet or impose unwarranted opportunity costs on other parts of the defence portfolio, thus reducing Australia's net defence capability. Unless credible offsetting benefits can be identified, and they have not been to date, the case for continuing the current preference for domestic production is very weak indeed.[24]

From the start, ASPI has tracked the rolling story of kit creation—with frequent backward glances for lessons learned from the hard school of capability development.

When Andrew Davies looked back 13 years at the release of the 2000 DWP, some of the major capabilities it announced had still to be realised. Future decision leaders could take lessons from an unhappy process. Chronic optimism permeated project timelines: the 15 delivery times given ranged from four to 15 years, with an average of seven years. The actual average was almost 13 years—schedule overruns that averaged more than five years.

Projects taking more than a decade to deliver were overtaken by events, Davies wrote. The world changed and priorities changed. More than a quarter of the capability enhancements announced in the 2000 DWP were altered because of shifts in government thinking or the strategic environment.[25]

Covid-19 gave sovereign industrial capability a pandemic-sized boost. The 'Think for yourself, make it yourself' mantra wasn't just about building the economy and giving control over kit—it protected Australia from new fragilities in international supply chains.

US President Donald Trump's 'thought balloon' about bringing all elements of production of the F-35 back to America was a brutal illustration that one person's local manufacture is another's loss of export markets and jobs. Marcus Hellyer commented that Trump's idea of stripping work from the seven remaining non-US partners in the Joint Strike Fighter consortium (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK) probably wouldn't happen. Finding new suppliers for literally thousands of components would delay the program even further, he wrote, and 'it would be an act of perfidy that would be hard for America's allies to ignore.'[26]

Reviewing the 2021 defence budget, Hellyer said Australian manufacturers had shown they could deliver:

> It's a very encouraging sign that industry can meet the challenge of 'eating the elephant' presented by the 2020 Defence Strategic Update's growing acquisition program. Australian defence industry did particularly well, according to Defence's data. Defence's local military equipment spend grew by a remarkable 35% to around $3.5 billion.
>
> Australian industry isn't just growing in absolute terms: there are also signs that it's growing in relative terms compared to the share of spending going overseas. If that continues, it's evidence at the macro level that the government's defence industry policy is delivering.[27]

The getting and fretting of buying and flying the F-35

When ASPI began, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) was Australia's biggest and most expensive defence program ever. Now that title has passed back to the submarines.

The F-35 arrived 10 years late. The submarine program exhibits similar tardiness.

The JSF is slowly delivering what Australia wants. Because of the delay, we spent $6 billion on an 'interim' Super Hornet capability, later topped up with another $3 billion on Growler electronic attack aircraft. The 'interim' has become more like a 20-plus-year force structure element.[28]

Australia decided to help develop the F-35 to replace our fleet of F-111s (which were due to leave service around 2010) and F/A-18s (due to retire between 2012 and 2015). It was 'a big deal'—the biggest of calls and a deal with many elements, as Aldo Borgu explained in 2004.

Joining the JSF project was partly motivated by the chance to grow the aerospace industry, to have Australian firms supplying individual components as part of a global supply chain. The JSF was still a 'paper plane', Borgu wrote—a US program 'driven by costs and not by requirements'.[29]

To confront the key question—'Is the JSF good enough?'—Chief of Air Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston published an ASPI paper arguing for 'a true fifth generation, stealthy, multi-role, single-seat, single-engine, fighter aircraft'. He argued that the F-35 beat the F/A-22 Raptor because it:

- promised the margin of capability we require for the tasks we intend for it
- would be the most 'network-enabled' capability on offer
- would be truly multi-role, giving great operational flexibility and cost-effectiveness
- could be acquired in operationally meaningful numbers within the available budget
- would be able to be supported in service at lower cost than any alternative
- would have the best growth potential, at the lowest ongoing cost, because of its large production base
- 'offers the potential for a significant and long-term industry program that should exceed in value and benefits the conventional offset arrangements of any alternative'.[30]

Houston's final line was: 'The conclusion is clear.' The RAAF's course was set. In all the dogfights that followed, the service seldom wavered from that conviction, even if the plotted course took some turns.

By 2006, Canberra was worrying about the unacceptable risk of a 'capability gap' arriving before the JSF. The eventual answer was to buy 24 F/A-18F Super Hornets as the immediate successor to the RAAF's F/A-18A/B Hornet fleet.

Australia would 'spend in excess of $4.1 billion to acquire this fourth generation "stopgap" aircraft', Andrew Davies wrote in 2007, yet the big risk of a capability gap remained:

> We could conceivably find ourselves faced with a difficult decision towards the end of next decade. We could have a mix of Super Hornets and barely viable Hornets and be desperately waiting for JSF capability to become affordable and mature.[31]

In 2014, Canberra was about to decide whether to spend between $8 billion and $10 billion on the new F-35, cementing the JSF as the main instrument of Australian air power for decades into the future. 'After several false starts', Davies and Harry White wrote, 'we're now reaching the main decision point.' Despite management issues, enormous complexity and significant cost and schedule overruns, the plane seemed to be on track to come into service by the end of the decade.

The government had only two options: buy more F-35s, accepting a mixed fleet of three types (F-35, Super Hornet and Growler) for at least the next 15 years, or decline the F-35 purchases and consolidate the existing fleet with additional Super Hornets.

Turning to the Hornets would hurt Canberra's relationship with Washington and provide less capability in a rapidly modernising region. Davies and White commented that 'On balance, the decision that appears to meet government priorities for capability, industry participation and alliance management with the US seems to be a further purchase of the F-35.'[32]

The first two operational JSFs arrived in Australia in December 2018. Explaining the situational awareness that the F-35 offered compared to previous generations of jets, the Chief of Air Force told *The Strategist* it was the difference between driving a car at night with no lights and driving a car with very effective night-vision goggles.[33]

Air Marshal Leo Davies said an F-35 pilot could characterise an adversary's aircraft, land forces, and ships and then choose how to react to them. Sometimes that will mean not reacting and just monitoring the enemy's movements. Sometimes it would mean 'cuing' another asset, such as one of the RAAF's F/A-18 Hornets, an air warfare destroyer or, in due course, a ground-based air-defence system. Ordinary aircraft operated like instruments in a band; the F-35 became the conductor: 'The F-35 won't send a package of data and then forget about it. It will orchestrate the operation.'

Marcus Hellyer considered the sustainment challenges of the F-35,[34] the range of the plane in projecting power,[35] and the advantages of operating it from offshore bases on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean, Butterworth in Malaysia and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.[36]

The F-35A jets are due to achieve final operational capability by the end of 2023. Malcolm Davis noted that the 2020 Force Structure Plan allocates funds for 'additional air combat capability' between 2025 and 2030, while the period between 2035 and 2040 is the time for considering a replacement for the F-35.[37]

The US was no longer speaking about 'sixth-generation' fighters, Davis wrote, recognising the risks of slow, decades-long acquisition cycles for a future fighter. The focus of its next-generation air dominance program was now a 'digital century series' approach of rapid development of small numbers of several types of airframes over periods as short as five years.

The Davis conclusion:

> It would be a mistake for the RAAF to embark on another 20-year acquisition project to eventually replace the F-35 from the late 2040s, yet that's exactly what the force structure plan implies. Waiting until 2035 to begin developing a replacement ignores the clear trends that suggest a desire for faster capability acquisition.
>
> The F-35 has taken two decades to develop, at great expense, and the approach of a common airframe for multiple tasks means it can't be optimised for a single role. Going back to platforms optimised for a specific role—air dominance, long-range strike and electronic attack, or intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance—that can be acquired faster might be a better path.
>
> The RAAF shouldn't wait until 2035 to get started on developing these types of capabilities. Its plans to complement, and then replace, the F-35 can be accelerated, and it would make sense to promote collaboration with the US and the UK in this endeavour to boost the RAAF's air combat capability sooner.

As the F-35 showed, buying and flying involves much betting and fretting in the getting.

Building subs and ships

Australian naval shipbuilding has a long and chequered history.

More than any other area of defence procurement, shipbuilding consistently captured the nation's attention, Hugh White observed, 'from the troubled Government shipyards of the 1950s and 1960s through to the Collins submarine project of the 1990s. Naval construction is a challenging, and at times risky, billion dollar business'.[38]

After selling off its defence factories, the federal government spent the final two decades of the 20th century insisting on arm's-length competition for all defence contracts.

Then, in 2001, the government announced a new approach. It would reduce competition and instead build long-term relationships with major defence suppliers. Shipbuilding—'the jewel in the defence industry crown'—would be the testbed, and an ASPI report offered proposals for 'modest but valuable' reform:

- Don't force an outcome on the industry as a whole. Let commercial forces decide how many shipbuilders we can support in this country.
- Smooth out the shipbuilding workload later in the decade, so the industry doesn't face a boom-and-bust cycle.

- Reform naval repair and maintenance, to better support the ships at sea and the industry.
- Sell the Australian Submarine Corporation to the highest competent bidder, allowing new firms to enter the industry, which might be able to bring non-defence work to the corporation.
- Avoid buying Australian-unique systems, which seldom offer operational advantages to offset the very high costs and risks they impose.[39]

Reviewing the Collins-class submarine in 2006, Patrick Walters called it Australia's most ambitious and controversial defence project:

> No major defence procurement project in Australian history has generated such an extraordinary saga of strategic, commercial and bureaucratic rivalries, technical snags, cultural misunderstandings, political interference and genuine national achievement as the building of the Collins Class vessels.[40]

Walters concluded that the government's $5 billion investment in the Collins had given Australia a key strategic asset and greatly boosted the skills of our naval construction industry.

Showing his knack with headlines, Andrew Davies called his 2008 report on Australia's future submarine *Keeping our heads below water*. He advocated going from the six Collins boats to 12 submarines:

> The project risks arising from the 'stop start' approach to building submarine classes could be mitigated by a rolling production model of continuous building. That would require a fleet of probably twelve boats to sustain, but the unit cost of each would be brought down and industry sustainment would be much more manageable. This approach would require a sustained government funding commitment beyond the usual forward estimate period.[41]

The desire to load the new design with high-end capabilities at the leading edge of submarine technology, Davies wrote, must be balanced against the need for a design that could be delivered close to schedule and budget.

Davies gave the 2009 DWP a tick for announcing 12 new submarines, but a kick for a significant omission: no cost estimate for the project. To fill that hole, Davies and Sean Costello offered their estimate—$36 billion (in 2009 dollars). It was a controversial calculation, subject to much argument, that eventually became the benchmark figure.[42]

At $3.04 billion each, the most expensive conventional submarines ever built would be large and complex—and a bespoke Australian design. Because ASC Pty Ltd (the successor to the Australian Submarine Corporation) had been retained under government ownership, Davies and Costello wrote, the federal government would be better placed to evaluate the designs, but 'ASC should not be handed the build contract as a fait accompli.'

In 2010, ASPI went 'naval gazing' to consider the future of Australia's shipbuilding and repair sector, drawing views from the federal and state governments and industry:

> Some common themes emerged: the challenge of delivering the Defence White Paper's planned expansion of the naval fleet, the need to manage the workflow for industry to avoid a 'boom and bust' pattern, and the need for Australian industry to be competitive in a global marketplace.[43]

At the end of 2011, Andrew Davies lamented that the nation's biggest ever engineering undertaking was making little progress. The saga of the Collins fleet made Canberra uncomfortable about 'throwing good money after bad' on the future submarine. The principals in charge of the project weren't making an authoritative case for the way ahead.

Treating the Collins and the future submarine as stand-alone problems, Davies said, increased the chance of a future capability gap between the two classes. Fixing the Collins's problems and developing technologies to go into the future boats could be the same activity. His judgement was that an 'evolved Collins' looked the best bet.[44]

In 2012, Davies and Mark Thomson pronounced that the promise of the 2009 DWP for 2030—a force of 12 new highly capable long-range submarines—was not going to happen: 'We're already past the point at which a force of that size and capability can be in place even by the mid-2030s.'

Mind the gap explored the options to fill the gap and to get serious about subs: 'The government needs to ratchet up the priority of the project and marshal the resources needed to accomplish the task.'[45]

After the election of the Abbott government in 2013, ASPI held a conference to discuss Australia's submarine choice. Feedback from the 220 attendees pointed to a striking message: 'the lack of agreement from Defence, the Navy and the Australian Government on design, capability requirements and numbers for the Future Submarine project'.[46]

The Abbott government turned towards a version of Japan's Soryu-class submarine (dubbed Option J), setting up a competition with designs from Germany or France.

The battle over the new boat bounced from the billions to the battery technology: Why should Australia build its own submarines?[47] What were the benefits of deepening the Australia–Japan defence relationship?[48] Europe versus Japan? Would Tony Abbott just do a 'captain's pick' for Japan?

The sub was a wonderful case study of defence acquisition, Davies observed:

> Because of its scale and time frame, it spans every aspect of defence decision-making from long-term strategic crystal ball gazing, including the possible impact of future technologies, through military strategy development and force structuring, all the way to robust politics of shipyard jobs.[49]

For *The Strategist*, the submarine was always generating headlines, with arguments for big submarines, little submarines, conventional submarines, nuclear submarines, no submarines, and the protest that Australia's ultimate choice was a preposterous submarine.[50]

The Turnbull government's 2016 choice of France's DCNS as the international partner for the design of the 12 subs merely started a new stage in the story of 'the very hungry future submarine'.[51]

Submarines—your questions answered had nearly 40 significant questions to answer. The specialist world of defence procurement could provoke argument at an Aussie BBQ, Peter Jennings noted:

> Why are they so expensive? Why do we need 12 of them? Why build them here? Why not nuclear propulsion? Why a French design? Why not an American, German, Japanese or Swedish design? Aren't submarines obsolete, to be replaced by drones? Won't technology make the oceans transparent?[52]

Australia set out on a multidecade undertaking to build ships and subs, but in 2018 Andrew Davies worried that we were making it up as we went along in a high-risk enterprise with inadequate governance and a piecemeal approach to managing risk.[53]

Reflecting on ASPI's decades of worrying about the cash–kit–capability nexus, Davies said:

> I think we're still paying too much, both in dollar terms and in broader opportunity costs, for our defence capability. And we're being too patient about getting it. I haven't won many friends in defence industry with my views on local procurement versus off-the-shelf purchases, but that's something I'm unrepentant about. What we have today is an uneasy amalgam of defence capability development and defence industry sector support, hiding behind a veneer of 'sovereign capability' or 'jobs and growth'.[54]

If Australia's strategic circumstances looked more benign, Davies wrote, this would be only a misuse of resources, 'but it runs the risk of also being a dreadful strategic oversight'.

Since Vietnam, Michael Shoebridge wrote in 2018, Australia had a small ADF with a clear technological edge over potential adversaries. That had given governments confidence that the ADF would prevail—and suffer minimal casualties.

Unfortunately, Shoebridge noted, the edge had dissipated because of military modernisation across the region. Regional militaries operating near-peer capabilities would inflict combat losses on the ADF:

> Ships, aircraft and vehicles that are lost in combat with their ADF operators are almost impossible to replace in a timely way given their complex nature. The lead time for getting a new ship is at least five years. For an F-35, it's a matter of joining a global queue. But even if a new platform was available, the bigger limiting factor to sustaining combat of this type is that replacing skilled military personnel takes years, and, in some cases, over a decade. That means we might be deploying a force that's unable to sustain itself against losses long enough to prevail. That's a fancy way of saying it would probably lose.[55]

The changing risk equation meant Defence should focus beyond the low-number, high-capability formula it had used for decades. As well as protecting advanced kit from loss, Shoebridge said, Defence needed lots of complementary consumables, able to be deployed, lost and replaced in numbers.

Cash

> 'Strategy without money is not strategy.'
>
> —Arthur Tange, Department of Defence secretary (1970–1979)[56]

On the cover of ASPI's first budget analysis, *The cost of Defence 2002–2003*, there's a small picture of a couple of Army vehicles and a large picture of the Department of Defence at Russell.

Below the pictures is a dollar figure, spelled out in words: Thirty-nine million, nine hundred and ninety-one thousand, eight hundred and ninety-eight dollars and sixty-three cents per day.

That was what Australia budgeted then, every day, to pay for Defence.

That updated daily dollar figure has since been on the cover of every annual ASPI defence budget evaluation.

For 2021–22, the spelled out number was one hundred & twenty-two million, two hundred & forty-two thousand, seven hundred & thirty-nine dollars & seventy-three cents per day.

Tracking the cash for the kit, then giving the clearest of explanations, has been an enduring feature of the institute's approach to Defence.

The second annual budget brief introduced what became an intermittent feature—a cartoon on the cover. Among the cover greatest hits: a cartoon of a submarine firing two torpedoes rendered as barrels loaded with cash, with the words issuing from the conning tower: 'Pork barrels away!'; a paper aeroplane labelled 'White paper', with one wing on fire and trailing smoke; a bayonet charge by uniformed kangaroos and koalas, all wearing slouch hats; a senior officer with many medals smiling at a piece of paper labelled 'Defence budget', exclaiming 'Incoming!' as showers of dollar notes fall from the sky.

The cartoons were fun with high purpose.

The official presentation of the defence budget had always been notoriously opaque and incomprehensible, Hugh White wrote, even to people within the government and Defence: 'ASPI believed that it would be impossible to foster a more rational and better-informed debate on defence priorities without a clear understanding of how the money was being spent and what things cost.'[57]

For maximum impact, that analysis had to be published only a few weeks after the federal Budget was announced in early May, not least to help inform the Senate committee budget hearings that began around the end of that month. Recalling the first 2002 report, White wrote:

> After an astonishing marathon effort, Mark Thomson duly produced the first of what has become an annual series of ASPI defence budget briefs, which was launched in Parliament House in late May. This laid out in clear terms just what the defence budget was being spent on, and how well the numbers added up, as well as including clear recommendations for what could be done better. This immediately established ASPI as the authoritative source of information on and analysis of the hard nuts and bolts of defence policy.[58]

After a decade watching Thomson do his annual May marathon as a frantic sprint, Andrew Davies pronounced: 'Every year I get to watch Mark Thomson pull off a remarkable feat of "extreme analysis", as he cranks out 260 pages of the annual *Cost of Defence* report in the couple of weeks after the federal Budget is released. (It's a bit like extreme ironing, but with fewer shirts and more graphs.)'[59] Extreme ironing involves taking an iron and ironing board up mountains, on bikes, the tops of cars, while parachuting or skiing or in a war zone. For Canberra, Thomson's feat of extreme analysis was equally impressive.

Not only did Thomson explain Defence to everybody else in government, politics, and the bureaucracy, but he helped explain Defence to itself. The sprawling Defence beast was offered a comprehensive yet sharp understanding of its own nature.

Journalists in the parliamentary press gallery quickly embraced Thomson's deep understanding and clear exposition. He became a unique resource on budget day, when reporters spend six hours in the 'lock-up', confined in parliamentary committee rooms with embargoed copies of the Budget until the Treasurer rises to speak at 7.30 pm. For defence writers, the two most welcome sights were the arrival of the coffee and sandwiches, and the smiling, lanky figure of Mark Thomson (also locked up), ready to offer a burst of analysis and explanation. The coffee quality was so-so, but the budget night journalism on Defence got the Thomson version of intellectual caffeine.

As an example of the Thomson touch, here's the budget-night comment he gave the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2011:

> On the surface, this was a tough budget for Defence. Funding over the next four years has been slashed by $2.7 billion compared with what was promised in the 2009 Defence White Paper. Critically, the cuts include deferral of $1.3 billion of planned investment in new equipment for the Defence Force. But Defence funding has not been cut to hasten a return to surplus. Rather, spending has been reduced to align with what Defence can spend. As the financial year draws to a close, Defence is in the embarrassing position of handing back $1.6 billion of its budget unspent. While this is understandable, it bodes badly for the government's long-term goal of expanding and modernising the Defence Force. So while [Treasurer] Wayne Swan will no doubt welcome this windfall, serious questions need to be asked about Defence's ability to plan, budget and deliver what the government wants.[60]

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the influence of Thomson's analysis gave him 'power' in the way Canberra dealt with Defence. The *AFR* published an annual list of the most powerful people in Australia—wielding overt, covert or cultural power—and one group was the five most powerful people in defence. Mark Thomson got the fifth spot in the list in 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2011. In the first year he appeared, the list ran: Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Defence secretary, Chief of the Defence Force, and, at number 5, Mark Thomson, with this explanation from Geoffrey Barker:

> Mark who? A new name on the power list. Dr Thomson is budget and management analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. He has single-handedly over the past three years made the labyrinthine Defence budget transparent and accessible through his superb post-budget briefs for ASPI. His insights are widely admired and sought in defence, industry and foreign policy circles.

The 2006 list lauded the 'unprecedented clarity' Thomson had brought to Defence spending, making him 'a powerful and respected Defence insider'. The 2007 list called him a 'star'.

In 2010, John Kerin wrote that Thomson ensured that 'the government provides more certainty for the defence industry on weapons'. In 2011, Kerin said that Thomson's review of the budget was 'once again compulsory reading. Its release is even more anticipated than the budget itself.'

As well as the annual *Cost of Defence* work, Thomson ranged widely across the cash–kit–capability nexus. In *Pay your money & take your choice*, in 2003, he considered what sort of defence force Australia could afford at differing levels of defence spending, examining five alternative futures ranging from a modest 1.3% of GDP up to a robust 2.5% of GDP.

At the cheaper end, Australia would have a force less capable than today's but still able to undertake a credible range of tasks. The problem was that our relative military strength would erode as regional countries continued to modernise. With the top option, 2.5% of GDP would provide a power projection capability built around two aircraft carriers and a much expanded Army and more capable Air Force and Navy, significantly boosting Australia's standing as an ally and our role in the region.

To the question 'How much should Australia spend on defence?', Thomson responded that there was no 'right' answer. Canberra made choices and trade-offs. Better a modest policy that worked and lasted than a more ambitious one that failed when the money ran out. Joined to that eternal economic judgement about the opportunity costs of government choices was a statement of the strategist's creed:

> Finally, in all strategic policymaking, it is wise to maintain an intelligent pessimism. Lurid and implausible worst-case scenarios should not dominate our thinking, but it is important to bear in mind that strategic policy choices last a long time, and that large and unexpected changes happen surprisingly often. A strategic policy that cannot encompass inherently improbable events is likely to prove inadequate.[61]

Australia's ability to fund defence was a recurring topic in a discussion ranging from regional power shifts to Australia's changing demographics. Assuming defence would account for 2% or 3% of Australia's GDP by mid-century, Thomson's 2004 calculation was a cash mountain of more than a trillion dollars, just to maintain current capabilities through to 2050:

> To many commentators, the question of defence spending is all too simple. You work out what is required so that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) can fight and win in any credible circumstance and you simply pay the bill. And you do this irrespective of competing demands for health, education and prudent economic management. In this view, the government (and ultimately the electorate) retains a steady appetite for national security, no matter what the cost. If only defence planning was that simple.[62]

The reality was a constant set of choices about affordability and risk management. The Thomson prediction was that economic needs would batter at Defence's budget:

> If demographics are destiny, our destiny is mixed. While we should be able to maintain a defence force like we have today—or even somewhat larger—out to 2050, our relative economic weight is set to decline in the decades ahead along with, more than likely, our strategic weight. This, by itself, is not an argument for spending more on defence. Just because we can afford to spend more on defence, does not mean we should; and just because other countries can afford to spend more on defence does not mean that they will.[63]

In 2016, Thomson noted that, since he wrote his first *Cost of Defence* in 2002, capital investment to modernise the force had driven the budget: investment had grown by 120%, operating costs by 46% and personnel costs by 39%. The ADF had become 'a little larger, somewhat better managed, much better equipped, and a lot more expensive'.[64]

Saying goodbye to ASPI in 2018, Thomson worried that multibillion-dollar defence projects were being contorted to 'buy Australian' and serve parochial politics:

> In normal times, the creation of a boutique defence industrial complex in Australia would simply be wasteful. But these aren't normal times. The strategic environment is deteriorating much more rapidly than current plans are strengthening the ADF. While the government focuses on the economically dubious goal of 'creating jobs' in defence industry, the gap between what the ADF can do and what it might be called upon to do grows by the day.[65]

Urgently eating the Defence elephant

> It's a very encouraging sign that industry can meet the challenge of 'eating the elephant' presented by the 2020 Defence Strategic Update's growing acquisition program.
>
> —Marcus Hellyer, 2021[66]

Australian industry is showing an appetite for 'eating the elephant'—the big task of producing new defence equipment.

A lot more of the Defence elephant is going onto the plates of Australian companies.

Not so long ago, defence industry policy was damned for hampering the effort to get the best possible kit. Now Australian industry gets to pour gravy on the elephant.

Defence's spending on locally made military kit is growing in absolute terms and in relative terms compared to overseas purchases. That dimension of the government's defence industry policy is delivering.[67]

Taking over as ASPI's senior analyst for defence economics in 2018, Marcus Hellyer remarked that it was amazing how a few years could change the industry environment:

> The Abbott Coalition government came to power [in 2013] with a defence industry policy that was essentially indistinguishable from its broader industry policy. Subsidies were a bad thing, and just as the government wasn't going to subsidise Australian industry to build cars, so it wasn't going to pay extra to build military equipment in Australia. Defence's investment plan was first and foremost about military capability, not nation building or supporting local industry. Times (and prime ministers) have certainly changed, and changed quickly.[68]

To let anyone track the cash, Hellyer set up the Cost of Defence public database, making available much of the data on the defence budget and spending that ASPI had accumulated since it was established in 2001.[69] The categories of data available for download were:

- defence funding
- the Capital Program
- the Sustainment Program
- personnel
- flying hours and costs
- the cost of operations
- the Defence Cooperation Program
- shipbuilding
- external data sources.

Amid the tough times and bad economic news of Covid-19, Hellyer judged the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU) to be 'a remarkable commitment by the Australian Government to sustained growth in the defence budget'.[70]

Confirming the robust funding line of the 2016 DWP, the defence budget would continue to grow past 2% of GDP, 'and indeed at a faster rate than before the Covid-19 pandemic hit'. The government had declared that Australia's strategic circumstances had deteriorated significantly: 'It states that the region is in the middle of the most consequential strategic realignment since World War II. That brings significant uncertainty and risk. The government regards robust military capabilities as essential to managing it.'

The DSU stated that a largely defensive force won't deter attack, Hellyer noted. Instead, 'new capabilities are needed to hold adversaries' forces and infrastructure at risk from a greater distance. They include longer range strike weapons, cyber measures and area denial systems'.

Among the risks, Hellyer wrote, much of the planned force was still a long way off in the future. And Australia was confronting the industry policy trap of preferring industrial outcomes to military capability. Some of the hidden costs of continuous build programs were becoming more apparent. A key question, he concluded, was whether Defence could internalise the urgency and change the way it does business:

> We now have a plan that calls for speed, lateral thinking, innovation and partnerships—to be implemented by an organisation that's slow, subject to groupthink, risk averse and reluctant to reach out. Adapting Defence to the demands of our new reality is going to be challenging, to say the least.

In the 2021 Budget, consolidated defence funding (including both the Department of Defence and the Australian Signals Directorate) was $44.6 billion, which was real growth of 4.1%. Hellyer noted that it was the ninth straight year of real growth, and, according to the DSU funding model, that would continue until the end of the decade.[71]

In 2020, defence cash hit 2.04% of GDP, meeting the government's promise to restore the defence budget to 2% of GDP by 2020–21. In 2021, it was projected to reach 2.09%. Both the 2.04% and 2.09% numbers were 'smaller than predicted a year ago, as GDP has recovered faster than expected. It's a salutary lesson on why we shouldn't obsess too much about small changes in percentages of GDP.'

Spending on military equipment, facilities and information and communications technology had all set records, Hellyer said: 'That's quite an achievement in the middle of a pandemic.'[72]

Drawing together issues of cash, kit and capability with the ticking strategic clock, Hellyer saw a 'fundamental disconnect' between strategic assessments and the capabilities of the force being planned and built:

> The DSU emphasised the need for long-range strike capabilities that can impose cost on and deter a great-power adversary at distance. Yet the ADF's strike cupboard is bare, and there's no clear path to restock it quickly. Moreover, huge investment is planned in capabilities that appear to have minimal deterrent effect on a great-power adversary, such as up to $40 billion on heavy armoured vehicles.
>
> Overall, the force structure and timelines for delivery are holdovers from previous strategic planning documents developed in circumstances that bear little resemblance to our current one. Fundamental changes to concepts and force structure, such as making greater use of uncrewed and autonomous systems, are occurring only slowly. The vast bulk of investment is still going into small numbers of exquisitely capable yet extremely expensive crewed platforms that take years, even decades, to design and manufacture and are potentially too valuable to lose. Defence needs to take more risk and invest more than half of one percent of its budget in in R&D, particularly in distributed, autonomous technologies.[73]

The government has delivered the steadily increasing funding it promised at the start of 2016. That was commendable, considering the economic impact of Covid-19. Yet, while Australia's strategic circumstances had deteriorated since 2016, Defence's funding model hadn't changed, Hellyer concluded:

> More funding is needed, but Defence will need to show that it can use it well to deliver capability rapidly. Over the decade, the government is providing $575 billion in funding to Defence, but in that time it won't deliver a single new combat vessel.[74]

To the complexities of kit and cash, Defence must add a sense of urgency to confront tougher times. Much is given and much is expected.

ASPI's contribution over 20 years was to open and drive debate on the many dimensions of capability.

A key purpose of the institute's foundation has been met: to give the information Australians need to inform themselves about procurement, budget, and force structure.

ASPI has done its part to prod Defence beyond its comfort zone—not least to go beyond the equipment habit of replacing like with like, but like with better. The sense of urgency might even demand something different.

The institute hunted the detail so it could do the broader work, relating the workings of Defence to national strategy.

Transparency delivers benefits to a huge department, laying out the facts to answer the sensationalist 'dollars for duds' critique. Often, ASPI was the honest witness able to attest that Defence had made the right choices and was delivering what was needed. In explaining Defence to Australia, ASPI revealed much to Defence about itself. The accounting of defence policy can go in many directions.

The submission to cabinet on ASPI's founding said that the principles of contestability had 'not yet been effectively implemented in relation to defence and strategic policy, despite the vital national interests and significant sums of money that are at stake'.[75] That demand, at the heart of the institute's creation, has been met and still drives its work.

The contest of ideas—the contest of contestability—has become a constant in that vital discussion of Australia's defence and strategy.

The old mentality that what the Department of Defence did was so important it must be kept secret has faded; ASPI was part of that change. Defence's default secrecy instinct is checked by the understanding that much can be done in the open, and openness can get much done.

Australia and Defence, and the nation's defence, are better served.

Notes

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Terrorism, security, intelligence, policing—and pandemic

Terrorism changed Canberra in large ways and small.

The 9/11 era and the Bali bombings caused a mushrooming of concrete barriers around Canberra's government buildings, pushing out perimeters in a suddenly bomb-conscious city.

A fence went up around Parliament House. No longer could Australians stroll freely up the grassy hill to the giant flagpole to stand above their elected representatives.

Australia's security fears were galvanised. Australians broadly accepted that the risk was real—terrorism loomed as the great and immediate threat.

Government demanded more of the intelligence services and police, and money and resources followed. That meant Liberal and Labor governments would have little tolerance for counterterrorism failures.

The Australian intelligence community (AIC), with six agencies, grew to become the national intelligence community (NIC).[1]

Cash tells part of the story. In 2000, the combined budget of the AIC was $325 million; in 2010, the figure was $1,070 million.

In 2004, Peter Jennings wrote that the AIC had had 'a massive injection of new funding' and had 'doubled in size over a period of three to four years'. Intelligence agencies had assumed 'an even more central and high profile role in Australian national security'.[2]

By 2017, the Independent Intelligence Review wrote of the NIC:

> With an annual budget approaching $2 billion and about 7,000 staff spread across 10 agencies, it is clear to us that on size alone the Australian Government's intelligence activities supporting national security are now a major enterprise. They would benefit from being managed as such.[3]

And that was written before the creation of the new superministry, Home Affairs.

As buildings express policy choices and bureaucratic growth, come for a walk around Canberra's parliamentary triangle to see the national security effects. The buildings tell how the intelligence agencies and the federal police were thrust into the centre of government.

Leaving from ASPI's office in Barton, follow Macquarie Street to the corner with Kings Avenue, and the headquarters of the Australian Federal Police (AFP), occupying the Edmund Barton building, which was previously home to trade, agriculture and environment agencies. The AFP shifted from Canberra's city centre, Civic, in 2009, crossing the lake to the political and policy centre arrayed around parliament.

Turn up Kings Avenue towards parliament and within moments come to the Office of National Intelligence (ONI) in the refurbished building named after Robert Marsden Hope, the judge whose royal commissions designed the AIC. The peak intelligence assessment agency moved into the Hope building in 2011—it was previously housed in Defence facilities and the old Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) building at Russell.

Next to ONI are the executive offices of the Home Affairs Department and also the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission.

Continue up to parliament to the side garden opposite the House of Representatives entrance, where a granite stone memorial bears the names of the 91 Australian citizens and residents who died in the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002.

To see the biggest marker of the terrorism era, go back down the avenue across Kings Avenue Bridge to walk around Lake Burley Griffin to Blundell's Cottage (built in 1860). Raise your eyes from the tiny stone dwelling to see the Ben Chifley building (the most expensive construction in Canberra since the new parliament building), occupied by ASIO in 2014–15.

The policy-in-the-architecture of this stroll is what national security built.

The first ASPI occasional paper, in July 2002, three months before the Bali bombings, was *Recovering from terror attacks: a proposal for regional cooperation*, based on a conference of Asia–Pacific defence ministers convened in Singapore by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (the Shangri-La Dialogue). The paper, by Ross Babbage, argued that few countries in the Asia–Pacific were well prepared for a terrorist attack and sketched a regional agreement to respond to terrorist incidents. Following the US invasion of Afghanistan, terrorist groups viewed Southeast Asia as a potential safe haven and even a 'second front', Babbage wrote:

> Some parts of Southeast Asia do appear to be potentially attractive to terrorist groups, largely because of their extant armed extremist groups, the anti-US attitudes of many younger people, large pools of urban and disaffected poor, porous national borders, exceptionally large air/sea/land transport hubs from which people can disperse with little trace, and sometimes weak national security and law enforcement capacities.[4]

Aldo Borgu set out some fundamental thoughts: agreeing on a definition of terrorism was as hard as agreeing on the best strategies to combat it; root causes needed to be addressed but doing so wouldn't stop all acts of terrorism; terrorism does sometimes work; the war on terror wasn't a war and it wasn't against terrorism (you can't wage a war against a tactic); and intelligence was the frontline defence and offence against terrorism.[5]

Carl Ungerer wrote in 2008 that non-traditional security risks become a national security priority only when they meet the benchmarks of scale, proximity, and urgency. Thus, Australian statements on national security had come to be dominated by counterterrorism.

As director of ASPI's national security project, Ungerer called for a single national security budget and an annual risk assessment. An integrated strategy should assess national capabilities and vulnerabilities, as well as the resilience of government and civil society: 'Beyond contingency planning, national resilience requires the inculcation of an understanding of what membership of a diverse, complex, modern state entails not only in terms of individual rights but also of obligations to both governments and fellow citizens.'[6]

ASPI studied healthcare preparedness for a mass-casualty attack;[7] what terrorism meant for Australian universities, both as targets and as recruiting grounds;[8] the media's role in covering a terrorist attack;[9] and the impact of terrorism on tourism and the need for the industry to review physical security and evacuation procedures, evaluate staff vetting and consider security investments.[10]

The threat of maritime terrorism had led to fundamental changes in the international maritime security environment, Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin wrote. They described the gaps in Australia's maritime thinking:

> Aviation and maritime security pose very different challenges. There's a relatively high level of aviation awareness in Australia, but this isn't so with maritime awareness. While airports are basically similar, every seaport is different. The security of ports and ships must consider all environments: land, air, sea surface and subsurface. Most importantly, however, their security involves a fundamental division of responsibility between the Commonwealth, the states and territories.[11]

ASPI did a joint research project with Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) on countering internet radicalisation in Southeast Asia. Terrorist groups in the region were increasingly using the internet to radicalise people and to recruit and train supporters, and the average age of terrorists seemed to be declining:

> Most extremist activity on the internet aims to communicate a narrative, to draw in support and to incite action. The operational aspect is certainly there, but it's much smaller than the communications and propaganda side. To put this bluntly: security agencies may detect the bomb manuals, but miss the process of radicalisation that produces the bombers.[12]

A further ASPI-RSIS effort was to understand how individuals became terrorists. Based on face-to-face interviews inside the Indonesian prison system with more than 30 men convicted of terrorism, the report detailed:

- how and why the men first became involved in terrorist operations
- why some of them, despite having served time in prison, later chose to re-engage in violence
- why others decided to disengage from violent activities altogether.[13]

When the inaugural National Security Statement was released in 2008, Carl Ungerer and Anthony Bergin wrote that 'the concept of national security has shifted from its traditional moorings in the defence and intelligence establishment'. National security was no longer a synonym for terrorism, and terrorism was relocated 'within a broader spectrum of transnational security risks'.[14]

In its first years in office, the Rudd Labor government commissioned two dozen policy reviews on all aspects of national security, from terrorism to transnational crime. The problem of all those reviews was 'connecting the docs', in Carl Ungerer's apt headline. He identified the tensions in integrating the strands of security policy into an 'all hazards' concept:

- *The internal/external divide:* The assertion that 'there is no longer a sensible distinction to be made between internal and external security and between domestic and foreign policy' was not matched by government processes.
- *Cops versus spies:* The culture of mistrust and lack of communication between intelligence and police agencies was a serious weakness.
- *The diplomatic drought:* The lines separating war, peace, diplomacy and development had blurred, yet Australia's diplomats had suffered two decades of 'chronic underfunding'. Australia should take note of US debates about the creeping militarisation of foreign policy.[15]

Bergin and Ungerer wrote that the Howard government's counterterrorism strategy had focused almost exclusively on preventing terrorist threats from reaching the Australian homeland: there was a strong emphasis on the US alliance, the Bush administration's 'war on terror' and border security. Although the Rudd government acknowledged the need for international action, the new emphasis was on tackling violent extremism at home.[16]

Hazards of many types

The post-9/11 era took shape.

The old demands of state and international security still stood, dressed in new cyber garments but carrying the familiar flags of the power contest.

Terrorism was a domestic issue as much as an international fear, sharing space on stage with other hazards.

In Rudd's 2008 National Security Statement, terrorism sat with climate change, followed by other scourges, from people smugglers and organised crime down to the need for e-security against cyberattacks. The rise of 'all hazards' thinking meant that the remit and membership of cabinet's National Security Committee expanded.

When Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a national security strategy in 2013, non-state actors had dropped down the list. In Gillard's ordering, the state was back at centre stage, and that applied as much to the cyber domain as to the 'strategic competition' she identified between the US and China.[17]

'Some 12 years [after 9/11]', Gillard said, 'our strategic outlook is largely positive. We live in one of the safest and most cohesive nations in the world. We have a strong economy. A major war is unlikely.' The government's judgement was that the security environment was 'positive' and 'benign'.

As Peter Jennings commented: 'Welcome to the decade after the national security decade.'[18] The strains of the national security decade, though, ran through the second decade of the century.

From 2001 to 2014, Australia's terror alert level was set at medium—an attack could happen. In September 2014, the warning was lifted to high—the risk of an attack was likely. The threat was from homegrown terrorists. Levi J West wrote that the strategic power of small acts or 'lone-wolf' attacks was an important aspect of the global terrorist milieu:

> That evolution of the terrorist threat, and the arrival in Australia of active, offensive, individual and small-cell jihadist terrorism, demands the permanent embedding of our counter-terrorism structures (and funding) into the normal operations of government.[19]

ASPI considered the system of threat communications and what government should be saying to change people's behaviour. More than issuing advisories, Anthony Bergin and Clare Murphy wrote, government had to ensure the community understood what alerts meant:

> Communicating terrorism alert level warnings is a tough challenge. It's no easy task for our political leaders to find language that conveys the need to be alert, while also creating a sense of calm. But right now the public feels underinformed when it comes to terrorism advisories.[20]

In 2013, ASPI set up the Strategic Policing and Law Enforcement Program, with research funding from the Australian Federal Police; its inaugural report was on organised crime.[21] The first head of the program, David Connery, wrote that strategic policing involved protecting national interests at home and abroad to deal with:

- espionage and foreign interference
- instability in developing and fragile states
- malicious cyber activity
- proliferation of WMDs (especially domestically)
- serious and organised crime
- terrorism and violent extremism
- countering state-based conflict and coercion.[22]

The policing program built on earlier habits of thinking about the international dimension of Australian policing. ASPI's first Strategic Insights paper, in 2004, was *Police join the front line*, by Elsina Wainwright, on how Canberra had turned to the AFP for foreign policy purposes.[23] The AFP was used to help preserve the security and stability of weaker South Pacific states.

Australian police had been working in peace- and capacity-building operations in Bougainville, East Timor and Solomon Islands.

ASPI's digital journal *The Strategist* launched weekly columns on policing, *The Beat*, and counter terrorism, *CT Scan*, which joined to become *The national security wrap*, which these days is called *The threat spectrum.*

In 2015, more than 100 Australians had left to fight in Syria and Iraq, and high-risk terrorism threats being monitored in Australia had more than doubled, prompting the report *Gen Y jihadists: preventing radicalisation in Australia*.[24] Australia had become an exporter of terrorists, and later debate would turn to how to avoid the return of those fighters.

The *Gen Y jihadists* database identified Australians believed to be pulling the strings in Islamic militant groups, as well as a significant number of others who had been drawn to extremist beliefs, as Rosalyn Turner and Stephanie Huang wrote:

> The database shows that there's no archetype of an Australian jihadist. Australian foreign fighters come from a diversity of backgrounds, and there's a wide range of influences and factors that appear to contribute to their decision to take part in a conflict half a world away.
>
> However, one recurrent factor was the presence of an influential mentor that encouraged or facilitated the person to make *hijrah* (migration).[25]

The 'radicalisation' broker was a guide offering recruits purpose and a sense of belonging to something 'bigger than themselves', wrote Tobias Feakin, the head of ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre. Online, modern jihadist propaganda had all the tools, as exemplified by Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. A striking image expressing this was a photo circulated on Twitter showing three rifle bullets, each with a different top: 'A bullet. A pen. A thumb drive … There is a different form of jihad.'[26]

Islamic State members had grown up with digital technology, Feakin wrote, and were adept at using those tools to glorify the conflict:

> JustPaste is used to publish summaries of battles that have taken place, SoundCloud to release audio reports of activities, WhatsApp and Kik Messenger to communicate and send images and videos, and Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to share images, propaganda and messages from the frontlines. They even have Q&A sessions about joining the group on Ask.FM. Their messages are tailored to their audience, changing depending on whether they're intended for a local audience, or would-be Western recruits.

Guarding the guardians

Who will guard the guardians? Who will watch the watchers?

The oldest of questions for any republic still mattered in the capital of the Australian Commonwealth.

Canberra's discussion was about securing freedom and rights while delivering safety and security.

Some of the debate was about traditional constitutional topics, such as parliament's role in national security and controlling ministerial power.

Other dimensions went to the uses and limitations of intelligence. Some of the more secret arms of the intelligence community stepped forward into the light.

The guardians and watchers were reviewed and remade. A departmental federation of border and security agencies was formed.

A report on 'creative tension' between parliament and national security, by Anthony Bergin and Russell Trood, advocated robust checks and balances: 'Enhancing parliament's role in national security would reinforce Executive accountability, expand public access to policy processes, improve the quality of public debate about national security and strengthen our democratic foundations.'

The two analysts (and Trood was also a former Liberal senator) knew that ministers would remain dominant in foreign and security policy. But parliament had a growing role in overseeing intelligence and security, to move the needle in the direction of change:

> Executive and ministerial resistance has often been cloaked in rhetoric about defending traditional ministerial prerogatives and the values of the Westminster system, but when change has occurred its impact on those prerogatives and values has been limited and it hasn't significantly degraded Executive authority. But reform has changed the institutional culture of the parliament. It has legitimised parliament's role as an increasingly important partner of the Executive in the conduct of Australia's national security policy. There's undoubtedly room for further expansion of this role.[27]

In 2017, ASPI published the first edition of its annual *Counterterrorism yearbook*, with a preface by Indonesia's President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono:

> It is a matter of certainty that terrorism will continue to be the key challenge to national and international security. It is extremely difficult to know when and where the next attack will occur. Each of us—no matter how distant, or how powerful, or how seemingly peaceful—can be a potential target.[28]

The head of ASPI's Counter-Terrorism Policy Centre, Jacinta Carroll, wrote that the core issue was the conundrum of protecting society from terrorist violence while maintaining other human rights:

> CT practitioners will advise their governments to change laws, take additional security measures, and conduct operations to make the environment harder for terrorists, and also ensure that terrorists are held to account. The net result of these additional measures can, however, be restrictions on the very liberty that the terrorists are aiming to undermine.[29]

ASPI's analysts debated the benefits and pitfalls of sharing intelligence between the federal, state and territory governments to counter terrorism. Anthony Bergin argued that Australia needed a national security information sharing system to combat criminal and terrorist activity:

> Speeding up the current system of access for police around the country is sensible. But what's also needed is real-time access to information from law-enforcement agencies and the intelligence community across the nation. Currently, law enforcement and intelligence agencies use separate systems to identify threats to the community.[30]

Isaac Kfir responded with a warning about the need for cautious implementation and giving information context:

> What is often missed in the conversation about intelligence sharing is that granting access also means establishing new vulnerabilities. By having a uniform platform to share intelligence, many more individuals will have access to sensitive intelligence.[31]

The head of the Strategic Policing and Law Enforcement Program, John Coyne, remarked that ASPI found itself dealing with multiple layers of Australian government, from local councils to the halls of Canberra. Application of intelligence methodologies had rapidly expanded in the private and public sectors over the past 15 years. Popular culture saw intelligence as a 'magic bullet' to all national security problems, he said—an idea that was more science fiction than fact. In the race to exploit the value of intelligence, the understanding of intelligence as a process and an output had been diluted, Coyne wrote:

> Unsurprisingly, most intelligence professionals don't want access to more data, but access to more of *the right data at the right time*. With an increasing number of analysts collating data, the task of joining the dots between disparate data points is ever more difficult. Unsurprisingly, increasing the number of data collators may not result in any tangible improvement in output or outcome.[32]

In another piece, Coyne reflected on what he'd gleaned about 'increasingly diversified and complex' domestic security threats from his 25 years in intelligence:

> I am not lamenting the simple life of days gone by, nor seeking to create fear. I am reflecting on the way the consequences of cyber-attacks, terrorism and foreign influence in our day-to-day life have increased in severity and regularity. It's hard to argue that

> non-state actors including terrorists, hackers and organised crime figures haven't increased their capacity to negatively impact upon our day-to-day life. The evidence, including the normalisation of security measures, is everywhere.[33]

Getting domestic security settings wrong could mean mass-casualty attacks, lost economic opportunities, poor policy decisions, even rigged elections. Coyne offered two linked conclusions: 'we have to accept that we are not as safe at home as we once were' and there was less trust in government.

Those seeking resources and powers for national security, he wrote, also had to offer more transparency and accountability—pointing to a big new Canberra creation, the Department of Home Affairs.

On 18 July 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced 'the most significant reform of Australia's national intelligence and domestic security arrangements in more than 40 years'.[34]

Some changes were based on the recommendations of the Independent Intelligence Review: transform the Office of National Assessments into the Office of National Intelligence, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence, and make the Australian Signals Directorate into a statutory agency within the Defence portfolio.

The revolution in the domestic security structure, however, wasn't one considered or recommended by the review. It was all the Prime Minister's own work—the creation of a Home Affairs portfolio to cover immigration, border protection, domestic security, and law enforcement agencies.

In his memoir, Turnbull has a chapter titled 'Matters of trust: reforming intelligence and home affairs' that offers a dusting of policy intent and much discussion of the politics and personalities involved.[35] Despite the 'horrified' reaction of the agencies moving into the mega-portfolio, Turnbull writes, and the political danger of giving Peter Dutton 'a position of enormous responsibility' as the first minister, Home Affairs was born.

The policy purpose was set out in Turnbull's announcement:

> The new Home Affairs portfolio will be similar to the Home Office of the United Kingdom: a central department providing strategic planning, coordination and other support to a 'federation' of independent security and law enforcement agencies including the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Border Force and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission. These arrangements will preserve the operational focus and strengths of frontline agencies engaged in the fight against terrorism, organised crime and other domestic threats.[36]

The bureaucracy was then given 12 months to put Home Affairs together as a department.

This was a blank canvas with many tints on the palette, Anthony Bergin and Derek Woolner thought, and the picture in prospect looked much like the department of homeland security

they'd long advocated. A senior member of cabinet would now give 100% of their time to the domestic aspects of national security. The reorganisation of all those functions into a single portfolio—a 'federation' of border and security agencies—was long overdue, Bergin and Woolner wrote, but:

> The difficulty will be developing the structure and governance arrangements for the Home Affairs portfolio: in particular, improving the response to terrorism that Prime Minister Turnbull thinks isn't adequately provided by current 'ad hoc and incremental adjustments' to our national security arrangements.[37]

By contrast, Peter Jennings welcomed Home Affairs with faint praise and firm damns:

> The most important point to make about the government's proposed Home Affairs portfolio is that these new arrangements can be made to work. They will not harm our counterterrorism performance and could improve Australia's underwhelming efforts to protect against foreign interference and strengthen the security of critical infrastructure. But … it's surprising that so little groundwork had been done to justify the need for change or to say how it was going to be done.[38]

John Coyne commented that 'the creation of the portfolio will expose difficult-to-fix cultural and philosophical differences between agencies that have, to date, been ameliorated by the goodwill and leadership of individuals'.[39]

One of the authors of the Independent Intelligence Review, Michael L'Estrange, did a series of video interviews with ASPI on the intelligence community, the impact of fundamental changes in the international system, extremism with global reach, and the security consequences of accelerating technological change. The Director-General of Intelligence as the new czar would need a 'light touch' to deal with the 'federated structure' of the community and its expansion to embrace collectors and analysts, cops and lawyers, spooks and spies, cyber nerds and cyber warriors, diplomats and accountants, mappers and managers.[40]

L'Estrange said Home Affairs was not part of the review's recommendations, but that it followed the review's logic. If Home Affairs were still just an idea, he noted, the Canberra arguments would be intense. But Home Affairs was a government decision that had been made, and the new department must be made to happen.

