Strategic studies in practice: An Australian perspective

Hugh White

Ours is a practical discipline. Our aim is, or should be, always to bring the virtues and strengths of scholarship to bear on the real and often urgent practical choices that nations—and especially their governments—face about strategic policy: about how we develop and use armed force to achieve national policy objectives. So it seems appropriate to mark our centre’s 50th anniversary by reflecting on the practical strategic policy choices that Australia faces today. That is what the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) has always done best and how it has made its most important contributions over the decades. I will try to do this here by reflecting a little on history, not just because this seems fitting for an anniversary but also because it is often the best way to address these practical questions in a scholarly way. Our focus should always be on the future because policy is always about the future, but the only way we can think seriously and systematically about the future is through a sophisticated understanding of the past.

So this chapter will explore something of Australia’s strategic past in order to illuminate the choices we face today about our strategic future. I shall try to sketch some long-running strategic questions that seem to be distinctively Australian because they spring from our specific—and in some ways unique—strategic circumstances. My hope is that reflecting
on how Australia has approached these questions in the past will help us to better understand the choices we face today about our strategic policy and posture in future.

Bob O’Neill last night at dinner mentioned the Seven Years War, reminding us that this was truly the first world war, fought not just in Europe but also in North America and Asia. It also marks in a very real sense the start of Australia’s strategic history because it created the strategic preconditions for British settlement of this continent. Britain defeated the French in the waters around India during the Seven Years War and thus became the primary maritime power in what we might now call the Indo-Pacific. Establishing an outpost at Sydney Cove became possible only once Britain had established this primacy, and the outpost in turn, once established, helped to make its primacy more secure.

More broadly, the global maritime preponderance that Britain won in the Seven Years War, and the economic revolution that it was both sustained by and helped to sustain, gave Britain the power to seize, hold, colonise, develop and populate our continent. Without the Seven Years War, this nation would not exist on this continent, and most of us would not be here.

This reminds us that strategic questions—questions of the role of force in international affairs—have been part of Australia’s story from the very beginning. There never was a time of pre-strategic innocence. We were, so to speak, born in strategic sin, a product of the extraordinarily dynamic power politics of the later 18th century as Europe’s strategic order was transformed by radical changes in the distribution of wealth and power and an accompanying revolution in ideas. We can see something of the intensity and global reach of the resulting rivalry in La Perouse’s remarkable appearance in Botany Bay just a couple of days after Arthur Phillip arrived with the First Fleet. Only four years later, Britain was plunged into the epic series of European wars that completed the destruction of the old European order and ushered in a new one. The establishment of British settlement in Australia thus took place against the background of a world in conflict, the biggest and most costly war in history up to that time, which profoundly touched every aspect of British national life. Although it does not feature much in our national narrative of those first decades of settlement, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars must have loomed very large indeed for the colonists in Australia in that first quarter-century of settlement.
The outcome of those wars had a profound effect on the strategic setting of Australia’s first century and has perhaps shaped the way Australians have seen their security ever since. By 1815, Britain’s maritime primacy in Asia and globally was consolidated beyond serious challenge, so that British settlements in Australia enjoyed the luxury of being protected by a power that exercised complete command of the world’s oceans, including those that surrounded the continent and connected it with Britain and the rest of the world. Britain’s position in turn was protected by the Concert of Europe, which constrained strategic rivalry with its powerful continental neighbours and thus ensured that Britain’s strength globally, and in our region, was not be sapped by the need to meet major threats to its security in Europe.

It is therefore only natural that for about a century after they were established, the British settlements faced no specifically Australian strategic questions. We were embedded in a global empire with no serious rivals and with the capacity to deploy and sustain such overwhelming maritime force against any threat to us such that the risk of serious strategic challenge was negligible. There was therefore little reason for colonists to think about strategic questions. To the extent that they did, they thought about the empire’s security rather than Australia’s. I hope I do not have to labour the contemporary parallels.