Home Affairs was 'created with no burning need and without a major review or public consultation process', according to a former deputy commissioner for national security at the AFP, Leanne Close. Serving as the head of ASPI's counterterrorism program in 2020, Close wrote that it was time for a wide-ranging examination of Home Affairs' resourcing and capabilities: 'While governments regularly release defence and foreign affairs white papers, no similar consideration is given to policing or domestic national security, even though policing and national defence could be considered two sides of the same coin.'[41]

Australia needed a law enforcement White Paper, Close said, following the approach recommended in a 2015 ASPI report, *A long time coming: the case for a white paper on Commonwealth law enforcement policy*.[42]

On 29 October 2018, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) tweeted for the first time with the message, 'Long time listener, first time caller'.[43] That night, the Director-General of ASD, Mike Burgess, gave a speech to ASPI's National Security Dinner on 'coming out from the shadows' after 71 years:

> As the world and the technology continues to change, so must ASD continue to adapt and change. It is important the Australian public understand why changes are necessary. That would be difficult to do if ASD were to continue to be highly secretive about the nature of its role. So, expect us to be clearer about how this agency protects Australian interests and any changes to our enabling capabilities. Of course we will continue to protect many secrets. We will lose our ability to defend from global threats if capabilities are known to those who would do us harm. Nonetheless, it is important that ASD is transparent about its role, and the protections that apply to Australian citizens. And that these protections are clear on the face of our legislation.[44]

Michael Shoebridge called the Burgess speech 'probably the most broad-ranging public outline of the work of a modern, high-end cyber organisation that we have seen internationally'. Two extraordinary things had happened, Shoebridge said: first, that the head of the normally very secretive signals directorate had spoken publicly outside a parliamentary committee; second, Burgess's effort to demystify his organisation, going public to establish ASD as a 'trusted, credible adviser to Australia's business sector and to the public'.[45]

In another come-from-the-shadows moment, the Director-General of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), Paul Symon, did a series of video interviews with ASPI in 2020, the first in the 68-year history of Australia's overseas spy service.[46]

ASIS, Symon said, was in the people business, operating in the intelligence market for 'the cultivation, the recruitment and the validation of agents who are betraying the secrets of their nation'. The spy ambit ran from terrorists to people smugglers, from the nature of foreign leaders to the operational needs of the ADF. The spy service, he said, had grown from a small entity to a mid-sized corporation.

ASIS had strengthened its ethical framework, Symon said, especially when seeking to penetrate terrorist groups or recruit people inside terrorist organisations. An ASIS officer could 'opt out' or have a discussion 'about that relationship between ethics, morals and what they're being asked to do with an agent'.

Spies sought 'jewels', Symon said: the 'most sensitive secrets overseas that bear in on our national interest and help inform a judgement that our government needs to make—whether it's in relation to our military, our economic or security outlook'. The fictional spy James Bond was more curse than blessing, Symon reflected:

A blessing because on holidays it's a darn good read or darn good movie. Curse, because there's so much wrong—there's so much wrong with the way he performs his function. He's licensed to kill. We don't give people a licence to kill. He has, one would suggest, an ego—aspects of narcissism that wouldn't fit comfortably with my people.

Confronting threats, facing pandemic

> Australia can no longer take refuge in the barriers of time and distance as a defence against the pestilence without. It is clear that geographical notions of security and national stability defined in terms of territorial sovereignty and integrity are not the only relevant factors in today's environment. Not only has the transnational spread of infectious disease transformed our view of national security by producing threats without visible enemies, but it has also rendered the 'national' insignificant and replaced it with the 'international.'
>
> —Peter Curson, 2005, *Invisible enemies*[47]

At the start of the 21st century, terrorism redefined Australia's threat calculus.

Canberra's response remade the national security community, even as the terms of the terrorist threat evolved.

Terrorism merged with the cyber world. Violent political extremism became a danger ranked with militant jihadism.

Then, in 2020, the pandemic redid the threat calculus again. Australia experienced the expanded notion of security as old warnings about disease arrived as fact. The pandemic became *the* threat confronting every Australian.

In the 2020 *Counterterrorism yearbook*, Isaac Kfir and John Coyne identified three themes:

- *Salafi-jihadi* terrorist activities had continued a decline that was noticeable from 2015: 'The decline is very much linked to the demise of ISIL and the fact that al-Qaeda has changed its strategy.'
- Dealing with returning foreign fighters and those convicted of terrorism offences coming to the end of their prison sentences: '[T]here's a drastic need for the international community to adopt a united, cohesive approach to tackle not only foreign fighters but their dependants.'
- The role of technology, especially social media, in the evolution of violent extremism: '[W]e're likely to see more cyberterrorism and … extremist groups are likely to continue to use the internet to promote their intolerant views, placing an enormous strain on states that must balance the right to free speech with security.'[48]

The yearbook's fifth edition in 2021 stressed the continuing development of terrorism as well as the evolution of ideas about resilience, the multiplying roles of technology and the threat of the new far right. Leanne Close judged: 'Terrorist ideology now attracts larger, more diverse sections

of our societies because propaganda and online rhetoric are increasingly sophisticated, making the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation harder to contain.'[49]

ASPI produced three books on the coronavirus in 2020, each with the general title 'After Covid-19'; volume 1 in May was subtitled 'Australia and the world rebuild',[50] volume 2 in September was 'Australia, the region and multilateralism',[51] volume 3 in December was 'Voices from federal parliament'.[52]

In the foreword to the first volume, the Governor-General, David Hurley, wrote:

> 'The way forward' is a topic occupying the minds of many Australians at the moment. When I think about Australia in 12 months and five years' time in the context of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, I frame my thoughts in the simple, post-operation review process that I was taught in the ADF: to achieve our agreed outcome, what must be sustained and what must be improved? In our current situation, therefore, what policies, programs and actions must be sustained and in what areas must we improve?

The editors of volume 1, John Coyne and Peter Jennings, said that in the years leading up to the global crisis, Australia, like many countries, failed to heed health specialists' warnings. Critical pandemic readiness was an insurance policy deemed too expensive by most nations:

> The pandemic has shown that far too much of our national resilience, from broadband bandwidth to the capacity to produce basic medical supplies, has been left to market forces and good luck rather than planning. While the global Covid-19 pandemic is far from over, it's clear that the crisis has brought about seismic social, economic and geopolitical changes to our world.

The editors of volume 2, Michael Shoebridge and Lisa Sharland, said Australia needed to think big:

> Simply accelerating or continuing current policies and engagement won't produce the results we want. Waiting for others to define a post-Covid-19 agenda for us, whether that's the UN, Washington, Delhi, Tokyo or Brussels, just won't work, because everyone is groping about in search of solutions.
>
> Notably, in several areas, Australians have done at least as much thinking about this as anyone else on the planet. It turns out that we aren't bad at navigating concurrent crises and making decisions that attract domestic and international support. Australia's policy and influence can help lead debates and decisions, just as we have in China policy and in technology policy, notably with 5G and countering foreign interference.
>
> This volume of articles shows us that Australia is entering a more disorderly, poorer world where there's a real risk of nations and peoples turning inward and hoping that big problems—such as intense China–US struggles over strategic, economic and technological power—will go away without anyone having to make hard choices; that, if we just wait, we can get back to business as usual. That won't work. The risk of military

> conflict between the world's two big powers, involving US allies such as Australia and Japan, will be greater in coming months and years than at most times since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Volume 3 asked Australia's federal parliamentarians to consider the world after the crisis and discuss 'policy and solutions that could drive Australian prosperity through one of the most difficult periods in living memory'. That drew responses from 49 MPs and Senators.

One key theme was concern about supply chains, focusing on both security and prosperity. Australia could play a substantial role as a stable and predictable source of exports, including agricultural products, critical minerals and rare earths, and as a provider of high-quality education.

The global outlook was dominated by China, and four contributions focused on how to respond to Beijing during and after the crisis.

The editors, Genevieve Feely and Peter Jennings, concluded:

> How Australia assures its prosperity and security after the pandemic is a central concern for our parliamentarians. Different contributors offered alternative models for society, such as using wellbeing as a metric instead of economic output or emphasising improving the climate in the recovery phase of the crisis.
>
> Whatever the topic, our MPs clearly have an intuition that there's an opportunity for change and that the opportunity needs to be seized to improve Australia's security and prosperity. It's obvious that there are strongly divergent views on policy choices here, but a common uniting theme is the need to ensure that Australia learns lessons from the pandemic experience.

In thinking about the pandemic, ASPI could call up one of its early papers—*Invisible enemies: infectious disease and national security in Australia*—on the threat of emerging pandemics and the need to reassess preparedness for a major outbreak of infectious disease.[53]

In 2005, Peter Curson wrote that approximately 40 newly emerged infections had been identified around the world over the previous 30 years, including AIDS, legionnaire's disease, mad cow disease, SARS, and bird flu.

Traditionally, national security had been defined by the dynamics of international relations, the defence of national territory, the protection of citizens from external threats, and the state's survival. Rarely, Curson wrote, had infectious disease played an integral part in the 'high politics' of states.

Curson's proposition in 2005 became the experience that Australia and the world grappled with in 2020, when infectious disease threatened national security.

The health of Australia's population was a critical resource vital to the stability of the nation. Disease would threaten 'not only the livelihood and way of life of individuals, but also … the stability and viability of the state'.

Curson went on to discuss how people handle fear in their lives, the problems of 'panic, avoidance, scapegoating, rumour-mongering, violence and other personal adjustment strategies', and how the media would report pandemics, playing to the 'desire to sensationalise, to exaggerate, and play on people's emotions'.

The re-emergence of infectious disease had become a top-order security issue, no longer the sole preserve of the physician or public health specialist, as Curson had forecast:

> Transnational health threats involve every aspect of modern life, including food safety, human rights, organ transplants, travel, commerce and trade, education and environmental law. HIV/AIDS illustrates the extreme challenges faced by countries and their citizens when faced by a virulent infection that affects a large proportion of the population and for which no specific cure or treatment exists. There are many lessons and challenges for Australia here, but the underlying message is that infectious disease needs to be near the top of the national security agenda.

Notes

1 The six agencies of the old Australian intelligence community were the Office of National Assessments (ONA), the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Signals Directorate, the Defence Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation. In 2017, the form of the expanded national intelligence community was set with ONA becoming the Office of National Intelligence, the creation of Home Affairs, plus the role of other agencies, including the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC).

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Iraq and Afghanistan

As ASPI was formed in August 2001, the first new war of the 21st century was only weeks away.

The US air campaign in Afghanistan, following the 9/11 attacks, began at the start of October.

The Iraq war loomed as ASPI began its work in 2002.

The two conflicts would run through Australian military thought and actions for two decades.

The total cost of Australian military operations in Afghanistan over the 20 years was $8.5 billion. The total cost of ADF military operations in Iraq to 2021 was $4.1 billion.[1]

Hugh White recalled that, as ASPI's first reports were being written in 2002, Australians 'were starting to debate an issue which became unquestionably the most divisive question of national strategic policy since Vietnam—the proposal to invade Iraq'.

ASPI staff had to be part of that debate, White wrote, but it raised serious challenges for a new institute looking to establish its role as a government-owned and -funded but independent policy player:

> The potential for ASPI to find itself embroiled in intense and difficult public debates had, of course, been recognised and accepted from the outset, and some important principles had been established and embodied in ASPI's charter: that ASPI as an institution would hold no view, but present the views of staff and others who contributed to its work, and that it would seek to publish a range of views on contentious issues. These principles served ASPI well, but it was nonetheless a stern test to find that, within a few months of its launch, ASPI staff were among those arguing against an invasion of Iraq for which the government was doing all it could to build support.[2]

Iraq

As one of only four members of the military coalition that deposed Iraq's government in March and April 2003, Australia shared responsibility for what Iraq would become. On 1 May, US President George W Bush declared 'the end of major combat operations', while ASPI released a paper on 9 May on 'postwar Iraq from a distinctively Australian perspective'. Australia was a member of the transitional authority and had a direct responsibility for Iraq's future, Elsina Wainwright noted.

Having participated in the military action, Australia had a moral obligation to contribute to the replacement of the deposed regime with a new and better alternative. Practically, the US and the UK wanted Australia to sustain an active role in Iraq's administration and political evolution. If things went badly, there was a clear risk that the engagement could drag on indefinitely. Australia needed to set a clear limit to its commitment to the reconstruction process. Wainwright also identified—'not in any priority order'—a lengthy list of Australia's interests in the outcome:

- long-term stability in the Middle East
- Australia's commercial stake in Iraq and the Gulf
- Australia's credentials in the new Iraq
- Australia's standing in the wider Islamic world
- ready availability of oil at fair prices
- the global credibility of the US
- the strength of the US–Australia alliance
- the effectiveness of the UN and the wider Western alliance
- international cooperation to limit WMD proliferation
- effective measures to prevent terrorism
- the safety of Australian personnel.[3]

A few months later, Aldo Borgu wrote about the continuing war in 'postwar' Iraq. The insurgency, he said, was destined to follow the same path as the 2003 Gulf War, 'full of myths, misrepresentations, half truths and wishful thinking on both sides of the debate'. The insurgency was a lot more serious than the US admitted publicly, he said, and far less serious than the doomsayers believed:

> The major problem the US currently faces is that it has no idea who or what it's facing. US Administration officials have identified the Iraqi resistance at different times as comprising foreign terrorists, regime loyalists, criminals or combinations of all three. That might be right for now but there is a greater risk that the resistance will begin to develop into a pro-Iraq, anti-American nationalist resistance that has nothing to do with Saddam, Al Qaeda or the Iraqi mafia.[4]

In ASPI's strategic assessment, *Beyond Baghdad*, published in May 2004 at a time of widespread fighting in Iraq, Peter Jennings wrote that Iraq's prospects were poised on a knife edge. One possible outcome was the creation of a stable, more open and prosperous regime in the Middle East. The other was anarchy, and a substantial if temporary rebuff to America's place in the world, Jennings said:

> Australia's involvement in the Coalition is an important signal of our support for the US and for the essential work of rebuilding Iraq. Australia's interests are served by maintaining a strong commitment to the Coalition and the reconstruction of Iraq.[5]

The Iraqi national elections held on 30 January 2005 would 'not by themselves defeat the insurgency in Iraq', Peter Khalil wrote. Insurgents would use terrorist tactics to incite sectarian strife, 'to kill as many Iraqi civilians as possible, in the hope of derailing the political process over the course of 2005 by destabilising Transitional Government and Coalition efforts to help Iraqis establish democratic governing structures.'[6]

Khalil had served as Director of National Security Policy for the Coalition Provisional Authority (August 2003 to May 2004), working to rebuild Iraqi security forces and institutions. He wrote that Australian Army trainers had been more successful with Iraqis than US civilian contractors had been:

> The relative effectiveness of Australian trainers is also a result of sharing with Iraqis a common tradition and understanding of British doctrine and tactics. The Australians have shown they can connect with Iraqis through treating Iraqi culture with respect, the lack of which among contracted, non-uniformed trainers has been particularly criticised by Iraqis.

By 2006, ASPI's Iraq headline thought was the need to think clearly about what 'staying the course' meant. Rod Lyon argued that 'we tried to do too many things in Iraq, and set ourselves an impossible mission', aiming for a set of outcomes that were 'the equivalent of trying to hit seven birds with one stone'—plus, the act of intervening had its own unintended consequences.[7]

Lyon said the coalition forces should tick off what had been achieved: no Iraqi WMDs, Saddam toppled and prosecuted, sanctions lifted, and the prospect of Iraqi state sponsorship of terrorism minimised. The long-term objective of embedding democracy would depend on Iraq. Australia wanted an exit strategy that pocketed those gains and left behind some form of stability for Iraq and the Gulf states, Lyon wrote:

> We also have a fundamental interest in the continuing good health of our own alliance, and so, in helping our ally to find a graceful exit route. It is not in our interests to have the United States slump into a 'post-Iraq syndrome' similar to the post-Vietnam one.

In 2007, Leanne Piggott produced an ASPI report on what Iraq meant for Middle East security:

> The spill-over of jihadi-salafist terrorism from Iraq to neighbouring countries and beyond has to date been the deadliest effect of the Iraq war. Like Afghanistan before it, Iraq has provided an ideal training ground for jihadi terrorists from around the region who bring home with them newly honed skills in bomb-making and other aspects of insurgent warfare.[8]

For Australia, Piggott argued, the two important exports from the Middle East were oil and 'the ideology underpinning global terrorism, jihadi-salafism, and the terrorists themselves'. The Iraq imperative for Australia was to continue to support coalition partners in providing security for the Iraqi people:

> The challenge of reaching the point of sustainable security and political reconciliation in Iraq is a formidable one, particularly in the light of the decades of tyranny and division that preceded the 2003 US-led invasion. Regardless of the mistakes in US policy to date, Australia has an obligation as a coalition partner to do all that is possible to ensure that Iraqi society does not collapse and degenerate into all out civil war.

Approaching Australia's 2007 election, the Liberal government and Labor opposition were sharply divided over how to depart from Iraq. The Liberal position was condition-based; Labor's was time-based. The government had 'made clear that it is in no hurry to withdraw Australian forces', Rod Lyon wrote, while Labor would withdraw troops after consultation with Washington:

> So far, broadly speaking, we've seen Iraq as the US's game; so the most likely exit point has been one virtually of Washington's choosing. If we want to move to a more 'independent' sense of our exit point, then our exit point logically depends on us reaching one of two decisions about the conditions in Iraq:
>
> - either we judge that we have achieved what we wanted out of our engagement or
> - we judge that what we wanted is no longer attainable at a sensible price.[9]

In the 2007 federal election campaign, Labor's Kevin Rudd argued that the scale of the Iraq disaster showed it was the wrong war: Australia should withdraw and concentrate on Afghanistan. Rudd's case was that Australia could leave Iraq while holding firm to the US alliance.

Security issues had helped deliver two election wins for John Howard. The 9/11 attack was an element in his victory in 2001. In the 2004 election, the Iraq and Afghanistan involvements—with only one Australian military death in Afghanistan at that point—were still a relative plus for Howard when weighed against the scepticism of the Labor leader, Mark Latham, about the US.

By the 2007 election, however, Iraq weighed on the Howard government and was part of Rudd's effort to define Howard as yesterday's man. Issues of war and peace were central to those three elections of 2001, 2004 and 2007.

As he took office in December 2007, Rudd announced that Australia's 550 troops serving in Iraq would be withdrawn by the middle of 2008.

Following Rudd's timetable, the ADF departed, leaving a fragile Iraqi Government and sectarian conflict. Writing about big trends in the Middle East in 2013, Lydia Khalil described a region 'at best in flux and at worst in turmoil', pointing to:

- a marked uptick in sectarianism and sectarian violence
- crisis within political Islam and a widening rift between secular and Islamist political forces
- the gradual disengagement and declining influence of the US in the Middle East.[10]

By the middle of 2014, ISIL (also known as ISIS or Islamic State) controlled significant territory in Syria and Iraq, and thousands of young men and women were flocking to be part of its proclaimed 'caliphate'. ISIL had consolidated its grip on much of Syria and mounted military operations in Iraq, capturing the country's second largest city, Mosul. A quarter of the Iraqi Army had collapsed, and ISIL forces had reached a position 60 kilometres north of Baghdad.[11]

In October 2014, Australia was one of the first to join the US coalition to 'degrade' ISIL, committing planes for airstrikes and troops to train Iraqi security forces. In the same month, a former chief of the Australian Army, Peter Leahy, published an ASPI paper on the long war of the 21st century:

> Australia is involved in the early stages of a conflict that may last for the rest of the century and potentially beyond. Terrorism is but a symptom of a broader conflict in which the fundamental threat is from radical Islamists who are intent on establishing Islam as the foundation of a new world order. It's a conflict between radical Islamists and modern secular, mostly Western, states. The likely duration of the conflict is due to the intrinsic and widespread appeal of the underlying ideology, the youth of those currently involved, their fervour and the inability of those under attack to either realise or accept the true nature of the threat. While the violence, so far, is mostly confined to Islamic lands, some of the radicals are engaged in a direct war against Western secular nations.[12]

When Einat Wilf looked out across the century, the conflict he saw was within Islam. He wrote that the story of the Middle East for decades to come would be the battle for the hegemony of Sunni Islam, especially in the Arab world, and of the efforts by non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims to ensure that no dominant Sunni power was capable of uniting the Sunni Arab world:

> Ultimately, Australia and other Western countries have to come to terms with their limited role in shaping the outcomes of the battle for hegemony in the Arab Middle East. This doesn't mean that there's nothing to be done, but those outside the region must clinically and dispassionately consider their interests in the region and what they can reasonably expect to achieve.[13]

By the end of 2017, the military defeat of Islamic State by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was at hand. An Australian Army major, Andrew Maher, wrote of tactical success in the Iraq war but strategic ambiguity. Islamic State, he said, might be abandoning its territorially based identity for a virtual caliphate:

> In the process of liberating Mosul, coalition airpower delivered more than 5,075 weapons in support of ISF over the month of August 2017 alone. That's an average of one aerially delivered weapon every 10 minutes. A total of 98,532 weapons have been delivered in Operation Inherent Resolve, in Syria and Iraq. For a force estimated to consist of around 30,000 fighters in 2015, that is both frighteningly inefficient and has devastated Iraq's Sunni and Turkomen populations. The current short-term focus on the military defeat of IS belies the reality that Iraq will retain fragile governance, making it vulnerable to violent extremism.[14]

Maher judged that the combination of battle damage, disaffected youth and the potential for sectarian and political misrepresentation suggested that the seeds had been sown for the next war in Iraq.

Isaac Kfir pointed to Iran's efforts to make Iraq a client state. In the early 2000s, he wrote, Tehran preferred that both Iraq and Afghanistan should remain in a state of manageable chaos that kept the Americans occupied and unable to focus on Iran:

> Now the regime wants a pro-Tehran government in Baghdad. That would give Iran a safe western border, allow it to influence oil prices (Iraq has the world's fifth-largest proven oil reserves with 140 billion barrels), and enable Tehran to continue to challenge Saudi dominance in the region.[15]

In 2021, Amin Saikal judged that Iraq was still at a crossroads between stability and instability, security and insecurity, peace and conflict:

> The US toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, but in the process also dismantled the administrative and security structures which were pivotal to holding the mosaic that was Iraq together as a functioning state. It ultimately failed to empower the Iraqi people to rebuild their lives and country and engaged in processes geared to benefit Washington's ideological and geopolitical preferences rather than to endow Iraq with the appropriate foundations for stability and security in a very difficult neighbourhood.
>
> The result was political, social and sectarian fragmentation, and transformation of the country from a strong state with suppressed societies to a weak state with strong societies. This opened the space for a plethora of not only domestic clusters but also outside forces to engage in power struggles to shape Iraq's future.[16]

Afghanistan

After the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban, Australia marched out of Afghanistan in 2002. In June 2005, our contribution to security in Afghanistan was one officer. Then our forces slowly returned. This became our longest war.

As part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the 190-strong Special Forces Task Group returned to Afghanistan at the end of 2005, joined by a rotary transport contingent of 110 personnel and two Chinook helicopters. In 2006, Australia deployed military personnel to join a Netherlands-led Provincial Reconstruction Team in southern Afghanistan. It's emblematic that there were different English spellings of the province's name. The ADF called it Uruzgan. ASPI at first spelled it Oruzgan but eventually switched to the ADF orthography. Uruzgan became the frame and lens of the Australian experience in Afghanistan.

Elsina Wainwright wrote in 2006 that Afghanistan had had far fewer international troops on the ground per capita than efforts in East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq. Afghanistan had also received far less aid per capita than Solomon Islands, East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq. The US view, she said, was that, compared to Iraq, Afghanistan was 'containable'. Yet Afghanistan was an 'acutely fragile state' with social indicators among the worst in the world. The escalating insurgency, narco-economics and politics, high-level corruption and rampant banditry all created a climate of lawlessness and impunity.

Reconstruction teams moving into the south and east of Afghanistan would face significant threats, Wainwright wrote:

> [I]nsurgency activity is increasing in part because international troops are now moving into areas where they have not been in large numbers before, and … greater resistance is therefore being encountered. Predictions have been made that insurgents will test the arriving ISAF troops: forces could face suicide and roadside bombings.[17]

The Dutch-Australian operation in Uruzgan would therefore need a significant security emphasis and more robust mandates, rules of engagement and equipment than was required in the north and west of Afghanistan.

When the Rudd government took office in 2007, it inherited plans for a military build-up and a rising aid budget in Afghanistan, but Labor's Defence Minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, worried: 'We are winning the battles and not the war … We have been very successful in clearing areas of the Taliban but it's having no real strategic effect.' The problem, Jacob Townsend wrote, was that the 'war' was a state-building project:

> To have lasting effect, it must establish a functional government that can compete successfully for legitimacy and territory with its predecessor, the Taliban. Our alliance and counter-terrorism interests currently point in the same direction. We need a legitimate Afghan government that can lead the counter-insurgency campaign, a campaign whose success depends on external events and which stretches well into the future.[18]

The Rudd government wrestled with a policy conundrum. While committed to the state-building project and reconstruction, it confronted the Taliban insurgency and the perceived lack of progress in Afghanistan.

Canberra thought the international strategy in Afghanistan lacked coherence, Raspal Khosa wrote, suggesting that Australia's commitment might be in vain if the West couldn't persevere for at least another decade: 'Afghanistan is not a country for quick victories and we must accept that this is a long-term intervention in a dangerous environment.'[19]

During eight years working for ASPI, Khosa established himself as a leading commentator on Australia's mission in Afghanistan. He visited the country on five occasions, with the ADF, NATO and the US military. In a report titled *A long and winding road* in 2009, he discussed the 'main focus' of the ADF mission, which was helping to build a capable Afghan National Army (ANA).

> This effort is critical to the success of the coalition's new strategic approach to stabilise the volatile region and deny violent extremists a sanctuary along its borderlands. The government's much anticipated troop increase, announced by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 29 April 2009, will see a near 50% expansion of the ADF presence in Afghanistan by 2010, with troop numbers rising from 1,090 to 1,550 personnel. The operational goal of sending extra forces to Afghanistan is to raise the effectiveness of an ANA infantry brigade so it can assume primary responsibility for security in Oruzgan Province, thereby creating the conditions for the withdrawal of the ADF over the medium term.[20]

Australia had defined its long journey in one province, yet the ultimate purpose of the international force was still being argued. Raspal noted divisions in NATO, which commanded the international security force: 'There is still fundamental disagreement among NATO states on whether the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is counter-insurgency (COIN) or stabilisation and reconstruction.'

The US took comfort or cover in the ambiguity of a series of ambitious aims, Raspal commented:

> Somewhat surprisingly, the daunting task of contested nation-building in Afghanistan is not an avowed US strategic goal, but one of five supporting objectives that includes establishing effective democratic government control in Pakistan. This deliberate policy ambiguity is intended to sell the strategy to a domestic audience in America and war-weary coalition allies in Afghanistan, who are reluctant to contribute further resources to what many increasingly perceive is a flawed enterprise in the midst of a full-blown insurgency.[21]

The Dutch withdrew in 2010; in the Netherlands, the coalition government had collapsed because of divisions over NATO's request to extend the Dutch military mission in Afghanistan. On 1 August 2010, formal command of Task Force Uruzgan was transferred from the Netherlands to what was called Combined Team—Uruzgan, which was a multinational melding of military and civilian contributions.

The Dutch–Australian partnership had been a meeting of two military cultures, illustrated by the Australian jibe that DUTCH stood for 'don't understand the concept here'.[22] A force that deployed with its own anthropologist certainly showed the ADF other ways of thinking. The most public disagreement was about food. Initially, the Dutch did the catering, and herring for breakfast was not to Aussie tastes. Visiting Uruzgan over Christmas 2007, just after being elected, Kevin Rudd recalled his first question from among 900 Australian troops: 'Prime Minister, Dutch food is shit. We want our own tucker. Can you please fix it?' Rudd replied, 'That's precisely why I've brought Angus with me. And Angus will deliver.' Standing beside Rudd, the chief of the ADF replied, 'Yes, Prime Minister', as Rudd later wrote: 'And so, a few months later, the Dutch kitchen was dispatched into the annals of history.'[23]

Casualties in Afghanistan split Dutch politics. The Dutch view of NATO and the US was a complex multilateral equation compared to the bilateral alliance embraced by Australia's governing parties. The Labor–Liberal agreement on Afghanistan was firm throughout—even as casualties mounted and Australian public opinion turned against the war. Campaigning for the 2007 federal election was suspended so the Prime Minister and opposition leader could attend the funeral of the first Australian soldier killed by enemy action in Afghanistan. The shared political stance on Afghanistan was a contrast with the Liberal–Labor divisions over Iraq, where Australia suffered no ADF deaths.

ADF personnel became the most numerous of coalition forces operating in Uruzgan. Australia, though, refused the command role vacated by the Netherlands. That was taken by the US. The formal transfer of command in Uruzgan took place while Australia was in the midst of the campaign for a federal election on 21 August 2010. In the week before the vote, three Australian soldiers died in southern Afghanistan; two days after the poll, another Australian soldier was killed. At that point, 21 ADF personnel had been killed in Afghanistan and a further 149 wounded.[24]

For Australia, the peak negotiations on Afghanistan were with the US, after which the detailed coalition work was done with NATO and ISAF. Kevin Rudd wrote that the 2010 AUSMIN alliance talks dealt with:

> … Australia's new Afghanistan strategy, which clearly defined Uruzgan province as our core mission—in particular the effective training of the Fourth Brigade of the Afghan National Army over the following three years, by which time Australia could complete its mission, hand over responsibility for the province to the Afghan national security forces and bring our forces home.[25]

A cabinet-endorsed timetable set 2013 as the date for the withdrawal. In 2012, Australia accepted the Uruzgan command, saying that that would help manage the transition process.

In October 2013, seven weeks after Australia's federal election, the new Prime Minister and new opposition leader stood together in Afghanistan to declare the end to Australia's longest war.[26] The message from Tony Abbott and Bill Shorten was of a job nobly performed. There was no claim of victory after 12 years of military effort, and the mission-well-done language was marked by its hesitancy. Their duty had been done, the troops were told, and at that point the rhetoric meter started to falter.

Abbott captured both the tone and the balance with his opening words at the 'recognition ceremony' at Tarin Kowt: 'Australia's longest war is ending, not with victory, not with defeat, but with, we hope, an Afghanistan that's better for our presence here'.

'Neither victory nor defeat' was the most provisional of political epitaphs; the military summing up extolled the ADF's 'professionalism and work ethic'.[27]

One political judgement was definitive: the bipartisan unanimity at every stage of the Afghanistan saga. The cross-party consensus was remarkable for showing few cracks and never publicly wavering.

Afghanistan joins World War II and Korea as conflicts that did not see Australia's political parties at war over the war. Afghanistan, indeed, brought broad unity in Canberra on how the war should be fought, as well as agreement that it was a war worth fighting. That distinguished Afghanistan from World War I, when the agreement on purpose was deeply shaken by the fight over conscription.

The unusual joint visit by Abbott and Shorten expressed the political reality that Labor and the Coalition had both supported an Australian role in the Afghanistan conflict all the way through. Both sides 'owned' the war in government, and neither deviated when in opposition.

During our longest war—as anything that looked like victory faded to invisibility—that bipartisan unity persisted; the consensus held even as the nature of the war changed and evolved, Australian casualties rose and popular Australian support fell away.

Unlike in any previous war, Australia's leaders went to the funerals of those who died serving in Afghanistan, joining with families in mourning while giving assurance on the worth of the mission.

The centrality of the US alliance explains much—probably most—about the unbroken consensus of the Australian polity, as expressed by the four different prime ministers—two Liberal and two Labor—who owned the commitment to Afghanistan: John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott.

Howard, in Washington on the day of the September 11 attacks, never wavered from going along with the US. Rudd performed the difficult balancing act of withdrawing from Iraq while hanging on to the US alliance; a central element in that was the turn back to Afghanistan as the 'good war'. Whatever elements of the Rudd legacy Gillard disowned, Afghanistan was a mission she embraced as strongly as did either Howard or Rudd.

Beyond the US alliance, what sustained that unanimity? How were Australia's politicians able to stay committed to Afghanistan when opinion polls showed that the great majority of Australians opposed the war?

One answer is that the Australian people supported the alliance while also being deeply doubtful about the war. And, while voters expressed their rejection of the Afghanistan war when talking to pollsters, the national mourning at the return of the bodies of Australia's fallen sons didn't translate into any political action or activism; only the Greens stood against the Liberal–Labor consensus.

The bipartisan backing for Afghanistan rested on the US alliance, but it drew strength from the professional nature of the ADF. Liberal and Labor leaders were sending volunteers, not conscripts. That three-way relationship between the people, a professional military and Australia's politicians was the dynamic that allowed a series of governments to uphold the mission. The true cost was carried by the ADF. What the long mission did to Australia's soldiers is a reality that is becoming clearer, long after the withdrawal from Uruzgan.

Marking 50 years of diplomatic relations between Australia and Afghanistan in 2019, William Maley judged that what ultimately binds the countries is Australia's strong interest in Afghanistan's progress down the broad path set in 2001. This was a complex mixture of state-building, institutional development, economic change, civil society activism, and enhancement of human rights and freedoms. A failure in Afghanistan, Maley wrote, would be catastrophic for regional and global security:

> To start with, such a failure would undoubtedly fuel a narrative similar to the one that appeared following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989: that radical religion is a force multiplier that can defeat even a superpower. This would likely have the effect of stimulating the growth of radicalism all the way from the Arab Middle East to the Indonesian archipelago, undermining years of effort directed at countering violent extremism in Australia's neighbourhood and beyond. A failure in Afghanistan could also trigger very large new flows of Afghan refugees.[28]

In November 2020, after a four-year-long investigation into allegations that members of Australian special forces committed war crimes in Afghanistan, 25 soldiers stood accused of murdering 39 unarmed Afghan civilians or prisoners and cruelly treating two others.

The inquiry, led by New South Wales Supreme Court judge Paul Brereton, a major general in the Army Reserve, found credible information about 23 incidents in which one or more non-combatants or prisoners were unlawfully killed by or at the direction of Australian soldiers in circumstances which, if accepted by a jury, would be the war crime of murder. Some of the incidents involved a single victim, and some multiple victims.[29]

The report, released by the chief of the ADF, General Angus Campbell, said that a total of 25 current or former ADF personnel were perpetrators, either as principals or accessories, some of them on a single occasion and a few on multiple occasions.

None of these incidents occurred under pressure in the heat of battle, the report said.

Campbell said the ADF was rightly held to account over allegations of grave misconduct by some members of its special forces. The report detailed credible information regarding deeply disturbing allegations of unlawful killings: 'To the people of Afghanistan, on behalf of the Australian Defence Force, I sincerely and unreservedly apologise for any wrongdoing by Australian soldiers.'

Brereton's report said that, overwhelmingly, the special forces soldiers performed skilfully, effectively and courageously. Because of their role, they formed a disproportionately high percentage of ADF members killed or wounded in action in Afghanistan, and consequential mental health issues continued to emerge among the rest.

The executive editor of *The Strategist*, Brendan Nicholson, made repeated visits to Afghanistan as a correspondent. He penned a piece, from both the heart and head, in response to the Brereton findings:

> The war in Afghanistan has profoundly changed the Australian Army and had a significant impact on the whole defence force. Around 30,000 ADF personnel served in Afghanistan and 41 died there. The vast majority of them fought and worked with great courage and decency, many living in small, isolated patrol bases in remote valleys with the Afghan soldiers they mentored.

> They did not just teach the Afghans to shoot and then send them on their way; they fought, and some of them died, with those Afghan soldiers.
>
> Even when trust was broken with 'insider' killings of Australian and other allied soldiers by Afghan personnel who were traitors or disaffected, the Diggers persevered. Soldiers who ran technical training programs teaching Afghans were immensely proud of the tradesmen they turned out. Those who built schools and clinics took the same pride in introducing visitors to young Afghan doctors who worked there, tending long lines of sick and injured.

But, at the same time, Nicholson wrote, there was another war going on in the mountains and valleys a helicopter ride away. Australian and allied special forces battled through one dangerous operation after another in a conflict fought in darkness, out of sight of the media and the world at large. A small minority of them got out of control:

> This became a true corporal's war in which junior NCOs had the authority of kings. On top of that, some officers were treated with contempt by a small number of NCOs who'd spent endless nights on dangerous operations and who undoubtedly did know more about fighting and surviving than those sent to command them. There was also a view by many in the regular army that they'd largely been marginalised through a determination to minimise casualties by using the special forces for just about everything.
>
> When concerns were raised about possible unlawful killings, the army ordered its own investigations. What they uncovered was profoundly disturbing. Something had gone badly wrong on the Afghanistan missions—a deep-seated and distorted warrior ethos permeated parts of the SAS and an entrenched culture of impunity had taken hold there.
>
> There were 'catastrophic cultural and professional shortfalls' within Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) and 'corrosive' friction between the major special forces units, the SAS Regiment and the commandos. Under the pressure of 20 intense rotations in Afghanistan over 11 years, the special forces had become isolated from the rest of the army.

Nicholson wrote that ADF commanders said the decline has been reversed. A restructured SOCOMD was ready to implement the Afghanistan inquiry's findings and to rebuild the trust of government, the defence organisation and the public:

> Of all the wars in which Australia has been involved, the Afghanistan conflict was the longest, its intensity and its largely hidden cost reflected in the significant number of veterans who have killed themselves since coming home.
>
> On the positive side, the war taught the army a lot about the necessity for the war fighter and intelligence to be tightly integrated. It led to major technological advances by Australian soldiers and engineers to deal with weapons such as the ingenious improvised bombs, mostly made from diesel and fertiliser, that proliferated there. Those innovations will save lives in wars and peacekeeping missions all over the world.

US President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw US military forces from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021 was 'an unseemly bolt for the exit' and Biden's 'first big blunder in office', Peter Jennings wrote:

> Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump are on a unity ticket, locked onto a bizarre sabotage mission, negotiating, and now honouring, a 'diplomatic agreement' with the Taliban, while deserting the very Afghans who have fought with our forces over the past two decades.[30]

Because of the 'imminent international military withdrawal from Afghanistan', Australia closed its embassy in Kabul on 28 May. Announcing the decision because of an 'increasingly uncertain security environment', Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the closure 'will be temporary and that we will resume a permanent presence in Kabul once circumstances permit'.[31]

Amin Saikal wrote that Canberra must ponder whether it pursued the right strategy, and if it ever had an appropriate end game. Australia's diplomatic and military operations made a positive contribution, he said, especially to the reconstruction and security of Uruzgan:

> Yet, most of the good work that Australian diggers and aid workers performed in Uruzgan is now in ruins, as the Taliban have regained control over much of the province. The closure of the embassy ahead of total military withdrawal releases Australia from a very costly and unwinnable war. Yet, being the first country to disentangle itself from Afghanistan, basically cutting and running, is not a very good look. And the closure is bound to hamper the investigation of the circumstances surrounding 39 Afghan civilians alleged to have been killed by Australian special forces and the justice that needs to be delivered in this respect. The initial justification of fighting terrorism rings hollow.[32]

Australia served Afghanistan—standing with its US ally and with the ISAF—to deliver a tenuous stability. We helped keep reasonable regimes in power and the Taliban out of power. And we helped the work to build a better country.

The 2021 withdrawal will put the meaning and the resilience of those achievements to the test. As the Taliban predicted: we had the clocks, they had the time.

In mid-2021, Australia's spending on military operations was at its lowest level since before the ADF deployed to Timor-Leste in 1999.[33]

Notes

1 From 2000–01 to 2020–21, the cost of all Australian military Iraq operations was $4,146.4 million. For Afghanistan, it was $8,548.3 million. See Marcus Hellyer, *The Cost of Defence Public Database*, ASPI, June 2021, online.

2 Hugh White, 'Robert O'Neill and the birth of ASPI', in Daniel Marston, Tamara Leahy (eds), *War, strategy and history: essays in honour of Professor Robert O'Neill*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2016, 262, online.

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21 Khosa, *A long and winding road: Australia's role in building an Afghan National Army*.

22 Chris Masters, *No front line: Australia's special forces at war in Afghanistan*, Allen & Unwin, 2017, 311.

23 Kevin Rudd, *The PM years*, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2018, 19.

24 Raspal Khosa, *Australia's commitment in Afghanistan: moving to a more comprehensive approach*, ASPI, Canberra, 31 August 2010, online.

25 Rudd, *The PM years*, 425.

26 Phillip Coorey, 'Long war ends with hope, says Tony Abbott', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 2013, online.

27 When the last Australians left Tarin Kowt on 15 December, the chief of the ADF, General David Hurley, said the eight years in Uruzgan had degraded the insurgency and seen the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade and Afghan National Security Forces develop into a capable force. The Provincial Reconstruction Team and Managed Works Team had successfully built and restored basic infrastructure and essential services throughout the province. 'Sadly our mission has also come at a cost with the loss of 40 ADF personnel and the wounding of a further 261. We have honoured our fallen by completing the transition of security lead in Uruzgan to the ANSF.' Department of Defence, 'A statement from the Chief of the Defence Force on the conclusion of ADF operations in Uruzgan province', media release, Australian Government, 16 December 2013, online.

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Cyber and tech

In the language of strategy and defence, the information space has become the battle space.

Cyber operations are a new military domain where heavy blows—'kinetic effects'—can be inflicted.

In this crowded domain, governments seek to direct, demand, defend—and attack.

Tech giants grow gargantuan. Businesses swarm. Spies and criminals throng.

And billions of people can act as individuals as well as groups.

The cybersphere today, and the tomorrow of quantum computing, are a manifold expression of what Marshall McLuhan saw 50 years ago: 'Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all … It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale.'[1]

The cyberworld can be specific and infinitely individual—a realm where a lone terrorist can become radicalised and act. Yet digital tools also have vast scope, allowing ASPI to peer deep into China. Employing one of the largest concentrations of Chinese-language speakers in any Australian think tank, the institute has revealed much that Beijing wants to deny and conceal.

E-security

Australia's first National Security Statement in 2008 said that e-security was one of the top security priorities, referring to cyberwarfare, cyberattacks, electronic espionage, threats to critical infrastructure running on computer systems, and computers used by terrorists.

An ASPI paper on threats and responses in the information age, by Alastair MacGibbon, said that Australian cybersecurity policy had been outstripped by the take-up of technology by the public, industry and government—and its abuse by criminals and foreign powers.

Canberra had relied on business for security solutions via industry self-regulation and a failed belief in 'light touch' regulation of telecommunications. A narrow policy focus on the legal definition of cybercrime missed broader problems, MacGibbon said, causing a widening gap between the cybersecurity problem and the national capacity to deal with it. Australia faced a greater level of risk because of 'the incremental nature of government policy-making which can't keep up with the speed of information and communications technology innovation, and more importantly, how such systems are abused'.[2]

Surveying cybersecurity in 2011, Andrew Davies judged that Australia had acted 'after the event' to 'catch up'. Awoken by 'consistent penetration of national and commercial systems and substantial commercial losses', the elements of a national strategy had emerged.[3]

Using expertise from cyber operations in defence and national security, Canberra could provide guidance, build regulatory frameworks and even offer technical help and tools. The outstanding

issues were whether the governance mechanisms in place would be sufficient as the problem evolved and grew, and whether the resources brought to bear were proportional to the threat.

At the 2011 AUSMIN talks in San Francisco, marking the 60th anniversary of ANZUS, the alliance extended into cyberspace:

> [O]ur Governments share the view that, in the event of a cyber attack that threatens the territorial integrity, political independence or security of either of our nations, Australia and the United States would consult together and determine appropriate options to address the threat.

It was the first time outside NATO that two allies had formalised cooperation in the cyber realm, Carl Ungerer wrote, while cautioning that classic deterrence wouldn't work in this new domain:

> The real cybersecurity threat is not from a single weapon of mass destruction but from the persistent and pernicious combination of online crime and espionage that is undermining financial systems, compromising the identity of individuals and stealing important intellectual property rights from corporations and governments. The classic deterrence theory of holding at risk the things that an adversary values fails in the cyber world because would-be attackers operate with an assumed level of deniability that changes their risk calculus.[4]

ASPI convened a conference of Australian and American experts in Washington DC in 2011 to discuss the future of cyber conflict and defence. Lydia Khalil wrote that the alliance would have to define what type of cyberattack would be a threat to territory, politics or security:

> [T]here's an important blurring between espionage and attack in cyberspace that doesn't exist in the physical space. The same intrusion method that's used to extract information from a network can also be exploited to conduct an attack to disrupt that network. This is a critically important distinction that policymakers must be aware of and account for. While every cyberintrusion can't be labelled as an 'attack' per se, it's critically important to assess whether or not an intrusion has exploited a vulnerability that could also be used to disrupt or destroy networks.[5]

The International Cyber Policy Centre

ASPI thought Canberra had to offer more coherence and clarity on the cyber challenge. The institute's response was to create the International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC), in August 2013, with Tobias Feakin as director.

Peter Jennings said that the centre was ASPI's first major expansion as a think tank, giving it a wider remit. Cybersecurity, he said, was emerging as 'one of the most significant strategic challenges faced by Australia'.[6] Jennings and Feakin wrote that ASPI saw a pressing need to be involved in emerging policy debates:

> There are two such debates: one at an often very highly classified government level, and one that encompasses a wider group in civil society but is often limited to those with deep specialist knowledge about information technology and security. There's a need for a broader dialogue among people interested in many aspects of the impact of cyber issues on public policymaking.[7]

The ICPC would have four aims:

- Lift the level of Australian and Asia–Pacific public understanding and debate on cybersecurity.
- Provide a focus for developing innovative and high-quality public policy on cyber issues.
- Provide a means to hold Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue on cyber issues in the Asia–Pacific region.
- Link different levels of government, business and the public in a sustained dialogue on cybersecurity.

Jennings and Feakin set out a creed for the ICPC based on needs and ambition:

> These efforts will be at the national and international levels and look to enhance the cybersecurity of Australia and the region. There's currently no centre in Australia or Asia that provides a focused research and strategic outreach program on the national and international development of the 'rules of the road' and confidence building measures for the cyberdomain.
>
> One of the ASPI International Cyber Policy Centre's core principles will be to ensure that both private sector and public sector voices are heard and considered. The internet is mainly in the hands of the private sector and civil society, so their opinions are essential if we're to build lasting cyber norms that don't constrain innovation and commerce, and that make cyberspace a secure place.

Visiting Washington in January 2016, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a new US–Australia Cyber Security Dialogue to be convened by ASPI and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

As co-chair of the first dialogue, Tobias Feakin said it responded to a newly central policy interest. The two allies realised more could be done using the public and private sectors and academics. Unlike traditional security issues, cybersecurity couldn't remain purely the purview of states:

> [R]esources must be pooled and expertise and information shared. In the online world, Australia faces a strategic picture filled with foes constantly rewriting the rule book as to what can be achieved though disruption and disinformation online. But governments are not the exclusive targets. States looking to gain a competitive economic advantage are targeting the private sectors of other nations in pursuit of the nugget of information or intellectual property that will guarantee a domestic payday.[8]

In November 2016, the Turnbull government announced the appointment of Australia's first ambassador for cyber affairs: ASPI's Toby Feakin.

Following Feakin as the director of the ICPC, Fergus Hanson led a study of Australia's offensive cyber capability—an 'attack' capability publicly confirmed by the Prime Minister in 2016.

Hanson and Tom Uren wrote that the government had been 'remarkably transparent' in declaring that the capability would be used to 'respond to serious cyberattacks, to support military operations, and to counter offshore cybercriminals'.

In November 2016, the government said that the capability was being used to target Islamic State. In June 2017, Australia became the first country to openly admit that its offensive cyber capabilities would be directed at 'organised offshore cyber criminals'. In the same month, the formation of an Information Warfare Division within the ADF was revealed.

Hanson and Uren quoted an Australian Government definition of offensive cyber operations as 'activities in cyberspace that manipulate, deny, disrupt, degrade or destroy targeted computers, information systems, or networks'.

Any offensive cyber operation in support of the ADF would be governed by military rules of engagement, Hanson and Uren wrote:

> The full integration of Australia's military offensive cyber capability with ADF operations sets Australia's capability apart from that of many other countries. Only a very limited number of states have this organisational arrangement, which provides a distinct battlefield edge that with modest additional investment would give Australia an asymmetric advantage in a range of contexts.[9]

Because offensive cyber operations were relatively new, Hanson and Uren recommended careful communications to reassure other nations, enforce norms, deepen industry engagement and classify information at lower levels.

Digital heritage, digital future

Anne Lyons wrote a study on serious gaps in how Australia protects its digital national identity. Cyberattacks targeting a nation's culture and memory would not inflict physical damage, but could cause enduring and potentially irreparable harm:

- Altering digital reference legal documents could bring the court system to a halt while the integrity of the entire system is reviewed.
- The deletion, encryption or corruption of information relating to landholdings or births, deaths and marriages would cause widespread societal disruption, stopping everything from property sales to weddings.
- A synchronised attack on half a dozen key historical archives—such as our entire newspaper archives, historical photo databases, war records and Indigenous archives—would cause an irreplaceable loss.

Australia had not expected sophisticated attacks against archives because they were generally undervalued, Lyons wrote, and the protections in place were inadequate:

> The increasing vulnerability, invisibility and online exposure of our digital identity is an underappreciated national security issue. In a global environment of increasing cyberattacks, capable state and non-state actors, information espionage and grey-zone cyber conflict aimed at disrupting nations, the threat to our national identity assets is real … Previously, victors rewrote history. Now, in the digital age, our adversaries could rewrite our present. If we aren't vigilant, we run the risk that adversaries could destroy or manipulate our national identity assets, compromising the digital pillars of our society and culture.[10]

In 2019, the ICPC began a three-year project to improve Australia's internet by using international security standards to secure exchanges of information. Adoption would be voluntary and non-binding, relying on goodwill and incentives. With support from auDA (the policy authority and self-regulatory body for the .au domain), the centre set to work on a public test tool to validate websites, email accounts and connections against standards that were considered international good practice.[11]

The ICPC conducted a scenario exercise to ponder what Australia would face if cyberspace were to fragment and divide. The scenario for 2024 wasn't a forecast, but considered the end of a single internet, wrecked by tensions between the US, China, Russia and Western Europe. Content and services would be largely inaccessible from outside the same country, region, or bloc:

> Asia is a contested zone in 2024. The US and China vie for power in the region while Chinese and American firms compete for market share … On the one hand, countries in the Indo-Pacific enjoy more choice than those in the Western Hemisphere, since the American and Chinese internets are both viable options in this region. Some countries are choosing to bandwagon with China … On the other hand, innovation in this scenario is not improving global integration. Choosing one internet increasingly means forgoing access to others. Chinese and American cybersecurity standards are not compatible. Nor is compatibility of much interest to the tech giants. Years of national tariffs, investment restrictions, divergent regulations and export controls have limited their sales in the others' domestic markets.[12]

Cyber world

The creation of cheap, realistic forgeries—'deep fakes'—could be weaponised by criminals, activists and countries, Hannah Smith and Katherine Mansted wrote. Technology lowered the costs of information warfare at scale, accelerating propaganda and disinformation and harming trust in democratic institutions.

Deep fakes are increasingly realistic and easy to make. To illustrate, the foreword to Smith and Mansted's report was written by a machine, using a 'deep fake' algorithm (a form of artificial intelligence) to generate text and also a 'photograph' or 'headshot' of a fake female author. Here's that foreword, generated in about five minutes using free, open-source software:

> Fakes are all around us. Academic analysis suggests that they're difficult to spot without new sensors, software or other specialised equipment, with 1 in 5 photos you see being fraudulent. The exposure of deep fakes and the services they facilitate can potentially lead to suppression of information and a general breakdown in confidence in public authorities and trust. We need to react not just to false or compromised claims but to those who would try to exploit them for nefarious purposes. We should not assume the existence of fake news unless we have compelling evidence to the contrary, but when we do, we should not allow the propaganda. I've never been more sure of this point than today.[13]

The faked picture accompanying those words was of a smiling woman, but the words were accurately attributed to 'GPT-2 deep learning algorithm'.

When Covid-19 struck, many state and non-state actors went online to exploit the pandemic using 'disinformation, propaganda, extremist narratives and conspiracy theories'. This was monitored by the ICPC using its Influence Tracker tool. This machine-learning and analytics capability creates social media datasets. The tool ingests data in multiple languages and auto-translates, producing insights on topics, sentiment, shared content, influential accounts, metrics of impact and posting patterns.[14]

Among the reports on Covid-19 disinformation and social media manipulation were:

- inauthentic activity on Facebook and YouTube, in English and Chinese, to support the political objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): assertions of corruption and incompetence in the Trump administration; the US Government's decision to ban TikTok; the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests; and US–China tensions[15]
- Russian efforts to manipulate information about the coronavirus, mapping the social media accounts spreading those messages[16]
- a case study showing how to extrapolate from Twitter's take-down dataset to identify persistent accounts on the periphery of the network, and providing a guide on how to identify 'inauthentic activity'.[17]

By the third decade of the 21st century, the world was 'at the precipice of another technological and social revolution—the quantum revolution', ASPI's study said. Quantum-enabled technologies would reshape geopolitics, international cooperation and strategic competition.

Gavin Brennen, Simon Devitt, Tara Roberson and Peter Rohde predicted that countries that mastered 'quantum technology will dominate the information processing space for decades and perhaps centuries to come, giving them control and influence over sectors such as

advanced manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, the digital economy, logistics, national security and intelligence.'

Australia benefited from the 20th-century digital revolution, but missed the chance to play a major role in computing and communications technology. The new era could be different because Australia had a long history of leadership in quantum technology:

> As geopolitical competition over critical technologies escalates, we're also well placed to leverage our quantum capabilities owing to our geostrategic location and alliances with other technologically, economically and militarily dominant powers (most notably the Five Eyes countries) and key partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, including with Japan and India.[18]

China facts

> Analysis informed by the hard work of empirical research is the most valuable contribution we can make to the policy debate. People don't have to agree with our analysis, but it at least provides a factual basis for a debate.
>
> —Fergus Hanson, ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre[19]

> '[P]rovided funding to anti-China think tank for spreading untrue reports, peddling lies around Xinjiang and so-called China infiltration aimed at manipulating public opinion against China'.
>
> —China's charge against the Australian Government and ASPI[20]

The list of 14 grievances issued by China's Canberra Embassy in 2020 had one point aimed at ASPI. The institute was having an impact and Beijing had noticed.

In mid-2013, in *Enter the dragon*, Tobias Feakin wrote about the cyber capabilities of Chinese intelligence agencies and their 'industrial scale' operations.[21] While Chinese agencies were collecting vast quantities of data, Feakin said, 'what happens to it once it's collected is relatively unknown. We're not certain how the data is processed and analysed, and whether it ever becomes a fully usable intelligence product that's of value to Chinese policymakers'.

A deeper understanding of what China was doing in the cyber realm, Feakin wrote, would shape Australia's own policy settings.

A 2014 report on China's cyberpower considered Beijing's international and domestic priorities under Xi Jinping. James Lewis dismissed claims that China was waging an economic war in cyberspace. China's behaviour, he wrote, had more to do with commercial interests than geopolitical strategy:

> China's cyber doctrine has three elements: control of networks and data to preserve political stability, espionage to build China's economy and technological capabilities, and disruptive acts aimed at damaging an opponent's military command and control

and weapons systems, all of which are dependent on software and networks. More 'strategic' uses, such as striking civilian infrastructure in the opponent's homeland, appear to be a lower priority and considered as an adjunct to nuclear strikes as part of China's strategic deterrence.[22]

ASPI staff and contributors to *The Strategist* debated whether the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei should be allowed a role in Australia's 5G network, tackling the broad Australia–China relationship, other states' experience with Huawei, the Chinese Government's approach to cyber espionage and intellectual property theft, and the Chinese party-state's view of state security and intelligence work.[23]

In August 2018, the Australian Government banned China's Huawei and ZTE, stating that 'the involvement of vendors who are likely to be subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government that conflict with Australian law, may risk failure by the carrier to adequately protect a 5G network from unauthorised access or interference'.

It was a key moment in the dawning of an icy era in Australia's relations with China.

ASPI studies revealed much of the detail about Chinese policy and behaviour:

- China's censorship of the micro-blogging service Weibo[24]
- deterrence in cyberspace[25]
- China's 'social credit' system—the use of big-data collection and analysis to monitor, shape and rate behaviour via economic and social processes[26]
- the 'dual-use' dilemma in artificial intelligence: China's demonstrated capacity and intent 'to co-opt private tech companies and academic research' for defence objectives in ways that were far from transparent[27]
- big data in China and the battle for privacy: 'If data is the new oil, China is oil super-rich'[28]
- how China steals Western intellectual property, examining the experience of Australia, the US and Germany[29]
- online influence and hostile narratives in East Asia, using the examples of Taiwan, the Hong Kong protest movement, West Papua and the Philippines[30]
- the People's Liberation Army's sponsorship of more than 2,500 scientists and engineers to study abroad, working with researchers and institutions across the globe, particularly in the Five-Eyes countries: 'Australia has been engaged in the highest level of PLA collaboration among Five Eyes countries per capita, at six times the level in the US. Nearly all PLA scientists sent abroad are Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members who return to China on time.'[31]
- cyber-enabled covert foreign interference in 97 national elections between 2016 and 2019, which was overwhelmingly attributed to Russia or China[32]
- the need for the West to have a technology strategy: 'China is not an enemy. They aren't an adversary. They're a competitor, and we need to ask ourselves, *How do we compete with them?*'[33]

- a new Sino-Russian high-tech partnership, adapting to an era of great-power rivalry[34]
- China's tech-enhanced authoritarianism expanding globally, creating a massive data-collection ecosystem: facial recognition, bulk data collection, tools for smart cities, and artificial intelligence, as tools for shaping global governance[35]
- dealing with a more confrontational China, the risk that commentary on China's influence and interference operations could affect Chinese-Australian communities adversely: how can Chinese-Australian communities be enlisted as equal partners in meeting the challenges ahead?[36]
- based on analysis of PRC-linked information operations against the Hong Kong protests, actors linked to the Chinese Government may have been running covert information operations on Western social media platforms for at least two years[37]
- China's use of talent-recruitment programs to gain technology from abroad through illegal or non-transparent means, drawing in almost 60,000 overseas professionals between 2008 and 2016[38]
- a persistent, large-scale influence campaign linked to Chinese state actors on Twitter and Facebook[39]
- foreign interference and the CCP's united front system: co-opting representatives of ethnic minority groups, religious movements, and business, science, and political groups, the CCP claimed to speak on behalf of those groups and used them to claim legitimacy[40]
- the Chinese 'super-app' WeChat, which has around 1.2 billion monthly users worldwide, including 100 million outside China, extended the 'PRC's techno-authoritarian reach into the lives of its citizens and non-citizens in the diaspora. WeChat users outside China are trapped in a mobile extension of the Great Firewall of China through which they're subjected to surveillance, censorship and propaganda'.[41]
- China's coercive diplomacy against foreign governments and companies, recording 152 cases of coercive diplomacy affecting 27 countries and the EU over 10 years and a sharp escalation in those tactics from 2018.[42]
- China's central bank's digital currency, 'DC/EP' (digital currency / electronic payment), if successful, would have major implications for governments, investors and companies and allow China to 'create the world's largest centralised repository of financial transactions data and, while it may address some financial governance challenges, such as money laundering, it would also create unprecedented opportunities for surveillance'[43]
- Over two decades, Australia's Chinese-language media landscape had undergone fundamental changes at a cost to quality, freedom of speech, privacy and community representation. CCP influence 'targets individual outlets while also manipulating market incentives through advertising, coercion and WeChat'.[44]

In 2020, Fergus Hanson responded to criticism that ASPI's research on China was 'one-sided' and 'dystopian'. Hanson noted that Australia had put lots of effort into understanding China's

economy, but other critical areas were ignored, such as technology transfer programs, united front activities, military modernisation and interference in diaspora communities:

> ASPI's researchers read Chinese-language documents and have the expertise to assess Chinese technology, political and military developments including through the lens of Chinese Australians who can draw analytical depth from understanding both societies.
>
> That objective to clearly understand China is precisely why we set up a China research capability at ASPI. To bring empirical data to one of the most consequential policy debates that will engage the current generation of Australian decision-makers. ASPI has one of the largest concentrations of Chinese-language speakers in any think tank in the country. Their specialisations include China's military, technology transfer, online censorship, smart cities, social credit and industrial espionage. Our China research runs across different thematic programs and, while it attracts attention, is still only a modest part of ASPI's total research output.
>
> The simple act of looking at what the Chinese government says it wants to do and is doing has produced some remarkable empirical research and insights into the type of state that Australia, and the world, is dealing with.[45]

Hanson said ASPI didn't have an editorial line on China, but it did follow a very clear research method: original empirical work that, wherever possible, generated new data. Researchers had to trawl through masses of information in multiple languages over months and sometimes years in order to create new datasets:

> This focus on empirical research is grounded in the idea that analysis informed by the hard work of empirical research is the most valuable contribution we can make to the policy debate. People don't have to agree with our analysis, but it at least provides a factual basis for a debate.

Uyghurs for sale

The most widely read study ever produced by ASPI is *Uyghurs for sale*: *'re-education', forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang*. First published in March 2020 (with rolling additions and updates since), the paper had received nearly half a million unique page views and downloads by June 2021. Vicky Xiuzhong Xu reported:

> The Chinese government has facilitated the mass transfer of Uyghur and other ethnic minority citizens from the far west region of Xinjiang to factories across the country. Under conditions that strongly suggest forced labour, Uyghurs are working in factories that are in the supply chains of at least 82 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing and automotive sectors, including Apple, BMW, Gap, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Volkswagen.[46]

The report estimated that more than 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang to work in factories across China between 2017 and 2019, and some of them were sent directly from detention camps. The estimate was conservative, and the real figure was likely to be far higher:

> In factories far away from home, they typically live in segregated dormitories, undergo organised Mandarin and ideological training outside working hours, are subject to constant surveillance, and are forbidden from participating in religious observances.

The study *Cultural erasure* detailed China's systematic program to rewrite the cultural heritage of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The campaign sought to erode and redefine the culture of the Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking communities to make those cultural traditions subservient to the 'Chinese nation', Nathan Ruser reported:

> Using satellite imagery, we estimate that approximately 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang (65% of the total) have been destroyed or damaged as a result of government policies, mostly since 2017. An estimated 8,500 have been demolished outright, and, for the most part, the land on which those razed mosques once sat remains vacant. A further 30% of important Islamic sacred sites (shrines, cemeteries and pilgrimage routes, including many protected under Chinese law) have been demolished across Xinjiang, mostly since 2017, and an additional 28% have been damaged or altered in some way.
>
> Alongside other coercive efforts to re-engineer Uyghur social and cultural life by transforming or eliminating Uyghurs' language, music, homes and even diets the Chinese Government's policies are actively erasing and altering key elements of their tangible cultural heritage.[47]

Apple Inc. severed ties with Chinese component supplier Ofilm because of its use of forced labour.[48] Ofilm had to sell its factory and saw its share price plummet.[49]

French prosecutors opened an investigation into four leading fashion retailers over suspicions that they benefited from and concealed 'crimes against humanity' by using Uyghur forced labour. The inquiry follows a lawsuit filed against the companies by human rights groups and a Uyghur woman who said she had been imprisoned in Xinjiang. The lawsuit was largely based on ASPI's report.[50]

ASPI can point to some direct policy impact beyond Australia. Legislation was introduced in the US Congress in 2019 that directly cited ICPC research.[51]

Governments in the UK and Europe have introduced laws and regulations citing or informed by the centre's work on 5G, technology transfer, supply chains, forced labour, other human rights issues, disinformation, critical infrastructure, and talent recruitment focused on science and technology.

The ICPC receives a growing number of requests from foreign governments, multilateral organisations and corporations. One dedicated team is needed to deal with the daily requests that come in on the 2020 *Uyghurs for sale* report. That study by Vicky Xu has fed into new

legislation and policies around the world and has rediverted supply chains for scores of international companies.

The ICPC runs a website, *The Xinjiang Data Project*, drawing on open-source data, including satellite imagery, Chinese Government documents, official statistics, and a range of reports and academic studies. The site focuses on 'mass internment camps, surveillance and emerging technologies, forced labour and supply chains, the "re-education" campaign, deliberate cultural destruction and other human rights issues'.[52]

Another website, *Mapping China's Technology Giants*, charts the overseas expansion of key Chinese technology companies. The project, first published in April 2019, was relaunched in June 2021 with new research reports, a new website and updated content.[53] The data-driven online project—and the accompanying research papers—fill a 'policy gap by building understanding about the global trajectory and impact of China's largest companies working across the Internet, telecommunications, AI, surveillance, e-commerce, finance, biotechnology, big data, cloud computing, smart city and social media sectors'.

The ICPC took on new leadership in mid-2017, eager to push the think-tank model.

The new director, Fergus Hanson, had worked in three think tanks—the Lowy Institute, the Brookings Institution and the CSIS Pacific Forum. Hanson saw 'an opportunity to take from that experience to try a new approach'. The new deputy director, Danielle Cave, had previously worked in two think tanks.

For Hanson and Cave, it was a case of going back to basics to focus on policy influence, both at home in Australia and globally. Cave summarises the philosophy:

> The collapse of traditional media led many think tanks around the world to fill that vacuum by producing large volumes of opinion and analysis. But at the end of the day opinion and analysis can be contradicted by the next person with a different opinion. The real value of a think-tank is original, empirical, data-driven research.

The withering of old economic models for news media means fewer resources for investigative work and getting the 'facts'. A think tank can do the investigation, amass the expertise and spend the time—picking up some of the work once done by journalism. The ICPC uses its tools to amass the facts as data—a modern version of the old editor's injunction for firm facts and hard news.

The Hanson–Cave approach brought together key elements:

- finding and hiring young, emerging talent to bring in skills in open-source intelligence, such as geospatial mapping skills
- an entrepreneurial model that created untied funding for research on sensitive and emerging topics that governments around the world desperately needed but were often too risk-averse to fund themselves
- new approaches to the dissemination of research that took a more global approach

- hiring people with a more diverse mix of skills and backgrounds, most notably ASPI's first Chinese linguists and first Indigenous person.

The bets paid off.

In a few years, the ICPC's growth had doubled ASPI's headcount, including one of the largest China teams in the think-tank world.

Topics worked on by the centre broadened out, and new teams were built up to focus on information operations and disinformation; foreign interference; work on opening careers in science, technology, engineering and maths for Indigenous Australians; critical technologies; and cyber capacity building. Much of the work has an Indo-Pacific frame.

By 2020, the ICPC had produced all 20 of ASPI's most read reports, attracting hundreds of thousands of views from the US, China, the UK, Europe, India, Japan and Canada—in addition to Australia. This is the work of a centre with a staff of around 30 in mid-2021.

The anger expressed in the Chinese Embassy's list of 14 grievances has fed unusual pushback, smear campaigns and cyber-enabled interference targeting ASPI and individual staff members. Tackling state-backed information operations and disinformation can also make you a target.

The Sydney Dialogue

Soon after ASPI's 20th birthday, the institute will convene the first Sydney Dialogue in November 2021. The aim is to make the dialogue the world's premier summit on emerging, critical and cyber technologies.[54]

The creation of the Sydney Dialogue was announced by Foreign Minister Marise Payne:

> While significant international conferences and dialogues exist for traditional areas of security and economics, there is currently a gap for political leaders, industry experts, academics and civil society representatives to meet and discuss the most pressing issues around cyber and critical technology. This annual, high-level dialogue will fill that gap.
>
> With cyber and critical technology increasingly affecting all aspects of international relations and foreign policy, the Australian Government is committed to strengthening understanding of these issues to ensure their applications are positive for our society, economy and security.
>
> With the world on the cusp of transformational advances in technology, it is vital that countries like Australia take a lead in creating an environment that makes the most of the enormous promise of these advances, while avoiding or mitigating their risks and negative uses.

Creating this environment is not something any nation can do alone. It is essential that the international community—including governments, industry and civil society—work together to harness the benefits for all of humankind. We want the design, creation and use of technology to reflect our values.[55]

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The United States and China

> Today, China is challenging America's position.
>
> —*2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*

> Major power competition has intensified and the prospect of high intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific, while still unlikely, is less remote than in the past.
>
> —2020 Defence Strategic Update

> We're going to have to learn to ride two horses simultaneously, which is not the most comfortable of feats. We're going to have to cultivate a greater degree of complexity and ambiguity than we have in the past.
>
> —Owen Harries, 2006[1]

In Australian strategy today, to talk of the US is to talk of China.

The two giants stand together—or face off—in a joined dynamic that defines the era. The US and China dominate global business like never before, just as they drive geopolitics.[2]

Australia's strategic dilemma had such fundamental force that it became the standard foreign policy trope of ASPI's two decades: the balance between the alliance partner and the top trading partner. Or the choice.

The evolution of the great dilemma tracks through Australian policy documents.

The 2000 Defence White Paper, *Defence 2000*, had a comforting, clear hierarchy on the contents page: the chapter on 'Australia's international strategic relationships' had as the first topic heading, 'The US Alliance'. No other country was mentioned on the contents page—they were implied in headings about regions, relationships and neighbours. It was the contents page of a contented nation.

The 2009 DWP had sharper headings, and the giants were in view: 'US strategic primacy' and 'The strategic implications of the rise of China'.

Come the 2013 DWP, the two powers were joined in the discussion of strategic outlook: 'The United States and China'. That joining of the US and China was the heading repeated in the 2016 DWP and the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update declared that strategic competition between the US and China 'will be the principal driver of strategic dynamics in our region'.

Drawing on the 2016 DWP, the 2020 update defined the factors that would shape Australia's strategic environment; the top two were 'the roles of the United States and China' and 'challenges to the stability of the rules-based global order'.[3]

Here was the great-power arc of the first two decades of the 21st century in Australia's region. China's rise as Asia's paramount power intersected with US strategic primacy.

In 2004, in *Power shift: challenges for Australia in northeast Asia*, William Tow and Russell Trood wrote that China aimed to maximise its regional influence, and minimise America's, in a long-term, zero-sum competition for power and influence in Asia.

China's aspirations for regional leadership had transformed its regional and international diplomacy in the 1990s. Once shy of regional institutions, Tow and Trood said, Beijing had concluded that those institutions could advance and protect its interests while simultaneously limiting Washington:

> China has embarked on a comprehensive strategy to become a pre-eminent regional power, one that is able to shape the international system to its advantage and not merely respond to events as best it can. This is a long-term goal, rooted in pragmatism and reality. It recognises, for example, that the US is a hegemonic power with effectively unassailable global reach. But China appears to believe that within the Asia–Pacific region it can balance and constrain American actions and options. And where Chinese vital interests are threatened by the US—especially in relation to Taiwan—they will be defended.[4]

Peter Jennings wrote in 2005 that Australia was caught between optimism and fear:

> We are enthralled with the prospect of doing more business with one of the world's most dynamic economies, whose growth already underpins Australia's prosperity. But we are suspicious of China's authoritarian political system, and worried about their potential to turn economic power into military and strategic muscle.[5]

Jennings noted that the broad shape of American policy towards China was constructive, based on economic and trade ties, supporting the 'One China' policy on Taiwan and agreeing to contain strategic differences: 'Neither Washington nor Beijing want to swap their mutual prosperity for conflict.'

A 'tidal wave of common sense' had swept through Asia as the region's leadership emphasised economic growth, Kishore Mahbubani told ASPI's 2005 conference. Throughout the region, Mahbubani said, the guns had fallen silent: 'There are virtually no major wars anywhere across the Asia–Pacific.' The fundamental dynamic for coming decades should be the focus on development and growth as more of Asia joined the middle class.

What the US did in Asia, Mahbubani said, would 'set the tone' on the great-power front. Paradoxically, America was both the greatest source for stability in the region and also the greatest source for instability in the region. The US had sparked the rise of Asia through the creation of a great liberal and open economic order and encouraging decolonisation. While no one in Asia wanted the US to leave, Mahbubani said, flux in Washington was creating an enormous amount of concern:

> [T]his sense of fluidity is having a ripple effect on the region and certainly most importantly on the whole Sino-American relationship. If you were a Chinese policy maker

> you would be asking yourself a very simple question: will the US allow the rise of China or will the US try to block the rise of China? This has to be the most important question of the day. The relationship between the world's greatest power and the world's greatest emerging power, that's what's going to determine in some ways the overall dynamic of the region.[6]

The US was still the sole great power, Wang Gungwu told ASPI's 2007 conference. China was certainly a rising power, he said, but only a rising regional power. History suggested that it would be an aberration for China to reach far beyond the region:

> Most of the projections of China's 'superpower' or Great Power potential consist of hyperbolic optimism or alarmist pessimism. They are based on assumptions that have no precedent in Chinese history and use modern analogies like the rise of Germany and Japan in the 20th century. These fail to underscore the disastrous endings to both those adventures and assume that the Chinese are stupid and will not learn from history about the dangers of nationalist and militarist power.[7]

Jian Zhang argued that Beijing and Washington had fundamentally different views of Asia's future regional order. And he penned a succinct version of the 'biggest dilemma' facing Australia:

> With China's rising influence and its increasing desire to shape the regional order, a key policy challenge for Canberra is how to balance its relationship with both Washington and Beijing to protect and advance Australia's diverse interests.[8]

At ASPI's 2006 Global Forces conference, Allan Gyngell saw the previous five years as 'the greatest deepening of US–Australian military engagement since the establishment of ANZUS', based on:

- John Howard's presence in Washington on the day of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the personal relationship he formed with President George W Bush
- Howard invoking the ANZUS Treaty, for the first time, in response to the attack on the US
- Australia's military commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq
- the general expansion of 'intimate institutional cooperation between the American and Australian armed forces'
- a benefit of this deepening at the economic level: 'the successful negotiation of the Australia–US free trade agreement', in force from 2005.[9]

A caution from Robyn Lim was that Washington had more strategic choices since the end of the Cold War, and some might not suit Canberra:

> As an island continent, we are best defended at a distance, and in the company of more powerful allies. Still, our alliance with the US may not be as robust as many Australians seem to think. America, no longer tied down by Soviet power, has greatly enhanced strategic latitude. It is thus freer to give up on allies who seem more willing to 'consume' US security than to contribute to it.[10]

Rod Lyon judged that the US might no longer want the alliances it needed during the Cold War. To be effective, alliances might need different characteristics from those of the past 50 years. ANZUS could remain largely the property of the Department of Defence, or could become the property of many Australian Government departments. In the first option, ANZUS would remain reactive, applicable to a world of defence and deterrence; in the second, it would become proactive, aimed at a new class of adversaries:

> The Australian–US security partnership has already been partly reinvented, given that Australia sits comparatively far forward in the saddle in the War on Terror. The pressures for reinvention don't arise solely from the Bush Administration, or from the supposed influence of the neo-cons within it. They arise from a deeper and more fundamental shift in the nature of the security environment, and are likely to grow rather than shrink in the years ahead.[11]

'Transformation' had become the central plank of US national defence strategy, Richard A Bitzinger wrote, shifting from its Cold War structure and changing its military posture in the Asia–Pacific:

> As flexibility, agility and mobility become more important requirements, maintaining large numbers of US soldiers around the globe has become less imperative. Overseas bases, while perhaps becoming fewer and smaller, more austere and more impermanent, will be increasingly valued as forward staging areas for expeditionary operations. The US military will likely come to rely even more than ever on its allies and partnering states.[12]

In early 2006, separate papers from US economist David Hale and Australian Sinologist Ross Terrill examined the implications of China's unprecedented growth.

Hale saw China as the first major test of the capacity of the global system of states to cope with a new great power. Despite the natural suspicions of China in Washington, Tokyo and elsewhere, Hale believed, the odds were high that the system would accommodate China, not least because of China's self-interest:

> China has become so integrated with the global economy that she can no longer pursue a high-risk foreign policy without jeopardising her economic prosperity. China is likely to become a threat to other countries only if she experiences domestic political instability which produces an upsurge of nationalism or a search for external scapegoats to blame for local problems. The Communist regime appears to be firmly entrenched and is unlikely to lose power any time in the near future.[13]

For Terrill, China raised questions about the relative weights of the colonial past and a globalised future, the role of democracy in East Asia, the message (if any) China had for Asia and the world, and the comparative experiences of China and the former Soviet Union. China's foreign policy goals would be shaped by the evolution of its political system and the reaction of other powers to its ambitions:

> Chinese foreign policy seeks to maximise stability at home, sustain China's impressive economic growth, and maintain peace in China's complicated geographic situation. More problematically, it also seeks to blunt US influence in East Asia and 'regain' territories that in many cases are disputed by others. Some uncertainty exists as to whether Beijing seeks to redress grievances of the past or attain a new pre-eminence.[14]

Terrill's conclusion was that China was an aspiring great power, yet still constrained at home and likely to act prudently if faced with countervailing power.

Surveying the global financial crisis of 2007–08, Geoffrey Garrett said the crash was born in the US, 'the product of too loose money and too lax regulation, aided and abetted by China's willingness to give the US endless credit so long as Chinese goods continued to fly off American shelves'. Here was another challenge for 'Chimerica', the century's two most important countries joined at the economic hip but wary of each other's ambitions, with radically different world views:

> What China and the US do—alone, together, or in conflict—will increasingly define the global bounds of the possible for fixing finance, reviving trade, resisting protectionism and tackling climate change, and for geopolitical stability in the Asia–Pacific region and beyond. For more than a decade, China and the US have successfully managed down their geopolitical frictions by focusing on win–win economic outcomes. What has been quite simply the most imbalanced economic relationship in recent human history has had the positive result of keeping a lid on Sino-American tensions.[15]

China's maritime strategy challenged the US sea-based alliance system and the regional order, Chris Rahman wrote in 2010. Bluewater operations far from home weren't the main point of China's naval expansion. The focus remained on the semi-enclosed and other narrow seas of East Asia, to deny access to those seas in a crisis or conflict, Rahman said: 'China's maritime ambitions (and behaviour), even though focused relatively close to home, indicate nothing less than a bid for geopolitical pre-eminence in East Asia.'[16]

At the close of ASPI's first decade, in 2011, Peter Abigail said the most notable strategic development of recent years had been China's increasingly assertive position in territorial disputes. Unnerving its neighbours, he said, China's 'charm offensive' had stumbled:

> At ASPI we noted this increased assertiveness in our dialogues with Chinese counterparts which included a new narrative built around the '20 years of strategic opportunity' first foreshadowed by Deng Xiaoping. The combination of China's confidence in successfully weathering the worst of the Global Financial Crisis, the apparent debilitation in Western economies, and the strategic distraction of the United States beyond East Asia, seemed to add an edge to the opportunities available to China during the coming decade or two. This included the Taiwan Strait and a sense that the balance of military capabilities in that area was swinging in China's favour and limiting US options.[17]

The US pivot to Darwin and China's Port of Darwin

In November 2011, President Barack Obama visited Canberra to mark the 60th anniversary of ANZUS and announce an agreement to deploy US marines to Darwin for six months each year.[18]

Negotiating the Darwin deal caused jitters in the Gillard government. Kevin Rudd, at the time serving as Foreign Minister, said Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith had 'feared a major domestic political management problem' on a 'near permanent American military deployment', especially from 'the comrades on the left' of the Labor Party.

Australian efforts to 'process' the decision—to delay it until after the Obama visit—crashed into US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton at the 2011 AUSMIN meeting in San Francisco. In the Rudd telling: 'Eventually, Hillary leaned across the table, eyeballed Smith, and said slowly and deliberately, "Stephen, I'm glad your processes are working well. But let me be clear—the President of the United States will not be visiting Australia unless the Australian Government publicly welcomes the Darwin deployment during that visit".'[19]

Gillard's version of the process was that Smith had been cautious and had raised 'some of the concerns in the foreign policy establishment about the regional reaction'. The safe option would be to start on the Darwin deal 'without agreeing to it as a whole so we could effectively test the responses of others'. Gillard wrote that she understood cabinet concern about domestic reaction to US soldiers on Australia soil, but determined to agree to the whole proposal:

> I came to this view not because it was going to be easy, indeed managing regional reaction, particularly China's, had a high degree of difficulty. Rather I thought it was the right decision strategically for the future. It would meet an American need. It would facilitate joint training and exercises at a time beyond both our deployments to Afghanistan. It would show our preparedness to modernise the alliance between our nations. It would also send a self-confident message to our region that Australia was not succumbing to a dogma of false choices between valuing our alliance and our relationships in the region in which we live.[20]

Australia deepened the alliance and brought it closer to home. The aim to anchor the US in the region was served. The defence of northern Australia would get an American dimension that would, in turn, push the ADF to do more itself in the north. The Defence organisation would improve interoperability with the US military and maintain the ADF's high-end war-fighting skills. Not the least of the regional effects would be the attraction for Asian powers of training with the US on Australian soil.

Obama's speech to the Australian Parliament announced the US pivot to Asia that became the 'rebalance'. The President spoke of a 'broader shift', 'our new focus' and a 'deliberate and strategic decision' to make the 'Asia–Pacific a top priority'.[21]

The pivot aimed to bolster the current American-led order, enhance US access to Asian markets, reassure allies and encourage them to share more of the security burden, Hayley Channer wrote. She looked at the response of three US allies: Australia, Japan and South Korea.

Japan's most important contribution to the rebalance had been a political–military one, by reinterpreting its pacifist Constitution and expanding the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

Australia's clearest support was the rotational deployment of marines and offering 'additional diplomatic–political support by toughening its response to assertive Chinese behaviour'. Drawing on interviews in Washington, Channer wrote that Australia's contributions fell short of American expectations:

> Overwhelmingly, Americans say that Australia could make a major political contribution by being 'a voice for the region'. Many think that Canberra is neglecting its leadership ability by failing to speak out more on regional issues; one US analyst called Australia 'scared of its own shadow'. We're seen as having a unique opportunity to use our political and diplomatic capital to help shape rules of behaviour and establish norms, particularly in territorial disputes in the South China Sea.[22]

South Korea's concerns about China meant it had not made a gesture akin to Australia's hosting of marines or Japan's expanded military role:

> Expectations of South Korea to support the rebalance are markedly lower than for Australia and Japan. Rather than supporting the rebalance directly, Seoul's expected to effectively deter North Korean aggression and avoid unnecessary confrontation with Japan. In short, the US wants South Korea to 'hold'.

The US military's 'AirSea Battle' concept for the Asia–Pacific was designed to counter China's military power, Benjamin Schreer said, but Australia didn't have an interest in officially signing up to the strategy. In the unlikely event of a war with China, the ADF could make a valuable military niche contribution independently of any public commitment:

> The Australian strategic debate about AirSea Battle, to the degree that there's been one, has largely centred around two opposing camps: those who see it as a dangerous instrument to 'contain' China and potentially drag Australia into a nuclear escalation between the two great powers, and those who embrace the concept's logic and even argue that Australia should develop long-range strike capabilities to contribute to potential offensive operations against China.[23]

Australia had a major interest in supporting America's rebalance, Schreer wrote, and a credible US war-fighting strategy was a deterrent against a China flexing its muscles.

To explore new ideas for the alliance, ASPI conducted a dialogue in Honolulu in 2014, gathering policymakers, military officials and academics. Peter Jennings and Andrew Davies reflected that, after Vietnam, the alliance had been 'business as usual' until the early 2000s:

> As a proportion of its national wealth, Australia's defence spending fell off steadily throughout the period from 1972 to 2000, especially after the end of the Cold War. This reflected the relatively benign local security environment and modest post-Guam aspirations. As a result, the difference in capability between Australia's and America's armed forces widened.[24]

ANZUS had been propelled back into the mainstream of security policy by John Howard invoking the alliance after 9/11 and by the American pivot to Asia.

In the maritime domain, greater use of Australian naval facilities by the US Navy would raise the issue of future Australian knowledge of, and concurrence with, American operational plans, Benjamin Schreer wrote:

> [W]ould the government seek to place conditions on the employment of American warships forward deployed on Australian territory, or would it assume that in times of crisis in the Asia–Pacific their deployment by the US Government would always be in concert with Australia's strategic interests? Because the US alliance will operate in a more contested Asian maritime environment, finding answers to this question will be important.

On land, Andrew Davies said the overlapping Asia–Pacific interests of the US and Australia offered the chance to work as combined forces, but that Australia had to maintain the ability to conduct independent operations:

> Enhanced cooperation could be facilitated by 'twinning' American and Australian land force units in arrangements that include exchange of leader programs, the sharing of techniques and procedures, and joint exercises and training. As well as special forces and amphibious units, twinning could be extended to the regular Australian and US armies, perhaps at the brigade level. However, we'd need to make sure that such efforts didn't overwhelm Australia's forces and consume disproportionate time and resources. Australia has many missions for a small force and operates on a much smaller scale than US Pacific forces.

In the air, after a decade (and many billions of dollars) of investment into air-combat capability, Davies wrote, the ADF could be a real contributor to allied air operations, provided it matched the capability of its American counterparts:

> Being a solid performer in modern air operations requires more than just having the right tactical aircraft—it also requires having adequate stocks of advanced weaponry and the key enablers in place, both of which are resource intensive.

Drawing on Chinese statements and media, plus interviews with Chinese think tanks, Jingdong Yuan wrote that Australia was seen as 'providing critical military bases and facilities and serving as critical strategic rear—the "southern anchor".' China viewed Australia as offering strategic depth and safe havens for US military deployments, beyond the reach of Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles:

> Australia now plays what Chinese analysts characterise as an 'offshore balancer' role: supporting US rebalancing efforts but also reassuring China that it has no interest in containment. This is a balancing act to hedge against China's rise without openly declaring hostility towards it, and to neither blindly follow US anti-China strategy nor tie Australia to it—thereby creating some freedom of space and action and emphasising interests and pragmatism rather than ideologies and rigid lean-to-one-side approaches.[25]

The 2015 decision by the Northern Territory Government to lease key facilities in the Port of Darwin to a Chinese company for 99 years generated multiple articles on *The Strategist.* A paper drawing together all those contributions said that the Darwin lease highlighted an urgent need to review how national security interests were factored into foreign investment decisions.[26]

Among the contributors, Geoff Wade said, 'In a worst case scenario, operational control of the Port of Darwin could facilitate intelligence collection of the tactics, techniques and procedures used by Australian Defence Force and US Marine elements during their north Australian deployments.'

Allan Behm, puzzled by the mixed messages of US marines in Darwin but China in the port, wrote: 'Such even-handedness may be consistent with our charming national capacity for insouciance. But it betrays an extraordinary strategic naïveté.'

Neil James called the deal an utter failure of thinking:

> In geostrategic terms, Darwin Harbour and its city provide the only location suitable for major naval use across northern Australia, should this be necessary. To deny or downplay that such increased use may become necessary over the next 100 years is to deny both history and any inter-generational responsibility for the security of our descendants.

Sam Bateman responded that it was a good deal for the Northern Territory that would develop the port: 'Important checks and balances will be in place with the lease. Australia can take back control of the port at any time of crisis.'

From Washington, Patrick Cronin and Phoebe Benich reported that the US was surprised by what looked like a 'grey zone' problem: 'The moral of the story is this: protect core interests but closely scrutinise and monitor potential threats that seek to nibble around those strategic equities. And for mercy sake, communicate.'

Riding two horses

The terms of the US–China dilemma sharpened. Xi Jinping pushed in the South China Sea. China grew louder and sharper.

When Donald Trump took power, the US gyrated. The US always has options about its role in the Indo-Pacific, and Trump offered a vision of a choice that was isolationist and 'America first'.

Balancing the two great relationships became ever more testing. Canberra's dealings with Beijing became icy. Australia's number one trading partner started to dish out trade punishment.

The difficult ride Owen Harries predicted had arrived: 'We're going to have to learn to ride two horses simultaneously, which is not the most comfortable of feats. We're going to have to cultivate a greater degree of complexity and ambiguity than we have in the past.'[27]

The China–US dilemmas caused recurring intellectual stoushes between ASPI's first executive director, Hugh White, and the institute's third executive director, Peter Jennings.

'We've been talking about these things for decades,' White observed during a debate on his book *The China choice: why America should share power.*[28]

Jennings and White fronted the lectern for a debate on their different positions in 2013.[29] Then they sat down in front of the ASPI camera again in 2014 for a return bout.[30] A multi-author joust on *The Strategist* on how to deal with China's growing power and influence became an ASPI paper, *To choose or not to choose: how to deal with China's growing power and influence.*

White defined his key difference with Jennings as a view about the future of the regional order.

The strategic *status quo* in Asia, White said, wouldn't last:

> I think the order is going to change—indeed, is already changing. It's simple. Asia has been stable since 1972 because China has accepted US primacy as the foundation of the Asian order. China did so because it believed it was too weak to contest it effectively. Now China believes it's strong enough to contest US primacy, and it's doing so.[31]

The choice, White wrote, was between accommodating China or confronting it as a rival. The more firmly China's ambitions were resisted, 'the faster strategic rivalry will escalate'.

Peter Jennings's attack was that in the Asia–Pacific the Hugh White road was the road not taken, because the fork on that road was either subordination or incineration:

> [N]owhere in the civilised world is the China Choice logic gaining traction. Countries in the Asia–Pacific stickily persist in cooperating with each other; in wanting the US to remain engaged; in building defence capabilities and otherwise refusing to sacrifice their own interests to give China more breathing space.[32]

Dealing with China 'brings into play American idealism and Australian pragmatism', Ross Terrill wrote in 2013. Between the two extremes of Beijing and Washington seeing each other as a 'threat' and a China–US condominium, Terrill hoped for a peaceful competition that offered Asia breathing room. He judged that the US and its many allies had the power to balance China, if they had the will:

> While some Australians may view China as the new America to lead the Asia–Pacific, China has a less dramatic view of Australia. We're useful but not indispensable to Beijing, and less politically important to it than China is to us. Shared experiences haven't brought us to this moment of economic partnership, and the Chinese owe us no guiding loyalty. Nor should Australian (or US) policies aim to change China; that will happen

> largely through the internal dynamics of China. Nothing in international relations is eternal (and that goes for American leadership), but stable implicit systems shouldn't be thrown overboard too hastily.[33]

China would be 'Australia's greatest foreign policy challenge during the 21st century', David Hale declared in 2014. He described a Canberra nightmare if America's fiscal problems forced it to slash defence spending and withdraw from the East Asian region*:*

> In such a scenario, Australia would cease to have a great-power ally and be more vulnerable to foreign aggression than at any time since 1942. The only Asian country with the long-term potential to challenge Chinese hegemony is India. Australia should therefore hedge its bets with the US and China by pursuing better relations with New Delhi.[34]

Studying 15 years of Sino-US military discussions, Jingdong Yuan said the PLA saw the bilateral exchanges as part of a 'new type of major-power relationship', demonstrating that the PLA was an equal of the US military. China had used the expansion or suspension of military ties to influence US policies on arms sales to Taiwan and US alliances in the region. Deep strategic distrust and growing rivalry set limits to the depth and scope of Sino-US exchanges:

> However, even as the two militaries may be preparing for the next war with each other, they have nonetheless found common interests in cooperating in a range of non-traditional security areas, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search and rescue, peacekeeping, military medicine, and anti-piracy and terrorism operations.[35]

Australia was becoming louder in voicing its worries about what China was doing to rules and to order. The 2016 DWP referred to 'rules' 64 times, including 48 uses of the term 'rules-based global order'. The three basic defence interests were given as defending Australia, a secure nearer region in 'maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific', and 'a stable Indo-Pacific and rules-based global order'.

The ironic counterpoint was that China had established a series of fortified outposts on artificial islands in the South China Sea in the heart of maritime Southeast Asia. And on the rules-based global order front, Beijing damned and disregarded the legitimacy of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that unanimously dismissed China's claims in the South China Sea.[36]

ASPI's report noted that, in The Hague, the Philippines had a 'major, if unenforceable, win against China' in arbitration under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.[37] And Beijing's official response had been sharp: 'China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea shall under no circumstances be affected by those awards. China opposes and will never accept any claim or action based on those awards.'[38]

A new icy period in Australia–China relations began to dawn from 2017.[39] In a speech in Singapore in June 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull offered a 'dark view' of a 'coercive China' seeking domination. He challenged China to strengthen the regional order as it reached for greater strategic influence:

> Some fear that China will seek to impose a latter day Monroe Doctrine on this hemisphere in order to dominate the region, marginalising the role and contribution of other nations, in particular the United States. Such a dark view of our future would see China isolating those who stand in opposition to, or are not aligned with, its interests while using its economic largesse to reward those toeing the line … A coercive China would find its neighbours resenting demands they cede their autonomy and strategic space, and look to counterweight Beijing's power by bolstering alliances and partnerships, between themselves and especially with the United States.[40]

As the frost set in, the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson, observed that the 'new normal' of the relationship with China would be marked by 'enduring differences', telling a Senate hearing:

> [I]t will be a relationship where we will need, on both sides, to work quite hard to manage what I really think will be enduring differences. Some points of difference may come and go and be able to be resolved, but other points of difference which go more deeply to the differences between our systems and our values are likely to endure. It should, therefore, not be surprising in my view that a relationship where there are points of difference, some of which are actively canvassed in the public domain—and whilst I don't particularly like the term—is the 'new normal'.[41]

Surveying ANZUS and alliance politics in Southeast Asia under President Donald Trump, William Tow observed that the greatest impediment to alliance credibility was Washington's tendency to oscillate between commitment and alliance detachment.

> Trump's 'America first' posture is the latest case of this US tendency but is hardly the only instance of Washington struggling to choose between its roles as a global superpower and as an Indo-Pacific regional power balancer. The Nixon Doctrine, Carter's 'swing strategy' and George HW Bush's flirtation with an immediate post–Cold War peace dividend are all precedents illustrating this American predisposition to shift between internationalism and neo-isolationism.[42]

The true test of the Trump administration's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' policy, Tow wrote, would be to overcome ASEAN and Australian concerns that Washington was easily distracted.

The idea of 'Chimerica'—the joining of China and America—had ended, John Lee pronounced in 2019. Chimerica had rested on a global economic consensus that had passed. Instead, Lee described the rise of US–China technological contest and strategic hypercompetition.

A long period of Chinese economic and trade malpractices had distorting effects on the global economic system, Lee wrote, and US dissatisfaction was irreversible:

> The deepening tension isn't a transient phase in US–China relations. China has long treated America as a comprehensive rival. The US has finally accepted that reality, and that pessimistic conversion is deep and enduring. The administration's turn against China is perhaps the only policy of Trump's that the Democrats overwhelmingly support.[43]

Lee said Australia had been slow or reluctant to accept the demise of the previous economic consensus on the unmitigated good of free and open trade, especially with China. Now there was little prospect of Australia 'waiting out' the US–China economic dispute.

US voices for the containment of China were getting louder, Peter Varghese told an ASPI conference in 2019, and a dangerous period loomed. The former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said there was nothing new about US determination to hang on to strategic primacy. What was new was the call to block or thwart China, Varghese said:

> Containing China is a policy dead end. China is too enmeshed in the international system and too important to our region to be contained. And the notion that global technology supply chains can be divided into a China-led system and a US-led system is both economic and geopolitical folly. The US is right to call China to account. But it would be a mistake for the US to cling to primacy by thwarting China. Those of us who value US leadership want the US to retain it by lifting its game, not spoiling China's. China's rise needs to be managed not frustrated. It needs to be balanced not contained. Constructing that balance and anchoring it in a new strategic equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific is the big challenge of our time.[44]

Taiwan had returned as a critical security question for Australia, Mark Harrison wrote in 2019—an issue framed by the US alliance and a longstanding risk calculus for Australia–China relations.

Australia's thinking rested on pragmatism and realism, Harrison wrote, but Beijing's treatment of Taiwan challenged Australia's medium- and long-term interests. China sought to export the risks of cross-strait relations to the international community through policies that prioritised the CCP's legitimacy:

> Australia's realism is conditioned by underlying assumptions that align with Beijing's narrative and goals. Furthermore, as the conditions of cross-strait relations deteriorate in the Xi era, the policy analysis term *status quo* itself becomes misrepresentative of that reality.[45]

The terms of Australia's balancing dilemma—not having to choose between the US strategic relationship and the China economic relationship—had been changed by China's 'policy, actions and intent', Michael Shoebridge wrote. Australia had to act on the evidence of China's actions

in the South China Sea and the implications of the modernisation of the PLA. We had to speak loudly about Chinese coercion and ensure that we didn't help China's military technology:

> Australian companies, research organisations, universities and government agencies shouldn't act in ways that advance China's civil–military fusion agenda, or that assist Chinese research organisations or universities to build PLA capabilities. Examples would be cooperation between Australian and Chinese academic institutes on artificial intelligence, machine learning and novel materials.[46]

China's case against the Australian Government was set out in a list of 14 charges handed to a Canberra journalist by a Chinese diplomat in November 2020. One of those attack points was aimed at ASPI, with these words: 'provided funding to anti-China think tank for spreading untrue reports, peddling lies around Xinjiang and so-called China infiltration aimed at manipulating public opinion against China'.

The charge sheet from the Chinese Embassy accused Australia of 'spearheading the crusade against China' and 'poisoning the atmosphere of bilateral relations'. Among the Australian sins listed were blocking Chinese foreign investment bids, banning Huawei and ZTE from the 5G network, foreign interference legislation, Canberra's 'call for an international independent inquiry into the Covid-19 virus', which was 'echoing the US attack on China, Australia being the first non-littoral state to make a statement on the South China Sea to the UN, legislation to scrutinise Victoria's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative; and 'outrageous condemnation of the governing party of China by MPs'.[47]

The Chinese trade punishment that began in 2020 cut the value of Australian trade with China for almost all industries by 40% (only China's huge appetite for iron ore sustained the trade figures).[48] Australia's Ambassador to Beijing, Graham Fletcher, said that China 'had been exposed as quite unreliable as a trading partner and even vindictive'.[49]

The idea of Australia having a 'strategic partnership' with China faded.

Canberra had accepted Beijing's 'strategic partnership' language during the Gillard Labor government in return for an annual summit. The Foreign Minister who did the deal in 2013, Bob Carr, wrote that 'strategic partnership' was 'the shorthand description of what they want from us, and what we will agree to in order to get them to give us guaranteed annual leaders' meetings'.[50]

In February 2021, Prime Minister Scott Morrison bid adieu to strategic partnership:

> China's outlook and the nature of China's external engagement, both in our region and globally, has changed since our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was formed and going further back than that, certainly in the decades that have led up till now. We cannot pretend that things are as they were. The world has changed.[51]

In May 2021, Beijing announced that it was indefinitely suspending all activities under the China–Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue. It was the first formal freeze of a diplomatic mechanism in what had become a five-year chill, as evidenced by the fact that the dialogue was last held in 2017.[52]

From the 2021 vantage point, Peter Jennings offered a set of conclusions about the icy relationship:

- We're going to be on this roller-coaster ride for years: 'National positions are hardening. Neither Beijing nor Canberra will back down and the prospects for "negotiation" are zero given China's "wolf warrior" mania.'
- The Morrison government looked increasingly confident in its stance: 'The language used about relations with China is careful but is becoming clearer and more definitive. There is something to be said for knowing when your back is hard up against a strategic wall.'
- Shrill and threatening rhetoric from China's Embassy in Canberra and from the Foreign Ministry in Beijing was counterproductive: 'Beijing's usual Australian support base has largely gone to ground and public opinion has massively swung against the People's Republic.'
- Beyond the bilateral struggle with China, a positive international beckoned for Australia: '[O]ur ability to draw on strong alliances and deep friendships with like-minded democracies is the reason that we will prevail against Beijing.'[53]

Scott Morrison's observation about Australia–China relations was equally true for the US and China: 'We cannot pretend that things are as they were. The world has changed.'[54]

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Japan, India and the Quad

Australia built a triangular security relationship with Japan and the US in the first decade of the 21st century. In the second decade, at the second attempt, the triangle became the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue when India was included.

China's anger helped sink Quad 1.0, while China's actions revived Quad 2.0.

Japan was the most cautious in accepting the trilateral, but became the cheerleader for the Quad.

The shape of Australia's trilateral with Japan and the US was prematurely revealed in the main committee room of the Australian Parliament in July 2001.