One might say, then, that Australia was born in strategic sin but enjoyed a blissfully innocent strategic adolescence. That happy time came to a surprisingly abrupt end in the last quarter of the 19th century. By about 1880, the economic preponderance that Britain had won with the Industrial Revolution and with which it had sustained its global maritime power was being challenged and even eclipsed by new rising economic powers—most obviously America and Germany but also France, Russia and—a little later—Japan. Moreover, some of these powers were starting to intrude into our neighbourhood. Australian colonial governments were plainly aware of the shifting distribution of power and started to worry about what these local intrusions could mean for their security. They sought a firm imperial response, for example to Germany’s occupation of northern New Guinea, and they did not get it. As the distribution of power shifted and pressure on the 19th-century European order grew, Britain had to balance much more carefully the interests of its empire against the overriding imperative to manage growing strategic risks in Europe.
This presented Australian political leaders with a new situation—and they understood it swiftly. They could no longer assume that Britain had the power and the will to keep Asia safe for Australia. They could no longer assume that London’s strategic interests, objectives and priorities were identical with Australia’s. They had to start thinking for themselves and acting to pursue distinctly Australian policy responses to specifically Australian strategic imperatives. They soon came to understand the key features of Australia’s strategic situation, which remain with us today. On the one hand, Australia is almost uniquely isolated from the main centres of power globally, and from the great and powerful friends on which we rely. On the other, we are deeply integrated into the global strategic system: we believe our security depends on the balance between the major powers in the key theatres of strategic rivalry because we believe that the active support of a global power ally is essential to our security.

This creates the perennial dilemma that has framed Australian strategic policy ever since the 1880s. We must depend on our allies because we do not believe we can defend ourselves independently, yet we cannot depend on our allies because we are so remote from them, and our most pressing strategic threats will always be different from theirs. For all the talk of shared values and culture, alliances are based on shared interest, and interests are deeply embedded in geography. This deep dilemma is inherent in our geographic circumstances, so it cannot be resolved or dissolved. It must instead be managed, as that first generation of Australian strategic policymakers very plainly understood. Managing it means asking and answering the great question at the heart of Australia’s strategic policy: how far do we depend on our allies, and how far do we try to fend for ourselves? How clear sighted and courageous that generation, led by Alfred Deakin, was in facing this daunting challenge. Of course they were people—men—of the Victorian era, to whom courage and enterprise and rapid change came naturally. To see that spirit at work we need look no further than Deakin’s remarkable contribution to the Colonial Conference in London in 1887, where he set out with startling clarity the strategic challenges that were to face the British Empire and its constituents over the coming decade.1

The key result of their work was, of course, Federation, which more than anything else was a response to the new strategic challenges that emerged in the late 19th century. On that foundation they built a quite

1 See, for example, J.A. La Nauze, Alfred Deakin: A Biography, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1965, pp. 95ff.
sophisticated policy that balanced the opposing imperatives of alliance and self-reliance, between depending on others and fending for ourselves. Perhaps unavoidably, the principal weight lay with supporting our allies, in part because over coming decades those allies faced tests far bigger and more serious than anything Deakin and his colleagues could have imagined.

It is sobering and poignant to reflect on how Alfred Deakin and his contemporaries would have felt at the time of Federation had they been given a glimpse of the strategic challenges that lay ahead. The trends they had so presciently identified in the 1880s did indeed have far-reaching and disastrous consequences. In two world wars, British power globally and in Asia faced immense challenges and finally collapsed. US power rose to take its place, but it too faced major challenges globally and in Asia. Australia made huge sacrifices to help respond to these challenges in World War I, World War II, Korea, Malaya and Vietnam. The alliance with Britain did not survive, and its alliance with the United States suffered immense stress. By the mid-1960s, reliance on great and powerful friends seemed less and less credible as the long-term foundation of Australia’s security. It was time for a rethink.