Concluding the annual AUSMIN talks with a press conference, the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, was lobbed a final question about linking the separate US alliances in Asia. Could the US join together its bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia? Powell delighted and surprised the journalists by giving a revealing answer:

> Interesting, we were talking about this subject earlier in the day, as to whether or not we might find ways of talking more in that kind of a forum. I don't think it would lead to any formal arrangement of the kind you suggest. But there might be a need for us to seek opportunities to come together and talk more often. So yes, we've talked about that, but not in the form of some formal kind of new organization. We just began speaking about that today.[1]

Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, sitting beside Powell, glimpsed a diplomatic flashing light.

Downer confirmed that Australia had held informal discussions with Japan while issuing a caution:

> So as not to allow a hare to rush away here, we obviously—I think it must be obvious—wouldn't want new architecture in East Asia which would be an attempt to kind of replicate NATO or something like that. We are talking here just about an informal dialogue.

The Foreign Minister headed back to his office after the press conference, telling staff he'd headed off a diplomatic explosion.

On the contrary, his denial of an Asian version of NATO created an instant label that has echoed ever since in China's strategic community.

Downer had triggered the Henry Kissinger rule on denials. Kissinger said that when a state denies it intends to do something it sends two messages. One message is that, for the moment, the country won't do it. But, secondly, the denial is a statement that the country has the capacity to do it if it wants to.

NATO was about opposing the Soviet Union, just as Asia's non-NATO is about China. At every stage of the process that created the trilateral and then the Quad, Canberra has denied that it's about China. The 'doth protest too much' line works as well from Hamlet as from Kissinger.

The denial of a NATO-style unification of forces and single command is patently true. That bit of denial fits the facts. The demurral about responding to China, though, became increasingly disingenuous. What were once barbed questions about China's real intentions in the trilateral became responses to China's actions in Quad 2.0.

The absence of South Korea from the joined-up alliance structure mooted in 2001 points to China's magnetic abilities, as well as the continuing schism between Seoul and Tokyo.

Looking back at the triangle creation, Alexander Downer said that China 'objected right from the word go when we started the diplomacy of trying to set up the trilateral strategic dialogue'. The US was interested in the trilateral, but he got a dismissive response from Japan's Foreign Minister (presumably Yōhei Kōno). Downer recalled:

> First of all, we suggested it to the Americans and they said they would go away and think about it and then they came back and said, 'We think it might work, see what the Japanese think.' I took it up with the then Japanese Foreign Minister, very unsuccessfully initially. He said to me, 'Minister, why would we bother to have a trilateral security dialogue with a country like Australia. You're not a very significant country compared to the US.' I thought this was not terribly diplomatic. I remember when I am crossed. He passed as the Foreign Minister and others came. The Japanese Foreign Ministry was pretty supportive.[2]

By 2005, John Howard was hailing the coming together of the three great Pacific democracies to work 'more closely than ever' on shared security challenges:

> Our Trilateral Security Dialogue has added a new dimension to the value all sides place on alliance relationships. Within the framework of its alliance with the United States, Japan has taken on important out-of-area security responsibilities in recent years, including in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. This quiet revolution in Japan's external policy—one which Australia has long encouraged—is a welcome sign of a more confident Japan assuming its rightful place in the world and in our region.[3]

After its lost decade of the 1990s, Japan began to redefine its regional role and itself, with the idea that Japan would become a 'normal nation'.

'Towards being a more normal nation' was the title of the speech by Makio Miyagawa at ASPI's 2005 Global Forces conference: 'Anxiety about China's military build-up has heightened the sense of urgency inside Japan for re-evaluating its defence strategy and addressing new security realities.'[4]

What started as dialogue between senior officials in 2002 shifted up in 2006 to the foreign ministers of Japan and Australia and the US Secretary of State.[5]

In 2007, John Howard flew to Tokyo to sign the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Japan's Shinzo Abe. The Prime Minister said the agreement meant that Japan would have a closer security relationship with Australia than with any other country except the US. The briefing line to Canberra correspondents was that Howard was willing for a more ambitious alliance treaty, but Tokyo was cautious.

Australia would have preferred to sign a formal defence treaty, Aurelia George Mulgan wrote, but Canberra 'settled for the declaration in the hope of moving to a formal pact at some time in the future. The end game is, therefore, potentially much more momentous: a profound shift in the security architecture of the Asia Pacific.'[6]

Whatever spirit Howard intended, the agreement had no provisions for the parties to come to each other's aid if attacked, instead stating that 'Japan and Australia will, as appropriate, strengthen practical cooperation' between their defence and security forces.[7]

Howard said that the declaration built a 'strategic dimension' to the partnership: 'Japan had become, to most Australians, a key partner, economically, and now strategically'.[8]

In his memoirs, Howard wrote that 'China's great power ambitions' meant that 'one of the shrewdest foreign policy thrusts of the Bush Administration was to encourage the trilateral security dialogue between the United States, Japan and Australia. The possibility of extending it to include India, thus creating a quadrilateral dialogue, was raised during the Bush presidency'.

The trilateral was 'an unexceptional way of providing a democratic counterbalance to China', Howard said, and was a 'democratic riposte' quietly welcomed by some of the smaller nations of the region.[9]

Rod Lyon said the Australia–Japan declaration confirmed that the Asian security order was moving into a new phase:

> Although the pact is limited in its scope, it heralds an age when Asian great powers will be more engaged in the regional security architecture, both as players in their own right and as 'partners' to other regional countries. This phase of Asian security will probably take ten to twenty years to run its course. But when it has finished, the age of US hegemony in Asia will have ended. The US might well still be the strongest player, even then, but Asian security arrangements will have taken on many more of the characteristics of multipolarity.[10]

The security agreement and the start of negotiations for an Australia–Japan free trade agreement were both surprises, according to George Mulgan. Since the 1970s, this had been a relationship of 'rather dull predictability' that seemed to have 'reached the limits of its potential, without seemingly much scope for dramatic expansion or diversification. The intensity of trade and economic ties has been unmatched in either the political or security spheres.'[11] Much, though, was shifting. In May 2007, she noted, China had taken over Japan's position as Australia's largest trading partner.

Japan was hedging against China, she said, but also the danger that the US would swing towards China and downgrade the importance of Japan:

> Japan fears being isolated by the US and China on East Asian strategic issues. Hence, it wants to create a Japan-centred economic and security system in which it can exercise influence independently of both China and the United States. Building a direct security link with Australia (and India) provides a convenient vehicle for Japan to exercise greater strategic autonomy.

Australia was much more in the Japanese camp on security with the triangle in place. Tokyo's next ambition, George Mulgan said, was courting India for closer security relations and to promote the triangulation of Japan–India–US ties:

> Inevitably Japan's policy of coalition-building with other regional states will be perceived by the Chinese as containment or at least a challenge to China's desire for regional supremacy and in that sense represents a high-risk strategy. China views the formalisation of the Japan–Australia security link as not only a reinforcement of the US alliance system in the region, but also evidence that a transition from existing bilateral defence pacts to a multinational regional defence arrangement is gradually being engineered.

In December 2007, the 1.5-track dialogue conducted by ASPI and the Japan Institute of International Affairs discussed a 'maritime coalition centred on the Japan–Australia–US trilateral alliance', how to respond to 'strategic shocks in Asia', the 'impacts of China's rise on the Asian international system', the role of the two nations in the emerging Asia–Pacific security architecture, and prospects for the Australia–Japan security relationship.[12]

Apart from Japan and Australia, speakers at the two-day conference mentioned the US 62 times, India and the Indian Ocean 116 times, and China or the East China Sea 466 times.

Australia's new Labor government had just won office, and one of the ideas coming at it fast was the idea of the Quad 1.0.

The Rudd government gave the thumbs down to Quad 1.0, but the fact that it was even contemplated showed the slow recovery in Australia's arid diplomatic dealings with India.

Eyeing India

Australia's hope–fear equations on India and China went through contrasting evolutions during ASPI's two decades.

At the start of the 21st century, Australia's dealings with China were warmly optimistic, as trade soared exponentially.

With India, official exchanges were frigid and tetchy, in no way reflecting buoyant trade and the strength of what diplomat-speak calls 'people-to-people links'.[13]

Engagement with India needed a cautious restart from the low point of India's five nuclear bomb tests in May 1998, when venom flowed between Canberra and New Delhi. India rejected the tone, content and vehemence of Australia's reaction to India proclaiming its nuclear-weapons status.

New Delhi saw Australia as siding with the US (and even China) in trying to marginalise and pressure India. The Indian arguments to Australia had a familiar tone—part self-righteous, part aggrieved—illustrating deeply different perceptions.

In the first decade of the century, Canberra's cautions about Beijing were carefully coded, hardly shadowing the optimistic vistas. Canberra's doubts and distance from New Delhi were all too public.

Australia feared how India had proclaimed its status as a nuclear-weapons state. India dismissed Australia as a hypocritical stooge of the US, happy to shelter under America's nuclear umbrella but loud in its protests at India's nuclear shield. The argument was emblematic of an Australia–India strategic relationship in zero territory, often in negative mode.[14]

ASPI's earliest international effort was to help establish the Australia–India Security Roundtable as the only Track 1.5 or Track 2 security dialogue between the two countries.

From its inception, Peter Abigail wrote, ASPI had been a focus for great Australian interest in India, and that the two nations that 'have lived in each other's blind spots'.

Australia had turned to East Asia and the US, Abigail wrote, while India's eyes had been on the two nuclear-armed neighbours on its borders:

> As a US ally, Australia's priorities have tended to be Western in character. As one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Cold War, India's priorities have traditionally been non-Western. But a new sense of dynamism in the Asian regional security order is drawing the two countries closer together.[15]

After the third Australia–India roundtable in 2003, Jenelle Bonnor and Varun Sahni wrote that the two countries had covered a considerable distance since bilateral defence and security relations were re-established in 2000, after a two-and-a-half-year hiatus.[16] They described re-engagement involving common security concerns, converging strategic horizons and complementary military forces (Australia's 'boutique' military and India's 'mass' forces). The foundation had been laid 'for a more substantial and predictable security relationship', including the opportunity to do much together in the Indian Ocean.

After the fourth Australia–India Security Roundtable, in 2005, Bonnor wrote that the economic realities of the bilateral relationship weren't reflected in strategic and defence relations: 'there is no natural constituency for Australia in India, and vice versa'.

Many influential Indians had not forgiven Australia for its reaction to India's 1998 nuclear tests:

> To the mystification of Australians, this remains a fairly large bone of contention that is regularly picked over by Indians. Together with the still present perception that Australia is a 'stalking horse' for the United States, this means Australia often does not get the hearing it should in India. For some reason, it has proven difficult to put the past behind us.[17]

At ASPI's Global Forces conference in 2005, Varun Sahni said that India's coming great-power role would help change the map of Asia:

> There is a continent-wide security architecture that is finally arriving in the Asia–Pacific, perhaps for the first time, certainly for the first time since European colonialism. It's a continent-wide security interdependence, and this security interdependence is linked clearly to the rise of China. In other words, China makes Asia a region.[18]

The 2006 US–India nuclear agreement 'made India both a *de jure* and a *de facto* nuclear power', as Amit Gupta noted, pushing along 'significant strides' in the US–India military relationship.[19] The long-term challenge for India, he mused, was countering the rise of China and its perceived incursion into the Indian Ocean: '[R]esisting Chinese pressure will require a greater commonality of interests with the United States, since Indian forces on their own may have less success in deterring Chinese pressure.'[20]

In 2007, Sandy Gordon said that underlying many of Canberra's decisions about India was an awareness of a difficult Asian regional security order:

> India is currently basking in its emergent large power status and the relationship with Australia is not its top priority. But the relationship has a promising future, and it is likely that the two countries will move towards some form of closer partnership in the coming decade.[21]

A report by Anthony Bergin and Sam Bateman called for the development of a comprehensive approach to the Indian Ocean neighbourhood. Australia was a three-ocean country with the largest area of marine jurisdiction in the Indian Ocean, they wrote, yet the Indian Ocean had been neglected compared to the Pacific and Southern oceans.

Strategic competition between India and China meant that a 'new maritime great game' was emerging in the Indian Ocean, which is the major energy and international trade maritime highway for the booming economies of Asia. Bergin and Bateman observed:

> In the past, regional diversity and political differences made it difficult to establish cooperation and some concept of an Indian Ocean 'region'. However, a lot has changed politically, economically and strategically since the last serious attempts at building regional cooperation in the mid-1990s. It's now time to review regional cooperation and the role that Australia might play.[22]

Those themes were refreshed in the next decade in *Australia's second sea*, by David Brewster, in which he argued that Australia needed the same level of activism and planning in the Indian Ocean as it had in the Asia–Pacific in previous decades.

> It's no longer 'business as usual' in the Indian Ocean. It's clear that the region has a much more multipolar future that will require Australia to take a much more active role. We can no longer afford to just 'muddle through'. Priorities remain unprioritised, potential threats might not be properly planned for, and many opportunities are unpursued. Our regional objectives remain unclear.[23]

In 2009, India and Australia announced their agreement on a 'strategic partnership' and a joint declaration on security cooperation. By 2012, Prime Minister Julia Gillard was able to change Labor Party policy to scrap what she called the 'irrational' refusal to sell uranium to India. India could source uranium elsewhere, she wrote, but it had 'become a question of status and face. Australia's attitude was received as an insult.'[24]

In 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott was in New Delhi with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to witness the signing of a civil nuclear agreement. The agreement was a diplomatic tool to build trust with India and move bilateral ties forward, Kyle Springer wrote:

> The uranium deal is first and foremost a diplomatic gesture meant to jumpstart Australia's broader engagement with India. Both countries share an interest in Indian Ocean maritime security and bilateral military relations can be built around that common interest. We should expect to see strengthened dialogue between India and Australia on security issues. And we can expect that more joint military exercises and military-to-military exchanges will also be announced.[25]

In 2018, the former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Varghese, submitted to the Prime Minister a report on an India economic strategy out to 2035 that saw India as a geopolitical partner.[26]

Writing for *The Strategist*, Varghese said that India had a deep strategic competition with China, but that it 'is not about to become an ally of the US or anyone else'.[27] While maintaining a firm attachment to strategic autonomy, though, India had a growing level of comfort in strategic cooperation with the US and its allies, such as Japan and Australia.

Australia's shift from an Asia–Pacific to an Indo-Pacific framework put India squarely into Australia's strategic matrix, Varghese wrote:

> India shares our democratic bias, but the political character of the Chinese state isn't its primary strategic concern. For Australia, a democratic China becoming the predominant Indo-Pacific power is a very different proposition to an authoritarian China occupying that position. India's concerns about a powerful China would exist irrespective of whether China were a democracy.[28]

Quad 1.0 and Quad 2.0

Quad 1.0 had a tentative start and then crashed. Reborn in 2017, Quad 2.0 had its first leaders' summit in 2021.

The dialogue has become a grouping.

Australia, India, Japan and the US first got together in December 2004, when they responded to the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami with coordinated humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The initial meeting among officials from the four countries happened on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila in 2007, and was followed by the first Quad naval exercise.

China's opposition to Quad 1.0 was 'swift and forceful'. It sent a formal note of concern to the foreign ministries of the four countries in May 2007, William Tow recorded. Beijing launched a campaign against the concept via Chinese academics, and it 'soon became nigh-on impossible to meet a Chinese foreign policy scholar without hearing a variant on why the Quad was bad'.[29]

The Howard government qualified its support, murmuring that the Quad focus might be confined to trade and culture. Quad 1.0 was taking water, and it sank after the Rudd government was elected in November 2007.

Kevin Rudd devoted nearly two pages of his memoir to the reasons for his reluctance about Quad 1.0. Rudd denied that discontinuing it was appeasing China, instead pointing to the possibility of zigzags in the way New Delhi or Tokyo dealt with Beijing. 'Australia would run the risk of being left high and dry as a result of future policy departures in Tokyo or Delhi. Indeed, that remains a danger through to this day', he wrote.[30]

Explaining what shaped his thinking in 2008, Rudd wrote:

> [W]hy would Australia want to consign the future of its bilateral relationship with China to the future health of the China–Japan relationship, where there were centuries of mutual toxicity? For Australia to embroil itself in an emerging military alliance with Japan against China, which is what the quad in reality was, in our judgment was incompatible with our national interest.

India's dealings with China weren't as toxic as Sino-Japanese relations, Rudd wrote, but the two neighbours had fought a violent border war in 1962 and still had thousands of square kilometres of disputed border regions that periodically erupted into violent clashes.[31] 'So did Australia want to anchor our future relationship with Beijing with new "allies" which had deep historical disputes still to resolve with China?'

Australia was already bound by what Rudd called the 'far-reaching' provisions of the ANZUS Treaty to support the US in the event of an armed attack on US forces in the Pacific. 'Strengthening a bilateral alliance is one thing', he said. 'Embracing a *de facto* quadrilateral alliance potentially embroiling Australia in military conflict arising from ancient disputes between Delhi, Tokyo and Beijing is quite something else.'

As for Quad 2.0, that got one Rudd sentence: 'The extent to which political and strategic circumstances may have changed a decade later is another matter entirely.'

What changed—and hardened—was the way the Quad viewed China.

Returning as Japan's Prime Minister in 2012, Shinzo Abe began work on the Quad's second coming, describing it as a 'democratic security diamond' that would be all about the maritime domain.[32] Abe's diamond image was based on 'a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific'.[33] Just as diamonds are formed by high temperature and pressure, so the Quad bonds four democratic powers that feel the force and weight of Asia's coming power.[34]

Asia's strategic environment was witnessing one of the most important power shifts in history, Anthony Bergin and David Lang wrote in 2014:

> The biggest strategic question we face is not simply whether the future for our region will be one of war or peace: it's also about the nature of that peace. Will it be a peace governed by rules and norms or a peace governed by power and coercion?[35]

Bergin and Lang were writing on an ASPI project with Japan on strengthening the rule of law in the Asia–Pacific:

> Australia and Japan share an interest in minimising the role that coercion plays in the Asia–Pacific and maximising cooperation across the region. We're both liberal democracies, with a strong bilateral security relationship, an alliance with the United States and a genuine commitment to the rule of law.[36]

The recommendations from the project on rules and norms are a playbook for Quad 2.0: maritime security, the rule of law in conflict-affected states, trade and economic cooperation, cyberspace and internet governance, airspace and outer space, the East Asia summit, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Abe wanted Japan to be a 'first tier' country, Brad Glosserman wrote, but the Abe administration could well be 'peak Japan' as a regional power. Two 'lost decades' had downsized Japan's horizons, and the country's demographic trajectory fed the increasingly inward focus of the Japanese people. Glosserman diagnosed a diminishing popular inclination to compete with China and a reluctance to embrace Abe's ambitions:

> Japan must be pushed to do more even while its partners remain conscious of the domestic circumstances that create resistance to such initiatives. Australia can play a key role in this effort. Canberra has emerged as Tokyo's preferred security partner (after the US). The two governments have overcome a bitter and difficult history to forge a 'special strategic partnership' that reflects shared values and interests and includes an expanding institutional infrastructure with regular meetings of the two top leaderships, an array of security instruments and coordination with their alliance partner, the US.[37]

Quad 2.0 was revived in 2017 during the East Asia Summit by Shinzo Abe, Narendra Modi, Donald Trump and Malcolm Turnbull.

Times had changed, and it was time to get the band back together.

ASPI's *Quad 2.0: New perspectives for the revived concept* noted that this second coming 'has become one of the most debated and contested ideas in current geopolitics'.[38]

The reborn Quad had bipartisan Australian support. Labor's shadow foreign minister, Penny Wong, and shadow defence minister, Richard Marles, endorsed the 'valuable complementary role' of the reborn Quad:

> It makes a space for four like-minded trading democracies to share their thoughts on regional security. The high-level discussions add another layer of co-operation to the intersecting bilateral and multilateral activities in place across the region. Defence exercises, particularly naval exercises, with these countries and others in the region also play a critical role in building operational understanding and confidence which in turn is vital for the security of the Indo-Pacific.[39]

Huong Le Thu surveyed Southeast Asian perceptions of the Quad, collecting answers from government agencies, militaries, academia, think tanks, businesses, media and university students in all 10 ASEAN countries.[40]

A majority opinion (57%) among the ASEAN respondents supported the initiative as having a useful role in regional security; only 10% of respondents opposed it. There were reservations that the 'anti-China' nature of the Quad was dangerous (19%), but more thought that 'an anti-China bulwark' was necessary (35%).

On challenges ahead for the Quad, the distribution of responses was even. The most popular answers were that:

- the interests of the four nations may be too divergent for common actions (27%)
- the Quad was unclear about its own mission (24%)
- the grouping would 'provoke' Beijing (22%).

'Refreshingly', Huong wrote, 'the study found that there isn't much of a gap between the respondents from ASEAN countries and the Quad countries. Hence, there's a level of "like-mindedness"—both in support for the Quad and in ambiguity about its future.'

The joint 'vision statement' issued following the first Quad leaders' summit in March 2021 ranged from vaccines on land to vessels at sea to meeting 'challenges to the maritime order in the East and South China Seas'.[41]

Four disparate democracies could do much together, not least to reassure Southeast Asia that it has options (Quad-speak: 'strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality').

Michael Shoebridge commented that the Quad was developing as a working forum for leaders to generate momentum on practical actions and was broader than the 'security dialogue' that restarted in 2017: 'This may be what Beijing is most anxious about—a multilateral grouping that is action oriented and agile enough to provide new challenges to how China wants the world to work.'[42]

Australia walked away from Quad 1.0 in 2008 because the Rudd government had high hopes about China and doubts about Japan and India; Canberra bet on Beijing rather than Tokyo and New Delhi.[43] The terms of the race have since changed dramatically, the stakes are even higher and Australia has put new wagers on Japan and India to reinforce its traditional bet on the US.

Quad 1.0 sank, Kevin Rudd said, because the US and India weren't keen, and neither was Japan after Abe ended his first term as leader in 2007.[44]

Quad 2.0 arrived, Rudd commented, because Xi Jinping had 'fundamentally altered the landscape' by projecting Chinese power.[45] Strategic circumstances had 'changed profoundly'.[46]

The mission of Quad 2.0 becomes more than patrolling the Indo-Pacific—Quad ambition now meets today's angst and ambiguity.

Australia, India, Japan and the US are driven together as much as they're naturally coming together. A new cohesion is shown by the simple fact that the three prime ministers and the president issued a joint statement from their summit; previously, when the Quad foreign ministers met, there was no joint communiqué—each country gave a separate written account of the talks.

For the Biden administration, the Quad puts an exclamation point on the shout that the US is back.

Ever seeking to anchor the US in Asia, Canberra and Tokyo now have another anchor point in New Delhi. The anchor image responds to a permanent reality: China will always be in Asia, while the US presence is always a choice for Washington to make.

Choosing the Quad, the US is renewing its promise to the Indo-Pacific as much as joining with three fellow democracies.

The four democracies are present at the creation of Quad 2.0, but that conception had much to do with China's coercion.

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Indonesia and Southeast Asia

> Indonesia and Australia are destined to be close neighbours. We cannot choose our neighbours. We have to choose to be friends. Australia is Indonesia's closest friend.
>
> —President Joko Widodo, address to the Australian Parliament, 2020[1]

> No country is more important to Australia than Indonesia. If we fail to get this relationship right, and nurture and develop it, the whole web of our foreign relations is incomplete.
>
> —Prime Minister Paul Keating, 1994[2]

Indonesia and Australia are the most different of neighbours, working on being friends.

Indonesia can be a metaphor for the complexities of Australia's Asia interests: how little the two have in common, how much they must share.

For Australia, Indonesia opens out to be Southeast Asia; then ASEAN opens out again as East Asia.

As with Indonesia, so with Asia. Australia's fear about the neighbours in the past was about the dangers of weakness. Now it's about the promises and perils posed by strength.

The Australian interest

For all the mood swings and power surges, Australia's interest is abiding. Yet the size of the swings in relatively short periods points to the combustibility in the complexity. The Indonesia lens on ASEAN and East Asia offers kaleidoscope effects.

Using that lens, consider the five years either side of ASPI's creation: the Asian financial crisis; the fall of Suharto; the Australia-led intervention in East Timor that caused Canberra to contemplate war with Indonesia; the 2002 Bali bombing and radical Islam in Indonesia; the 2004 bombing of the Australian Embassy; the first direct presidential elections in 2004, a major moment for Indonesia's democracy; the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in the Indian Ocean; the 2005 Bali bombings; the 2005 joint declaration on comprehensive partnership by Prime Minister John Howard and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which became the 2006 Lombok Treaty for Security Cooperation.[3]

When the East Timor intervention in 1999 led to Jakarta tearing up the security agreement reached by Keating and Suharto in 1995, it would have been a brave Canberra seer who predicted that Howard and SBY would be putting the pieces together again by 2005.

Yudhoyono later said that, when he came to office in 2004, 'changing Indonesia's relations with Australia became my foreign policy priority.' Speaking to ASPI's 2016 'Defence White Paper: from the page to reality' conference, SBY recalled:

> In 2005 I visited Canberra where Prime Minister John Howard and I signed the first Comprehensive Partnership between our countries. Not long after, we signed the Lombok Treaty, which transformed the security relationship between our countries. Indeed, our relations with Australia is among the most extensive, involving an annual Joint Ministerial meeting participated by a good line-up of Ministers covering different sectors. Indonesia rarely has this kind of relationship with a foreign country, and it is a good sign of how close we have become.[4]

As Robert Ayson observed dryly in 2005, the stability questions that preoccupy Canberra security planners are subject to significant shifts. Ayson's review of stability in East Asia saw the balances involved in the Lombok Treaty:

> This would involve something of a tradeoff, with Canberra codifying its support for Indonesia's territorial integrity and Jakarta confirming Australia's role in helping meet security challenges such as terrorism which Indonesia struggles to deal with on its own. Both issues reflect the continuing importance of instability through weakness issues … The strengthened links with Indonesia might also be seen as increasing Australia's connection to an emerging East Asian regional community, which at times Australia has appeared to stand a chance of missing out on.[5]

At ASPI's 2006 Global Forces conference, Dino Patti Djalal, Indonesia's presidential spokesperson for foreign affairs, started with a joke about Russia's economy: the one-word description was 'good' but, allowed two words, the description became 'not good'. Applied to the Australia–Indonesia relationship, the one word was 'good' and the two words were 'quite good'. The creation of a security partnership, he noted, showed the extent of recovery:

> The treaty does not make Indonesia and Australia allies, because Indonesia cannot enter into any military alliance with any country, but it does express our common conviction, as President Yudhoyono said, that the security of Indonesia and Australia are interrelated and that we need to engage in cooperative security. It also does signify how far this relationship has progressed since the stressful and uncomfortable period of 1999 during the troubles in East Timor.[6]

While terrorism was a global issue, for Australia the danger was closely tied to the relationship with Indonesia. The attacks in Bali, the bombing of the Australian Embassy, and the extent of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist network, raised questions about the nature of Indonesian Islam.

Aldo Borgu said that JI had some tactical success in being able to mount terrorist operations, but its ability to realise strategic success—the establishment of an Islamic state—was far more limited. Terrorism was both an immediate threat and a long-term policy concern:

> While terrorism, unlike traditional defence concerns, is a direct and immediate threat to Australian interests, the time needed to combat the threat effectively has to be measured in decades. Efforts to improve perceptions of Australia in the region, nation-building

> with failing South Pacific states, developing intelligence analysts or addressing the Indonesian education system will take as long as, or even longer than, developing a new air or naval combat capability.[7]

Greg Fealy wrote that Indonesia's radical Muslims had powerful political, social and economic grievances: 'Most believe that Islam has been marginalised and oppressed in Indonesia, and that potent domestic and international forces are determined to deny Islam its rightful place at the centre of national life.'[8]

Australia was seen as part of the West and therefore an enemy of Islam, Fealy said. That antipathy was heightened by our alliance with the US. Australia was seen as 'having orchestrated East Timor's separation from Indonesia as part of its hegemonic designs on Muslim majority nations in the region'.

Australia's post-Bali-bombing collaboration with the Indonesian police in investigating JI attacks and hunting down its members, Fealy said, had 'further raised the ire of JI leaders. Many would be aware of the important role of Australian forensic expertise and signals interception and tracking in the capture and prosecution of key JI figures.'

ASPI studied the relationship between Indonesia's National Police and the Australian Federal Police, drawing on 60 interviews with current and retired police officers from the two countries. Police cooperation between Indonesia and Australia had become a remarkable partnership:

> Over the past four decades, and especially since the late 1990s, the two police forces have built a relationship based on trust, mutual benefit and shared concern for fighting crime. It's a relationship that's moved from simple information sharing, to capacity building, and into truly cooperative operations. It's also withstood most of the fluctuations in the broader bilateral relationship. This is a rare achievement for any international partnership, and one both sides must value and protect.[9]

In 2008, Andrew MacIntyre and Douglas Ramage saw Indonesia 'no longer in a state of profound flux and turmoil' but as a 'stable, competitive democracy, playing a constructive role in world affairs'.

Indonesia's swing from deep-seated authoritarian rule to democratic governance had been swift by global and regional standards. Australia must see Indonesia through new eyes, 'as a normal country'. The starting point for all Australian thinking about Indonesia was geopolitical. By comparison, the US had much less at stake in Indonesia, either emotionally or strategically.[10]

In 2012, Damien Kingsbury described Indonesia facing the simultaneous challenges of political reform, economic development and a shifting regional security environment. The political future was less certain than Australia would hope because of the danger that Indonesia might slide back into old ways—democratisation was a fraught process.

Geography brought the two neighbours close, but geography also contrasted, Kingsbury noted:

> Australia is historically federalist, but our geographical and sociolinguistic unity construct us as a 'nation'; Indonesia is historically unitary, but its geographical and sociolinguistic disaggregation imply that it should be federalist, which the decentralisation of 2001 was partly intended to achieve. Geographical proximity can provide only so much in the way of glue. In the longer term, circumstances aren't guaranteed to drive each state to an identical, or even consistent, space in which liberal cooperation is the norm.[11]

Indonesia had embraced its status as a G20 country and resumed its role as first among equals in ASEAN. In serving Jakarta's commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy, ASEAN was useful in keeping the great powers at a distance, Kingsbury said:

> ASEAN provides a known framework and a sense of order for regional states and remains a useful mechanism for discussing regional affairs, even if its capacity for concerted action hasn't yet been tested in any meaningful sense. But some Indonesian strategic thinkers are increasingly trying to look beyond ASEAN to the wider regional and global geopolitical space.

As middle-power democracies with differing strengths and capabilities, Indonesia and Australia could seek a 'mutually beneficial defence structure' that could reach towards alliance. A formal alliance would be 'a formidable partnership able to act as a significant deterrent to all but the largest and most determined potential aggressors', Kingsbury wrote:

> There would be questions about what conditions Indonesia might require for the establishment of such an alliance, and what conditions Australia would be prepared to accept to achieve it. At some point, closer cooperation would inevitably have to deal with the status and methods of the TNI [Indonesian armed forces] and intrude upon the political space of the more reactionary elements in the Indonesian security community. Therefore, this possibility needs to be explored carefully, within a tight intellectual and legal framework, lest it end up creating more, rather than fewer, tensions.

In 2013, ASPI gathered 20 Australian and Indonesian participants from the military, academia, government departments and think tanks for two days of discussion on defence issues. As Natalie Sambhi recorded, one 'amusing and insightful presentation' compared the Australia–Indonesia relationship to a marriage:

> If the analogy is right, for reasons of proximity, history, interest and mutual benefit, the case for keeping the marriage of a rather unlikely couple together is very strong: even the best relationships have ups and downs. There remains some cause to wish that the two countries understood each other better but a lack of Indonesian language training in Australia and similarly a lack of a strong Indonesian interest in studying Australia don't help. But participants agreed that individuals and groups in both countries would continue to highlight differences of interest, if not of values, between the two countries.

> The challenge for Australia and Indonesia is to learn to love each other with all our faults and differences, rather than to make those blemishes grounds for splitting up.[12]

A sign of Indonesia as a 'normal' country with 'normal' relations with Australia was that ASPI reports on the start of Joko Widodo's presidency in 2014 and Jokowi's second term in 2019 focused on economics rather than geopolitics.

In 2014, Peter McCawley said Indonesia's institutions had grown stronger and its international standing had risen during the 10 years of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. McCawley saw two possible scenarios for Jokowi's administration:

- An outward-looking reform path would be hard to implement in the short term but deliver significant medium-term gains.
- An inward-looking resilience path would be the popular option with powerful groups in Indonesia, but would delay many urgently needed reforms.[13]

When Jokowi was re-elected in 2019, Siwage Dharma Negara wrote of Widodo's mixed economic outcomes in his first term: he hadn't delivered the promised 7% growth, but a steady 5% was commendable. Macroeconomic stability had been maintained and creditworthiness improved, Negara said, yet Indonesia still underperformed compared to ASEAN neighbours:

> Amid current US–China trade tensions, it hasn't been well placed to attract significant benefits from the relocation of manufacturers away from China to Southeast Asia. Foreign investors find some of Indonesia's neighbours, most notably Vietnam, more attractive as new production bases.[14]

Widodo's description of Indonesia as the 'world maritime axis' turned attention to what Australia and Indonesia could do together on maritime security—an area highlighted in the Lombok Treaty. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto wrote that illegal cross-border activities such as people smuggling often occurred between the archipelago and the continent: 'Both countries share interests in maintaining regional stability and seeing regional disputes resolved peacefully. Keeping up the momentum for cooperation isn't easy. Innovative thinking and creative ways are needed to sustain it.'[15]

Under Jokowi, as with SBY, the Indonesia–Australia relationship has been relatively smooth, even on an upward trajectory; the basis was firm, the structure was established, and there seemed to be enough of the material Gareth Evans always desired: 'ballast'.

The down moments were caused not by trends but by events, such as Indonesia's execution of two Australians in 2015 for drug smuggling.[16]

In 2018, Scott Morrison flew to Jakarta less than a week after being sworn in as Prime Minister to announce that the two countries had clinched a free trade agreement.

The symbolism of Morrison going to Indonesia so early in his leadership was tarnished a few months later when the Prime Minister ruminated about moving Australia's embassy in Israel

from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Jakarta's angry response was to freeze the signature of the trade treaty, to show support for Palestine and snub Australia. Morrison eventually shelved the embassy shift to some indeterminate future date 'when practical'. That 'practical' face-saver saw the Australia–Indonesia agreement signed by the trade ministers without too much fanfare in March 2019, just ahead of Indonesia's elections.

The celebration of new trade ties came when the re-elected Jokowi flew to Canberra in February 2020 and told parliament: 'Australia is Indonesia's closest friend.'[17] The president's 'closest friend' avowal had a certain geographical truth, but it was a statement of the aim rather than the actual.

Widodo was offering geostrategic and geo-economic aspiration expressed in the most human terms, in an ambitious example of what leaders must do: shift reality towards the vision they describe. 'Closest friend' sits beside Paul Keating's declaration that 'No country is more important to Australia than Indonesia.'[18]

The friendship is prey to shocks and shakes. As Indonesia's previous president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, said in the Great Hall of Australia's parliament in April 2005:

> Over the years, our relations have experienced many twists and turns, highs and lows. We know from experience that our relations are so complex and unique that it can be pulled in so many different directions, and it can go right as often as it can go wrong. Which is why we have to handle it with the greatest care and counsel.[19]

When SBY visited Canberra in 2016, he went so far as to endorse Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper*, saying that it put forward 'strategic viewpoints that are shared by many countries in the region, including Indonesia'. Yudhoyono told ASPI's conference that the Australia–Indonesia relationship had been transformed:

> As Australia seeks to shape her strategic environment, the evolving partnership between Indonesia and Australia presents a good case of a transformed relationship that solidifies common security. To be honest, in the past, there was a lot of baggage between Jakarta and Canberra.
>
> There was mutual distrust, and mutual discomfort in our relationship. The East Timor issue was a major source of friction. In the eyes of many Australians, Indonesia was seen as an authoritarian state with human rights problems, and a troubled country politically and economically after the fall of President Soeharto. In the eyes of many Indonesians, Australia was seen as intrusive, and harbouring negative intention on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia.
>
> I would say that Jakarta–Canberra relations were similar to many conflictual relations that we see among states today. But, together, we reversed that situation. We not only normalised the relationship: we elevated and transformed it.[20]

The closest friendship can be volatile because this is a closeness of opposites. Indonesia can be metaphor, frame and key for Australia's Asian journey. Here's how Bruce Grant expressed that thought 50 years ago:

> Relations with Indonesia have provided the crucible of modern Australian foreign policy … the relationship has been more primary and less secondary … Indonesia has brought home to Australians the concreteness of foreign policy problems … So there has been a non-proxy, direct and pragmatic flavour about Australian thinking and acting … This did not determine the relationship, but it persisted, through global politics, great power rivalry, regional conflict and arguments and debates within the two countries … an attempt to frame a foreign policy based on the acceptance of Indonesia as a permanent feature of our external environment. This is not just an effect of geography … Australia senses the presence of a neighbour which must be treated with care and consideration.[21]

For Australia today, the four compass points of the relationship are:

- the geography that shapes strategy
- relative power shifting to Indonesia
- Australia's constant focus on creating diplomatic, economic and military partnerships with Indonesia—the people-to-people element lags
- the new dimension that can shape all else: shared democracy.

The north star is geography: as Indonesian people-smugglers demonstrate, we're only a boat ride apart.

For Australian strategists, a friendly Indonesia 'acts as a strategic shield to the immediate north of Australia', while an unfriendly Indonesia is a sword above our head.[22] Paul Dibb's statement about geography is as true today as it was in 1986:

> In defence terms, Indonesia is our most important neighbour. The Indonesian archipelago forms a protective barrier to Australia's northern approaches. We have a common interest in regional stability, free from interference by potentially hostile external powers. At the same time, we must recognise that, because of its proximity, the archipelago to our north is the area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed.[23]

Keating paints this vividly: 'How things go in the Indonesian archipelago, in many respects, so go we. Indonesia remains the place where Australia's strategic bread is buttered.'[24]

Australia wants an Indonesia strong enough not to be porous, but uninterested in using its strength for anything nasty.

The second compass point is that relative power is shifting steadily to Indonesia. It's the same relative power loss Australia faces across Asia. Indonesia just brings it close to home. Our giant neighbour, as Kevin Rudd remarks, is on track to pass Australia in economic size in the 2020s and eventually in military capabilities by the 2040s.[25]

If Indonesia maintains its 5% growth rate for the next two decades, by 2040 it will be the world's fifth largest economy. In that future, Hugh White muses, Indonesia is as important to Australia as China, 'because while it will not match China's wealth and power, it is much closer—and that could make all the difference. Never underestimate the importance of proximity.'[26]

Indonesia sets the temperature and frames Australia's approach to the rest of Southeast Asia (just as Papua New Guinea does in the South Pacific).

Australia's role in 'regional architecture' always has an Indonesian element, even a Jakarta veto. Suharto brushed away Gough Whitlam's regionalist ambitions, just as his support helped Bob Hawke and Keating build APEC. Jakarta's nod was needed to get John Howard into the East Asia Summit.

Indonesia's centrality to Australia is central to the argument that eventually Australia will join ASEAN.[27]

The third compass point is Australia's constant focus on creating diplomatic, economic and military partnerships with Indonesia. And getting the two peoples to see each other clearly.

The comprehensive economic partnership agreement finalised during Jokowi's Canberra 2020 visit was the trade twin of the 2018 comprehensive strategic partnership, which is built on the 2006 Lombok Treaty.[28]

Widodo told parliament that the two countries can be 'anchors for development' in the South Pacific and help ASEAN transform the Indo-Pacific 'trust deficit'.[29]

The effort, always, is to build more weight and depth, to get bilateral alignments that serve regional aims.

The 2020 joint statement from Indonesia's President and Australia's Prime Minister devoted 10 of its 45 points to Indo-Pacific 'stability and prosperity', 10 points to shared regional interests, and nine points to maritime cooperation.[30]

The fourth compass point adds a great caveat to the statement that Indonesia and Australia have nothing in common.

We now share something vital and defining: democracy.

The fact of a democratic Indonesia should help Australia adjust to its relative decline compared with the growing wealth and strength of its giant neighbour.

Stating that Indonesia ranks 'in the forefront of Australian foreign and strategic policy', ASPI created an Indonesia Program, headed by former Australian diplomat David Engel.

Engel emphasises:

- practical ties, to 'inch our reality closer to the rhetoric' of friendship[31]
- firming up Australia's soft power in Indonesia[32]

- turning around the steep decline in Indonesia studies as part of a policy to change the 'depressingly widespread ignorance of, and ambivalence towards, Indonesia among the Australian public'.[33]

Geographical proximity should privilege us, Engel wrote, but was plainly proving insufficient to produce Australians interested and skilled in Indonesian history, politics, culture and language. Many Indonesian leaders remained suspicious of our motives and dismissive of our capacity to be a significant economic and strategic partner. No less than for Washington, Engel said, we shouldn't expect any lingering gratitude and reciprocity from Jakarta. Indeed, Australia had to confront its 'trust deficit' in Jakarta:

> It will be a long, sometimes dispiriting haul, but it's in our interests to start. We should consider it a form of burden-sharing.
>
> Reorienting our public diplomacy to focus on those aspects of Australia that Indonesians value in other societies should be elemental to this. While science and technology haven't been absent from our public diplomacy, they warrant greater attention. The more effectively we project the fact that great scientific and technological achievement is an integral part of the nation's contribution to the world, the more attractive and worthy of emulation we are likely to appear to the emerging Indonesia.
>
> The values we project are also vital. Our democratic ideals and the rule of law feature appropriately in our representations of ourselves, but one value that accords with both the better parts of our national story and the ideals of Indonesia should get a much greater airing. One of the five silas of Indonesia's foundational ideology is 'social justice' for all Indonesians. If Australia's history is far from perfect on this score, particularly in relation to the First Australians, it's replete with examples of public policy and societal transformation built on the principles of fairness and equal opportunity for all Australians. We should weave that narrative into the broader depiction of who we are, without camouflaging those episodes of our history in which a 'fair go' was hardly universal.
>
> But we'll need to do much more if Indonesians are to find Australia so attractive as to imbue our advocacy with greater persuasiveness. Successive governments will need to commit far more resources over a decades-long time frame. They'll need to view the goal of greater Australian persuasion in Indonesia through attraction, as well as effective public diplomacy as a primary means of achieving it, as a sustained bipartisan national project.[34]

Southeast Asia: joining the neighbourhood

Australia got a seat at Asia's top table, the East Asia Summit (EAS), just as the geopolitics on the menu started to get tougher.

The EAS seat was partly about the luck of leaders as well as the push of policy.

Australia's place at the peak of the regional architecture created by ASEAN was aided by the warming of relations with Indonesia under President Yudhoyono and the retirement of Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad. Mahathir's departure lifted his veto from an ASEAN–Australia free trade agreement and opened the way to Australia's summit ambitions.

Canberra had suffered from 'the Malaysian pitch of Asian versus Western values' and Mahathir's championing of an 'exclusive form of East Asian regionalism', John Lee noted. Malaysia used regionalism as a 'counter-dominance strategy' for both the US and China, Lee wrote.[35] In that Mahathir equation, Australia was discounted as a US proxy.

Thus, in 2004 John Howard became the second Australian to have summit talks with the ASEAN leaders (Malcolm Fraser was the first in 1977).[36] The 2004 meeting in Vientiane opened the possibility of the top table, as ASEAN prepared for the first EAS, to be held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005.

Australia won its EAS seat 'despite some eleventh-hour bumps along the way', William Tow wrote, as John Howard initially balked at damaging the US alliance by signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC):

> Ultimately, both sides compromised. ASEAN agreed to allow Australia to participate if it signed the TAC and Australia agreed to sign after being assured by the ASEAN Secretariat that Australia's ANZUS obligations would not be affected. In return, Australia adjusted its position on the key document justifying the 'ASEAN Way' and ASEAN's cardinal diplomatic principles. The TAC was no longer to be regarded in Canberra as an outmoded 'Cold War relic' but as an integral blueprint for community-building that would complement Australian bilateral security obligations.[37]

Australia was bringing together the 'dual strategy' it had followed since World War II, Tow wrote, seeking alliance with the dominant Western maritime power while cultivating ties with its neighbours.

The Rudd government had retained that approach, 'seeking to sharpen and refine the strategy at a time when the Asia–Pacific is experiencing unprecedented structural change'. Rudd's declarations of support for the ANZUS alliance sat alongside his call in June 2008 for the formation of an Asia–Pacific community 'which can, for the first time, have a pan-regional dialogue on the question of our common security'.[38]

The Asia–Pacific had no single regional security architecture, Tow said, but 'a set of tangled webs of interconnectivity'.

Philomena Murray argued that Australia could shape regional cooperation with 'activism, expertise and successful policy development'. In building regional communities, architectures and institutions, Australia should:

- position itself as an agent of change in the Asia–Pacific region
- take on the role of mediator, advancing relationship building

- exploit soft power assets—its influence and educational strengths—to strengthen regional relationships over the longer term
- promote sound design principles in new proposals for architectural renovation that include security cooperation alongside economic and political cooperation
- build an enhanced regional consensus about the leadership, membership, mandate and sustainability of emerging regional structures.[39]

Coral Bell said it was in Australia's power to promote favourable local and regional outcomes: 'Luckily, our national interests aren't in conflict with those of any of our neighbours, and this is an asset in helping to nudge the multilateral process gently forward.'

The EAS, with its diversity of cultures and political systems, was a promising start, Bell observed: 'Australia will have to play down a few national grudges, accept a few symbols we may not much like, and sometimes shut up when we would rather be outspoken (remember Keating's troubles over that ill-chosen word [describing Mahathir] "recalcitrant").'[40]

Southeast Asia sat at the intersection of the wider world and Australia's local neighbourhood, Carl Thayer wrote in 2010. The broader Asian security environment was in flux, and an era of strategic quiescence in Southeast Asia was drawing to a close.[41]

In the introduction to *Southeast Asia: patterns of security cooperation*, Peter Abigail observed:

> A sea change now seems to be occurring in the Southeast Asian security environment. As Asian great powers grow, so the broader strategic circumstances within which Southeast Asian countries manufactured that story of strategic success have also begun to shift. That shift is critical to Australia. Southeast Asia forms the intersection point between the broader Asia and our own neighbourhood, and we cannot be indifferent to the events taking place there.[42]

Carl Thayer laid out the elements of the sea change:

> Southeast Asia's emerging strategic environment is being shaped by eight major trends: the global economic and financial crisis, China's military modernisation and transformation, the United States' stepped-up engagement, increased arms procurements, the heightened importance of the maritime domain, the increasing salience of transnational security issues, the persistence of 'everyday security challenges', and the evolution of the regional security architecture.[43]

Traditional patterns of strategic influence and cooperation were shifting. ASEAN would have to work hard to maintain regional autonomy as global forces eroded the boundaries between Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, Thayer wrote:

> The strategic weight of key Southeast Asian states—principally Indonesia and also Vietnam—is growing. But it is not growing nearly as fast as the strategic weight of the Asian great powers (Japan, China and India), whose influence will be felt increasingly within the region.[44]

Australia's strategic policy remained focused on potential threats arising from external power domination of the region and regional instability, Thayer said:

> Australia has a clear conception about the kind of Southeast Asia that it would like to see emerge in the future—a region composed of peaceful, stable, prosperous, developing democracies, which enjoy increasing patterns of security cooperation among themselves and with Australia and its other security partners. But that vision of the future will be difficult to realise within a broader Asia–Pacific increasingly roiled by shifting power relativities and tensions among the great powers.

ASEAN declared its intent to establish a fully integrated community by 2015, institutionalising a regional bloc built on three pillars:

- the ASEAN Economic Community
- the ASEAN Political-Security Community
- the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Peter Chalk wrote that the community 'would, for the first time, provide Southeast Asian countries with a single regime of intergovernmental collaboration'. The main aim was to serve ASEAN 'centrality'—leveraging cohesion for economic progress and to manage external partners. ASEAN was girding to face an assertive China, which was 'now the pre-eminent power in Southeast Asia'.[45]

To be successful, the ASEAN Community would need considerable backing from the US. Ultimately, however, it was up to ASEAN to achieve centrality and remain a relevant player. The tools would be what ASEAN always used: the twin principles of unanimity and non-interference in the internal affairs of the 10 member states, and an incremental and informal approach to problems, Chalk wrote:

> There's no specific mechanism to penalise non-compliance with formal policies, adherence to which is largely up to individual countries. Regional integration remains a state-driven (as opposed to people-oriented) process. And ASEAN's secretariat has yet to be given the necessary resources to allow it to act as a truly or even partially effective supranational governing body … maintaining the norms of consensus and non-interference may well be necessary if ASEAN is going to stay unified as a regional bloc, especially given its member states' highly diverse economic development and strategic interests. Now in its sixties, ASEAN sits at a critical juncture that could see it either occupying the driver's seat in future regional cooperation or being marginalised as a relic of the past.

In March 2018, Australia hosted a summit with ASEAN leaders in Sydney. Ahead of the meeting, ASPI's journalist fellow released a report advocating the start of a discussion about Australia (and New Zealand) joining ASEAN. The way in would be the creation of a new form of membership (ASEAN Community partners), avoiding the geographical veto while giving Australia and New Zealand full ASEAN rights and obligations. Joining ASEAN would be the logical culmination of

decades of Australian regional engagement. Australia must draw ever closer as ASEAN grows in importance and power.

> In the 21st century, Australia must be all-in in Asia: we must be a smart and vibrant nation that's always engaged and always present, ever ready to be in the mix and help with the fix. The all-in line asks for more than transactional competence and business as usual. Asia is shifting too fast: ASEAN membership is only one part of much that will confront Australia in our region(s). We'll seek change and be changed in turn. ASEAN membership seems a long way off only if you ignore the distance Australia and ASEAN have travelled in the past 50 years. In the journey of convergence, the hardest miles are done and fading into memory. The greatest changes are things already changed—certainly in the make-up of Australia's community and the way the nation thinks of itself.[46]

The Australia-into-ASEAN idea was endorsed by Indonesia's President, Joko Widodo.[47] Think-tank bliss arrived when Jakarta whispered that ASPI's Australia-into-ASEAN report was the final piece of briefing material given to Jokowi before his Sydney meeting with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Astonishment arrived shortly after from Kuala Lumpur, when Mahathir Mohamad chimed in with the view that Australia had earned the right—could be 'entitled' even—to join ASEAN.[48] It gave weight to the observation by Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani that the hardest people to persuade about the membership idea would be Australians, not Southeast Asians.[49]

Responding to that mateship-to-membership idea, Huong Le Thu commented that Australian perspectives on ASEAN fluctuated from fearful to fascinated, along with periods of neglect and the odd blind spot, depending on Canberra's political mood:

> Australia's varying attitudes towards ASEAN has resembled a drawing class exercise on getting perspective right. Australia has been outside, in front of, behind, beside, overlooking, far away, close up and, one day, may even be inside ASEAN. Let's hope that its enthusiasm doesn't burn out after the summit, and that Canberra's current fascination isn't just a passing phase.[50]

Enthusiasms may, indeed, wane. Necessity is a more constant spur. Australia knows its needs ASEAN. And that Australian need will grow, not least because of what Indonesia will become. The mateship message must become a mutual musing about membership.

Economically, Australia stands to benefit mightily from an ASEAN Community able to deliver a middle-class future to its people and push beyond the middle-income trap.

The strategic dimension is what Australia, as a fellow middle power, can bring to ASEAN's efforts as a middle-power grouping seeking to shape Asia's norms and strategic system.

Australia's understanding of Southeast Asia is framed by Indonesia, set by geography, flavoured by history and worked by diplomacy but driven by trade. The concern of strategy is no longer regional weakness but the promises and perils posed by strength.

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Australia's island arc: the South Pacific and Timor-Leste

ASPI's first big policy impact was arguing that Australia must intervene to save Solomon Islands.

ASPI's 2003 description of Solomon Islands as 'a failing state' was one element in the Howard government's policy somersault. The key factor in the U-turn was a cry for help from Solomon Islands—the institute's role was a timely report on the new direction needed.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

The plea from Honiara came as Elsina Wainwright's *Our failing neighbour* set out how Australia should step in to stabilise Solomon Islands after five years of turmoil. The conflict, she wrote, had 'paralysed the country's capital, stifled its economy, disrupted government, discouraged aid donors, and inflicted suffering and hardship on its people. It has virtually ceased to function as an effective national entity.'[1]

John Howard paid tribute to the impact of Wainwright's report:

> I especially recall in its early years that ASPI took a different position on the possibility of intervening in the Solomon Islands. In time the government decided on a course of action which chimed with that put forward by ASPI. It was a significant change in policy direction. Events demonstrated the wisdom of that change.[2]

Much Canberra policy orthodoxy was swept aside as Australia galvanised to create what became the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Previous Australian policy had been judiciously proper in respecting the sovereignty of South Pacific states. That hands-off stance was explained to me in 2002 by the secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department, Ashton Calvert: Canberra's aim in the South Pacific was to 'cleverly manage trouble'.

A gap had opened between Defence guidance about Australia's determination to fight for the island arc and what Canberra would do for the stability of the troubled nations of the arc. Well into the 1990s, Australia promised to do its bit so that island states could 'look after their own strategic interests'; in a crisis, the focus of the Australian military would be the 'evacuation of Australian citizens'.[3]

At the start of 2003, Australia's policy in the South Pacific was to manage problems without getting too close to what was going wrong. Canberra might help if asked, but island governments would fix themselves. Australia could do only so much to relieve all that ailed Australia's arc.[4]

While lamenting the crisis in Solomon Islands in January 2003, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stressed that Australia couldn't 'recolonise' the South Pacific:

> Sending in Australian troops to occupy Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme. It would be widely resented in the Pacific region. It would be very difficult to justify to Australian taxpayers. And for how many years would such an occupation have to continue? And what would be the exit strategy? The real show stopper, however, is that it would not work—no matter how it was dressed up, whether as an Australian or a Commonwealth or a Pacific Islands Forum initiative.[5]

The following month, the government released its Foreign Policy White Paper, noting that Australia had major interests in the stability and development of the South Pacific. Under the heading 'What Australia can and cannot do to help', the paper expressed the non-colonial mantra:

> When problems are so tightly bound to complex cultural traditions and ethnic loyalties, only local communities can find workable solutions. Australia stands ready to help those South Pacific countries willing to help themselves by tackling the problems of poor governance and economic underperformance.[6]

So, Australia would 'stand ready'—a useful diplomatic phrase for a wary nation. Stand there. Be ready. And, in this noncommitted posture, continue just to stand.

Two months after the White Paper, the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Allan Kemakeza, faxed a desperate letter to Australia's Prime Minister on 22 April 2003, pleading for help. The chaos in Honiara had become so bad that cabinet couldn't convene for fear of being held to ransom by armed gangs. The new (British) police commissioner in Solomon Islands couldn't arrest one of his own senior officers who had walked into the Treasury and demanded money.

The response to that appeal from Honiara was the start of the policy revolution.

The Pacific chapter in the White Paper, issued in February, was to have set the policy course for the rest of decade. By July, those prescriptions had been shredded as Australian police and troops led the regional intervention into Solomon Islands—a remarkable example of how declared policy and set strategy can be remade by events and changed political judgements.

Solomon Islands was in dire need, and the Pacific Islands Forum supported action. Australia would lead with the essential money and muscle. Yet, in launching the intervention—and in its eventual resilience and endurance—a key to success was in the name: it was a regional assistance mission.

The forum offered legitimacy as well as support. The Solomons turned for help not just to the region's big power but to all its neighbours. In all the twists of Solomon Islands' politics in coming years, that regional dimension was RAMSI's anchor as well as badge.

ASPI offered fresh thoughts to a government in need of better answers, as John Howard's cabinet discarded the advice of officials in deciding to intervene. Wainwright reflected that her report provided a ready-made, high-level blueprint:

> We proposed the operation should be police, rather than military led: the security challenges facing Solomon Islands were of a kind best tackled by police, and the optics of a police-led operation would be more benign. Such an intervention would require Solomon Islands' consent and should be multinational, with regional endorsement and participation. It should have two phases: the first would address the law and order crisis, and the second would be a comprehensive, long-term capacity building program to tackle governance and economic challenges which were fuelling the crisis.[7]

Australia stopped worrying about an exit strategy from its own region and made a commitment to the Solomons that lasted 14 years.

The authority of *Our failing neighbour* was helped by those named as contributing to its thoughts: Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, a South Pacific correspondent based in Honiara for 15 years; Quinton Clements of the Australian National University; and one of the greats of Australian diplomacy in the islands, Greg Urwin, later that year elected by island leaders as the only Australian to serve as secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum.[8]

The credibility of the ASPI report was further bolstered because it included two contributions from Honiara bluntly calling for Australian action. The Governor-General, John Ini Lapali, wrote that some government ministers saw Australia as 'reserved and noncommittal', deploring Canberra's 'wait-and-see attitude' when the Solomons needed help.

The first prime minister of the Solomons, Peter Kenilorea, then the speaker of parliament, wrote: 'I fully support any direct involvement of Australia in the area of the peace process, law and order, revival of our collapsed economy and reconstruction of our social sector—education and medical services.'

A year later, in June 2004, John Howard used a speech to ASPI to describe the terms of his government's somersault:

> Australia has entered a new phase in its strategic role in the Pacific—confident to lead, confident in what we offer, and confident we are seen as partners for progress. There was a time not so long ago when sensitivities about alleged 'neo-colonialism' perhaps caused Australia to err on the side of passivity in our approach. Those days are behind us as we work constructively with others to address the challenges faced by our immediate neighbourhood … Australia has a particular responsibility to help those countries struggling to secure the basic requirements of law and order. In this context, the RAMSI mission in the Solomons serves an important demonstration—both to those who value peace and order and to those who might seek to undermine our efforts.[9]

On 30 June 2017, RAMSI completed its work in Solomon Islands after 14 years. Australia had filled the post of special coordinator throughout and paid most of its $3 billion cost. The final RAMSI coordinator, Quinton Devlin, told ASPI the mission was a 'genuine success' because of the size of the political and community disaster Solomon Islands had avoided.[10]

RAMSI, he said, 'put an end to a dire humanitarian situation on Australia's doorstep and reversed the decline of a disintegrating nation that threatened security and stability in the broader Pacific region. RAMSI halted Solomon Islands' descent into lawlessness and towards economic collapse and state failure'.

The criticisms of RAMSI were often as big as its claimed achievements. The intervention was attacked as an 'emerging parallel state', for encroaching on Solomon Islands' sovereignty, for heavy-handedness and 'mission creep'.

Devlin's response was that frequently 'criticisms came from the political class in Solomon Islands, which in some quarters resisted RAMSI's suggested good governance and financial reforms, and in others, weren't happy that RAMSI was involved in the investigation and arrests of MPs'.

The long foreign intervention had enjoyed remarkable support: surveys conducted from 2006 to 2013 showed that popular backing for RAMSI never dropped below 85%.

The big bill and the long stay reflect the ambition and scope of the original mandate agreed by Solomon Islands and the Pacific Islands Forum. That called for state building, not just stabilisation, as Devlin set out:

- restore civil order [in Honiara and throughout the rest of the country, including confiscating illegal weapons, investigating and prosecuting criminal offences, strengthening the courts and prison system and protecting key government ministries]
- stabilise government finances [including securing revenue collection and controlling expenditure, strengthening financial administrative safeguards and obtaining donor and international financial institutions' support]
- promote longer term economic recovery and revive business confidence [including implementing economic reform, dealing with corruption and improving debt management]
- rebuild the machinery of government [including the functioning of the national parliament, the cabinet, the public service and the electoral process].

Devlin said that Australia's RAMSI role 'invigorated and reinforced Australia's relationships' across the South Pacific', calling the rebuilding of the Solomons one of Australia's finest foreign policy achievements of recent decades: 'It has made Australia and the region a safer place. It has also helped cement Australia's leadership in the Pacific and as a security partner of choice'.

Yet RAMSI's 14-year trek proved that 'even with all the resources and good will in the world, there are limitations on what states can do to help other states address the causes of their insecurity, even while restoring that security.' Devlin said RAMSI showed that state-building interventions must be:

- welcomed by the host government and public
- viewed as providing the nation the time and breathing space to recover the lost ground and address the underlying causes of the conflict, rather than as a panacea for all ills

- drawn from and endorsed by the region
- deployed and operated under a clear legal framework
- commenced with large numbers and superior firepower if restoring law and order
- not persuaded to drawdown quickly or look for an early exit strategy
- conscious that it could be an extended commitment of up to 15 years.

RAMSI saved the Solomons from crocodiles. That's more than a figurative boast. The destruction of all guns and the disarmament of local police meant that only RAMSI was legally allowed to possess or use guns. A crocodile cull was part of what RAMSI did to make Solomon Islands safer.

Australia's island arc

The leading role in RAMSI and in East Timor in 1999 was vital work conducted as neighbourhood policy.

Canberra had done a reset—what John Howard called in 2004 'a new phase in its strategic role in the Pacific'.[11]

Australia's readiness to act had been brought into line with the interests it had always declared in the island arc running from Timor-Leste through Papua New Guinea (PNG) into the South Pacific (with New Zealand supporting the other end of the arc).

ASPI's work on East Timor and the South Pacific—then and since—has used a wide understanding of security. At a mid-point between 'stand ready' inactivity and colonial paternalism lies the policy ground where island needs and Australia's interests come together.

Before Solomon Islands, Wainwright had authored a report on East Timor as it transitioned to independence in May 2002. *New neighbour, new challenge* identified themes often revisited over two decades in the institute's work on the security of the nations of the island arc—diverse countries that share many similar problems.

With a 'big stake' in East Timor as a viable state free from foreign interference and serious internal unrest, Wainwright said, Australia must recognise the scale of the task, make a long-term and comprehensive commitment (properly funded and coordinated), give police priority, and build international support.[12]

When Hugh White and Wainwright turned to PNG in 2004, they argued:

> Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of Australia's three top-priority foreign policy challenges, along with China–US relations and the future of Indonesia. The deep nature of the problems in PNG makes it perhaps the most difficult we face. It is the one which probably places the biggest demands directly on Australia, and the only one we face largely alone.[13]

In a description with echoes across Melanesia, White and Wainwright said that many of PNG'S long-term trends were negative, as things slowly but steadily worsened and institutions weakened:

> A vicious cycle links failing service delivery, falling revenues and national fragmentation with increasing fragility of government institutions, poor economic performance and lack of legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people. The longer this cycle continues, the more vulnerable PNG becomes. Underlying all of PNG's problems are pervasive and systemic weaknesses in the capacity of the PNG state to provide effective government. While PNG has considerable assets, including many talented and dedicated people, it has not developed the capacity to govern effectively; and indeed that capacity has declined significantly.[14]

When Ron May reported again later in the decade, PNG had recently completed its seventh post-independence elections, retaining its position 'as one of the few post-colonial states to have maintained an unbroken record of democratic government'. Despite that achievement, PNG had a poor press because of low levels of development, falling social indicators and inadequate government.

Australia's task, May wrote, was to contribute to a harmonious and viable society without being accused of compromising PNG's sovereignty: 'If Australia is seen as trying to impose its values and concerns on Papua New Guinea, or even of overwhelming Papua New Guinea with new development initiatives, its efforts could be counter-productive.'[15]

In 2008, ASPI convened an 'independent task force' to report on a new relationship between Australia and the Pacific islands. One ambitious element added to the calls for improved relations, better governance, enabling security and economic growth, and deepening the knowledge of Australians about the islands.

The big recommendation—an ambition spanning decades—was to integrate Australia's arc with Australia:

> More broadly, the ASPI Task Force believes the best way forward in this endeavour lies in a regional integration of Australia and the Forum Island states conceived in the widest sense—not only in the liberalisation of trade and investment already under way but also in a measured opening of borders that would allow Pacific Islanders to work more easily in Australia and Australians to work more easily in the Pacific Islands, and, beyond that, in a growing interchange and cross-flow of people between Australia and the Pacific for a whole variety of positive purposes that would enrich both sides.[16]

The terms and ambition of 'integration' would keep recurring in Australia's discussion of the islands.

If demography is destiny, Melanesia's youth bulge foretells trouble in the decades out to 2050 because of the 'clear correlation' between civil conflict and youth bulges (the proportion of young adults aged between 15 and 29). In 2009, examining the nexus between demographics and security, Mark Thomson sought to map 'the underlying demographic terrain upon which history will plot a course'.[17]

Although Polynesia was close to being demographically stable, the prospects for Melanesia and Timor-Leste were of 'serious concern'. By 2050, the populations of PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were projected to more than double from 2000 levels, while Timor-Leste would grow more than fourfold. Economic growth rates for those nations were lacklustre, especially when compared with their population growth.

As statistical correlations go, the result was clear, Thomson reported: the likelihood of conflict was three times higher in countries with youth proportions of 40% or more than it was in countries with a proportion less than 30%. And Melanesia would continue to have youth proportions higher than 40%:

> Youth bulge generations are born into societies in which the population is growing rapidly and traditional socioeconomic structures are eroding. It's conceivable that the potential for unrest is heightened by having a high proportion of young people who are, by nature, inherently less risk averse.

The build-up of the ADF meant that Australia would be 'better able to render assistance in our immediate region than at any time since World War II', Thomson wrote:

> Similarly, we're now better able to control our borders than at any time in our history. Improved intelligence, surveillance and coordination and enhanced regional cooperation have been established, and the ADF's ability to assist has been boosted by the acquisition of a new class of more capable patrol vessels. Should it become necessary to ramp up our border protection to meet a surge in unauthorised arrivals or other activities that threaten our security, we have a sophisticated and solid base to build on.[18]

The message of Melanesia's youth bulge for Thomson was that Australia must redouble efforts to assist and develop, to guard its strategic and humanitarian interests in the island arc:

> In the absence of stronger and more determined action, the future in many parts of our immediate region is bleak. Australia should expand its program of engagement to help our neighbours build economic capacity, promote trade, strengthen governance and bolster security.

Following the model of its previous taskforce on the South Pacific, ASPI gathered another taskforce in 2011 to consider a better fit between Australia's national security and the aid program. Ideas included:

- Australia should follow the example of the US in conducting a quadrennial diplomacy and development review that would enable government to re-examine the aid program every four years, paying attention to the links between the aid effort and national security.
- Australia should establish a new Minister for Overseas Development Assistance in the Foreign Affairs portfolio.
- Australia should maintain its new aid commitment to Africa, but not at the expense of the Asia–Pacific.
- Australia should maintain its aid focus in the South Pacific, an area where China was 'fast growing in importance as an aid donor, investor and trade partner; Australia has compelling security interests to remain predominant in this region'.
- Australia should maintain aid commitments to PNG that were set to rise by as much as 50% over the next four years.
- An increasing aid program provided the opportunity to expand Australia's spending on climate change adaptation in Pacific countries.
- A separate security sector of the aid budget should be created to give recognition to the increasing importance of aid–security cooperation, giving greater transparency about aid expenditure by agencies such as the Australian Federal Police.[19]

The big breach in Australia's relations with the islands during the two decades was with Fiji, after the 2006 military coup by Frank Bainimarama. Criticism and then sanctions on members of the regime by Australia and New Zealand met angry pushback from Suva, becoming an argument about whose vision of Pacific regionalism should prevail.

The contest went to a new level in 2009, when Fiji's Court of Appeal ruled the 2006 coup illegal. In response, the constitution was abolished and all judicial appointments were revoked, so all power stayed with Bainimarama. Fiji was ejected from the Pacific Islands Forum. The punishment was taken as an insult by Fiji—a nation that sees itself as the creator of the forum and hosts the forum secretariat in Suva.

Australia should condemn Bainimarama but 'keep this in proportion', Anthony Bergin said; 'Fiji isn't Zimbabwe.' Even if Canberra–Suva dialogue was difficult, Canberra needed to offer rewards, not rancour, Bergin wrote:

> While we shouldn't exaggerate our potential influence, we must work closely with forces in Fiji to get the country moving towards an elected government in the near future and so capitalise on Fiji's place as the natural hub of the South Pacific. We should try and facilitate a positive and early outcome of the political dialogue in Fiji, and ensure that a post-election Fiji will want close cooperation with Australia. At the same time we must be realistic about our ability to influence developments within Fiji: we learnt to live with a military dominated government in Indonesia for thirty years. Thailand, with its history of coups, is one of our closest regional partners. The road back to democracy will not be easy. The military in Fiji will remain highly influential even after it returns to barracks.[20]

Richard Herr called for a fresh Canberra approach to eliminate festering irritants with Suva:

> The degraded state of relations between Australia and Fiji cannot be restored to their pre-coup status without addressing the profound distrust between the two governments. That will have to be turned around before significant re-engagement can be successful.[21]

Australia should look beyond the defiant language from Fiji, Herr said, and re-engage by:

- rebalancing the regional relationship, by limiting Fiji's suspension from the forum and admitting it to the Pacific free trade negotiations
- changing the rhetoric to avoid undiplomatic language
- abandoning 'indefensible travel bans' on families of members of Fiji's regime
- relaxing defence bans
- cooperating on non-traditional security issues.

Shunned by the Pacific Islands Forum, Suva turned to China and sought new expressions of regionalism that excluded Australia and New Zealand. Fiji remained a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), and China joined in seeking a more active role for the MSG. Ron May thought it unlikely that the MSG could pose a serious threat to the forum, but China was now a big aid donor, set to play a larger role in the islands:

> A unified MSG, backed by China, could provide a counterweight to the strong influences exerted by Australia and New Zealand through the Pacific Islands Forum. As the 'big brothers' in the island Pacific, Australia and New Zealand are always likely to be viewed with some suspicion by their smaller neighbours. At the same time, as countries with the greatest stake in maintaining a prosperous and peaceful Pacific, Australia and New Zealand can't afford to isolate themselves from Pacific island states and territories, even intransigent ones.[22]

Australia was losing influence over collective decision-making in the South Pacific, Richard Herr and Anthony Bergin judged in 2011. The islands were displaying an increasingly independent fascination with Asia, and preferred regional representation at the UN that excluded Australia:

> The Pacific islands region has been undergoing a substantial and dynamic change in its geopolitics, with profound consequences for Australia. The changing tectonics of the Asian century, the dramatic rise of China and a bitter intra-regional dispute with Fiji are amongst the most visible developments. Although Australia is the largest donor in the region as well as its most influential political actor, these geopolitical shifts have raised serious questions about the contemporary effectiveness of our regional relationships.[23]

The intimacy that Australia enjoyed through membership of the forum hadn't been negotiated through treaties, Herr and Bergin noted, but built by friendship and maintained by mutual respect. The coherence and robustness of the regional system was being tested as never before, and support for Australia's lead was faltering:

> There can be no doubt that effective regional relationships remain an important soft power asset for Australia. The trust that has come with being an accepted member of the regional family contributes enormously to maintaining those relationships and that power. The warmth of the family ties is a highly valuable foreign policy advantage, and prudence demands that it be maintained.

In *Securing the Pacific* in 2013, Karl Claxton wrote of the serious security challenges—mainly internal—facing all of Australia's Melanesian partners and most of Polynesia and Micronesia.

Having concentrated on the Middle East and North Asia, Australian defence thinking was swinging back to stability and security in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste.[24]

Every Defence White Paper since 1976 had included the South Pacific as a main focus, Claxton noted, and the 2013 DWP had made the islands the principal task after preventing attacks on Australia:

> Canberra's renewed attention mainly reflects concerns that security in the near neighbourhood could deteriorate quickly in the face of persistent development and security challenges, requiring the ADF to conduct stabilisation missions. The challenges include fast-growing populations, youth bulges, high unemployment, periodic political instability and poor governance … The focus on regional security gives the ADF a coherent foundation for force structure planning based on 'credible contingencies' that are actually likely, and provides opportunities to retain useful and interesting roles after Afghanistan. The regional focus reflects slight anxieties about local ripples from China's rise too.

The swing back to the South Pacific continued in the 2016 DWP and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update.

The 2016 DWP repeated that, after defending Australia, the second strategic defence interest was a secure nearer region, encompassing maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific:

> Australia cannot be secure if our immediate neighbourhood including Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries becomes a source of threat to Australia. This includes the threat of a foreign military power seeking influence in ways that could challenge the security of our maritime approaches or transnational crime targeting Australian interests.[25]

The foreign power seeking influence got even more explicit treatment in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, which described an era of state fragility, marked by coercion, competition, grey-zone activities and increased potential for conflict.

Part of the response to what was on the horizon was the expansion of the over-the-horizon radar. The Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN) would be extended 'to provide wide area surveillance of Australia's eastern approaches'.[26]

'Eastern approaches' was a polite way of saying 'Melanesia'.

Australia wanted a constant view of every ship and plane operating in the South Pacific arc. What JORN did for Australia's northern and western approaches was to be extended to the east.

The strategic update announced that the JORN site at Longreach in central Queensland would be expanded to look east as well as north. The existing Longreach transmission station covered most of PNG and further north to the Bismarck Sea. A new eastern array will sweep around from PNG to cover Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, probably reaching out as far as Fiji.

The update allocated $700 million to $1 billion to 'operational radar network expansion', in the period to 2030.

A driver for the Jindalee decision was given in one sentence in the South Pacific chapter of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's memoir: 'In recent years, China has been reported as taking an interest in establishing a naval base in variously PNG, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands.'[27]

Those 'reports' express what Canberra thinks is a grave new fact: our strategic interests in the South Pacific are directly challenged by China. That stark fact casts a deeply different light on Australia's desire to be the preferred security partner of the islands. It's a thought about China at the heart of the third paragraph of Chapter 1 of the 2020 strategic update:

> Since 2016, major powers have become more assertive in advancing their strategic preferences and seeking to exert influence, including China's active pursuit of greater influence in the Indo-Pacific. Australia is concerned by the potential for actions, such as the establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region.[28]

Link the concerned thoughts in that sentence about 'establishment of military bases' and 'our immediate region' to express this judgement: Australia thinks China wants a base in Melanesia. If that fear were to become a reality, Australia would have a constant Jindalee eye on every ship and plane.

Australia hadn't had to worry about a security threat from the east since the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942. Now we did.

Crowded and complex

Crowded and complex was the headline title of a 2017 ASPI paper by Joanne Wallis. In a phrase, she had captured the mood and the trend of geopolitics in the South Pacific.[29]

Echoing that mood, the 2018 Boe Declaration of the Pacific Islands Forum referred to a 'dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region'.[30] Australia's Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, described living with 'the reality of a more strategically crowded Southwest Pacific'.[31]

Joanne Wallis wrote that Australia remained by far the largest aid donor to the region, but the islands saw that they had more diplomatic options:

> The increasingly crowded and complex geopolitical environment in the South Pacific has important implications for Australia, particularly given our strategic interest in being the region's 'principal security partner' in order to ensure that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on Australia or threaten allied access or our maritime approaches.[32]

To judge the impact of Chinese influence in the islands, Richard Herr produced a study on the yin and yang of Chinese soft power. China was now 'the second most engaged external power in the region' with extensive influence, 'and that's affecting the relations that the Island countries have with their traditional friends, including Australia'.

Herr cautioned, though, that Beijing's economic power wasn't translating easily into soft power:

> The admiration that Pacific Island states feel for China is genuine. However, on balance, China's current regional soft power lacks breadth and depth, although it's still evolving. A major reason for querying the strength of Chinese soft power in the Pacific Island region is its limited texture.[33]

Herr judged that Australia had a substantial lead in soft-power influence. Canberra's best strategy would be to concentrate on 'improving those assets that have made our soft power so influential for decades, rather than responding negatively to counter much more limited and still evolving Chinese soft power in the region'.

Herr recommended that Canberra not engage in a blame game over 'who lost the Pacific to China'. Instead, the focus must be on using Australia's own soft power in the islands, including grassroots connections, elite networks, the promotion of small and micro-enterprises, and investment in infrastructure. The policy push must avoid the appearance of competitive aid-giving ('dollar diplomacy'). And playing to the shared values of open societies, journalism in the islands needed Australian support to prevent 'soft-power freedoms from being used for sharp-power manipulation of information'.

In 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull launched Australia's Pacific 'step-change', which was a policy push adopted by his successor, Scott Morrison, as a 'step-up' and an embrace of Australia's 'Pacific family'.

ASPI dubbed the steps a policy pivot to the South Pacific, with a paper describing the pivot as an expression of Australia's 'destiny, duty and desires' in PNG and the islands.[34] Australia's deep strategic denial instinct was roused. Canberra fretted at China's arrival and worried that its central role and leadership in the region were being tested.

Date the pivot from November 2017, when Australia launched its Foreign Policy White Paper, devoting one of eight chapters to the South Pacific under the heading, 'A shared agenda for security and prosperity'.

Without naming China, the paper warned of 'competition for influence and economic opportunities' straining the islands' capacity to absorb aid, increasing debt and undermining regional coordination.

Reaching beyond the usual language of partnership with the South Pacific, Australia offered economic and security integration. The integration policy was a new official ideal: not just neighbours, but joined. The White Paper unveiled the integration vision with an initial but ambitious sketch.

> The Government is delivering a step-change in our engagement with Pacific island countries. This new approach recognises that more ambitious engagement by Australia, including helping to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions, is essential to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific. Our partnership with New Zealand will be central to advancing this agenda.[35]

Australia's 'new approaches' would have three priorities:

- promoting economic cooperation and greater integration within the Pacific and also with the Australian and New Zealand economies, including through labour mobility
- tackling security challenges, with a focus on maritime issues
- strengthening people-to-people links, skills and leadership.[36]

Australia and New Zealand offer economic and security integration to uphold the region by holding it closer.

Integration is a confronting idea for the identity and sovereignty of the independent nations of Australia's arc.

Scott Morrison showed political and diplomatic insight by talking about Australia as part of the 'Pacific family'. The family imagining offers much, not least a lens to widen Australia's understanding of our neighbours.

Family feeds naturally into ideas of community, launching a discussion about a shared future, not dominance by Canberra or Wellington.

Family offers a story about history and the future that Australians can embrace and the people of PNG and the islands (and Timor-Leste) might accept. It's an explanation of belonging and responsibility—an imagining offering more equality than talk of 'our patch' or 'our backyard'.

Family is a human expression of Australia's major new offer to the South Pacific: economic and security integration. As an idea, integration is big and difficult policy dressed in neutral, bureaucratic tones. Canberra hasn't managed to construct a story about integration that inspires or excites. Nobody's going to mount a great campaign for integration. Family is different: emotion and commitment can be added to the policy ambition.

Morrison walked the family talk by making bilateral visits beyond PNG to neighbours such as Vanuatu and Fiji (it was striking that those were the first bilateral visits by an Australian Prime Minister to Port Vila and Suva not tied to a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum).

In Vanuatu, Morrison said that, if Australia was going to step up, it would have to show up: 'When a family member or a friend invites you to visit their home, Australians more than often say: "Yes, of course we'll come", and who would ever turn down an invitation to visit Vanuatu?'[37]

The real test was in Suva. Since the 2006 coup, the Fiji–Australia relationship had been defined by fights and diplomatic freeze—the roughest of family feuds.

Proclaiming a reset and an open and candid future, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama embraced the family concept: 'I am proud to say that Prime Minister Morrison and I have dubbed a new Fiji–Australia Vuvale Partnership aiming to consolidate our two countries' relations in order to leverage new opportunities and address common challenges.'[38]

In Fiji's indigenous i-Taukei language, *vuvale* means family. Here was a significant political gift from a leader who had spent a decade waging diplomatic war against Canberra. Bainimarama had decided Australia had things Fiji needed, even if only to balance its ties with China.

The *vuvale*/family gift was the heart of Morrison's keynote speech in Suva:

> We are vuvale and this principle of vuvale is something we feel very deeply about. It's a different kind of relationship … [T]o talk about vuvale is to go beyond diplomacy, it's to talk about something deep and something rich, something that is very local, something that is very 'home' and something which connects peoples more than any words or any documents can.[39]

In diplomacy, the ownership of good ideas is usually mixed. In the preparation for Morrison's visit to Suva to inter past acrimony and anoint future accord, *vuvale*/family had became the motif. Whoever offered it first, Morrison has embraced it and made it central to Australia's pivot.

The hard part will be translating family into Australia's policy of integration with the South Pacific.

New Zealand will be central in setting the ambition for and the limits to integration. Wellington must play the special role it claims for itself in the Pacific. New Zealand knows all the benefits of alliance with Australia and the free movement of goods, services and people. Yet that embrace of the kangaroo has never hurt kiwi identity or sovereignty. New Zealand is proudly itself, while prospering from the kangaroo partnership. The New Zealand experience of partnership with Australia is the positive model for the creation of a Pacific community to serve the Pacific family.

To succeed, the pivot must be a long-term policy with a broad vision of what Australia and New Zealand offer the South Pacific. The pivot needs two dimensions: power and people.

Power is about Australian policy—diplomatic, defence, trade, aid, business, communications and international broadcasting—driven by our strategic denial instinct. The power questions

for Australia are about our interests and influence, but also about our values. And that brings us to the Pacific family.

The people dimension is about Australian values meeting the values and needs of the diverse peoples of the Pacific family living in Australia's arc.

Covid-19 highlighted that people dimension, in the same way disasters always do. In April 2020, Cyclone Harold battered Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga—a category 5 tropical cyclone that was the second strongest ever recorded in Vanuatu. Then came the pandemic.

'Crises don't wait in line', Paul Barnes observed in ASPI's *Pacific disaster prevention review* of eight island states. The aftermath of Harold and the arrival of the virus, Barnes wrote, showed the dilemmas of the Pacific, which was facing cascading and cumulative impacts:

> While public health protocols may advise closing borders and physical distancing as part of coping with the virus, disaster relief normally entails the rapid transfer of emergency supplies and the movement of support personnel across borders and regions into devastated areas. The Pacific island countries and territories (PICs) aren't alone in having to respond to the convergent challenges of climate/weather hazards and emergent diseases: these are currently global issues. A critical difference between the Pacific and many other regions is the significant vulnerability of the region to natural hazards before the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic is an ongoing global health and socio-economic crisis with a long tail of effects that will remain concerning into the future. Distance from major continental landmasses and being at the periphery of major supply chains and transportation routes doesn't confer protection on PICs.[40]

ASPI mounted a project on the vulnerabilities of Indo-Pacific island states in the Covid-19 era. Two key themes dominated the mosaic of challenge:

> One concerns the way vulnerabilities are expressed as challenges. The second identifies the opportunities that resilience can create. Many small island states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans lack the resilience in medical infrastructure—physical and human—to absorb the onslaught of the pandemic if it had hit them with the ferocity of the European or American experience. While this hasn't occurred (and may not, if an effective vaccine reaches them soon), their economic resilience has been put under serious pressure by the policies adopted to manage the pandemic's continuing public health threat. Consequently, the more visible vulnerabilities and resilience that Covid-19 has exposed throughout 2020 have had more of an economic than a medical accent.[41]

Notes

1 Elsina Wainwright, *Our failing neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands*, ASPI, Canberra, June 2003, online.

2 John Howard, 'Foreword from the former prime minister John Howard', in *ASPI at 15*, ASPI, Canberra, October 2016, online.

3 Department of Defence (DoD), *Strategic Review 1993*, Australian Government, December 1993, 29, 31, online.

4 My 2003 jeremiad against Canberra's 'inability to think new thoughts, to alter failed policies' was delivered in 'The South Pacific: policy taboos, popular amnesia and political failure', *Australian security in the 21st century* series, Menzies Research Centre, Canberra, February 2003, online. The final lines of the lament: 'It's time for Australia to stop being Uncle No and embrace our responsibility … There is no exit strategy for us in the South Pacific. After all, this is where we live.'

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Northern Australia

> Unlike in the Cold War, Australia's strategic geography as the pivot between the Pacific and Indian oceans is now assuming much more strategic relevance. This means that we will have to revisit the disposition of our forces and their capabilities in the north and west of our continent. The most vulnerable geographic approaches to our continent are still in the north.
>
> —Paul Dibb, 2019[1]

Northern Australia is a huge space. And 'the north' often feels forgotten as a vacant policy space—far away and out of mind for the rest of the continent.

The Northern Territory covers 1.3 million square kilometres, so each of its 250,000 people has the equivalent of five square kilometres. That's a lot of space to get around, conceptually as well as physically.

The unique view from the north—above the 26th parallel of south latitude—is expressed in ASPI's meme 'North of 26° south'.

Channelling the north's forgotten feeling, ASPI saw a widening gap between Canberra's declared policy commitment to northern Australia and what the Defence organisation actually does in the north.

The sceptical argument runs that the last time real attention was paid was in Paul Dibb's 1986 Review of Defence Capabilities and the 1987 Defence White Paper—billions of dollars went into bases and bare base infrastructure, with a real focus on the Northern Territory. Then, after the 1999 intervention in East Timor, Canberra's gaze went elsewhere.

Michael Shoebridge thinks defence attention to the north mimics a cicada's life cycle. For a brief period, it's out in the world, 'flying around and making a huge amount of noise, just long enough to mate and create the beginnings of the next generation'; the long years that follow are about quiet subterranean gestation until the next generation arrives.

As with any policy area that gets spasmodic attention, Shoebridge wrote, commentators had a habit of getting very simplistic, very fast:

> If you advocate a greater defence presence in northern Australia, you're just resurrecting the Dibb review and have an overdeveloped sense of paranoia about small numbers of men in black raiding Darwin infrastructure and Territorians' cattle stations. If you see the value of drawing in the more advanced infrastructure and larger population centres in southern Australia and on the east coast, you're just one of those defeatist, pre-Federation types who wants to withdraw south of the Brisbane line during conflict and wants to see all money and activity flow to your own favoured state.[2]

It's not just the six-monthly rotation of US marines through Darwin that remakes the strategic focus. First, regional nations are now richer and more capable, with greater ability to project military power. Neighbours such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are becoming even more important in Australia's security and diplomacy. Second, great-power competition is back.

Northern Australia's dispersed critical infrastructure and primary resources remain vulnerable to traditional and non-traditional national threats. Modern weapon systems put these resources within striking distance of conventional weapons, and they're also susceptible to hybrid warfare strategies. Having abandoned the comfort of the doctrine of 10 years' warning time of conflict, Canberra needs a new understanding for the north, combining its strategic and economic importance.

ASPI's initial modest program to look at defence policy in the north grew over three years to become a full-blown centre covering nation-building and national security. The institute sees the north as a key forward operating base that requires a scalable industry base, not provided only by market forces.

With the support of the Northern Territory Government, ASPI established the Northern Australia Strategic Policy Centre, with programs on 'The North and Australia's Security' and 'Nation-building in the North' and concentrating on:

- a strong public policy focus on the north in the broader security of Australia as strategic circumstances drive new thinking in Canberra
- updating strategic frameworks that remain anchored in the 1980s 'defence of Australia' context
- placing the north in broader discussions on home affairs, border security and customs, space, cybersecurity, humanitarian and disaster response, biosecurity and energy security.[3]

The head of the Northern Australia Strategic Policy Centre, John Coyne, sees the need to reconceptualise the north as a single scalable defence and national security ecosystem:

> [T]he gap is widening between strategic policy and Defence's actual activities and presence in the north. This could well be symptomatic of a gap in Australia's northern development policies. It is likely that with the significantly reduced warning times of future conflict the north of Australia will increasingly become either Australia's forward operating base (FOB), or its lily pad to another forward location within the Pacific or the first or second island chain.[4]

'North of 26° south' work includes:

- a case study of the decade-long development of the Port of Townsville as an example of 'collaborative nation building'[5]
- the need for an indigenous Australian civil defence force[6]
- making Darwin Australia's national digital hub and the linchpin of telecommunications connecting the US with the region[7]

- the need to end China's lease of the Port of Darwin[8]
- the export possibilities of Australia's clean energy future[9]
- supporting a rare-earths industry[10]
- building an education and training link between northern Australia and eastern Indonesia[11]
- the need for an Exmouth naval base to plug the naval gap between Perth and Darwin[12]
- viewing Darwin and Townsville as complementary partners negating each other's geostrategic limitations[13]
- the expansion of the Tindal air base[14]
- Australia's National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre in Darwin—set up after the 2002 Bali bombing—offering capability and support to medical teams across the Asia–Pacific[15]
- establishing a space program with the Australian Space Agency—the north is close 'to the equatorial sweet spot' to launch payloads into space[16]
- economic integration between Timor-Leste and northern Australia[17]
- making Darwin a resilient city.[18]

John Coyne saw 'little in the way of big nation-building thinking, beyond mining, north of the 26° South parallel'. And that applies to Defence as well:

> Defence has made its mind up that most of the ADF's capabilities are to be built, maintained and sustained in southern Australia, while the north is to be a kind of limited domestic forward operating base from which the ADF operates with an almost expeditionary mindset. Despite that psychology, which seems to infect planning, our critical combat systems will, in the most likely future conflict scenarios, deploy from and perhaps even fight from and in Australia's north and will need to be sustained in what's likely to be quite intense war fighting.[19]

One northern Australian issue with deep national resonance was the Northern Territory Government's decision in 2015 to lease the Port of Darwin for 99 years to the Chinese-owned company Landbridge.

A number of ASPI staff have been strong critics of the lease—this is a policy decision still subject to plenty of contestability.

In 2020, the Labor MP for Solomon in the Northern Territory, Luke Gosling, wrote for *The Strategist* on the need to rethink the Chinese lease. He said that federal legislation to stop states such as Victoria embracing China's Belt and Road Initiative should also apply to the Port of Darwin. To avoid 'blatant double standards', Gosling wrote, Darwin should be in the same conversation the federal government was having with Victoria:

> This government has said that it considers Victoria's BRI deal to be inconsistent with its foreign policy. But when it comes to our strategic northern port, that concern vanishes into thin air. For some reason, the BRI is against the national interest in one jurisdiction but fine in another.
>
> China is an important partner for Australia. But who owns our critical infrastructure is not a question about our relationship with China. It's about our sovereignty. Of China's 34 ports, none are foreign-owned and you can bet none will ever be. That seems consistent to me.
>
> If it's worried about policy consistency, the government should start by reviewing the Darwin Port deal.[20]

The Port of Darwin issue encapsulates Australia's current strategic dilemma:

- our relations with China
- our thirst for foreign investment
- our desperation and determination to keep the US engaged in Indo-Pacific security
- enhanced cooperation with the US Marine Corps and US Air Force in the north
- Defence's apparent strategic blind spot about the north
- Japan's huge strategic stake in liquefied natural gas exported from Darwin.

All those factors find anchor points in the Port of Darwin—and what the future defence of the north must mean.

Defence of the north

> For its own myopic reasons, the Defence Department has, frankly, wanted to reduce its footprint in the north. In fact, the opposite must happen.
>
> —Peter Jennings[21]

Australia now thinks about defence of the north in partnership with the US.

The US Marine Corps deployment to Darwin is heading into its second decade.

At the 2020 AUSMIN talks, the US and Australia signed a statement of principles on alliance cooperation and force posture priorities in the Indo-Pacific for the next decade.[22] The US will fund a strategic military fuel reserve in Darwin. Discussions began on expanding US–Australia joint training exercises in the north 'to include additional partners and allies to bolster regional relationships and capabilities'.[23]

At an ASPI conference in 2021, Defence Minister Peter Dutton was asked whether he expected more marines in Darwin and US naval vessels operating out of the Perth naval base. His reply: 'Yes I do.'[24]

Dutton said an increased US presence 'is in our own security interests and it's in the interests of the US itself'. He said that the US role hadn't been hidden from the public since the 2011 agreement on the marines: 'We've been very clear—and to the credit of the Gillard government and others—there has been long-term strategic thinking along those lines and I would certainly encourage that.' The Defence Minister said that $8 billion will be spent on infrastructure works across the north of Australia in the next decade 'on facilities to train jointly with the US and others'.

The marines in Darwin are 'an important demonstration of America's commitment to Australia and Southeast Asian security', Peter Jennings wrote, 'based on an American judgement that northern Australia is increasingly important to Asia's security'. Australia needed a larger and more visible military presence across the north to protect the offshore oil and gas industry and to assert sovereign interest in a crowded and contested region, Jennings said:

> In Darwin, the strategic need will be to invest in bigger and more capable defence basing. We should work with the US to grow its Marine Corps presence. A larger defence presence in the north would position Darwin as a security hub, lending confidence in the region and counteracting China's attempts to dominate and demoralise the neighbourhood.[25]

Reflecting in 2019 on the experience of living with the marines, a retired ADF major general said 'implementation hasn't been without its irritants and the initiatives have been painfully slow to gather momentum', particularly negotiating cost-sharing arrangements. Michael Crane said that neither Defence nor the US should take for granted its social licence to operate in the Northern Territory. Despite frustrations, he concluded, the US had generally been well received in Australia and the region:

> Domestic critiques tend to come from those who decry ANZUS more broadly and from those concerned about the potential for the initiatives to destabilise our relationship with China. But the Chinese reaction has been mixed and surprisingly muted overall, and other regional neighbours, including Indonesia, have been quietly supportive … If we've sought to bolster the US presence in the region, we've certainly achieved that: while the trajectory has been uneven, the size and scope of US forces participating in the initiatives have continued to grow and, importantly, there's been no sign of the US resiling from its commitment.[26]

A US Army War College Fellow at ASPI, Todd C Hanks, wrote that the US finds itself relying more on its allies than at any time in the past 50 years, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. The lieutenant colonel observed that, while Australia valued its independence and self-reliance, its defence strategy and policies were increasingly aligned with the US effort to deal with the rapid rise of China as a near-peer competitor. He pointed to areas for growth of US–Australia cooperation:

- expand the Australian defence industrial base while securing and hardening supply chains
- establish a joint venture to manufacture critical ammunition within Australia

- increase the US Army force posture in northern Australia to take advantage of the region's strategic geography: '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.'
- increase multinational training opportunities, especially for the Quad
- expand Australia's defence partnership with Indonesia: 'The ADF's growing relationship with its Indonesian counterpart can only benefit US engagement to maintain a stronger defence cooperation relationship with Indonesia … A renewed focus on Indonesian maritime security operations also complements US defence cooperation priorities with Indonesia.'[27]

Resetting the north's national security posture will need Australia to think big, John Coyne wrote:

> While there are few federal votes to be had in Australia's north, and few politicians to represent those voters, economic possibilities abound. There's room to grow and expand, but that will require big thinking, not stovepiped policymaking. Without a socially and economically prosperous northern Australia, there will be insufficient industry and infrastructure support for future defence operations, including regional engagement and power projection.[28]

Once, Australia saw the north as its protection from the region, and the sea as a moat. Today the north is our bridge to the region, and the sea is our arterial connection.

The swing from shield to link is a great opportunity for the north and a great challenge for Australian policy.

Notes

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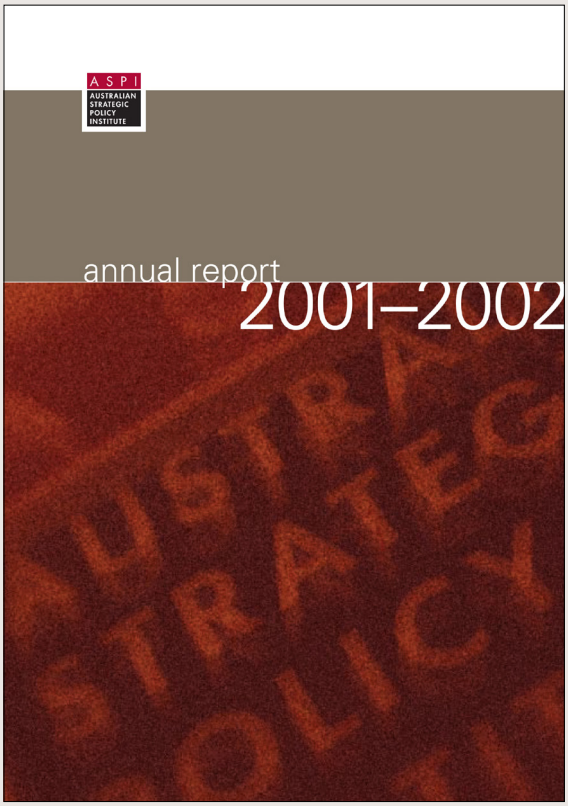
ASPI covers 2001–2021



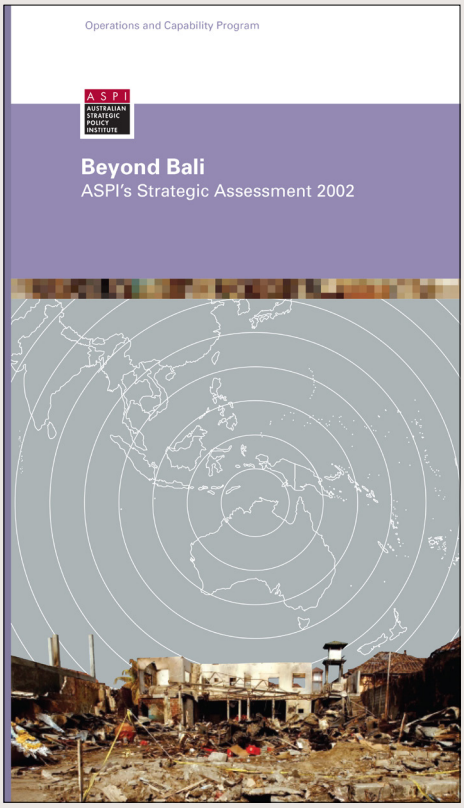
Annual report 2001–2002

2001

Note: ASPI was operating by late 2001, but there were no publications during that calendar year.

'ASPI is not just a new entrant to the strategic policy market; it is a new kind of participant. Speaking both to decision makers, and importantly, the wider community which has not been part of the debate traditionally. One of our key tasks is to define ASPI's role and modus operandi as a government funded but independent institute. During our first year ASPI has sought to establish its independence, and to present itself as closely focussed on the practical policy issues facing Australia. We aim to be directly competitive with Defence and other sources of policy advice to Government, and to provide clear views on alternative policy approaches. At the same time we have tried to avoid being drawn into an adversarial relationship with Government or with Defence. We want to establish a position as a contributor to the policy process, rather than as a critic of decisions once they are taken. Clearly the task of defining our role in the policy debate will take some time to complete, but we believe we have made a good start.'

—Hugh White, 'Director's report', *Annual report 2001–2002*, online.



Beyond Bali
ASPI's Strategic Assessment 2002

2002

'Terrorism is now a major security problem for Australia, and our most obvious strategic policy challenge is to find effective and proportionate responses to it. We need to prioritise according to one simple principle: while all aspects of the campaign against terrorism are important, priority should be given first to domestic efforts here at home, second to regional measures, and third to our contribution at the global level … We should now rate the risk of terrorist attack on Australia, and on Australians overseas, as High. We now need to approach the task of responding to terrorism on the basis that further attacks on Australia or Australians are more likely than not.'

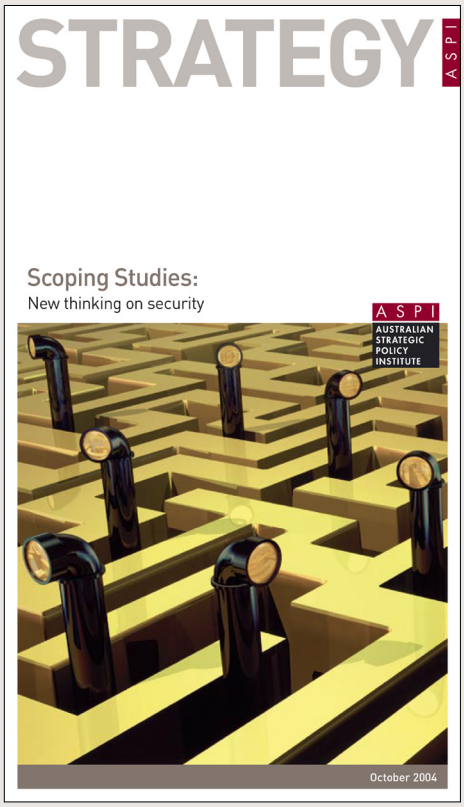
—Aldo Borgu, *Beyond Bali: ASPI's Strategic Assessment 2002*, 19 August 2002, online.

Our Failing Neighbour
Australia and the Future of
Solomon Islands

2003

'Australia's policy challenge is to find an approach to Solomon Islands which will address the acute law and order problems and establish a foundation upon which Solomon Islanders can rebuild their country. Such an approach must avoid the perils of neocolonialism and be implemented at levels of cost and risk that are proportionate to and justified by the scale of our national interests … A new approach might look like this. Australia could initiate and support a sustained and comprehensive multinational effort, which, with the consent of Solomon Islands, would undertake a two-phase program to rehabilitate the country.'

—Elsina Wainwright, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands,* 10 June 2003, online.

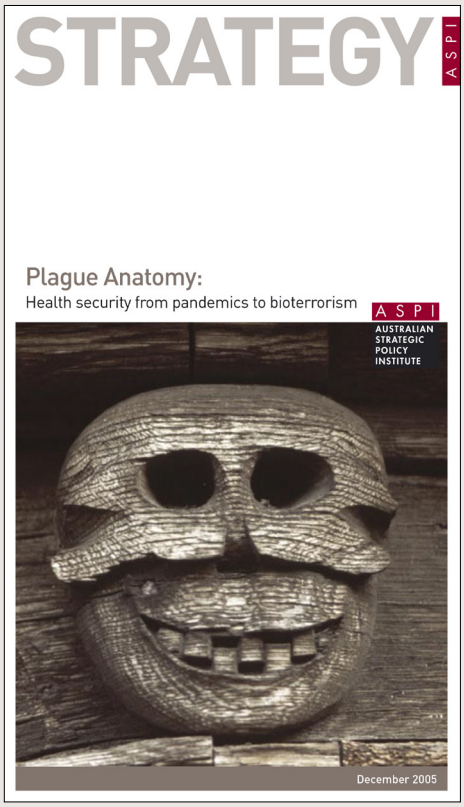


Scoping Studies:
New thinking on security

2004

‘Whether John Howard or Mark Latham is in the Prime Minister’s chair when the new Cabinet meets, the Australian national interest will be precisely the same: the security and prosperity of the Australian people, and the maintenance of a world system congenial to our hopes of justice and welfare for ourselves and other peoples. The policy makers’ focus must therefore be on the strategies—diplomatic and economic rather than military—by which those objectives can best be advanced. Given the events of the past year or so, most of the arguments will be about how to balance our alliance with the US against our many other diplomatic and economic relationships, and our special security commitments in this part of the world.’

—Coral Bell, ‘The diplomatic underpinnings of security’, in *Scoping Studies: new thinking on security*, 19 October 2004, online.

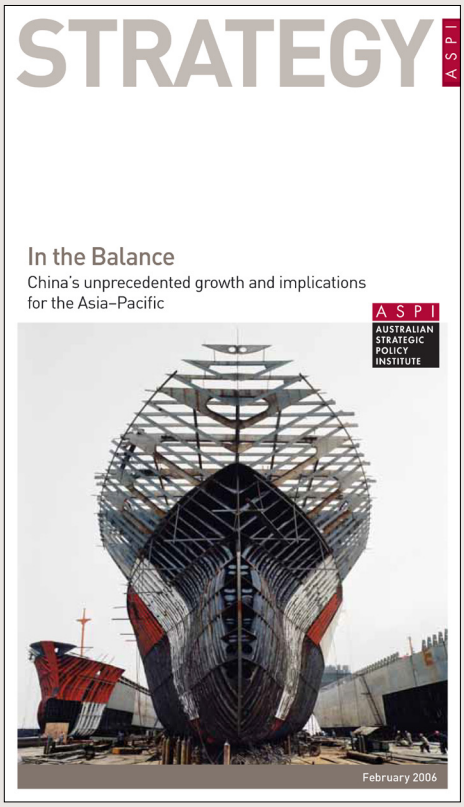


Plague Anatomy:
Health security from pandemics to bioterrorism

2005

'There would seem little doubt that globalisation has transformed the world, and that with increasing interconnectedness between states and increasing trade and travel, health has ceased to be "national" and become "international". Infectious disease is now just a plane journey away, and it is no longer possible to protect Australian citizens without addressing infectious disease elsewhere in the world. The revolution in cheap air travel brings with it its own concerns. With more than 1.5 billion airline passengers carried annually to all corners of the globe, the safety that was once inherent in Australia's geographic isolation has disappeared.'

—Peter Curson, Brendan McRandle, *Plague Anatomy: health security from pandemics to bioterrorism*, 1 December 2005, online.

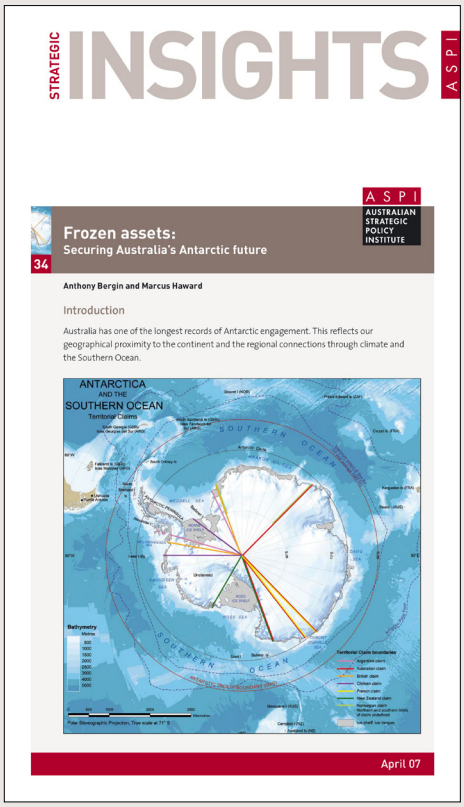


In the Balance
China's unprecedented growth and implications for the Asia–Pacific

2006

'Australia has adopted a pragmatic attitude towards the rise of China. She is seeking to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by China while maintaining a political distance because of potential disagreements over issues such as human rights and the alliance with the United States. There is no alternative to this policy of pragmatism because China could displace Japan as Australia's leading trade partner within ten years while Beijing will play a leadership role in the creation of new institutions such as the East Asian free trade zone. Australia will need a good diplomatic relationship with China in order to have a good relationship with Asia. Australia should also take advantage of its close relationship with the United States to encourage an equally pragmatic policy in Washington.'

—David Hale, *In the Balance: China's unprecedented growth and implications for the Asia–Pacific*, 28 February 2006, online.

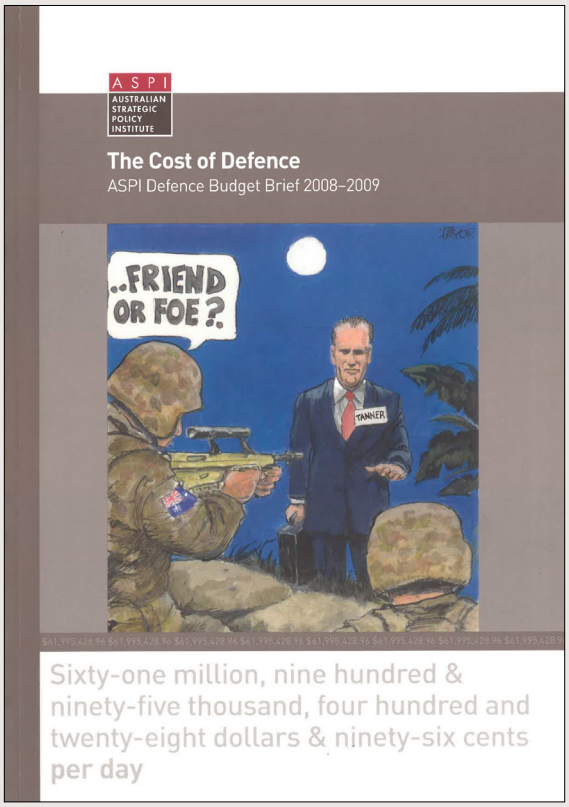


Frozen assets:
Securing Australia's Antarctic future

2007

'As the effects of climate change become more evident it will be to Antarctica that we must continue to turn for possible answers. Ice cores from Antarctica can tell us about the history of the earth's climate and, more importantly, help us predict the future with greater confidence. Sea level rise, when it comes, will partly have its origins in the continent immediately to our south … Australia has played a significant role in the development of the overall management of Antarctica. We have adopted a position of leadership in various international bodies and arrangements dealing with Antarctica. Antarctica tends to be viewed by policy makers as a settled policy arena, yet important questions remain. What are Australia's national policy interests in Antarctica? What are the key challenges likely to arise over the next decade that will shape our approach to Antarctica? Are we doing enough in Antarctica?'

—Anthony Bergin, Marcus Haward, *Frozen assets: securing Australia's Antarctic future*, 5 April 2007, online.

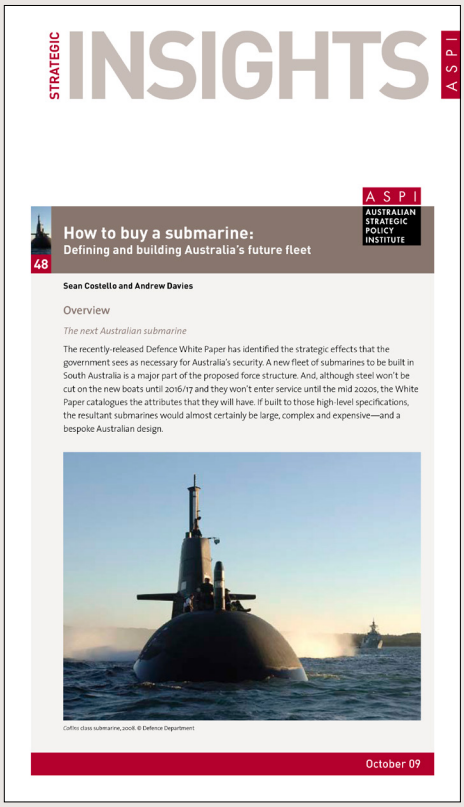


The Cost of Defence
ASPI Defence Budget Brief
2008–2009

2008

'Defence awoke from the Howard years with a throbbing hangover. Despite eight years of very generous funding, the like of which had not been seen since the 1960s, Defence's medium to longer term budget situation looked dire. Billions of dollars worth of new equipment was soon to arrive without the funding to crew and operate it, and future equipment purchases were going to cost billions of dollars more than initially projected. Unless more money was found—lots more money—the defence force would have to be cut. Such was the situation when, earlier this year, Defence embarked on a savings program to free up $10 billion over the forthcoming decade to help make means and ends meet. Then a very different picture emerged with the budget.'

—Mark Thomson, *The Cost of Defence: ASPI Defence Budget Brief 2008–2009*, 29 May 2008, online.

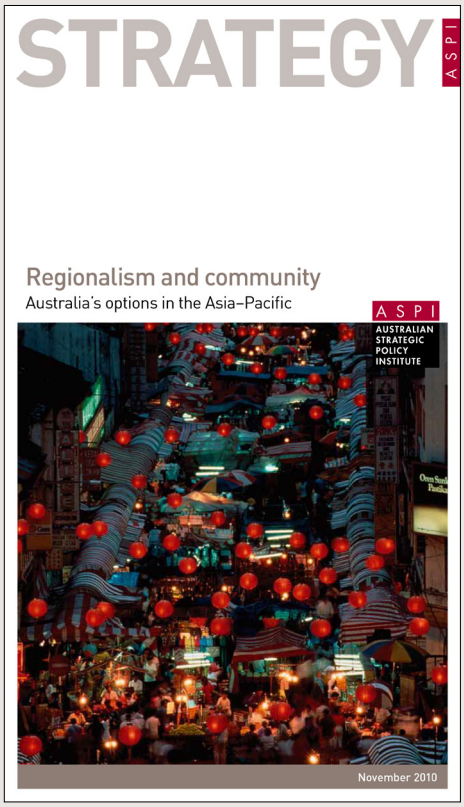


How to buy a submarine: Defining and building Australia's future fleet

2009

'[T]he ambition of the new submarine program will necessarily be bounded by the harsh realities of financial, industrial and engineering constraints and by workforce capacity. This ASPI paper argues that the capabilities of the new submarines should be determined by those realities, and that we may have to temper our capability desires against our threshold for accepting risk in some instances. The cost of the new fleet is also likely to be a significant consideration in future decisions. If the new submarine is to have all of the White Paper-mandated capabilities, they are likely to be significantly more complex, and larger, than their Collins class predecessors. If—like the Collins—the cost of the program follows historical trends, the fleet could cost as much as $36 billion (in 2009 dollars).'

—Andrew Davies, *How to buy a submarine: defining and building Australia's future fleet*, 29 October 2009, online.



Regionalism and community
Australia's options in the Asia–Pacific

2010

'This Strategy paper argues that Australia could enhance its regionalist credentials with activism, expertise and successful policy development. It advances five interlinked strategies for consideration. The first strategy advances a case for Australia to position itself as an agent of change in the Asia–Pacific region. The second strategy proposes that Australia take on the role of mediator, advancing relationship building. The third strategy seeks to exploit Australia's soft power assets—its influence and educational strengths—to strengthen regional relationships over the longer term. The fourth strategy is to promote sound design principles in new proposals for architectural renovation. The final strategy is that Australia should work towards building an enhanced regional consensus about the leadership, membership, mandate and sustainability of emerging regional structures.'

—Philomena Murray, *Regionalism and community: Australia's options in the Asia–Pacific*, 23 November 2010, online.

American primacy: what future?

2011

'Some analysts think the challenge to US primacy lies primarily at the level of US policy commitment—that it's really a problem of will rather than one of material power. Others say exactly the opposite—that US policy commitments haven't shifted much, but that the relative decline in US material assets is the basis for a gradual slippage in Washington's international leadership position. In truth, primacy's slipping on both fronts. Over the next ten years, we could well see both an America less confident about its place in the world and an America that faces greater challenges in converting its material power into influence … Primacy, in whatever form you can achieve it, is nothing to sneeze at. But for Australia, as for other US allies and partners, harder times lie ahead. The ANZUS alliance certainly isn't going to disappear; nor is it going to crumble. It just won't be the assured path to strategic outcomes that it was in an earlier era, when the US was effectively the only game in town.'

—Rod Lyon, Julia Rabar, *American primacy: what future?*, 23 June 2011, online.

Two steps forward, one step back
Indonesia's arduous path of reform

2012

'For Australia, it's important to build a close and constructive relationship with Indonesia and by so doing to ensure engagement to our north. The archipelago is no longer just—as Don Watson once described it—the "screen door" that locks Australians away from the world they know and understand. In many ways, Indonesia is a complementary partner for Australia, but for that partnership to unfold both governments would have to want it to be more than it is now. The path forward should be marked by mutual cooperation, democratic and accountable governance supported by the equitable and consistent rule of law, and the exploration of further collaboration in a range of mutually beneficial areas. Australia should be proactive in exploring new opportunities for cooperation with a reform-minded Indonesia—it's in our interests to draw Indonesia into a more important strategic role in regional security.'

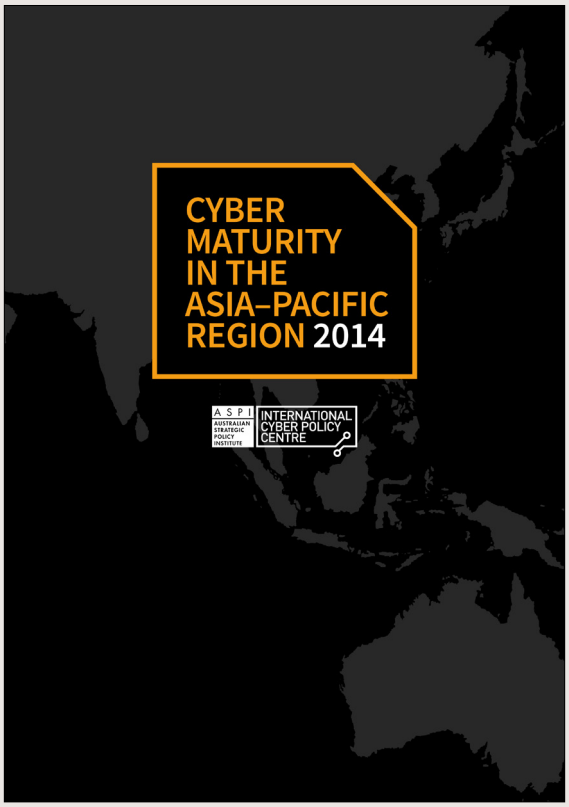
—Damien Kingsbury, *Two steps forward, one step back: Indonesia's arduous path of reform*, 31 January 2012, online.

Terms of engagement
Australia's regional defence diplomacy

2013

'This report reviews Australia's regional defence engagement. Its geographical focus is on our nearer region—the eastern Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands. This is the area where we can realistically expect to help shape the regional security environment in ways that will further Australia's national interests … Changes in the power relativities in the region are profound and have major implications for defence engagement. As regional defence forces expand and modernise and we lose our technological advantage, engagement becomes more about strategic partnerships and less about aid and assistance. This requires a significant change of mindset. We need to think differently about how we engage in the region and better understand what is meant by "strategic partnership". This isn't just an issue for the Defence organisation alone, but something that cuts across all aspects of our regional relations.'

—Anthony Bergin, Sam Bateman, Hayley Channer, *Terms of engagement: Australia's regional defence diplomacy*, 18 July 2013, online.

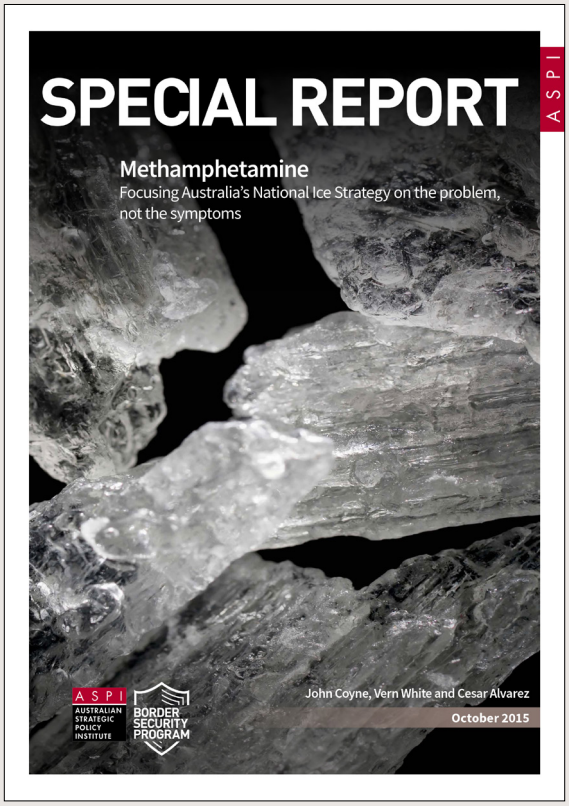


Cyber maturity in the Asia–Pacific region 2014

2014

'This report analyses the "cyber maturity" of 14 countries across the Asia–Pacific region, which represent a wide geographical and economic cross-section of the region. Australia's closest allies, the United States and the United Kingdom, have been included to provide an additional benchmark for overall national cyber maturity. "Maturity" in this context is exhibited by the presence, effective implementation and operation of cyber-related structures, policies, legislation and organisations. These cyber indicators cover whole-of-government policy and legislative structures, military organisation, business and digital economic strength and levels of cyber social awareness … Using the data from the metric we have also developed a separate "cyber engagement scale" for government and industry. The scale aims to be a reference tool for use in identifying opportunities for the sharing of best practice, capacity building, development and business opportunities.'

—Tobias Feakin, Jessica Woodall, Klée Aiken, *Cyber maturity in the Asia–Pacific region 2014*, 14 April 2014, online.



Methamphetamine
Focusing Australia's National Ice Strategy on the problem, not the symptoms

2015

'In contrast with more traditional responses to drug problems, this report argues that Australia needs a paradigm shift in its design and delivery of an ice strategy … It argues strongly to take a principled approach in the development of an ice strategy that's strategically focused on reducing harm to Australian communities, not on seizing drugs or making arrests. With this focus, strategists and policymakers will be able to develop surgical interventions to disrupt the factors that contribute to harm, and not merely the symptoms of the problem. In this strategy, law enforcement isn't focused on arrests, prosecutions, custodial offences or seizures, as none of those will have a guaranteed impact on the problem. The focus is on means to reduce the availability of drugs, the disruption of user behaviour and the integration of education and health initiatives.'

—John Coyne, Vern White, Cesar Alvarez, *Methamphetamine: focusing Australia's National Ice Strategy on the problem, not the symptoms*, 13 October 2015, online.

Why Russia is a threat to the international order

2016

'Putin claims the right to a sphere of strategic interest in Russia's neighbourhood, in which Western influence and involvement would be limited. That sphere probably includes not only Crimea and Ukraine, but also Belarus, the Baltic countries, Moldova and Kazakhstan. Putin's Russia seems set on a path to confrontation with the West and is now challenging the established post-World War II security order in Europe. Some Russian commentators argue that the current turn away from Europe may be why Russia is a threat to the international order more profound than in Soviet times … This paper analyses Russia's geopolitical ambitions, its military modernisation, the threat it poses to the international order and how the West should respond. It estimates the prospects for the Russian economy to assess how economic weakness might affect Russian behaviour. It concludes by addressing Moscow's strategic priorities in the Asia–Pacific region and the implications of Russia's rise for Australia.'

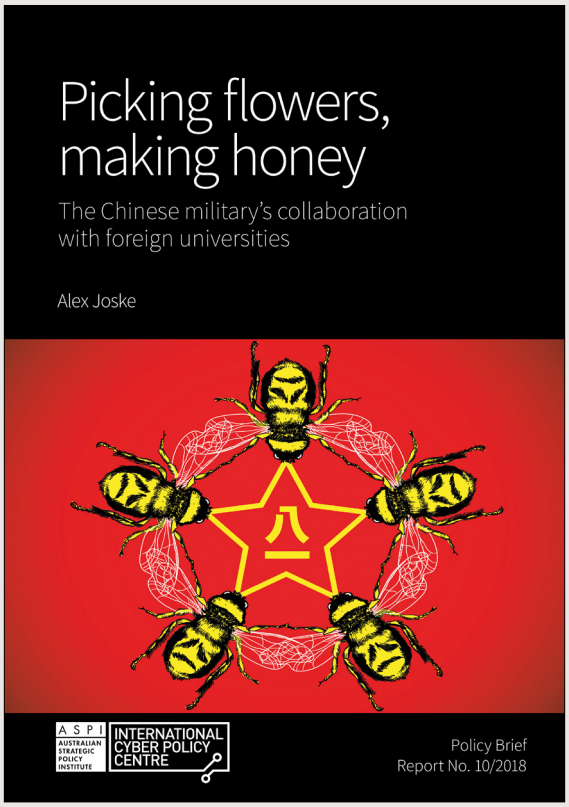
—Paul Dibb, *Why Russia is a threat to the international order*, 29 June 2016, online.

The Sultanate of Women
Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism

2017

'Unlike propaganda in previous conflicts, the propaganda disseminated by IS has framed the notion of jihad to transcend gender, thus ascribing specific—and equally important—roles to men and women. Women are positioned as integral to IS's caliphate-building project in Syria and Iraq and have been persuaded to migrate to the region. However, the reality is a far cry from the glamorised version of a "five-star jihad" that's been propagated by the media. IS has used a convergence of propaganda, media attention, intellectual and theological ignorance and a "warped version of feminism" to construct a hybrid role for the women of its caliphate. The number of Western women, in particular, who have migrated to IS-held territories has surprised governments, and that has affected the way policy has been developed and executed. The varied types of women drawn towards violent extremism in different capacities need to be addressed in CVE policy.'

—Sofia Patel, *The Sultanate of Women: exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism*, 13 February 2017, online.



Picking flowers, making honey
The Chinese military's collaboration with foreign universities

2018

'The activities discussed in this paper, described by the PLA as a process of "picking flowers in foreign lands to make honey in China" (异国采花 · 中华酿蜜), risk harming the West's strategic advantage. Helping a rival military develop its expertise and technology isn't in the national interest, yet it's not clear that Western universities and governments are fully aware of this phenomenon. Some universities have failed to respond to legitimate security concerns in their engagement with China. Current policies by governments and universities have not fully addressed issues like the transfer of knowledge and technology through collaboration with the PLA. Clear government policy towards universities working with the PLA is also lacking.'

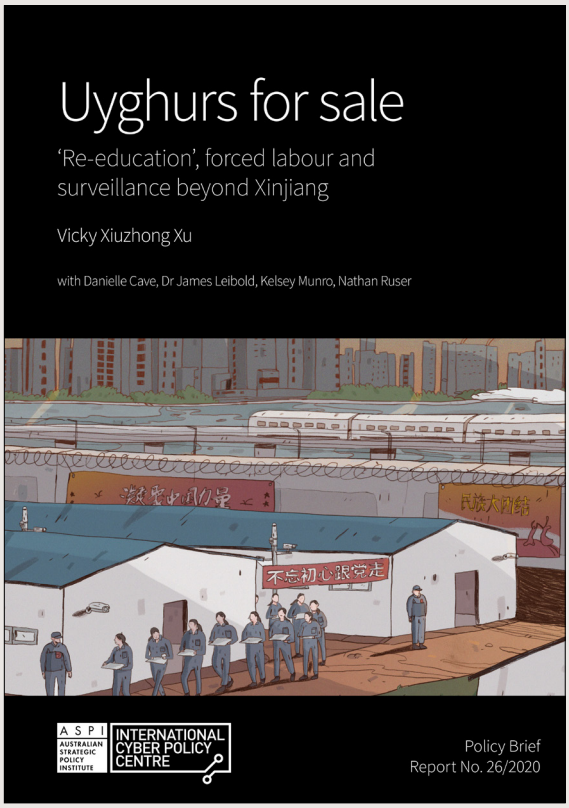
—Alex Joske, *Picking flowers, making honey: the Chinese military's collaboration with foreign universities*, 13 October 2018, online.

The Bushmaster
From concept to combat

2019

‘When the Bushmaster returns to the shot-up patrol vehicle five minutes later, it stops with its rear doors facing the wounded man and the soldier who’s trying to stabilise him. The medic has tied up the wound as best he can. The convoy commander, SASR Captain N, who was in the patrol vehicle, manoeuvres his men to reduce the weight of incoming fire. Just above their heads comes “grazing” fire from a machine-gun cutting back and forth at ground level, seeking them out and stopping them moving. They prepare to put the wounded man into the Bushmaster, but every time they put their heads up, they’re shot at. At one point, the wounded SASR trooper asks: “Is it bad?” The medic responds, “Well, I’m glad it’s on you and not me,” and the soldier, he says, “has a bit of a laugh” … The soldiers who emerged from the ambush were indeed impressed by the strength of the Australian-designed and -built “Bushie”, but they had no idea then that the sturdy vehicle nearly didn’t make it into production.’

—Brendan Nicholson, *The Bushmaster: from concept to combat*, 12 December 2019, online.

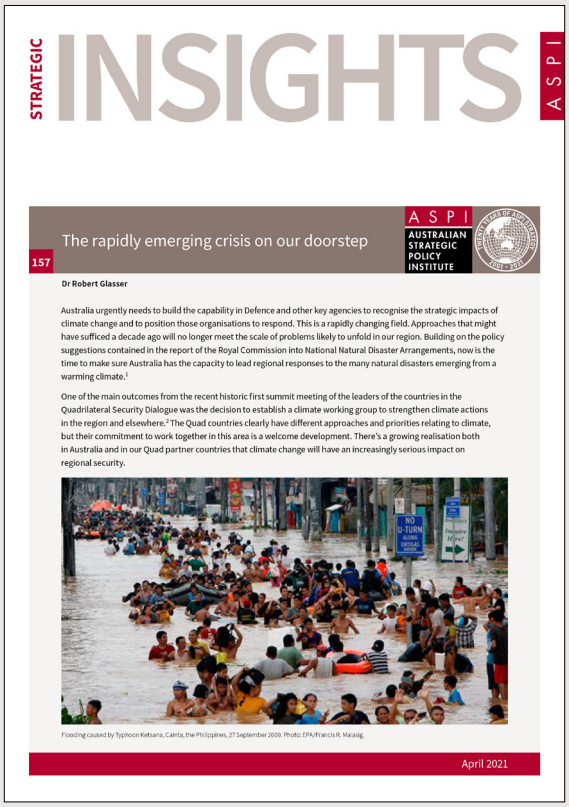


Uyghurs for sale
'Re-education', forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang

2020

'Since 2017, more than a million Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim minorities have disappeared into a vast network of "re-education camps" in the far west region of Xinjiang, in what some experts call a systematic, government-led program of cultural genocide. Inside the camps, detainees are subjected to political indoctrination, forced to renounce their religion and culture and, in some instances, reportedly subjected to torture. In the name of combating "religious extremism", Chinese authorities have been actively remoulding the Muslim population in the image of China's Han ethnic majority. The "re-education" campaign appears to be entering a new phase, as government officials now claim that all "trainees" have "graduated". There is mounting evidence that many Uyghurs are now being forced to work in factories within Xinjiang. This report reveals that Chinese factories outside Xinjiang are also sourcing Uyghur workers under a revived, exploitative government-led labour transfer scheme.'

—Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, with Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro, Nathan Ruser, *Uyghurs for sale: 're-education', forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang*, 1 March 2020, online.


STRATEGIC INSIGHTS ASPI

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The rapidly emerging crisis on our doorstep

ASPI AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Dr Robert Glasser

Australia urgently needs to build the capability in Defence and other key agencies to recognise the strategic impacts of climate change and to position those organisations to respond. This is a rapidly changing field. Approaches that might have sufficed a decade ago will no longer meet the scale of problems likely to unfold in our region. Building on the policy suggestions contained in the report of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, now is the time to make sure Australia has the capacity to lead regional responses to the many natural disasters emerging from a warming climate.[1]

One of the main outcomes from the recent historic first summit meeting of the leaders of the countries in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was the decision to establish a climate working group to strengthen climate actions in the region and elsewhere.[2] The Quad countries clearly have different approaches and priorities relating to climate, but their commitment to work together in this area is a welcome development. There's a growing realisation both in Australia and in our Quad partner countries that climate change will have an increasingly serious impact on regional security.

Flooding caused by Typhoon Ketsana, Cainta, the Philippines, 27 September 2009. Photo: EPA/Francis R. Malasig.

April 2021

The rapidly emerging crisis on our doorstep

2021

'Australia urgently needs to build the capability in Defence and other key agencies to recognise the strategic impacts of climate change and to position those organisations to respond. This is a rapidly changing field. Approaches that might have sufficed a decade ago will no longer meet the scale of problems likely to unfold in our region. Building on the policy suggestions contained in the report of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, now is the time to make sure Australia has the capacity to lead regional responses to the many natural disasters emerging from a warming climate … Maritime Southeast Asia is exceptionally affected by the hazards that climate change is amplifying. Those hazards will not only exacerbate the traditional regional security threats that currently dominate military and foreign policy planning in Canberra, such as the rise of China, terrorism and separatist movements, but also lead to new threats and the prospect of multiple, simultaneous crises, including food insecurity, population displacement and humanitarian disasters that will greatly test our national capacities, commitments and resilience.'

—Robert Glasser, *The rapidly emerging crisis on our doorstep*, 9 April 2021, online.

Women, peace and security

The international agenda for women, peace and security (WPS) is about giving voice and making visible. And the call for action now is: 'Jam today, not jam tomorrow'.

The jam theory was offered in a keynote address to an ASPI masterclass by Clare Hutchinson, the NATO Secretary-General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security:

> I would like to talk to you about women, peace and security—about women's equality, and the jam!
>
> Lewis Carroll wrote in his magnificent tome, *Through the Looking-Glass* … the White Queen said to Alice: 'The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday—but never jam to-day.'
>
> 'It must come sometimes to "jam to-day",' Alice objected.
>
> 'No, it can't,' said the Queen. 'It's jam every other day: to-day isn't any other day, you know.'
>
> And that is the story of gender equality. It's never jam today.[1]

The recipe for the jam was created in 2000, when the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 to establish the WPS agenda.[2]

The UN Security Council set a framework for women to participate across all peace and security decision-making, to promote the rights of women and girls facing conflict and crisis, to integrate gender perspectives in responding to disaster, and in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict rebuilding.

The UN resolution highlighted that 'civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons.'[3]

Dealing with WPS issues deals with much else, as Hutchinson detailed:

> We know that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without women's security and equality. We know that the treatment of women in any society is a barometer where we can predict other forms of oppression. We know that countries where women are empowered are vastly more secure. We measure the rise in violence through the decrease in women's rights and shrinking spaces for women's voices. We know all this and yet we still struggle to implement the very basics of the resolution. We still struggle to translate the essential nature of WPS.

Stirring in some Canberra flavour, ASPI's Danielle Cave wrote that the gender divide hampered Australian strategic policymaking. Few things were more ridiculous than 'manels' (all-male panels), and 'manel madness' was a 'reminder that we still have a long way to go'.

To get the best policy needs contestability, and that means diversity of people as well as ideas, as Cave observed:

> No matter the occasion, we want to end up with the best possible decisions being made. And we especially want to end up with the best outcomes when it comes to Australia's place in the world. The effective conduct of international relations across the spectrum of diplomacy, trade, defence and intelligence requires analytical, operational and problem-solving skills. There is plenty of evidence to show that gender-balanced workforces are more efficient, effective and innovative. We also know they produce a broader range of ideas and have more diverse experiences, leading to greater productivity and better decision-making. So why is Australia still failing to take advantage of both men and women in international relations?[4]

Responding to that question, ASPI established the Women in Defence and Security Network (WDSN) in 2014. WDSN has delivered speed-mentoring events in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, as well as panel discussions and dialogues to support women working in defence and national security.

WDSN was launched by lawyers Gillian Triggs and Elizabeth Cosson. Lauding the network as a 'great idea', Triggs, the president of the Australian Human Rights Commission, talked of the need to play straight, to get the facts and evidence right and 'being sure what you are saying is a fair and objective statement'.

Describing a life as a human rights lawyer ('debt and tropical diseases'), Cosson observed that working as a woman in Canberra's Parliament House could be tougher than being in the field with refugees. Cosson said she was still building on the examples of her teenage scrapbook of 'women I admired'. Triggs said women had to 'step up, and you put your hand up, and you exercise leadership in doing it'.

Cosson said she'd been to many national security forums where there were only one or two women, telling the WDSN women 'you're still pioneers. You are frontier women, you need to understand that. Things won't flow the "natural" way because you are actually displacing what the natural flow was for at least a couple of hundred years. So you do need to understand that—it's elbows out ladies.'[5]

The ADF boots battle: 'one size fits all'

> I sense a readiness by the ADF leadership to engage with change … Meaningful change is never easy—it takes courage to set aside the status quo. When that status quo, however, perpetuates marginalisation and loss of personnel, when it threatens the future capacity of the organisation, new and innovative ways of thinking must be embraced.
>
> —Elizabeth Broderick, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, 2012[6]

The WPS agenda has roots in decades of civil society activism, but also peacekeeping operations in the 1990s, so it was natural that much of ASPI's WPS work revolved around the ADF.

Direct policy push was applied by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner with two reports on the treatment of women in the ADF in 2011 and 2012.

Following the reports by Elizabeth Broderick, the three services set targets for the recruitment and retention of women in the permanent force over the decade from 2013. The Navy and Air Force set a target of 25% by 2023, which meant an increase from 18.4% in the Navy and 17.5% in the Air Force. The Army aimed to increase the representation of women from 11% to 12% by mid-2014, and to 15% by 2025.[7]

The appointment of a gender adviser to Australia's Chief of Defence Force was a welcome move, Lisa Sharland noted in 2014, to advise on women's access to leadership and the recruitment and retention of women. Sharland wrote that women were an 'indispensable' part of the ADF:

> For cultural or societal reasons, female military personnel may be best placed to engage with local women, which is essential to understanding their threat perceptions (which may differ from those of men). Furthermore, if women are engaged in military deployments that have a mentoring and training role, that can encourage local women to join newly-reformed local security sectors, contributing to the overall sense of security across all sectors of society.
>
> But simple participation of women isn't enough to deliver on those mandates. It's also essential to integrate a gender perspective into all levels of operational planning, doctrine and training, in order to ensure that those processes take into consideration the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, and the different needs of women and men in conflict environments.[8]

Add to the theory of jam the daft idea that everyone should wear the same size boots, explained by Deane-Peter Baker:

> Imagine you've joined the military, and are being issued your uniform and gear. The surly man behind the counter shoves a pile of stuff at you, including two pairs of boots, and tells you to move on. You see that the boots are not your size, so you object. 'We treat everyone the same here,' is the response. 'Stop complaining and move on.'[9]

The military had been a male-dominated profession for so long that what seemed like neutral standards were in fact 'male-centric', Baker wrote. Genuine gender neutrality meant seeing what military effectiveness really entailed, and then giving men and women what was needed to get those outcomes, even if they had to be equipped or trained differently. Baker offered three examples where one-size-fits-all should be rethought—backpacks, body armour and rifles:

> The 'we treat everyone the same' justification is particularly common—and pernicious—in the case of female members of the military. The use of this supposed 'standard of equality' is often just not properly thought through, or else is a disguised way of saying 'women don't belong here, they don't match up'. But the idea that having women in the military inevitably involves lowering standards confuses gender blindness for gender

> neutrality … a more nuanced and sensitive approach shouldn't end at gender lines: body size, body shape, and left or right handedness are just a few more of the differences that characterise human beings that ought to be taken into consideration in an 'outcomes based' approach to military equipment and training.[10]

The ADF needed to understand that the WPS agenda could be a tool. 'This is not just about equity but capability', was the opening line of Amanda Fielding's speech to the Council of Colonels at the headquarters of Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan in 2015.

As the mission's first senior gender adviser, Fielding knew she'd face resistance and would have to prove to military colleagues—predominantly men—why they should care about integrating women into the Afghan National Defence Security Forces. Key lessons were that WPS applied to different nations in different ways depending on cultural imperatives, and that there was a need to show military planners how WPS can enhance operational effectiveness:

> For example, in preparing for the Afghan fighting season, it was important for the military planners to understand that more women than combatants were being killed in Afghanistan every day, just because of their gender. In addition, women's empowerment in Afghanistan countered the strategy of the Taliban which was deliberately targeting women in public positions and the security forces. As such, it made operational sense to enable 50% of the population to protect themselves and contribute to Afghanistan's security.[11]

Fielding said the ADF—and Australian Army personnel in particular—were 'weary of women's agendas in light of the necessary and significant cultural reform that has occurred'.

ADF cultural reform to increase diversity was labelled 'PC rubbish' and 'tokenism' that would detract from Defence's core goal of 'war-fighting'; Defence efforts to increase diversity were attacked by *The Australian* newspaper, arguing that security must not play second fiddle to cultural change.[12]

The chiefs of the ADF responded to *The Australian* that the force was responding to 'gut wrenching stories' caused by 'a culture of exclusion':

> Diversity is not about identity politics it is about improving the quality of the workplace, it's the antidote to group think—gaining a wider range of perspectives to make better decisions and, in the military context, enhancing our capability, that often intangible concept that is manifest in the conduct of military operations be that in combat or non combat situations.[13]

ASPI's Andrew Davies and Mark Thomson argued that 'a military that predominantly consists of members drawn only from a fraction of the population, as the ADF typically did for much of its history, is a bad thing.' To keep the ADF as a 'demographic heritage theme park' would mean the force was unrepresentative of the people it existed to defend:

> The only justification for skewing the demographics of the defence force would be if its mission required a particular subset of the population. But, to the contrary, modern military operations often take place within local populations, where language skills and cultural knowledge are essential to success. Moreover, because the ADF is becoming more high-tech, it needs to recruit the best and brightest people it can get—irrespective of race, gender, religion or sexual orientation.[14]

Lisa Sharland argued that attitude shifts in the ADF were needed to respond to the evolving nature of conflict:

> Modern conflict situations (such as Afghanistan, or peacekeeping operations) often require engagement with the local civilian population. In these contexts, female military personnel may be in a better position to engage with the local women about potential threats. Ignoring the need to increase the number of women in the ADF—or failure to do so—risks diminishing the ADF's future capability and operational effectiveness.[15]

In 2017, Chief of Army Lieutenant General Angus Campbell said he wanted more women in his combat units to make those units smarter. 'To me it's all about talent,' Campbell told *The Strategist*. 'I don't have enough of it and I want more. I am not drawing on the full potential of the population. I can't possibly imagine, therefore, that the Army is as smart as it could be and as it needs to be.' That army, he said, was modestly sized, with 30,000 full-time and 15,000 part-time soldiers. 'If you're small, you need to be smart. If you're drawing on the talents and skills and energy of the breadth of the Australian population, you've got your best chance of being as smart as you possibly can be.'[16]

The RAN's Captain Stacey Porter wrote in 2019 that the ADF had a very strong commitment to operationalising gender, yet 'we struggle with *how* to implement a gendered perspective and *why* it's necessary'.[17]

Gender analysis was still maturing at Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC), where she worked as the senior gender adviser: '[W]e still haven't cracked what gender analysis can provide for us operationally. How do we make gender analysis more operationally relevant, particularly to mission commanders and planners and in intelligence analysis?'

Winning people to the 'way of gender' involved pragmatic examples of how it boosted military effectiveness and better operational outcomes, Porter wrote:

> For our sailors, soldiers and aircrews, this is through storytelling. We must take more advantage of our deployed gender advisers and give them airtime to tell their real-life stories, because in my world of operations the only way to win the masses over is to give them the answer to 'So what?' ... There's much work to be done, and it's an exciting time to be doing it. I find now, as a core member of joint planning groups, that people at HQJOC stop by to introduce themselves and establish communications when they post in. Fewer people now ask me to write up operational documents to integrate

gender: they have a go at it themselves. I see fewer rolling eyes among audiences at predeployment briefings, and I think to myself, 'I love my job.'[18]

Security for all: two decades of the WPS agenda

> We know that when girls have access to quality education, when more women are in positions as key decision-makers and participants in all stages of political processes, and when women are economically empowered and live without threats of violence and harm, their communities are more economically prosperous, stable and secure. Put simply, we cannot achieve sustainable peace and security for all without addressing gender inequalities.
>
> —Julie-Ann Guivarra, Australia's Ambassador for Gender Equality, 2020[19]

> As two decades of WPS work draws to a close, and we face the near certainty of increased austerity measures worldwide in response to the pandemic-induced economic downturn, the question of sufficient and consistent funding is sharper than ever. Money matters directly, as a way of resourcing the initiatives that are set out in national, regional and international plans and guidelines, and also indirectly, as a way of signalling political will.
>
> —Laura J Shepherd, 2020[20]

While women were disproportionately affected by conflict and violence, Sofia Patel wrote in 2017, women had a part in violent extremism, as shown by the threat posed by Islamic State (IS). Patel's *The Sultanate of Women* studied female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism.[21]

The motivations of women to join or support violent extremist causes didn't differ dramatically from those of men, but women's roles varied considerably across conflicts. The conflict in Iraq and Syria was a unique challenge because of the nature of women's participation. Not only were women migrating to the Middle East, Patel wrote, but their role as facilitators, supporters and recruiters on home soil was problematic for security agencies:

> Unlike propaganda from previous conflicts, what IS is disseminating has framed the notion of jihad to transcend gender, ascribing specific—and equally important—roles to men and women. Women are positioned as integral to IS's caliphate-building project in Syria and Iraq and have been persuaded to migrate to the region. However, the reality's a far cry from the glamorised 'five-star jihad' that has been propagated by the media. IS has used a convergence of propaganda, media attention and intellectual and theological ignorance to construct a hybrid role for the women of its caliphate.[22]

In *Australia's implementation of women, peace and security: promoting regional stability*, Louise Allen wrote that Australia had a positive story to tell in the ADF, the international operations of the Australian Federal Police, and the aid program. There are, however, significant inconsistencies and resourcing gaps in implementing its WPS commitments. Rhetoric had yet to be put into practice.[23]

To walk the talk, Australia had to demonstrate to other countries what it considered to be important, Allen said:

> The WPS agenda is still not a central tenet of Australia's national security, foreign affairs and defence policies. It isn't systematically featured in high-level bilateral engagements and it isn't always incorporated into new security policies, including those relating to countering violent extremism and countering terrorism. The aim isn't to have formulaic WPS references inserted into all high-level statements but for Australia to emphasise the importance of applying gender considerations to its security and foreign policy agendas by highlighting context-specific examples showing why it matters.[24]

The WPS agenda had bipartisan support in Australia and was established policy over ASPI's two decades, yet it was still a fight about priority (jam today) and understanding (the boots battle against 'one size fits all').

In the 25th anniversary year of the World Conference for Women in Beijing and the 20th anniversary year of the UN's WPS resolution, Lisa Sharland reflected that there were still heated exchanges and extensive lobbying in the international system over the use of terms such as 'gender' and 'sexual health'. Delegations had to work to hold the line on gains that had been made in advancing women's rights.

Gender equality and WPS were 'still not routinely considered to be relevant when geopolitical crises emerge. In traditional "hard security" contexts, women's participation is still viewed as easily expendable, with no consequences for the viability or sustainability of a peace deal'. Yet how a society treated women was an essential element of its stability and peace. Comprehensive thinking about national security must have more 'gendered analysis', Sharland wrote:

> In an era in which support for gender equality is fragmenting, including among some of our allies and partners, Australia's commitment to prioritising gender equality will be tested. It can't just fall to the ambassador for gender equality, the minister for women or public servants focused on gender equality or WPS to speak out when that's the case. It's a responsibility across the government that's linked to our ability to adequately address the security challenges we will continue to face.[25]

Departing from ASPI in 2021 after more than seven years at the institute, the deputy director of the Defence, Strategy and National Security Program and the head of the International Program, Lisa Sharland, reflected on the evolution of Canberra's understanding of WPS:

> Australia has made great strides in strengthening the ways that WPS is considered as part of defence, national security, and foreign policy over the last 20 years. It has been great to see ASPI have a role in contributing to that debate through research, publications, and discussions.
>
> A key challenge for the Australian government in the decades ahead will be ensuring that diverse women's perspectives and their participation are routinely prioritised as

part of our approaches to foreign policy, national security, and defence operations—and that gender analysis becomes the norm rather than the exception in policy, planning, intelligence, and operations. That would be transformative. It would also edge us closer to 'jam today'.

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Climate change

The world has reached a set of big judgements on global warming and started to act.

The arguments are intense, as they should be, about the future of the planet. Yet the facts are in:

- Climate change is happening.
- The science is settled.
- The way we live our lives will change in many dimensions.
- The world will suffer more extreme weather events and disasters.
- Climate change will undermine political and economic stability and increase the risk of conflict in the Indo-Pacific, which is the world's most disaster-prone region.
- Pacific island countries face an existential threat.
- Governments are committed: countries accounting for 70% of world GDP and greenhouse gases have targets for net-zero emissions, typically by 2050, and the developed world has pledged deep cuts by 2030.[1]
- Dollars follow the facts in what governments must do, and what public and private investment will do.
- Across the globe, the business, industry and finance sectors plan for a decarbonised future, altering today's share market and the insurance predictions for tomorrow.
- Tackling the 'climate crisis' is a great challenge of our times: to have a fighting chance of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and limiting the rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C 'requires nothing short of a total transformation of the energy systems that underpin our economies'.[2]
- The F flag flying for fossil fuels now means 'fossil fuels have a fading future'. The fact of that fading is even announced by a previous megaphone for big oil, the International Energy Agency: 'the future energy economy will be transformed from one dominated by fossil fuels into one powered predominantly by renewable energy like solar and wind.'[3]

As a major resource exporter, Australia grappled with the world's turn away from carbon. Hard truths battered our leaders.

The previous four prime ministers were all hurt by the politics and policy of climate change. The issue contributed to the 'it's time' factor that defeated John Howard, deeply damaged Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, and was a designated reason the Liberal Party twice dispatched Malcolm Turnbull, once as opposition leader and then as prime minister.

The warming war still divides public opinion. More than half of Australians (56% to 58%) believe that climate change is happening and that the heating is caused by human activity; 59% believe Australia needs to follow the lead of other countries and make action a priority.[4]

ASPI's response to the crisis is the Climate and Security Policy Centre, created with this judgement:

> Climate change is a global systemic threat that will have enormous consequences for Australia's national security and for international security more broadly.
>
> The impacts of climate change are already being felt globally in record-setting extreme weather events that are contributing to poverty, hunger and humanitarian disasters.
>
> The pace at which these and other climate impacts emerge is accelerating. The existing commitments states have made to reduce greenhouse gases are inadequate to prevent warming beyond the 2-degree cap set in the Paris Agreement. Even with additional reductions, the climate will continue warming for decades from the greenhouse gases already released to the atmosphere.
>
> The impacts in the Indo-Pacific region, the most disaster-prone globally, will be profound. Climate hazards will not only exacerbate existing regional challenges, such as separatist movements, territorial disputes, terrorism and great-power competition, but also contribute to food insecurity, population displacement and humanitarian disasters on an unprecedented scale. The cascading impacts will undermine political and economic stability and increase the risk of conflict. For Pacific island countries, climate change is an existential threat.

The objectives of the Climate and Security Policy Centre are:

- Evaluate the impact climate change will have on security in the Indo-Pacific region, including by identifying the most likely paths through which disruptive climate events (individually, concurrently or consecutively) can cause cascading, security-relevant impacts such as disruptions of critical supply chains, energy insecurity, food insecurity, separatist movements, humanitarian disasters, population displacement, opportunistic intervention by outside powers, political instability and conflict.
- Develop practical, evidence-based policy recommendations and interventions to reduce climate change risks and promote their adoption by policymakers.
- Increase Australian and regional expertise, understanding and public awareness of the links between climate change and national security.
- Identify the implications of those links for key stakeholders, including the ADF, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, other government agencies, parliamentarians and the private sector.[5]

ASPI's early work on climate change was driven by Anthony Bergin from the time he joined the institute in 2006. Bergin had been director of the Australian Defence Studies Centre at the Defence Force Academy (1991–2003), and his writing on climate drew on his study of oceans policy, the South Pacific and Antarctica.

Bergin twinned his research on terrorism with his study of climate change. His responses to the two scourges rhymed: the need for Australia to 'harden' and build resilience, to explain the policy challenges to the people, and for all arms of government to think about lines of leadership, responsibilities and coordinated responses.

Bergin hunted for strategic answers that joined up Australia's governments, police, emergency services, insurers and businesses. A central thought running through his writing was the impact of climate on the role and structure of Australia's military.

In 2007, Bergin and Jacob Townsend issued *A change in climate for the Australian Defence Force*, which was about how the ADF must rebalance its mix of missions and create new mission types.[6] The task was to look out two to three decades to examine the implications for strategy, force structure, capability and the way the military uses energy.

The Asia–Pacific would face increased cyclones and more flooding:

> Perversely, along with cyclones, fire risk may also rise and droughts are likely to become more frequent. More extreme weather may damage electricity transmission infrastructure and raise the risk to offshore installations. Heavier storms may degrade communication and transportation infrastructure and storm surges may become worse. Water shortages may become more frequent and severe. Another direct effect will be sea level rise. When sea level rises, so does the likelihood of flooding.

ADF missions would blend disaster relief, development assistance and state building. The biggest challenge would be changing Defence's behaviours and systems without reducing the ADF's operational capability, Bergin and Townsend wrote.

Relief missions would demand the capability to move and land large volumes of supplies. The Navy might require more shallow-draft ships to land in disaster-stricken areas and heavy-lift helicopters for ship-to-shore transport, or even hovercraft:

> For the ADF, the rapid response that disasters demand may require bigger surge capacity, a larger logistics capability and maintaining higher states of readiness. Additional resources would be needed, while extreme weather will add complexity to military missions and maintenance schedules.

In the following decade, Bergin hailed as 'absolute game-changers' the Navy's biggest vessels, the Canberra-class landing helicopter dock (LHD) ships (longer than the previous aircraft carrier). The LHDs could respond to disasters in Australia as well as in the region:

> The LHDs will focus on regional military support, including in disasters (they can be deployed as floating hospitals and command and control centres); evacuation missions (such as a raid from the sea to recover hostages); and peacekeeping. They will also play a key role in extreme natural disasters at home.

> In the event of regional disturbances where we could be called in for stability operations, the LHDs will allow our military to deploy forces quickly into larger areas than ever before and sustain them ashore.[7]

At ASPI's 2007 Global Forces conference, Brahma Chellaney argued that beyond the environment or economics lay a new topic: climate security. The most severe effects of climate change would occur where states were poor or fragile:

> Intra-state and inter-state crises over water and food shortages, inundation of low-lying areas, or recurrent droughts, hurricanes or flooding may lead to large displacements of citizens and mass migrations, besides exacerbating ethnic or economic divides in societies. It is thus important to examine the risks of global warming, including potential situations in which climatic variations could be a catalyst for conflict within or between states.[8]

Climate change would be a 'threat multiplier', Chellaney said, raising the risk of water wars, while different weather patterns would impinge on military operations:

> There is an ominous link between global warming and security, given the spectre of resource conflicts, failed states, large-scale migrations and higher frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as cyclones, flooding and droughts. Some developments would demand intervention by the armed forces.

ASPI looked beyond the domestic politics of climate change as it explored the policy implications of the science. Bergin produced or co-wrote a series of studies.

Australian domestic security—the role of Defence: The primary ADF focus was on war fighting, but a shift or broadening of military culture was needed. Expectations of Defence in domestic security had increased: 'Government is attracted to using the ADF because it projects strength.' Potential roles included maritime surveillance, special-event security and mass-gathering protection, communications and community liaison, and critical infrastructure protection.[9]

An Office of National Security: Australia needed a national security strategy, created and run by an Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA). The office 'shouldn't be part of an existing department; else they will simply echo the view of their minister. Instead, it needs to be an independent office that can form its own views and, to an extent, set its own objectives. ONSA should therefore be an independent entity, reporting directly to the Prime Minister and budgeted through the Prime Minister and Cabinet—much like the Office of National Assessments.'[10]

Taking a punch emphasised resilience as the answer to both terrorism and climate-caused disasters: 'Our ability to respond to a large-scale catastrophic event, which severely impacted on critical infrastructure for lengthy periods or caused a massive injury toll or loss of life, hasn't been truly tested.' Disaster response loomed as 'a core mission' for the ADF, influencing equipment decisions and military basing around Australia. Robustness and alternative supply options should be key selection criteria for infrastructure projects.[11]

Cops and climate: Australia's eight police forces would be the 'thin green line', facing disasters and environmental refugees, enforcing emissions-trading schemes and protecting precious water.[12]

All in a day's work—business and Australian disaster management: There would be a dollar in it, but business is happy to help. And they're already in place.[13]

Rudd's Army: a deployable civilian capacity for Australia: the Labor government considered a deployable civilian capacity (DCC) for the rapid use of civilian experts in international disaster relief, stabilisation and post-conflict reconstruction. Bergin and Bob Breen recommended as follows:

> An emergency response register of specialist personnel, such as medical teams, engineers, logisticians, sanitation experts and communications technicians, would enhance DCC responsiveness. Another register that monitors the quantity and location of commercial stocks for emergency humanitarian assistance would help.
>
> It is also worth considering, particularly in the aftermath of the Victorian bushfires, how best to draw on the DCC to respond to life-threatening disasters and delivery of humanitarian assistance to Australians at home when catastrophic natural disasters occur.[14]

Hardening Australia argued that the disasters of climate change would 'become larger, more complex, occur simultaneously and in regions that have either not experienced the natural hazard previously or at the same intensity or frequency'. The nation needed to harden critical infrastructure just as it should harden the preparation and coordination of its emergency response system.[15]

In 2010, *Here to help* explored the developing Defence role in Australian disaster management. Extreme weather events would increase the vulnerability of the growing populations in coastal developments and in bushfire-prone areas. The ADF would be called because of the continual per capita fall in the number of volunteers and emergency services personnel and 'growing community and political expectations to use military resources to support whole-of-government counter-disaster efforts'.[16]

Financing Australia's disaster resilience posed fundamental questions about the roles of private insurance and government in reducing future losses from natural disasters: 'We need a new approach to financing the costs of natural disasters and encouraging those living in high-risk areas to be better prepared. The reality is that all Australian taxpayers will have to bear a share of this cost.'[17]

In 2013, *Heavy weather* said that the ADF would inevitably be involved in mitigation and response tasks. Seeking to deflect the politics of scepticism or denial, the report argued that this wasn't a 'green' view, but was about the need to prepare Australia's military to deal with disruptive forces.[18]

Heavy weather recommended:

- An interagency group, headed by the Prime Minister's Department, should prepare 'climate event scenarios for Australia and the Asia–Pacific' and what they mean for national resilience and regional stability.
- The ADF should appoint an adviser to the Chief of the Defence Force to advise on what climate issues would mean for operations and infrastructure.
- Work with the Five-Eyes allies (Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US) to plan military responses to extreme weather events.

In 2014, *Working as one: a road map to disaster resilience for Australia* reported that natural disasters cost the Australian economy $6.3 billion per year, and that was projected to rise to $23 billion by 2050. Rather than 'just waiting for the next king hit and paying for it afterwards', Australia must build the resilience of individuals and local communities as well as state and federal agencies.[19]

ASPI led discussions on natural disasters as part of an all-hazards approach to national security, setting up the Risk and Resilience Program, led by Paul Barnes, which ran from 2014 to 2020. The program explored disaster risk reduction in the Indo-Pacific region, researched climate impacts and worked to strengthen Australia's critical supply chains (road, rail, aviation and maritime). Barnes said Australia needed a new and continuous conversation about resilience:

> Natural disasters are partly surprises: while we can't predict when they'll occur, we know that they will happen. To prepare, we must plan ahead, but we re-relearn lessons and often make the same mistakes. Given the many royal commissions and other investigations into disasters over the past few years, the lesson book is a thick one. The cost of disasters looks set to rise, as does the potential for impacts on the essential services and environmental systems that are central to viable community life. Prevention is important: we need to be doing more to 'sweeten the pot' by creating better incentives for mitigating the impacts of disasters with better planning and preparation. But capacity for effective response, recovery and remediation also needs to remain strong.[20]

The 2016 DWP pointed to six key drivers shaping Australia's security environment to 2035. One of them was 'state fragility, including within our immediate neighbourhood, caused by uneven economic growth, crime, social, environmental and governance challenges and climate change'.[21]

Climate change would be a major challenge for countries in Australia's immediate region, the DWP said, causing higher temperatures and increased sea-level rise and increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events: 'These effects will exacerbate the challenges of population growth and environmental degradation, and will contribute to food shortages and undermine economic development.'[22]

In 2018, Robert Glasser joined ASPI. Now head of the institute's Climate and Security Policy Centre, he's a former assistant UN secretary-general and the UN Secretary-General's special representative for disaster risk reduction.

In *Preparing for the era of disasters,* Glasser wrote:

> As the world warms beyond 2°C, as now seems increasingly likely, an era of disasters will be upon us with profound implications for how we organise ourselves to protect Australian lives, property and economic interests and our way of life.[23]

This emerging era would stretch emergency services, undermine community resilience and escalate economic costs and deaths. The Australian Government and state and local governments had to prepare for the unprecedented scale of these challenges, Glasser recommended:

1. Scale-up Australia's efforts to prevent the effects from natural hazards, such as from extreme weather, from becoming disasters through greater investment in disaster risk reduction.
2. Plan for financial support to states for economic recovery following disasters, with 'fodder banks' and 'land banks' for communities in chronic crisis and the permanently displaced.
3. Strengthen disaster response capacity and planning at all levels, including in the military, which will 'play an increasingly important role in transporting firefighters and equipment, fodder drops from helicopters and the provision of shelters. Joint task forces to coordinate the defence contribution, like the one established during the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires, will become increasingly necessary.'
4. Embed climate change effects in flood and bushfire risk maps, building codes, planning schemes, infrastructure delivery and laws.

Such thinking was amplified by the bushfire royal commission, which pointed to the dire consequences of climate change—increasingly intense natural disasters, catastrophic fire conditions, more violent cyclones and continued sea-level rise.[24]

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements was chaired by the former chief of the ADF, Mark Binskin, to investigate the devastating Christmas fires of 2019.[25]

The commission said that natural disasters had changed, 'and it has become clear to us that the nation's disaster management arrangements must also change.'

Extreme weather had 'already become more frequent and intense because of climate change; further global warming over the next 20 to 30 years is inevitable'. Australia had warmed by approximately 1.4°C since 1910. Globally, temperatures would continue to rise, and Australia would have more hot days and fewer cool days. Floods and bushfires would become more frequent and more intense.

The commission said that the 2019–20 fires started in Australia's hottest and driest year on record. Much of the country that burned had already suffered drought. The forest fire danger index was the highest since national records began. Catastrophic fire conditions could render traditional bushfire prediction models and firefighting techniques less effective:

> Tragically, 33 people died and extensive smoke coverage across much of eastern Australia may have caused many more deaths. Over 3,000 homes were destroyed. Estimates of the national financial impacts are over $10 billion. Nearly three billion animals were killed or displaced and many threatened species and other ecological communities were extensively harmed.

The commission cited the Bureau of Meteorology's conclusion that further 'warming over the next two decades is inevitable' and that, over the next 20 to 30 years, 'the global climate system is going to continue to warm in response to greenhouse gases that are already in the atmosphere.'

Looking beyond Australia in *The rapidly emerging crisis on our doorstep*, Glasser pointed to the exceptional hazards affecting maritime Southeast Asia (MSEA). Hundreds of millions of people living in low-lying coastal areas will experience more severe extremes and more frequent swings from extreme heat and drought to severe floods. The diminishing time for recovery between events will have major consequences for food security, population displacements and resilience, Glasser wrote:

> MSEA faces a dangerous constellation of simultaneous climate hazards. Sea-level there is rising four times faster than the global average, driven by climate change and other factors, such as groundwater extraction. MSEA has the world's highest average sea-level rise per kilometre of coastline and the largest coastal population affected by it. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country, and 60% of its population (165 million people) is in coastal areas. The same is true for over half of the Philippines' municipalities and 10 of its largest cities.

Glasser said that scientists have determined that, by 2040, at 2°C of warming, Southeast Asia's per capita crop production may decline by one-third. Amplifying the food insecurity risks is the region's reliance on fisheries. Indonesia obtains more than half of its animal protein from fish, while in the Philippines the figure is about 40%. Fish species are moving out of the region to escape warming waters, and the region's coral reefs, the 'nursery' for roughly 10% of the world's fish supply, are degrading rapidly.

The emerging regional impacts could overstretch Australia's operational capacities—creating demands on the ADF to simultaneously support disaster relief within Australia and respond to regional security challenges, Glasser wrote:

> The posture, training and capabilities of the ADF will need to change so that it can be part of Australia's response to more frequent, higher impact regional natural disasters. Its capability set will also need to evolve to equip it to operate at greater scale and in places affected by large natural disasters.

After defending Australia, Defence planning sets the second strategic objective as the stability and security of MSEA and the South Pacific. 'Realising that objective', Glasser judged, 'is about to become much harder.'[26]

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Antarctica

Australia loves the scientific wonder and harsh mystery of Antarctica. And Australia quietly loves its contested claim to own much of the icy continent.

Aligning those loves is always a difficult balance, especially as new players, such as China, have arrived there.

ASPI pushed to support the science and serve Australia's strategic needs—to hold and uphold the great southern land's role in the southernmost continent.

'Like national security more generally,' Anthony Bergin observed, 'Antarctic policy isn't an area where we can afford to just freeze and forget.'[1]

Not filing and forgetting, in ASPI's view, meant buying a new icebreaker ship and building an 'all-weather, year-round, paved runway'.[2]

More activity and investment were a response to the realisation that the old Antarctic club had grown, testing the silences and holes and compromises in the Antarctic consensus.

Since 1933, Australia has claimed 42% of Antarctica—an area equal to three-quarters of mainland Australia (or all of Australia without Queensland). The claim is in diplomatic 'deep freeze' because it's rejected or unrecognised by other major powers.

The Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT) has an odd, limited sovereignty, which is recognised by only a handful of other claimants.[3] Australia can't apply its laws to other nations in the AAT or deny them access for legitimate scientific activities.[4]

The diplomatic genius of the Antarctic Treaty is in what it agrees to leave unresolved. The claimants agree not to argue their claims, so much else can be done.

As one of the parties that created the Antarctic Treaty in Washington in 1959, Australia helped convince the Soviet Union that the 'treaty protected the Soviets' interests as much as it did those of the Antarctic claimant states'.[5]

The treaty entered into force in 1961, and its membership has expanded beyond the original 12 parties to include 54 nations.

The first Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting was held in Canberra in 1961, as Tony Press wrote for *The Strategist*:

> It marked a significant milestone in Australian foreign policy and in international affairs more broadly. It also marked the beginning of longstanding Australian political bipartisanship on major Antarctic issues—the Antarctic Treaty enabling legislation was passed unanimously by both Houses of parliament … The treaty made Antarctica a non-militarised zone, banned military manoeuvres and prohibited nuclear-weapons testing. It declared that the Antarctic treaty area (all the globe below 60 degrees south) was to be used for peaceful purposes only.[6]

Prime Minister Robert Menzies opened the 1961 Antarctic consultations, describing Australia's 'sense of neighbourhood about the Antarctic' and 'a deep and practical interest' over many years. Menzies set the foundations of what became an enduring strategy for Australia:

- Antarctica should be kept free of international conflict, war and aggression.
- Antarctica should be place of international collaboration in science for all of humankind.
- Australia had not abandoned its Antarctic territorial claim, but had agreed with other Antarctic Treaty parties that differences of view could be accommodated within the treaty.[7]

Negotiating the treaty for the icy continent was a remarkable achievement amid the frozen geopolitics of the Cold War. The *realpolitik* was a Washington–Moscow understanding that they didn't need another new front in their contest: put the issue on ice, give Antarctica to the scientists, and the military could concentrate on other matters.

The deal and the treaty have endured without major discord or conflict for 60 years, Press wrote:

> For Australia, the Antarctic represents a strategic zone of peace to our south, and it has immeasurable value just for that fact alone. But we know, too, that Antarctica is the engine room of the global climate system, and Antarctic science is critical for our understanding of the future of our planet.

Australia has been active in the norm-creation and treaty-making effort: during the formation of the Antarctic Treaty, in the development of the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources in the early 1980s (with its secretariat in Hobart), in meeting the developing world's challenge to the Atlantic Treaty at the UN General Assembly in the 1980s, and in the 1991 Madrid Protocol, which 'prohibits mining indefinitely' and designates Antarctica as a 'natural reserve, devoted to peace and science'.[8]

ASPI's 2007 *Frozen assets* report argued that Australian policymakers tended to view Antarctica as a settled issue, but important questions remained about interests and responsibilities.

While Australia had the largest territorial claim, going softly on sovereignty had been a successful strategy. Pushing too hard on the claim, Anthony Bergin and Marcus Haward wrote, would force other states to take a position on the issue: 'The status quo protects our interests.'[9]

Australia's territory couldn't be defended effectively in military terms, Bergin and Haward said:

> We don't possess an Antarctic war fighting capability. Fortunately, there has never been a war in Antarctica. Maintaining peace in Antarctica allows our defence and border protection efforts to be focused elsewhere. We have clear interests in maintaining a demilitarised Antarctica. The Antarctic Treaty prohibits military activities, although logistic support is permitted. Our military deployments have been used for fisheries interception, search and rescue, and logistic support in an earlier period. The effect of the Treaty is that we don't need to devote military assets to defend the Australia Antarctic Territory (AAT).

The all-science, little-military approach is one more element that makes Antarctica unique Australian territory.

The softly-softly model is replicated in Australia's posture in claiming more of the Earth than any other country—around 27.2 million square kilometres or 5% of the planet, ahead of Russia and the US. Of that, our maritime domain is around 4% of the planet's oceans. Australia should be an oceanic superpower, Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin remarked, yet 'we are neither a great maritime nation nor a great maritime power'.[10]

'Most strategic thinking in Australia is locked into hard power', they wrote, but, when it came to the oceans and Antarctica, Australia opted for 'soft power and creative diplomacy'.

Non-military creativity was an interesting mark of how Australia did much of its work as a Southern Hemisphere player, Benjamin Reilly argued in 2013: 'Geography makes Australia's interests in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica perennial, unlike those of some other players. The future of our Antarctic role will depend in large part on how much we're prepared to build on our scientific investment there.'[11]

Given the importance of the science card, it was worrying how little Australia spent on the science, Bergin and Haward argued in 2007. We needed the capacity to visit any part of the AAT for science, environmental or policy purposes. Antarctica and the Southern Ocean were our back yard, and we had a direct interest in a healthy Antarctic environment, they said. It was time to restore Australia to the front of Antarctic research with a significant lift in resources.

The annual budget for the Australian Antarctic Division—by far the main Australian Antarctic player—had remained static for many years at around $100 million:

> Our overall national Antarctic efforts are run on a shoe-string relative to other nationally significant activities that impact on our future security. International interest in Antarctica will grow. It's becoming more accessible. Policy challenges are emerging for the Antarctic Treaty system. If we don't remain a foremost Antarctic power and undertake concerted efforts at Antarctic diplomacy, we risk losing international prestige in an area where Australia is one of the undisputed leaders.[12]

By 2013, when ASPI published *Cold calculations: Australia's Antarctic challenges*, the budget figure had reached $112.8 million and other nations were ramping up their activities.

Many of the 'old' Antarctic nations were reducing their Antarctic capabilities, while the 'new' Antarctic nations (China, India and South Korea) were active, Anthony Bergin wrote: 'These new investments may well have implications for the balance of influence that's been the hallmark of Antarctic relations.'

Bergin listed Australia's policy interests, acknowledging that some were competing priorities:

- preserving our sovereignty over our Antarctic territory
- maintaining the continent free from confrontation and militarisation

- protecting the Antarctic environment
- taking advantage of the special opportunities Antarctica offers for science
- deriving economic benefits from Antarctica
- insuring against unpredictable developments down south.

The pressures on the Antarctic Treaty, Bergin noted, came from sovereignty claims, commercial fishing, tourism, the prospect of mineral exploitation, and the rise of China.[13]

Strategic interest in Antarctica was building, and Peter Jennings saw 'something of a race to the pole' by countries interested in scoping resource potential:

> When it comes to our Antarctic interests Australia better use it, or we risk losing it in what will be a more competitive strategic world in coming decades. The credibility of our claims will erode in lock-step with the erosion of our capacity to service our research stations by sea and air.[14]

In more measured tones, the 2013 Defence White Paper landed close to the same thought:

> Australia is a strong advocate of the Antarctic Treaty System and its goals. There is, however, increasing international interest in Antarctica, including in Australia's Antarctic Territory … To date, the Antarctic Treaty System has been well respected, but in coming decades it may come under pressure as resources become more scarce elsewhere.[15]

By the time of the 2016 Defence White Paper, the Defence organisation was back to the bedrock principles that have served Australia so well:

> The Australian Antarctic Territory faces no credible risk of being challenged in such a way that requires a substantial military response for at least the next few decades. It is in our interest to work with like-minded countries to prevent any militarisation of Antarctica which could threaten Australia's sovereignty over the Australian Antarctic Territory and its sovereign rights over its offshore waters. Australia is a strong supporter of the Antarctic Treaty System, which expressly prohibits any mining in Antarctica. Australia also strongly supports the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which regulates fishing activity in Antarctic waters.[16]

China and Antarctica

In Antarctica, Australia's China 'debate' starts with different premises and, indeed, from a different 'place'.

Yet Antarctica echoes much else in Australia's discussion of China in ASPI's two decades—the closeness of the economic partnership is mirrored in Antarctica.

The same argument arc runs from embrace and enthusiasm through wary caution to concern and contemplation of competition.

The push and pull over sovereignty and China's intentions and reliability has an Antarctic aspect. A similar discussion of China's grey-zone activities is underway—although, given the differences that Antarctica introduces, a better label is 'white zone', where scientific work merges with murkier purposes.

In the white zone, Antarctic science is stretched to serve tactical needs and strategic designs.

The optimistic version of the debate is that Antarctic partnership is laudable and workable, even when Canberra and Beijing differ sharply over other important issues. The two nations can cooperate in the continent free from military conflict. Canberra has a chance to influence China's evolving interests in the Antarctic Treaty system.

The harsher response is that China might cost Australia its traditional role as a leader in Antarctic affairs.

The bulk of China's Antarctic presence is within the AAT. And, over 40 years, Australia has done much to help China's expansion in Antarctica.[17]

In 2017, in *China's expanding Antarctic interests*, Anne-Marie Brady explored the implications for Australia. She wrote that Antarctic geopolitics was shifting rapidly. The clash between states promoting environmental protection and those focused on accessing available resources was becoming more acute:

> China has conducted undeclared military activities in Antarctica, is building up a case for a territorial claim and is engaging in minerals exploration there. The calculation that the Australian Government has long made in short-changing Antarctic affairs in order to boost activities up north is looking increasingly risky.[18]

Brady's key findings were as follows:

- Some of China's interests and activities in the AAT included 'undeclared military activities and mineral exploration', which may be 'at odds with Australian strategic interests and potentially breach international law'.
- China was rapidly expanding its presence in a triangle-shaped area within the AAT that it calls the 'East Antarctic Sector', stating in policy documents that it reserves the right to make a claim in Antarctica.
- Australia must rethink its assessment of risk in Antarctica and devise a strategy to protect its interests.

In 2018, Claire Young wrote that China was eyeing near-term economic opportunities: fisheries, tourism, exploitation of the genetic and chemical properties of Antarctic flora and fauna (bioprospecting), and contracts for equipment and stations. China was willing to strain the operation of the Antarctic Treaty system to defend what it called the 'utilisation' of Antarctica.[19]

Remote sensing was a legitimate scientific activity in Antarctica, Young wrote, as it was safer and easier than taking measurements directly, but Australia wouldn't want the day to come when no vessel could move in the Southern Ocean without Beijing knowing about it:

> So Australian policymakers need to advise Antarctic scientists on whether the remote observation systems they're using in collaboration with the Chinese are sharing technology we'd rather keep to ourselves. Australia should also be more involved in developing practices under the treaty system on the use of drones and other observation equipment, and insist on openness about what systems are deployed and networked.
>
> Under its current leadership, China is unlikely to be swayed from its aims in Antarctica. But we can seek to moderate or delay unsustainable levels of 'utilisation' or the establishment of surveillance systems that could hamper other countries' access. Most importantly, we should put in the diplomatic and scientific effort to support the treaty system, especially its inspection provisions.
>
> Accusations that China and others are contravening the treaty for grand strategic purposes may be good for attracting attention. But they're hard to prove and make it harder to negotiate on Antarctic practices that could quietly undermine Australia's security day by day.

In 2020, in *Eyes wide open: managing the Australia–China Antarctic relationship*, Anthony Bergin and Tony Press called on Canberra to reconsider policy settings for the long term.[20]

The context was broader Australia–China tensions, China's global ambitions, the lack of progress on key Antarctic policy initiatives and the potential for significant geopolitical consequences for the future of Antarctica and for Australia's strategic interests.

China had demonstrated its ability to disrupt the established decision-making systems of the Antarctic Treaty system. Responses to those disruptions required early intervention, coherent strategies, disciplined implementation and strong partnerships with like-minded countries.

Bergin and Press found no clear evidence that China was violating the Antarctic Treaty. Confrontation with Beijing wasn't the answer. Indeed, they said, Australia should continue scientific and logistic cooperation—but with a sharp focus on the costs and benefits, given China's more assertive international posture and increasing interests in Antarctica. The recommendations to maximise the value and mitigate the risks included:

- establishing a ministerial Antarctic council to assess, measure and review our Antarctic engagements, most importantly our engagement with China
- demonstrating Australia's commitment to Antarctica through visits there by the Prime Minister and senior ministers
- regularly engaging with Australian Antarctic scientists and logisticians through policy departments and other agencies

- conducting ongoing discussions on how China might be affecting Antarctic norms and governance, on any risks in research collaboration, and on areas in which our engagement might be more focused
- providing regular briefings by Australia's intelligence community for scientists and other Australian Antarctic officials about China's aims and what scientific cooperation might indicate about China's intentions
- placing Antarctica back on the agenda for the Australia–China High-Level Dialogue, from which it was dropped
- objecting strongly when China's views run counter to the values and norms of the Antarctic Treaty system and speaking out early about any Chinese attempt at norm-shifting
- adopting a more tailored and transactional approach in our Antarctic engagement with China, making clear what we expect from China
- establishing a dialogue with friends and allies to develop a shared understanding of China's interests and ambitions in Antarctica and to ensure that differences on China's Antarctic policies or actions aren't treated only as bilateral issues
- increasing our cooperation with the US on Antarctic affairs (for example, Antarctica could be a topic for consideration at the next AUSMIN meeting)
- increasing our Antarctic engagement with Asia to avoid problems arising from over-reliance on bilateral cooperation with China (Australia has strong scientific collaboration with South Korea and Japan, and India is keen to strengthen its Antarctic connections with Australia)
- promoting Hobart's role as a science and logistics gateway to Antarctica for South Korea, Japan and India, reducing Tasmania's economic reliance on China
- examining how technology such as civilian satellites could enhance inspection and transparency (for example, experts from the Defence Science and Technology Group, in civilian roles, should be more involved in an enhanced inspections regime)
- conducting regular inspections of Chinese facilities in the AAT.[21]

The challenge was in Australia's understanding of what it must do, as much as what China might do.

Writing for *The Strategist*, Bergin and Press called for an Australian approach to Antarctica—and to China's role—that was clear, cogently communicated, credible, comprehensive and consistent. Australia must develop a broad appreciation of the cumulative effect of China's actions, policy and presence in Antarctica:

> Stagnant and, in some areas, diminishing funding for science (as opposed to logistics and infrastructure) has opened the way for China to invest in Antarctic research by Australian institutions. We run the risk of being mendicants living on Chinese research funds. Modest Australian reinvestment will diminish that risk and increase our leverage as we engage with China on Antarctic research.

> As a guiding principle, applying the Hippocratic oath, 'First, do no harm', to our Antarctic and overall national interests would help manage Australia–China Antarctic relations.
>
> For example, we should not help China to use Antarctic research for resource exploitation, to gather information on advanced technology with clear potential for military purposes, or to damage the environment.
>
> Given Beijing's tendency to move quickly on a broad front, as it has done in the South China Sea, we need to be prepared to respond to a rapid increase in the speed and scale of China's activity in Antarctica.[22]

Discussion about the future of the Antarctic Treaty system (ATS) was far too caught up in the potential for the system to fail, Elizabeth Buchanan wrote. Instead, the focus should be on the coercive elements of Antarctic cooperation and the entrenched nature of grey-zone activities:

> Upholding the ATS continues be in Australia's national interest. It delivers a great return on investment—a whopping big claim shelved into perpetuity and no military conflict on the doorstep. But conflict is underway in Antarctica; indeed, grey-zone activity is a hallmark of the continent. And not only does the ATS facilitate grey-zone threats, but Australia's national security settings are failing to navigate them.
>
> Grey-zone activities are actions taken by state or non-state actors that are coercive, undesired and even undermining, but that fall short of war. Strategic competition today is facilitated by new technologies and non-traditional security threats, which supports normalisation of grey-zone activities.[23]

Cooperation between nations in Antarctica was lauded, Buchanan wrote, 'mainly because the ATS remains standing. However, this cooperation can be weaponised to frustrate the consensus nature of the ATS and the long-term protectionist foundations of the treaty'.

The *Eyes wide open* report applied the lessons of the chill in Australia's relations with China to the future of Antarctic policy. Canberra must broaden its Antarctic partnerships 'to avoid any pitfalls of overreliance on Chinese bilateral cooperation', Bergin and Press wrote:

> Australia should both lift and deepen our engagement with like-minded partners. We should establish a dialogue with friends and allies aimed at developing a shared understanding of Chinese interests and ambitions for Antarctica. That shared understanding should inform stronger common approaches in Antarctic multilateral forums. We should work closely with natural groupings in the ATS, such as the claimant states, the original signatories, the Five Eyes, the Southern Hemisphere states and the Antarctic gateway states, and other like-minded states and groupings. We should work to ensure that differences on China's Antarctic policies or actions aren't treated only as bilateral issues.

Antarctica could have a place in the workings of the US alliance. As the depositary for the Antarctic Treaty and a defining proponent of the treaty, the US doesn't recognise Australia's Antarctic claim. But the US and Australia shared strong common interests in the Antarctic and the continued stability of the treaty, Bergin and Press wrote, and could be a topic for AUSMIN discussion on areas for future cooperation.

Applying 'grey zone' concerns to the white zone means seeing how the international consensus on the Antarctic Treaty and the scientific mission can be stretched to serve national strategic interests.

The white-zone worry isn't the creation of military bases, but the 'dual use' of science.

The Antarctic Treaty prohibits 'measures of a military nature'. However, the treaty allows for military personnel or equipment to be used for scientific research or for any other peaceful purposes. As Anthony Bergin noted, the interpretation of those provisions has never been tested: 'The most likely potential military uses of Antarctica would involve the continent being more fully integrated into global military activities, rather than generating any direct military threat within or from Antarctica.'[24]

The science of sensors, monitoring systems and observation stations can be plugged into the cyber-physical networks of global military systems. Dual use, Bergin judged, will make it 'increasingly difficult to distinguish between legitimate activities being carried out under the ATS and activities that should be prohibited by the non-militarisation provisions of the Antarctic Treaty'.[25]

To push back at the margins of the white zone involves demanding full transparency and sharing of the data gathered in Antarctica. The treaty must embrace the trust-but-verify motto to see that the uses served are scientific.

The science solution for Antarctica continues to offer much. Power politics, though, always push.

The Cold War delivered the Antarctic Treaty as a deal that served science. Today, the new great-power competition needs fresh compromise on the southernmost continent if Antarctica is to be a less contested element in international politics.

For Australia, the terms Robert Menzies used 60 years ago still apply—a 'sense of neighbourhood about the Antarctic' and 'a deep and practical interest'.[26]

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On the 1.5 track

In international affairs, it can be tough to discuss the big and controversial issues—the elephant in the room.

When a think tank is doing its bit for diplomacy, the talk about the elephant can be frank, even surprising.

Thus it was at the second Australia–Africa Dialogue at the Royal Zambezi Lodge in Zambia in September 2015, co-hosted by ASPI and South Africa's Brenthurst Foundation.

The agenda was ticking over when one participant interrupted: 'This is an interesting discussion, but we need to discuss the elephant in the room!'

It was true. At the window stood an elephant, saluting with its trunk, a wonderful image for 1.5-track dialogue when different worlds meet in the same room.

Just as the elephant uses its trunk to both communicate and handle objects, the 1.5 effort mingles official and unofficial players to deal with all manner of objects and objectives.

Track 1.0 diplomacy involves official dealings between governments; 1.5 conversation mixes analysts and academics with government officials who speak in 'an unofficial capacity'. Track 1.0 does the formal. Adding the informal half-track aims for frank discussion of elephant issues. The 1.5 essence is to find points of connection and confront shared problems.

The Australia–Africa dialogue provided an African saying with many uses when trekking the 1.5 track: 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together'. ASPI's Anthony Bergin and Lisa Sharland often use that 'go far, go together' thought in discussing the institute's dialogues.

Think-tank diplomacy was one purpose of ASPI's foundation. The Howard government decided that one of the institute's roles would be to promote international understanding of Australian strategic and defence policies, as Hugh White wrote:

> This reflected ministers' awareness that the 1990s had seen something of a boom in the development of non-official and semi-official—'Second Track' and 'One and a Half Track'—security dialogues in Asia. They had become a key element of the slow, tentative, but nonetheless important process of development of regional multilateral security institutions and architectures in the post-Cold War Asia; such exchanges were favoured in a region still very wary of anything that smacked of formal alliances or defence groupings. They had also become important in the development of a number of key bilateral security relationships between Australia and Asian countries—especially those major powers beyond Southeast Asia, with which we had previously had little contact on strategic and defence questions.[1]

Participants at the second Australia–Africa Dialogue, Royal Zambezi Lodge, Zambia, September 2015. Image courtesy of Lisa Sharland.

Australia was already involved in Asia's 1.5 and second track dialogues through the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia–Pacific, but White said that ministers wanted to broaden the range of Australian participants: '[T]he new institute might evolve into a fitting counterpart for the government-funded institutes of strategic studies that had been established in most ASEAN countries, and which played a central role in these dialogues.'

Following this mandate, ASPI set to work to bring together think tanks, academics, journalists, military officers, businesspeople, politicians and officials. The institute mainly focused on the Indo-Pacific but also reached out to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

The Africa dialogue illustrates that much can be covered. An ASPI–Brenthurst Foundation conference held in Zambia in 2012 shared expertise on China's demand for natural resources and its impact on Africa and Australia. *Fuelling the dragon* discussed how Africa and Australia struggled to formulate a coherent understanding of the 'China factor' in their future.[2]

The first Aus–Africa Dialogue was held in Western Australia in 2013—a conversation across the Indian Ocean ranging from resources boom to population boom. As Terence McNamee and Anthony Bergin wrote:

> Australia's never experienced anything like the huge explosion in youth population or the rapid urbanisation that Africa is currently undergoing. However, Australia has, at different stages of its own development, experienced the same massive lift in the terms of trade that Africa's resource exporters have enjoyed over the past 10 years.[3]

Surprisingly, for many participants, McNamee and Bergin wrote, the Aus–Africa Dialogue revealed 'consonance and points of intersection between the two continents' across numerous issues, and 'a strong consensus that the biggest future challenges affecting Australia and Africa will be ones that don't respect borders, such as global economic shocks, transnational security threats and climate change.'

At the second Aus–Africa Dialogue—shared with that elephant in Zambia—the 'money' topic of resources and mining also shared space with the central role of women in achieving and maintaining security and stability in conflict-affected regions.[4] As often happens, the seeds of those debates led to an ASPI study—a 2018 report on the role the mining sector can play in countering terrorism in Africa. The report focused on four case-study countries—Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya and Mali—to 'identify the intersections between the mining sector and the drivers of violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa'.[5]

While the dialogue with Africa was about the potential in difference and what could be made anew, the dialogue with New Zealand was about what could be made fresh out of shared history. The discussion was simultaneously intimate and blunt—the eternal kiss-and-kick between kiwi and kangaroo.

ASPI's defence and security dialogue with New Zealand was a family discussion prodding at the scar tissue of the great alliance breach. Apart from war, the kiwis' expulsion from ANZUS rates as Canberra's alliance shock of the 20th century.

To be in Canberra in 1985–86 as NZ was shaken out of ANZUS was to witness the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Anger was the strongest, and acceptance was a long time coming. Australia's politicians, diplomats and defenceniks expressed incredulous amazement at the slow-motion disaster.

The nuclear-free principles of the Lange Labour government crashed into the 'neither confirm nor deny' doctrine of the US Navy, compounded by the determination of the Reagan administration that the kiwis wouldn't set a new low for alliance backsliding. This was drama played as a *Mouse that roared* farce.

The US renounced its treaty obligations to New Zealand, the excitement faded, everyone slowly adjusted, and all sides eventually got used to the idea that the NZ in ANZUS was no more. By the close of the first decade of the 21st century, a form of resurrection had occurred. US limits on intelligence sharing were relaxed, the 2010 Wellington Declaration announced a US – New Zealand 'strategic partnership',[6] and the 2012 Washington Declaration gave explicit expression to a new defence relationship.[7]

The impact on ASPI's kiwi dialogue was to go beyond the traditional Anzac and South Pacific topics to see what the partial restoration would mean for Canberra and Wellington in Washington. The word 'trilateral' was used again in talking about the US, Australia and New Zealand—the usage was hesitant and exploratory, but the ability even to talk in trilateral terms marked a notable revival.

At a dialogue in Canberra in 2012, former secretary of the Defence Department and Australian High Commissioner to New Zealand Allan Hawke said the game had shifted for Australia:

> I think it probably has changed Australia's thinking about New Zealand, in that there were some residual issues as a result of the breaking up of the ANZUS treaty. But now that NZ has been welcomed back into the fold by the US, in fullness, I think our policy makers and ministers are much more open about dealing with New Zealand on both a bilateral basis and also in terms of the nature of the trilateral relationship with the US.[8]

Robert Ayson, of New Zealand's Centre for Strategic Studies, said that Wellington had achieved a closer relationship with Washington without having to disown its nuclear-free policy. Because of China, he said, the US needed more partners. While there was no expectation of a full return to the ANZUS alliance, Ayson thought New Zealand had achieved a *de facto* alliance:

> We have this Washington Declaration which is about cooperation in the Asia Pacific. In that sense, I think there are expectations, even if they're not always there in terms of all the formal documents at times, there's certainly a sense that while we are not full ANZUS partners in the way that we were, we have a much closer relationship with Washington than we did ten or twenty years ago.[9]

After the 2014 dialogue in Wellington, Andrew Davies wrote that goodwill was abundant, but kangaroo and kiwi would have problems working together militarily:

> Future interoperability between the two countries will require effort on both sides. Simply put, Australia's building a force structure capable at the top end of modern combat that's suited for operations with American forces, and NZ is struggling to keep up.[10]

Robert Ayson said that the most revealing finding from the 1.5-track talks wasn't the trans-Tasman interoperability problem, but the political gap between Canberra and Wellington.[11] Karl Claxton, too, saw the reality of kiwi–kangaroo strategic differences, drawing 'dissimilar policy conclusions from an essentially shared reading of global trends'. One idea from 1.5 talks, he noted, was for Australia to periodically invite New Zealand leaders to attend the cabinet's National Security Committee in Canberra.[12]

A different dialogue in tone and topic was with Israel—the Be'er Sheva dialogue, named after the World War I battle in which the Australian Light Horse made the last great cavalry charge. Supported by the Pratt Foundation, the institute's partner was the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and then the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya.

The wattle and the olive: a new chapter in Australia and Israel working together looked at shared interests across traditional and non-traditional realms, offering the strategic rationale for a stronger working relationship.[13] From water management to social resilience, cybersecurity to high-level military exchanges, the two states had much to share, Anthony Bergin wrote:

> There's really no country in the Middle East whose interests are more closely aligned to Australia than Israel. In particular it's a bulwark against violent extremism in the region. Unfortunately in Australia there's a tendency to see Israel purely through the lens of the Palestinian issue and the peace process.[14]

On the 100th anniversary of Battle of Be'er Sheva, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull addressed the dialogue in Israel, noting that some of its themes were being taken up by the two governments, with growing collaboration on the cybersphere and the creation of an annual strategic dialogue. 'Our relationship', Turnbull said, 'is stronger than it has ever been, closer than it has ever been. This dialogue is a good example of that.'[15]

In Europe, ASPI mounted dialogues on defence industry with France and on counterterrorism with Germany. The Australia–France Defence and Industry Dialogue in 2014 was prescient about Australia's possible choice of a diesel–electric submarine, as Andrew Davies wrote: 'France has a submarine industry with a proven record of designing, building and exporting boats. Given that the future submarine is the biggest future Australian defence project by far, the industry reps at our meeting have some cause for optimism.'[16] The 2016 selection of French shipbuilder Naval Group to build Australia's future submarines created a strategic partnership reaching into the middle of the century that must be 'more than submarines'.[17]

In 2015, ASPI established its Counter-Terrorism Policy Centre and almost at the same time joined with KAS (the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) to run the Australia–Europe Counter-Terrorism Dialogue. Australia and Europe shared similar challenges from violent extremism, yet no cooperation forum had existed. Topics over the six iterations of the annual talks have included homegrown terrorists, counterterrorism strategy and architecture, border security, national resilience, Islamic and right-wing extremism, and the impact of social media.[18]

In 2020, Katja Theodorakis wrote that the dialogue dealt with an ever-evolving threat landscape:

> A tried and proven format, it brings together policymakers, representatives from relevant government institutions, academic experts and practitioners from Australia, Germany and other European countries for frank discussions through roundtables, in-depth seminars and bilateral meetings at various relevant institutions and ministries, as well as the respective federal, state and EU parliaments.[19]

In the words of Australian Senator Linda Reynolds, opening the fourth Australia–Europe meeting in 2018, the dialogue 'is testimony to two things: the enduring success of this event; and its value as a forum in bringing together people with a shared determination to manage a great evil of our times'.[20]

A shared ocean was the focus of a trilateral involving Australia, India and Indonesia, called the Track 1.5 Trilateral Dialogue on the Indian Ocean (TDIO). The talks covered disaster relief, maritime security risks, marine science, sea-lane security, fisheries, and illegal people trafficking, as Anthony Bergin wrote after the second meeting in 2014:

> TDIO countries have common interests in the eastern Indian Ocean that provide a potential building block for addressing concerns of the wider Indian Ocean region, without the diversions of the strategic troubles of East Asia and the northwest Indian Ocean.
>
> TDIO countries are powerful democracies, heavily dependent on shipping and the security of sea lines of communication, with extensive EEZs in the eastern Indian Ocean. We've each got a vested interest in the management of the wider Indian Ocean. (A pillar of Indonesian President-elect Joko Widodo's campaign was an emphasis on strengthening the country's identity as a 'maritime nation' and becoming what he called a 'global maritime nexus'.)[21]

The trilateral could be a powerful force for change in the eastern Indian Ocean, Bergin wrote in 2017, with fisheries as a major focus. Indian Ocean fisheries management is diverse in its scope, but, compared to the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is the wild west. We should prioritise areas related to monitoring, control and surveillance.[22]

From 2013, the Quad-Plus dialogue involved four think tanks—the Heritage Foundation (US), Vivekananda International Foundation (India), the Tokyo Foundation (through to 2017), the Japan Institute of International Affairs (from 2018) and ASPI. The 'plus' element was a rotating fifth country at the roundtable.[23]

After the first Quad-Plus meeting in Canberra in 2013, Andrew Davies wrote that the four think tanks aimed to get governments to revive the quashed quadrilateral. That was why it was a 'second track' dialogue, because no government official could be involved, even unofficially.

As a hedging mechanism against China, the Quad had the strengths and drawbacks of a values-based concept, Davies wrote:

> Values have a place in formulating foreign policy and security strategy. If nothing else, it's easier to work with countries with shared values because communication is easier and the calculus of self-interest tends to be similar. The Quad are natural partners in many ways, though it remains to be seen whether a values-based grouping can be constructive within the broader Indian–Pacific security architecture. There are costs as well as benefits, and any Australian engagement with the Quad (plus) concept will have to balance those.[24]

The Quad-Plus had kept 'the conversation going until our governments signed back up', Walter Lohman wrote in 2019. The rise of China was 'the defining challenge of our era' and the 'most important thing that unites the Quad countries'. Getting that challenge wrong would 'make the difference between war and peace, security and insecurity, prosperity and want, and freedom and oppression'.

Lohman set out the principles that guided the four think tanks in running the Quad-Plus:

1. The forum would be mostly about China: 'the impact of China's rise to global power is something that must be acknowledged directly.'
2. Additional partners—the 'plus' countries—offered critical perspectives: 'Their relationships with China will be affected by what the Quad does, as will their operating environments in the diplomatic, security, economic and other domains.'
3. All Quad countries have productive relationships with China: 'We never characterised the effort as anything resembling "containment"—which we calculated would be a perfect way to kill it, through irrelevance.'
4. Minimise security risks but don't create a trade bloc, which 'would only make worse the sicknesses caused by China's market distortions'.
5. Values matter: 'It's no accident that the Quad countries are liberal democracies. Likewise, all of our "plus" partners enjoy liberal political freedoms at home and support an interstate liberal order abroad.'[25]

China was also the elephant in the room for a separate dialogue ASPI conducted with South Korea and Japan.

The 1.5 track with the Korea Institute for National Unification was a rolling discussion of the difficulties South Korea had with its neighbours: China's economic influence; scenarios for

peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula; and Australia's abilities as 'an effective mediator for the strained relationship between Seoul and Tokyo'.[26]

Four themes run through two decades of ASPI dialogue with Japan:

- the condition of the bilateral relationship
- a shared fascination with the US alliance
- the nature of the region—Australia and Japan were the first two nations to make the conceptual shift from the Asia–Pacific to the Indo-Pacific
- China's intentions and actions.

ASPI's inaugural Australia–Japan 1.5-track dialogue was in Canberra in 2002. The aim was to assist the two governments to explore policy options 'through frank and sustained exchanges', and to strengthen 'bilateral security and defence relations to achieve a level of closeness befitting their common interests'.[27]

After the 2013 dialogue, Benjamin Schreer wrote that Japan was 'deeply worried about China's strategic trajectory'. The talks with officials and analysts in Tokyo 'confirmed the strong focus on China's "anti-access/area-denial" threat and a desire on the Japanese part for a more proactive defence policy, including participation in the emerging US "AirSea battle" concept and adopting an "offensive defence" posture (without specifying what that meant)'.[28]

The shifts in Japan's defence policy, Schreer judged, were 'more the result of a long-term development, rather than sweeping changes'.

China was the context for the 2014 study ASPI did with the Japan Institute of International Affairs on *Strengthening rules-based order in the Asia–Pacific.* China often brushed off calls for rules and norms based upon consensus, Anthony Bergin and David Lang wrote. Instead, Beijing 'expects conformity and respect because of its power and history'.[29]

ASPI's view of Beijing's mindset was shaped by the 1.5 track. Over the institute's first decade, Peter Abigail detected 'increased assertiveness in our dialogues with Chinese counterparts'. Beijing saw the US distracted away from East Asia and sensed that the balance of military capabilities was swinging in China's favour and limiting US options.[30]

Considering the role of the 1.5 track for ASPI, Abigail recalled how the discussions gave an evolving view of a Beijing increasingly ready to move and change—and challenge:

> From its early days ASPI pursued international engagement as a key thread in its research and dialogue programs. This included activities ranging from individual visits to foreign institutes and participation in international conferences and seminars, to more structured and regular 1.5 track strategic dialogues with counterpart organisations in China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.

> The 1.5 track exchanges brought together institute, academic and official participants from both sides to discuss strategic issues, trends, and possibilities. Hosting alternated with each iteration and over time an accommodating familiarity could and did develop between core participants, occasionally allowing a more open discussion.
>
> Whilst the topics for consideration did vary at each dialogue, and with each country, the common theme in all dialogues during my time at ASPI (2005–2012) was 'China and the changes to the country, its policies, and prospects under the leadership of Hu Jintao'.
>
> Hu had risen to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002 and soon changed the direction of the 'reform and opening' policies of his predecessor, adopting a more assertive 'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' as his theme for the decade.
>
> This had many parts and changed everything. Something brought home to me in my final 1.5 track dialogue with our Chinese counterparts in 2011, when a member of their delegation told me, as a private aside: 'The PLA will break out of the first-island chain in 2020.'
>
> Hmmm! The process is clearly continuing under his successor.[31]

In 2013, ASPI held its tenth annual 1.5-track dialogue with the China International Institute for Strategic Studies and a range of Chinese security scholars.[32] Peter Jennings reflected:

> A decade long investment has generated a frank and friendly exchange. A couple of meetings can never convey the surprising diversity of Chinese opinion on security matters, but the views of China's elite think-tanks aren't casual or to be dismissed.[33]

Beijing wanted cooperation with the US, Jennings said, although that wouldn't change China's 'long term aspirations to regional and global greatness, and the possibility of regression to angry chauvinism'.

ASPI built new think-tank links with the China Institute of International Studies in 2014, opening up meetings that discussed cybersecurity; the role of China, Australia and the US in the Asia–Pacific security architecture; and regional free trade initiatives.[34]

ASPI launched a 1.5 track on cyber issues with China in 2015, allowing a 'lively exchange on approaches to new and emerging cyber security issues'. The 2016 dialogue in Canberra covered 'online crime, China's new cyber legislation, and opportunities for capacity building, the implementation of international law and norms and new avenues for cooperation'.[35]

Ice, though, was starting to form on the track between China and Australia. As official exchanges between Canberra and Beijing got frostier from 2017, the temperature dropped for 1.5 dialogues. The elephant became a dragon not much interested in entering the room for dialogue.

The arrival of Covid-19 saw an end to international travel from March 2020 and the proliferation of Zoom diplomacy.

Although discussions on screen will never replace human interactions, they do make it easier to bring interesting people into a virtual room. In this way, ASPI delivered a further round of the Be'er Sheva Dialogue; launched a trilateral event bringing together the foreign policy community of Indonesia and India's Observer Research Foundation; and reached out to Taiwan's Defence University and to the US Air University.

The opportunities for international dialogue are endless for an ambitious Australian think tank, bound only by time zones and the appetite of Canberra participants for late evening or early morning discussions.

Notes

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The Strategist

The Strategist first went online on 17 July 2012, becoming a 'blog' that blossomed.

ASPI's publication set up its stall in the crowded town square of international affairs, seeking to make sense of the passing parade. The reporting and commentary site quickly outgrew the 'blog' brand. *The Strategist* is a think tank's evolving review of history, presented as an online magazine and digital record.

The masthead was launched with this welcome from Natalie Sambhi and Andrew Davies:

> Over the past 11 years, ASPI has been proud to produce fresh ideas and analysis on Australia's most important long-term strategic and defence issues.
>
> ASPI's well-established publication lines have served us well, and we'll continue to produce a range of quality long form publications. But, like the rest of the publishing world, our audience is increasingly looking for new ways to access our products. We're already on Twitter and Facebook, and they are opportunities for a greater two-way dialogue than ASPI has had in the past, as well as a way to promote collegiality amongst the wider strategy and defence community.[1]
>
> Building on that foundation, we're pleased to welcome you to our new blog, *The Strategist*. With input from ASPI researchers and contributors from around the world, *The Strategist* will host material to stimulate thinking and discussion about the critical strategic choices which our country will face over the coming years.[2]

The purpose of what became ASPI's digital magazine was to give the institute a daily voice that was also a platform for readers to be the writers—the voice would feed a big conversation, drawing on many other voices.

The dialogue has stricter rules than those applying in much of the blog world. More than 'curated', contributions are graded and gardened, with plenty of editorial pruning.

ASPI's editors rule the show, even if the writers are the stars. *The Strategist* aimed to be a quality publication with high editorial standards—a masthead with a daily news tempo.

Unlike academic journals, ASPI's digital review delivers at speed: headline, by-line, picture and text, with hyperlinks and thumbnail pointers to related posts. Here is no slow-maturing academic product, nor a ponderous departmental brief; although articles certainly get the ASPI version of a peer-review pounding, both before and after they're published. The editing process tests, while the readers judge and often respond.

A *Strategist* debate is a multi-article wonder that can go in many directions, driven by the intellectual heft of the readership. The arguments can be sharp, but barbs are delivered politely: *manners maketh the magazine.*

Each item stands on its own, yet joins a tributary of subject conversations as another layer in the think tank's reporting of Australian defence and foreign policy and Australia's concerns in the world. The 'search' function and the 'key word' tabs are the instant keys to arraying and accessing those rich layers.

The daily rhythm is set by the pulse of the articles published every couple of hours, starting from 6 am. *The Strategist*'s short style guide calls for a relatively informal writing style: adopt a conversational tone; without sacrificing meaning, judiciously relax the writing rules; add hyperlinks to show the thinking and evidence route.

For ASPI's journalist fellow (formed by service in newspapers, radio and TV), the line that this is old media dressed up as new media rings true. Much is familiar: crystallise the key point, highlight the telling quote, line up the facts. Then do think-tank duty to sketch in the history, pick the trends and point to policy implications. What matters and what will it mean? Adorn with a sharp headline served by a picture that entices, even explains.

The call to 'favour the reader' demands a constant effort to talk up to that reader (and not make 'em glaze up, give up or throw-up!).

Feedback from *Strategist* readers is embraced and sometimes highly valued. A prized comment was from a luminary of Australian strategic thinking, Robert O'Neill (ASPI's first chairman), who observed in 2019: 'Keep up the good work—you are producing *a world class review* of what is going on and how we can do better!'

The Strategist has had four executive editors. Here are the reflections of Andrew Davies, Rod Lyon, Patrick Walters and Brendan Nicholson on how they did the job and what the job did to them.

What is this thing called 'blog'?

Andrew Davies

The discussion wasn't quite at the level of 'I suppose we need some of this new-fangled social media thingy' when Peter Jennings sat us down to discuss new ASPI product lines late in 2011, but it was probably closer to that than most of us would care to admit. After all, ASPI had made a mark for itself with old-school long-form publications, and a jump into the new media world was a little daunting.

Running a blog was about as frivolous as we could bear at the time. Facebook was a bridge too far and the 140 character limit of Twitter in those days was far too small for the serious analysis pieces with which we blessed the world. Thus decided, I volunteered to be the inaugural editor, my main claim to the position being that I had my own page on Blogspot (readership: six), which distinguished me from my blogless colleagues.

The next step was choosing a name. I wanted to call the blog 'Policy, Guns and Money', capturing ASPI's three main product lines in those days as well as riffing off Warren Zevon.[3] (Proposing a 1978 pop culture reference in 2012 fairly represents my proximity to the cutting edge.) Peter had other ideas, thinking that we should go for something that had the gravitas of *The Diplomat* or *The Economist*. After we checked on which of us was the boss, *The Strategist* was born.

Being a foray into a new product line aimed at a wider demographic than our existing products—ASPI public functions tended to look a bit like a *Canberra Times* subscriber tour—we decided to hire some youth.[4] After we met some impressive and engaging young people, Natalie Sambhi, who ran her own *Security Scholar* blog, joined me on the editorial team of two.[5] Natalie can take a lot of the credit for making *The Strategist* a success.

Natalie and I decided we were going to run ASPI's blog on a few key principles.

First, quality mattered more than quantity, even though conventional wisdom says that quantity has a quality all its own in the social media space. We wanted to generate clicks, but not at the cost of being superficial.

Second, the blog had to look good, which meant that we spent a lot of time looking for the right image for posts.

Third, we wanted *The Strategist* to have a sense of humour (at least some of the time). That meant that we produced the odd punny headline and we were always sympathetic to a joke slipped into a piece. (Even if I did accidentally edit out one of Peter's jokes regarding the points on a kangamoose. Sorry, boss.[6])

In the end, we ended up deciding that *The Strategist* was in fact old media dressed up as new media.

We ran it like a newspaper (albeit one fairly heavy on op-ed pieces), right down to thinking about 'above the fold' and 'below the fold' pieces—trying to always keep the best pieces near the top and keyed to the audience of the time. Thus the 6 am post would often be Canberra policy centric, with an eye on the Qantas Club crowd. Pieces posted late in the day were often on US or European themes, so readers in those places would see them at the top when they visited.

If we had a role model, it was the *New York Times.* We made a point of correcting any factual errors that snuck past us with a Times-like correction at the bottom, complete with a finger pointed at the perpetrator (the author or us, basically). My favourite correction was to a piece by Mark Thomson, who managed to get his potato famines of the 1740s and 1840s mixed up.[7] We were nothing if not rigorous.

And it wasn't long before we realised one of the real strengths of having an in-house, near-real-time publishing arm.

No longer were ASPI staff members at the mercy of the editorial choices of newspaper and TV editors when commenting on the topic of the day. A TV news interview of 10 minutes will get distilled down to two sentences (if you're lucky) for the evening news bulletin—and it will always be the most colourful quote. But now we could put down a more expansive 800 words (we were pretty strict on that limit, back in the day) and have it on the streets before the papers or TV news.

We got pretty slick at getting product out the door. A particular highlight for me was the coverage of the 2013 Defence White Paper, when we published 10 analysis pieces on the day of its release.[8]

We must have done something right with the product, because the readership rose steadily in the first couple of years. We were thrilled the first time a piece got 100 views, but it wasn't long before we were blasé about 1,000. Today's editors will laugh politely about those numbers.

I've had a fun career, and some pretty good jobs in diverse settings along the way, but I look back at the early days of *The Strategist* with the most fondness. I had other things to do after a while, so I had to hand it over. Luckily, I was able to pass the baton to Rod Lyon, who continued the work Natalie and I had started, but also brought his own expert eye (and sense of humour) to the job.

Uneasiness of the shop window

Rod Lyon

As *The Strategist*'s second executive editor, I had an easier task than my colleagues. The primal act of creation had already been achieved, and the blog's reputation for delivering a high-quality product had already been established. By the time I assumed the helm, the blog had already become the front window for a lot of ASPI's work.

Why change horses in mid-stream, you might ask? Simple. ASPI needed Andrew to return to capability analysis. So in late March 2014 I found myself, somewhat unexpectedly, as the editor of a blog—definitely something I'd never foreseen when I left the public service in the mid-1990s.

Like the editor of any regular publication, one of my principal concerns was balancing contributions with publications. Striking the right balance had a strong sense of urgency about it. In the case of a high-quality academic journal, for example, editors need to find that balance once every few months. But *The Strategist* had reached a point where it was regularly publishing three or four—on occasion, five—items per day.

There were certainly times when we had a surfeit of submissions and therefore the luxury of picking and choosing key items for publication. The team worked on the theory that one of the slots in the schedule would be filled by a contribution that turned up during the day, thereby helping to keep the site 'fresh'.

Often that theory worked, but almost as often it didn't. Some days degenerated into a mad scramble to find an item for the final afternoon publication slot. Let me say that there's a deep queasiness that settles upon an editor unable to see what he's going to be publishing in two or three hours.

Those moments of quiet desperation were made more pressing by the need to maintain quality: if we wanted busy readers to read our product, it had to be brief, well written, crisply argued and—of particular interest to ASPI's audience—policy relevant.

Brevity was a standard that rested on regular enforcement. Unless the editorial crew policed the 800-word boundary reasonably diligently, contributions to the blog grew steadily longer.

The writing quality of submissions varied markedly. Items from some contributors—Peter Jennings, Andrew Davies and Lisa Sharland spring to mind—scarcely needed to be touched. But I'm forced to admit that the longer I sat in the editorial seat, the more interventionist I became in transforming drafts into one uniform writing style.

My task was simple: build upon the foundations already in place.

The Strategist aimed to be read by key policymakers—ministers and senior officials. If we could succeed in that, other readers, both within Australia and outside, would follow.

The Strategist sought to be an outlet—in the first instance—for ASPI's own staff, and in particular for our interns, whose careers would benefit from having their names on publications, humble blog posts though those might be. Andrew before me had aimed for a split in which about two-thirds of items would be authored inside ASPI and one-third by outsiders, and that seemed to be about the right balance to me.

Apart from the product line, my main concern was always the team. Putting it brutally: we were often one deep. Natalie Sambhi and Kristy Bryden—and later Amelia Long and David Lang—were key to the running of the blog. They often worked irregular hours to keep it afloat. Indeed, I can remember one occasion when Kristy posted an item from a car on the Hume Highway!

I lasted a year in the role. Looking back, those were some great days. For one thing, when you're the editor you get pulled into areas well beyond your own area of expertise. You learn the fine details of subject matter with which you've been unfamiliar. You get a front-row seat on how different authors weigh conflicting arguments.

But it wasn't all beer and skittles. Apart from ASPI's formal closure period over Christmas and New Year, I don't remember having a day off during that year. I remember emails sent out to staff soliciting contributions that would allow us to get through the next 24 hours. And I remember, too, occasions on which I wrote a blog post in the morning just on the off-chance that we would need one before the day was out.

It was with a sense of relief that I passed the baton to Patrick Walters.

Feed the daily beast

Patrick Walters

Approaching its third birthday in 2015, *The Strategist* had already established a solid readership and a growing reputation as the leading online source of daily commentary and analysis on Australia's defence and security. I was fortunate to follow two of ASPI's finest in Andrew Davies and Rod Lyon in the executive editor's chair, from March 2015 to March 2020.

The irrepressible and quick-witted Dr Davies continued to play a crucial role as a very regular contributor until he reluctantly decided to focus on rock climbing and cycling. Andrew could pen a word-perfect 800-word piece in well under an hour, and many a time he would come to the rescue with the final post of the day as the mid-afternoon email deadline loomed.

Rod's return to his former role as a senior analyst meant that he became one of mainstays of *The Strategist*. ASPI hasn't produced a sharper thinker or clearer writer than Rod Lyon, and his finely crafted commentary on the arcane world of nuclear weapons strategy and other security matters has continued to add lustre to *The Strategist*.

My role as a part-time (three-days-a-week) editor meant that I had to rely heavily on my editorial team of Natalie Sambhi, David Lang and Amelia Long to keep *The Strategist* humming along. The key mission was to steadily expand our daily publication output, subject matter and range of contributors, while still adhering to rigorous editorial controls.

But how to sustain the daily beast? This was no easy task, as Rod and Andrew have pointed out. To build a stronger and more durable online presence, we couldn't always rely on the willingness of ASPI's analysts and interns to step up at short notice, week after week. Nor could we continue to expect external contributors who were experts in their own disciplines to write regular columns for free.

Soon after I arrived in early 2015, I asked Peter Jennings for a formal editorial budget that would enable us to expand our stable of external contributors, which already included a sprinkling of academics, journalists and former senior public servants. The boss kicked things off with a modest subvention and also allowed me to go out to obtain external sponsorship.

Getting major defence companies to back *The Strategist* did generate some negative reaction about the perceived editorial independence of the platform, but I don't believe it ever prejudiced our ability to forensically analyse major defence procurement issues. We steadily expanded our overseas network of correspondents, and a syndication deal with Project Syndicate allowed us to run weekly coverage of broader global security issues. At home, we sought closer ties with other like-minded digital platforms, occasionally sharing posts in the defence and foreign affairs spheres.

Three years after its foundation, *The Strategist* had evolved way beyond a simple 'blog' (always an inadequate descriptor for the enterprise) into a more regular online journal or digital magazine. The number of posts published weekly rose, as did the range of authors. In 2015–16, we topped

the 1,000-post mark for the first time when no fewer than 242 individual authors wrote for the blog in that year. The numbers of subscribers and visitors to *The Strategist* continued to climb steadily month by month, eventually reaching 2.7 million unique page views in 2019–20.

We prided ourselves on being able to analyse major defence policy documents with speed, authority and panache. We made a real effort to source appropriate illustrations for every column, including through a contract with an international editorial image provider. Coming from the newspaper world, one could only marvel at the production speed of the online realm. We were publishing an average of four columns a day (a total of 3,000–3,500 words) and, later, an occasional additional longer read on Saturday mornings. If the need arose, we could commission and publish within a matter of hours. Our record from receipt of a column to it being posted on the site was inside 15 minutes.

Increasingly, the mainstream media turned to *The Strategist* for both stories and angles on the major defence and national security issues of the day. Led by Peter Jennings, Andrew Davies, Mark Thomson, Lisa Sharland and Anthony Bergin and, later, Michael Shoebridge, Marcus Hellyer, Malcolm Davis and Brendan Nicholson, we could provide unrivalled analysis of major defence policy developments. On the release of the 2016 Defence White Paper, we ran 16 separate analyses of the document over two days—some 12,000 words. Brendan joined the team as defence editor in 2017, bringing deep journalistic expertise on defence issues to *The Strategist*.

Over the years, we published sustained and focused analysis on some of the biggest public policy debates: the ANZUS alliance and the rise of China, the defence and foreign policy white papers, and the chaotic presidency of Donald Trump. Mark Thomson wrote with unchallenged authority on the defence budget, Rod Lyon illuminated the salient features of the nuclear world with clarity and gentle irony, and Lisa Sharland raised the profile of women, peace and multilateral security issues in *The Strategist*. Graeme Dobell, the alchemist of alliteration and our regular Monday morning columnist, framed a vital debate on Australia's engagement in the South Pacific. Later in my time, Huong Le Thu brought authority to our coverage of Southeast Asian security issues.

Some things never changed. There were regulars who were a dream to edit and irregulars whose prose required rivers of red ink and a herculean effort to render into print. In mid-2017, *The Strategist* recruited its first-ever senior professional editor, Larissa Joseph, who brought expert grammatical knowledge and rigour to the editing process. With the departure of David Lang to the foreign minister's office and Amelia Long to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Jack Norton joined the team as a full-time editor in 2018.

Some of the best-read posts in my time were, curiously, mostly focused on guns. I recall one by a certain 'WO1 W' (an Australian special forces member) that's still the only anonymous column ever run on *The Strategist*, debating the merits of the EF88 Steyr rifle versus the M4/AR-15. Several years later, Nathan Ruser's posts analysing India's airstrikes on Pakistan

by using satellite imagery became the highest rating posts in *The Strategist*'s short history—a testament to the site's growing international reach.

Outside ASPI, we were lucky to have Peter Edwards writing regularly on war, intelligence and politics; James Goldrick on naval history and maritime strategy; and Allan Behm, Paul Dibb and Hugh White on Australian defence strategy. We endeavoured to mark important historical anniversaries—such as a long-running series by prominent historians on the centenary of the Great War. Occasionally, I would twist the arms of old journalist contacts to come to the rescue if a major news story broke overseas. Tom Switzer, Don Greenlees, John McBeth, Keith Richburg and David Gardner all provided first-class analysis during my time at the helm.

Full of bright, capable, enthusiastic staff and some exceptional interns, ASPI was easily the most congenial place I've ever worked. Over my five years there, staff numbers more than doubled and ASPI's public impact and publishing output soared—notably following the creation of the cyber team.

While running *The Strategist* never proved to be a dream three-day-a-week job, I enjoyed heading into the office on most weekdays and the occasional Sunday.

It was with very mixed feelings that I finally handed over the baton to Brendan Nicholson early in 2020, just days before the onset of the great Covid-19 pandemic.

A think tank's review and record

Brendan Nicholson

In mid-March 2020, the ACT, ASPI and much of the world went into Covid-induced lockdown.

Larissa was well set up to work from home, but Jack and I scrambled for laptops, screens, headphones and VPN (virtual private network) access codes. I'd travelled the world as a journalist with a backpack and an iPad, which was great to write on but not enough to match our editing requirements.

Thanks to the sterling efforts of Larissa and Jack, the transition to remote editing was made seamlessly and *The Strategist* kept pumping out pieces without pause.

Then the flood began.

With much of the world in isolation, everyone on the planet seemed to find the time to knock out pieces they'd planned to get off their chests and fire them off to our site. There was also a big spike in readership.

ASPI has doubled in size over the past three years or so, which has increased the number of pieces we're receiving from in-house specialists. At the same time, *The Strategist* has increased in popularity—with both readers and writers.

Since its launch, it's run close to 8,500 posts.

The Strategist is a lively commentary and analysis site—some readers need to be reminded that it's not there to reflect an official ASPI view on anything. As ASPI's main public window, *The Strategist* is also a vital part of the organisation and the most effective means to get the vast amount of material it produces into the light of day.

It's matured into an excellent platform for debate, bringing strategic, defence, cybersecurity and national security issues to the attention of policymakers. It makes important contributions to discussions and provides critical scrutiny of individual defence projects.

The Strategist is an important source for local and international journalists and commentators working on defence, cyber and security matters. Ministerial advisers regularly include posts in briefing notes, and *The Strategist* regularly features on departmental and university reading lists. *Strategist* staff write frequent reports for the media on key issues.

Monitoring its progress provides serious insights into public interests and concerns. As an example, the most read posts in 2021 reflect a sharply increasing focus on analysis of relations with China and Australia's readiness for a potential conflict.

The Strategist has certainly evolved well beyond being a 'blog', but it's a high-quality commentary site, not a peer-reviewed academic journal, as some outside suggest it should be.

We've broadened the mix to include both short, sharp analysis and longer, more complex pieces, along with detailed interviews. We don't expect that everyone will read everything, but most will find something they can learn from, enjoy or be enraged by—or perhaps all three.

A key goal for the team has been to increase the number of women writing for us.

In February 2021, Susan Hutchinson wrote a post (on clandestine nightly flights between Myanmar and China) that received 64,471 views.[9] We think that was the first time a female author has published the most read piece in a quarter.

The proportion of posts written by women is consistently around 25%—ranging up to 29%—and we'd like to get that much higher.

As the lockdown ended after three long months, we were joined by Anastasia Kapetas as our national security editor.

The Strategist continues to attract a broad overseas audience of writers and readers; on average, well over 40% of hits come from outside Australia. It's particularly popular in the US, Britain, India, Canada, Singapore, Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines.

With a large volume of material to process for the site, we aim for an editing standard equivalent to that of a high-quality newspaper and 'fit for purpose'.

We increasingly run podcast interviews along with our written posts, each with a short, written introduction to say who's being interviewed about what.

We're often offered advance copies of speeches to be made at ASPI or elsewhere. Cutting them back drastically and running extracts risks unbalancing whatever message the speaker was seeking to convey. We understand the debate about angel's wings, but slashing pieces to make them fit into a finite space can become like chopping disciples out of da Vinci's *Last Supper* just to make it fit a template.

The Strategist team encourages junior ASPI staff to contribute and helps interns with their research and writing tasks. The team also helps with courses for Defence personnel.

Managing such a site does provide fascinating—and frustrating—insights into human nature. The quality of pieces varies to an amazing degree: some arrive pristine and ready for publication with a couple of style changes, and others require heavy-duty panelbeating to knock them into publishable shape. It's often worth the effort because they can contain valuable insights among the verbiage.

It's invariably the authors of the pieces requiring the most work who are most impatient to see them up in lights. And classics include: 'You said I could write 800 words but I've written 1,700. Does that mean I get paid double?' Well, no.

We're constantly reminded of versions of the comment attributed to wordsmiths from Cicero to Mark Twain: 'If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.'

The aim, always, is to publish an article that delivers one or two sharp points, rather than trying to round up all the points.

The force in the formula is that each article can layer and intertwine and compound with all that's already published.

The analysis and reporting and commentary create a think tank's review and record.

Notes

1 ASPI, *Twitter*, online; ASPI, *Facebook*, online.
2 Natalie Sambhi, Andrew Davies, 'Welcome to *The Strategist*', *The Strategist,* 17 July 2012, online.
3 Warren Zevon, 'Lawyers, guns and money (2007 remaster)', *YouTube*, online.
4 John Paul Moloney, 'The Canberra Times subscribers tour newsroom and press', *Canberra Times*, 16 August 2019, online.
5 Natalie Sambhi, 'Security and defence issues from an Australian perspective', *Security Scholar*, online.
6 Peter Jennings, 'Australia and Canada: the kangamoose wakes', *The Strategist*, 12 June 2013, online.
7 Mark Thomson, 'A folly of strategic proportions', *The Strategist*, 18 October 2013, online.
8 Natalie Sambhi, 'A first look at the Defence White Paper 2013', *The Strategist,* 3 May 2013, online.
9 Susan Hutchinson, 'What's on the clandestine nightly flights between Myanmar and China?', *The Strategist*, 23 February 2021, online.

Thinking the ASPI way— the Professional Development Centre

Helping others to think the ASPI way is the job of the Professional Development Centre (PDC).

One of ASPI's aims is to generate innovative ideas for policymakers, allowing them to make better informed decisions. The PDC's role is to help bring out those ideas and build capability.

In running programs since 2014, the PDC's focus has evolved from an emphasis on delivering courses to developing strategic policy muscle, engaging with problem solving and designing governance and capability frameworks.

Tailoring solutions for government and the private sector, the centre shapes and influences by leveraging ASPI's people, reputation, research and access to experts to design, develop and deliver unique professional development programs.

The PDC's journey was part of the expansion of ASPI's thinking about what it could and should do for Australian strategy.

Where it began

Since its establishment, ASPI has been committed to fostering the next generation of strategic policy thinkers and playing an active role in professional development for the Department of Defence. A two-week Defence Graduates Seminar was conducted from 2012 until 2017. The emphasis in the early days on enhancing and developing strategic policy capability has continued in the form of the flagship Better Policy Program. While the program's design and framing have evolved, it's a foundational element for enhancing capability.

In 2014–15, more than 300 Defence personnel took part in the Better Policy Program, and around 70 newly engaged Defence staff attended the annual Defence Graduates Seminar, which was a two-week seminar on the strategic issues facing Australia.

The History of Australia's Foreign Policy was a preliminary two-day short course that aimed to provide newly engaged Defence Graduates with an understanding of the history of Australia's foreign policy, as preparation for the Defence Graduates Seminar.

> *'As a beginner in the policy space the considerations and the insights that go into policymaking was valuable.'*

ASPI Education was a new enterprise that aimed to 'improve judgement through short, intense professional development courses and workshops that focus on policymaking, thinking skills and strategic analysis'. ASPI was committed to fostering the next generation of strategic policy thinkers, and the programs soon proved their worth in professional development for

government clients, particularly the Department of Defence. ASPI Education evolved into ASPI Professional Development in 2018 and, in a further change in 2021, became the PDC.

In 2016–17, 28 iterations of Crafting Better Policy for Defence Professionals were delivered for 376 Defence Executive Level and APS staff across Australia. This program examined policy from the viewpoint of Defence's contribution to national security and administrative policy, focusing on the Defence organisation's internal workings.

The Guiding Better Policy for Defence Professionals program built the capability of senior executives to lead and facilitate greater understanding of the Australian defence policymaking system and enhance their staff's policymaking skills.

Not content to focus solely on defence, ASPI worked with Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) to promote a broader understanding of security and the way state and federal government policy can be shaped and influenced. For example, members of the Queensland emergency services had limited understanding of how policy evolves and how they could influence and inform policy development. The aim was that course participants would have a 'lights on' moment when they saw the policy terrain and the role that they could play.

The QFES Academy Strategic Planning Seminar was a complementary program designed to engage QFES staff in thinking about the broader understandings and challenges facing QFES and the academy. This three-day seminar at the QFES Training Academy provided an opportunity to shape the long-term strategic direction of the broader QFES organisation. The seminar gave new QFES members the building blocks and understanding of policy mechanisms and the needs of a tri-service emergency management agency to shape them as future leaders.

The core of this work was the Better Policy for Emergency Management Professionals program, which was delivered for 119 QFES staff. Designed for fire and emergency management professionals at national, state and territory levels, the program improved participants' understanding of policymaking and policymaking skills in emergency management and community safety.

ASPI's highly effective relationship with QFES was also demonstrated during operational readiness reviews for the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. ASPI Professional Development worked with the Commissioner of QFES to review and assess the capacity of QFES to respond to and manage emergencies during the games.

In 2018, ASPI designed, developed and facilitated a five-week policy and politics module for the Centre for Defence and Security Studies of the Australian Defence College. ASPI's reputation and contacts enabled it to provide a greater range of presenters and commentators than was normally possible in this year-long master's degree program.

Fast-forward to today

The key feature of the PDC's growth and, importantly, its impact, is its focus on understanding and meeting organisational needs.

The programs of those early days have evolved and today are supplemented by others:

- a range of Better Policy workshops designed to enhance participants' critical thinking, knowledge and practical skills for policy development
- tailored programs for the Air Force to ensure that its leaders are equipped to meet future challenges
- a range of extended, immersive, in-depth strategic programs for government clients covering a comprehensive list of learning goals and skills
- APS Graduates programs, which provide the knowledge and skills necessary for graduates to succeed in the changing strategic environment
- Thinking and Communicating Outside the Box, facilitated by playwright Timothy Daly, which focuses on innovative thinking, original analysis and problem solving, creative flair in written and spoken expression, and persuasive speaking skills.

> *'Great engagement and helpful and personable speakers and staff. Felt encouraged to share and that opinions are welcomed and not judged.'*

- masterclasses addressing Australia's most complex national and regional security challenges, bringing together senior leaders and subject-matter experts in a discrete environment to define and agree on a way forward
- policy and framework development by working with clients and their teams to develop responses to their most pressing strategic and security policy and planning challenges
- 'red teaming' activities to test and evaluate strategies, policies, frameworks and strategic plans using realistic, purpose-built scenarios
- international programs in which the PDC works with government agencies to design and deliver extended, intensive programs for international participants, with a focus on Asia and the Pacific.

> *'I really liked how challenging the guest panel members were … the questioning and the contestability on our ideas was incredibly helpful and exciting.'*

These programs foster close engagement between stakeholders and experts to explore current and emerging policy challenges. Program participants use scenarios, case studies, simulations and desktop exercises to address real-world, complex and multifaceted strategic policy and operational issues. The focus is on ensuring a highly interactive, practical experience that develops expertise in strategy, policy and framework development; complex thinking skills; problem solving and red teaming; strategic analysis; and leadership.

Previously, the PDC's programs were initiated by organisations for the benefit of the teams and team members in those organisations. However, new programs open to public- and private-sector participants are now being designed.

The most recent such program is Thinking and Communicating Outside the Box, facilitated by author and playwright Timothy Daly, which aims to develop imaginative and intellectual thinking to help participants deal with complex problems in their workplaces.

> *'I think this course would enhance anyone who is required to brief or speak on a regular basis.'*

Because of the sensitive nature of the PDC's activities, a purpose-built, state-of-the-art facility was established to enable open and candid discussions. Controlled swipe and coded access enables sensitive conversations to be conducted.

> *'Best workshop/training I have attended. All my colleagues should do it.'*

Today, the PDC's expanded core team is supplemented by a range of subject-matter experts who act as mentors, facilitators and presenters in the centre's programs and projects. The PDC draws on ASPI's extensive defence and national security expertise and capability to advise on current and emerging strategic and defence issues.

Impact on real-world challenges

The PDC's programs build Australia's capacity for strategic policy excellence in the highest levels of the federal, state and territory governments and their departments and agencies. There are many examples of the positive impact that the PDC has had on real-world challenges. Here are a few.

Strategic advice to the Department of Defence

The PDC has been engaging with a team within the Department of Defence since 2018 to provide executive-level and expert advice and guidance on strategy and policy, reviews of strategic plans, and organisational outcomes and design.

The Defence team provides strategic military planning capability that complements the existing strategic framework, strengthens the strategic centre and enhances the link between policy, strategy and operations. A small team with a very significant role has the challenge of providing advice to the Minister for Defence, the Chief of the Defence Force and the larger Defence organisation in a strategic, timely and impactful way.

NSW Counterterrorism / Countering Violent Extremism Coordination Strategy

ASPI was engaged by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet from late 2017 to mid-2018 to review and advise on the development of the state's Counterterrorism (CT) / Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Coordination Strategy. The then NSW Minister for Emergency Services had identified the need for a strategy that would allow better coordination among stakeholders to produce whole-of-community outcomes.

A core team of experienced ASPI staff, including the PDC team, collaborated on this project, consulting with senior NSW and federal officials working on CT. In evaluating NSW's approach to CT and CVE, ASPI carried out a measured and detailed analysis of existing strategic plans and the objectives of the strategy. The ASPI team also facilitated in an effective stakeholder engagement process with a range of high-ranking officials from state government agencies.

This work involved research and analysis on current global thinking on and approaches to CT and CVE. Through that initial analysis, the team established a strategic framework, assessed existing policy approaches, and then designed a draft strategy. During drafting, ASPI maintained consistent communication with the client to ensure that the strategic direction aligned with the client's organisational objectives. The draft included briefing material for government that, most importantly, outlined ASPI's policy recommendations for the strategy.

The final strategy and briefing materials were presented to a meeting of the Counter Terrorism, Emergency Management and Community Safety Cabinet Subcommittee in June 2018. The NSW Government adopted most of the strategy's 12 recommendations for policy action.

> *'So hands-on and interactive. Tim was so articulate and amusing and humble—an amazing presenter. Full of encouragement for the participants.'*

Counterterrorism workshops

In 2017, ASPI Professional Development drew on its CT experience to design and deliver a maritime CT workshop for Maritime Border Command. This highly successful two-day activity brought together federal, state, territory and industry (including cruise industry) stakeholders to consider Australia's capacity to respond to real-world scenarios.

In 2019, ASPI Professional Development facilitated a workshop with Queensland CT Committee members and other senior Queensland Government officials to review the committee's remit, role, functions and membership in the light of the evolving terrorism threat and how options for government decisions could be best informed in the face of that threat.

Air Force programs

In response to a request from the RAAF to fill a gap in the professional development of senior officers, ASPI developed two programs. The first is the Niagara Program, which prepares senior officers to work at the highest levels inside Australia in government and industry and externally with international partners. The second is the Air Power in a Joint Environment Program, which is designed to prepare middle-level officers for staff college and subsequent command and staff positions.

Named after a significant air operation in the Vietnam War, Niagara takes participants on an intellectual journey to look at where Australia sits in the world today and how we exercise our national power.

> *'Nothing short of brilliant. Makes me want to follow a new role within Air Force.'*

By discussing such matters as Australia's role in great-power competition, its place in the Indo-Pacific region and the influence of global economics, Niagara allows participants to understand the political and economic levers that steer the nation. Then, through understanding the constitutional basis for the Australian federation and the relationship between the Commonwealth and the states, they gain an appreciation of how national security decision-making occurs.

A key feature of the Niagara Program is its consideration of real-world challenges and its development of solutions that meet national objectives. Scenario discussions allow participants to consider risk and control settings (testing design and underpinning assumptions) and to provide opportunities to reset policy if necessary. The importance of stakeholder engagement is also addressed. A thorough analysis of stakeholders is conducted to determine their positions and motivations and how to effectively influence them.

> *'This is the most valuable professional development activity I have done in my career to date.'*

Air Power in a Joint Environment follows a similar path in having participants understand Australia's place in the world and the region, but then goes on to improve their understanding of current and future Air Force capabilities. This equips them to make sure that Australian air power is properly postured and employed to achieve Australian Government objectives and that strategies are optimised to match intent.

> *'Deeply appreciate this rare opportunity to access a wealth of experience, knowledge and opinion on important fundamental issues relevant to our business. Thank you!'*

Overall, ASPI's programs have helped the Air Force to ensure that its future leaders are equipped to meet future challenges.

Better Policy for Improved Decision Making

Through the Better Policy for Improved Decision Making Program, ASPI plays an important role in strengthening understanding of strategic and defence policy issues, building organisational capability and enhancing the delivery of strategic policy excellence by Australian Government departments and agencies, particularly those within the Defence organisation. In doing so, ASPI has helped to develop and refine national and international security policies, plans and strategies for departments and national security agencies.

ASPI's contributions have led the Defence Department to extend this contractual arrangement for a further year. The Better Policy activities examine policy from the viewpoint of Defence's contribution to national security and have two key aims for participants: to understand the Australian system for defence policymaking and to enhance policymaking capability in the Defence context.

ASPI's Better Policy projects are short, intense and issue-focused and foster close engagement between ASPI and Defence and its key partners to explore current and emerging policy challenges and achieve effective policies and strategic analysis. This experience is enhanced through consideration of real-world scenario planning, case examples, simulations and desktop exercises addressing current and emerging strategic policy and operational issues. This practical approach provides an opportunity for Defence to directly enhance and apply a range of strategic policy development capabilities, bringing context and meaning to its work and ensuring relevance for its current and future challenges.

ASPI's team is supplemented by subject-matter experts from the Australian national security community. It includes current and retired senior executive government and Defence personnel, leading industry experts, and the best academics from Australia and abroad. A key outcome of this program is that it fosters close engagement between stakeholders and experts to explore current and emerging policy challenges.

> *'Presenters provided useful tips and practical tools for policymaking and navigating the public service in general.'*

Governance Framework and Model for Services Australia's Cyber Security Shared Services

ASPI developed the Governance Framework and Model for Services Australia's Cyber Security Shared Services.

ASPI found that, within the current Services Australia ICT shared services model, there was no clear pathway for cybersecurity accountability, reporting and review by the National Disability Insurance Agency and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. There were also a lack of

transparency and serious problems with communication flows. Given that Services Australia's cybersecurity service offerings were unspecified and unclear, there was no agreed path for decision-making, responsibility and accountability. This culminated in minor operational decisions being elevated to senior executives and ministers' offices and no clear path forward when more significant problems arose.

Therefore, a fit-for-purpose governance framework and model were needed, including for handling critical organisational and business risks and cross-agency prioritisation.

The framework informed a road map to guide the department in developing, standardising and delivering cybersecurity shared services to smaller, portfolio or functionally alike government agencies. The project involved in-depth research, interviews and a series of workshops designed to facilitate broader stakeholder engagement, the finalisation of the framework and the development of a strategic communications plan and governance model.

ASPI's support to Services Australia in developing its Governance Framework and Model for Cyber Security Shared Services demonstrates the institute's strong approach to working collaboratively with clients and their stakeholders. The size and complexity of Services Australia, coupled with the challenging operating environment and the importance of cybersecurity, required close engagement and collaboration. In designing the framework, the ASPI team used an iterative approach to engage with participants and to identify and engage with relevant stakeholders. A key focus was on working with partner organisations to develop sustainable business principles and practices.

In developing the governance framework and model, ASPI examined accountability, the ownership of systems and cybersecurity authorisations in a shared services environment, which highlighted issues in how that should occur. At the time, one agency was responsible for delivering cybersecurity while another was accountable without having any legal or contractual arrangements in place. Those challenges were addressed through transparent, mutually agreed and truly collaborative partnerships and governance arrangements captured in the governance framework and model.

Developing the Strategic Plan for the University of Newcastle

ASPI worked closely with the University of Newcastle's Chancellor and Vice Chancellor to develop Looking Ahead: The University of Newcastle 2020–2025 Strategic Plan. This project involved researching the current and future operating environment for the university, mapping key stakeholders and influences, and engaging actively with the University Council, the executive leadership and academic staff.

In developing the strategic plan, ASPI undertook strategic analysis, framed the organisational design, defined organisational objectives and delivery strategies, and defined and implemented communication strategies and stakeholder engagement.

The strategic plan responds to the needs of students, staff, local communities, Indigenous partners, business and the not-for-profit and community sector to position the university as an enduring leader in the Hunter Valley region. The plan focuses on several regional, national and global issues and sets the direction for the university based on four strategic priorities of excellence, equity, engagement and sustainability.

Given that the university has a very complex operating environment and many diverse stakeholders, this project involved considerable stakeholder collaboration, engagement and strategic communication. The strategic plan was developed from the bottom up, moving from students to staff and the University Council. The project culminated in a strategic briefing for the Parliamentary Friends of the University of Newcastle within the Parliament of Australia.

ASPI's Executive Director, Peter Jennings, led the project with the support of senior members of the ASPI team, including the PDC's core team.

> *'I was very impressed with the professionalism of all of the staff at ASPI—from the top through all of the staff, ASPI collectively demonstrated outstanding "client" focus and tailored the work accordingly as the problem statement evolved.'*

What's next?

The work of the PDC will continue to evolve into new ways of applying ASPI's innovative ideas and building strategic policy capability.

The PDC is increasingly engaging with ASPI's Defence, Strategy and National Security team in leveraging research and analysis to drive engagement with key stakeholders and enhance public discourse. Recent examples include facilitating industry briefings on behalf of the Department of Defence on communications security and quantum computing, and technology briefings for state and territory governments.

As always, the aim is to apply thinking the ASPI way to work in partnership with departments and agencies to meet Australia's strategic needs.

Conclusion

> With a certain youthful precocity, ASPI has injected new ideas and vigour into our national security debate.
>
> —John Howard, June 2004[1]

The prime minister's judgement on the verve of the institute that his government created was delivered near ASPI's third birthday. The political parent expressed measured pride in the early promise of the progeny.

From Howard (a leader always careful with his words), 'precocity' was a warmer label than the synonyms others in Canberra were using—'pushy' and 'presumptuous'—as the knives came out. Initially, elements in the Department of Defence were shocked at this new creation with sharp teeth. And they were paying for this!

Over two decades, ASPI has taken much of the mystery out of Defence for the rest of Canberra—and done some of the same magic for Defence itself.

On the institute's 20th anniversary, a trace of 'precocity' lingers in the appetite for challenge. The institute has grown up and gone in many directions. Yet it still pushes; it's still eager to question and weigh, judge and speak.

ASPI has lived the ideals described by John Howard.

The appetite for new ideas is core business for a now experienced Canberra player that brings constant energy to the work of Australia's strategy and national security. ASPI has gone in search of the best strategies for Australia and the broadest understandings of security. In the arguments over guns and butter, the institute has delved deeply into the details of the guns, and the policy butter has been widely spread.

The institute's structure has delivered as ordered. In the Canberra contest, rely on ASPI for contestability—a constant testing of what's working and what might work better.

ASPI has the freedom of a think tank. The role—by definition—is to think about policy. This is a tank able to roam across many battlefields, not required to line up in marching order with the big battalions. So ASPI doesn't carry the weighty load of the great departments that live around it in the parliamentary triangle—setting and administering policy.

The institute has the liberty no public service bureaucracy can know, in the way it can think about the needs of the day or the demands of the decade.

Having no bureaucratic interests but being close to the bureaucracy offers the chance to be creative, even cooperative, rather than merely carping and critical.

As a charming disruptor, ASPI is near enough to know the size and pain of the problems facing the great departments and their political masters. Close critiques can hit hard. The compensation is that the suggestions proffered and answers offered are based on deep understanding.

Among Canberra's big fish, ASPI is a tiddler. The minnow, though, has moxie. The job of the nimble think tank is to find the new and help the renewal. An institute with only 60 staff has shown the nerve and determination to take on big ideas and to play in the biggest policy spaces, in Australia and beyond.

The complaint about ASPI by China's embassy in Canberra was a backhanded compliment—an acknowledgement delivered as an attack. The facts and force of ASPI's work were having effect. To be cited as a source for legislation by other Western democracies is a tribute to those facts and the quality of the institute's work.

Turn from ASPI's intimate relationship with the Department of Defence and the other great beasts of the bureaucracy to the larger canvas of politics and policy that's Canberra.

Widening the picture underscores the two great strengths of ASPI's structure: its independence and its expertise, the ability to pursue the policy but not to play the politics.

What was intended in ASPI's creation has been realised. The design of the think tank has worked as intended, as shown by the recollections of those who've known it from the start.

John Howard said that, in establishing the institute, cabinet expressed a 'strong view that an independent body providing policy advice on defence and related matters was highly desirable', yet he reflected:

> Sensibly ASPI hasn't sought in any way to distance itself from the professionals of the Defence Department and security agencies. From my experience of participating in ASPI events, I'm conscious of a respectful relationship between the institute and those other bodies.[2]

As ASPI's first chairman, Robert O'Neill, recalled:

> My task as ASPI's inaugural chairman was to give substance to the Australian Government's decision in the late 1990s to establish an institution to generate independent strategic policy advice, following in the steps of the US, the UK, and other NATO allies. While the Howard government was well aware of, and respected, the existing Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the ANU, it wanted another body which could be taken into a closer, more confidential relationship with the Department of Defence, and focus on particular policy choices on which the government needed advice.
>
> When I began Prime Minister Howard emphasised to me that he needed contestable advice in the defence field, not simply advice from a single source such as the Department of Defence, however valuable that was. The government also wanted another dialogue

> partner in the public debate, not merely to agree with its positions and support them, but also to raise major issues, giving new perspectives on the basis of expert knowledge as ASPI's director and staff members saw fit.[3]

Labor's Stephen Loosley served as a council member of ASPI for 15 years from its inception and was chairman from 2008 to 2016. ASPI's design meant that the federal government and opposition both nominated board members. Loosley represented the Labor leaders Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Beazley (again), Mark Latham, then prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard and, finally, Bill Shorten: 'The standing joke at ASPI became that I'd survived more purges in the ALP leadership than a member of Stalin's Politburo in Moscow in 1937.'

Present at the creation, Loosley wrote, he'd seen astounding growth and extraordinary success:

> The creation of ASPI in 2001 by the Howard government, with the support of Kim Beazley's Labor Opposition, represents a rare Canberra decision. Not only has ASPI met expectations, it has consistently exceeded them. Centring the policy debate in defence and national security, crafting intelligent and effective policy options, and reaching out to Australians interested in strategic policy, ASPI has achieved a record of influential contributions while not losing its understood need for objectivity and balance. ASPI may occasionally have annoyed defence ministers, on both sides of the aisle. But that reflects an essential core of the institute's brief: to contest advice to government and to promote active debate on the issues. Even the most aggrieved defence minister over the years would stop well short of accusing ASPI of partisan positions …
>
> It wasn't always a rose garden. There were elements in the Defence Department bureaucracy who wanted ASPI shut down and for a while this appeared probable. [Executive Director] Peter Abigail was outstanding in adversity and eventually we emerged intact. This isn't to claim that ASPI hasn't made mistakes. The institute has been guilty of speculative commentary in earlier days, for example. But those days are long gone and the current crop of ASPI researchers and analysts are among the most able found anywhere. This statement is validated by ASPI repeatedly being numbered among the best 'think tanks' in the world. Part of the reason is that ASPI has attracted intellectual capital of a high order, people who are accomplished in their fields. ASPI Councils, often comprised of very gifted individuals, have supported innovative programs and exchanges, backed original research endeavours and encouraged a spirit of enquiry. Excellence is routinely the goal.[4]

As usual, O'Neill and Loosley offer nuance with sharps mixed in. Their descriptions offer the essence of what ASPI's informed and independent voice has done over two decades:

- to know Canberra but to reach out to all Australians
- to give both ideas and angst to defence ministers while not straying into the politics
- to break the Defence monopoly on advice

- to raise major issues and give new perspectives
- to bring objectivity and balance to the vital contests of strategic debate
- to get smart people to follow the facts—and allow them the fullest freedom to report on what they find (in Canberra, a rare freedom, indeed).

A powerful formula has delivered exactly what the circular logo proclaims: 'Twenty years of ASPI strategy'.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has lived its name to help deliver what Australia needs in imagining ends, shaping ways and selecting means.

Notes

1 John Howard, *The Prime Minister speaks on national security at the ASPI dinner*, Sydney, 18 June 2004, online.

2 John Howard, 'Foreword from former prime minister John Howard', in *ASPI at 15*, ASPI, Canberra, October 2016, online.

3 Robert O'Neill, 'ASPI at 15: the first chairman's perspective', in *ASPI at 15*.

4 Stephen Loosley, 'ASPI at 15: past, present, and future', in *ASPI at 15*.

Acronyms and abbreviations

AAT	Australian Antarctic Territory
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Australian Federal Police
AIC	Australian intelligence community
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANU	Australian National University
APEC	Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation
APS	Australian Public Service
ASD	Australian Signals Directorate
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ASIS	Australian Secret Intelligence Service
ATS	Antarctic Treaty system
AUSTRAC	Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre
CT	counterterrorism
CVE	countering violent extremism
DCC	deployable civilian capacity
DWP	Defence White Paper
EAS	East Asia Summit
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
HQJOC	Headquarters Joint Operations Command
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre (ASPI)
IS	Islamic State
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force (Afghanistan)
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JORN	Jindalee Operational Radar Network
JSF	Joint Strike Fighter
KAS	Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
LHD	landing helicopter dock

MSEA	maritime Southeast Asia
MSG	Melanesian Spearhead Group
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIC	national intelligence community
ONA	Office of National Assessments
ONI	Office of National Intelligence
ONSA	Office of the National Security Advisor
PDC	Professional Development Centre (ASPI)
PNG	Papua New Guinea
QFES	Queensland Fire and Emergency Services
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RSIS	S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore)
SBY	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono
SOCOMD	Special Operations Command
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
TDIO	Trilateral Dialogue on the Indian Ocean
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WDSN	Women in Defence and Security Network
WMD	weapon of mass destruction
WPS	women, peace and security

About the author

Graeme Dobell writes on Australian foreign policy and defence.

He is the Journalist Fellow with ASPI, writing a weekly column for the institute's digital magazine, *The Strategist*, since 2013.

Graeme's ASPI publications include:

- *Australia's Pacific pivot: destiny, duty, denial and desire* (2019)
- 'An Oz voice in the Asia–Pacific', in *Hard news and free media as the sharp edge of Australian soft power* (2018)
- *Australia as an ASEAN Community partner* (2018)
- *Improving on zero: Australia and India attempt strategic convergence* (2016)
- *PNG's golden era: political and security challenges in PNG and their implications for Australia* (2011)
- 'Pacific power plays', in *Australia and the South Pacific: rising to the challenge* (2008)
- 'Back to the future', in *Scoping studies: new thinking on strategy* (2004).

Graeme was a member of ASPI's 2008 Independent Task Force on relations with the South Pacific and a member of the 2011 Independent Task Force on national security and Australia's aid program.

Starting as a newspaper journalist in 1971 in Melbourne on *The Herald*, he joined the ABC's international service, Radio Australia, in 1975. He was an ABC correspondent for 33 years, reporting in Canberra, Europe, America and throughout Asia and the South Pacific.

Graeme was the ABC's Southeast Asia radio correspondent, based in Singapore, and did three stints as Radio Australia's foreign affairs and defence correspondent, reporting also for ABC radio news and current affairs programs and ABC TV. He worked in the parliamentary press gallery in Canberra in 1978–81, 1986–89 and 1991–2008. From 2001 to 2003, he was the presenter of ABC TV's weekly review of the week in federal parliament, *Order in the House*.

Assignments in his career included the Falklands War; coups in Fiji, Thailand and the Philippines; Beijing after the crushing of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square; and the return of Hong Kong to China. He covered the security dialogues of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and a dozen APEC summits.

From 2008 to 2012, Graeme wrote 'The Canberra Column' for *The Interpreter*, published by the Lowy Institute for International Policy. He has been a contributor to *Inside Story* since 2011.

He is the author of the book *Australia finds home—the choices and chances of an Asia Pacific journey*, published in 2000. He has a BA in Journalism (RMIT) and an MA in International Relations (ANU). In 2011, he was made a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs 'for his distinguished contribution to journalism through his reporting on politics and international affairs'.

Acknowledgements

Writing an ‘intellectual history’ of ASPI’s is a big task but a great pleasure, because there’s so much intellect to draw on.

So the first acknowledgement must be for the work and the worth of all those who have written for the institute.

What Australia has been doing and thinking in the first two decades of the 21st century is richly recorded in the archive of the institute’s reports and *The Strategist.* This became a longer book than first intended because so much wonderful work demanded its proper space. The writing agony was in all the great stuff that had to be left out.

As a journalist, I reported on ASPI from its start. The stroll from Parliament House to ASPI’s office was always rewarding. The press gallery quickly embraced the institute as a source of strong ‘stories’ and expert ‘talent’ (knowing the slow morning rhythms of the gallery, ASPI serves up coffee as good as its people).

Going back through the reports and conferences as ‘history’ rather than ‘news’ has been a fascinating journey through memory. Much felt so different at the time. Yet time has burnished much.

ASPI’s digital archive is a vivid accounting. The narratives cover diverse ground, united by the themes of Australia’s interests, influence and values. Here is a fine record of what’s been going on over two busy decades in the strange, complex beast that is Canberra—and what might come next.

As always, my greatest acknowledgement is to my wife, Jan. She responded to the arrival of this task with her usual aplomb, both elegant and practical, and the gentle smile of one who knows the twists and trials of the writing trek. With his acute eye, five-year-old Zachary observed to Jan: ‘It’s hard work looking after Grandpa!’

Like my life, this book is dedicated to Jan, who comes on all the journeys and is my heart’s destiny.

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An informed and independent voice: ASPI, 2001–2021

The mission of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute is to 'contribute an informed and independent voice to public discussion'. That was the vision embraced by the Australian Government in creating 'an independent institute to study strategic policy', designed to bring 'contestability' and 'alternative sources of advice' to 'key strategic and defence policy issues'. The story of how ASPI did that job in its first two decades, 2001 to 2021, is told in *An informed and independent voice*, with chapters on:

- Strategy
- The Department of Defence: kit, cash, capability—and contestability
- Terrorism, security, intelligence, policing—and pandemic
- Afghanistan and Iraq
- Cyber and tech
- The United States and China
- Japan, India and the Quad
- Indonesia and Southeast Asia
- Australia's island arc: the South Pacific and Timor-Leste
- Northern Australia
- ASPI covers 2001–2021
- Women, peace and security
- Climate change
- Antarctica
- On the 1.5 track
- *The Strategist*
- Thinking the ASPI way—the Professional Development Centre.