There are good reasons why Australia’s first centre for the academic study of strategic and defence questions was founded in 1966. In part the timing reflected a wider trend: under the stresses of the Cold War, academic study of strategic questions had taken off in the United States, Britain and Europe during the 1950s, and a number of Australians—most notably our own Hedley Bull and Coral Bell—had played significant parts in that. It was natural enough that Australia would eventually follow this trend. But more important than this were the local circumstances. In 1966, Australia faced a remarkable, complex and momentous set of changes in our strategic circumstances comparable in scale and significance to the transformation of the last decades of the previous century.

By 1966, these changes were already undermining the grand strategy of Forward Defence, which had evolved to deal with the new and unfamiliar challenges of the Cold War in post–World War II post-colonial Asia. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became increasingly clear that Australia could not rely on our major allies to help us deal with the challenges posed by the aggressive policies of Sukarno’s Indonesia. Geography ensured that they affected our strategic interests differently and more directly than our allies’. By 1966 Sukarno had fallen, but it was not yet clear
just how different Suharto’s Indonesia was going to be. And in order to buttress Washington’s support against Indonesia as well as respond to the wider threats that seemed to be posed by Maoist China, Australia had supported and indeed encouraged a deeper US commitment to Vietnam. Within a few years, the whole fabric of Forward Defence had fallen apart. Escalation and failure in Vietnam led to Nixon’s declaration in Guam in 1969 of substantial US strategic retrenchment in Asia. The year before, in 1968, Britain’s long and painful post-imperial decline reached the point that it could no longer sustain a strategic presence in Asia. Wilson’s ‘East of Suez’ announcement that year marked the end of any British commitment to help defend Australia or its interests in Asia. So, in SDSC’s first three years, Australia’s confidence in both of the great alliances on which its strategic policy was based had been undermined, and indeed overturned.

Today, we do not really recognise how shocking and disconcerting ‘East of Suez’ and ‘Guam’ were for that generation of policy-makers and analysts, and how fundamental they were to the defence policy revolution of the 1970s, and hence to our defence policies now. That is in part because they were accompanied by other changes that, while not at that time as plain as the eclipse of our alliances, were in the long run more important. Alongside the bad news about our alliances there was a lot of good news about our region. Over the next few years, Suharto consolidated his New Order and transformed Indonesia into a bastion of regional order. South-East Asia more broadly changed quite quickly from a major global trouble spot to become a model of progress and cooperation. The instability of the first post-colonial decades eased, and we saw real political, economic and social development in many countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emerged as an effective foundation of regional stability. Most important of all, Nixon’s opening to China transformed the wider Asian regional order by eliminating—for a time—the strategic rivalry between these, the two strongest powers in the Asia-Pacific region. After 1972, the United States’ strategic position was uncontested by any major Asian power. Paradoxically, failure in Vietnam, far from destroying the United States’ position in Asia, immensely strengthened it. This marked the effective end of the Cold War in Asia and the emergence of the US-led regional order that kept Asia peaceful and prosperous for 40 years, and kept Australia safe. Until the late 1980s, the United States still faced a bitter global rival in the Soviet Union, of course, but the later stages of the Cold War impinged surprisingly little on Australia’s sense of its security after 1972.
All these tumultuous changes in the first decade of SDSC’s life—both the bad news and the good news—drew a radical rethink of Australia’s strategic and defence policy, causing it to involve new approaches to those old questions about how much we could depend on our allies and how far we should be able to fend for ourselves. Much of this was driven by some notable political leaders, including Gorton, Fraser, Whitlam and Barnard; by a remarkable group of public servants led by the redoubtable Arthur Tange; and including such figures such as Bob Hamilton and Bill Pritchett. But it did not all happen behind closed doors. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, there was a remarkable efflorescence of public debate about how Australia should respond to the shifts in our strategic environment that everyone acknowledged were taking place and so plainly had big implications for defence and foreign policy. SDSC itself was at the very heart of this debate, which did a great deal to help build its position in the university, in Canberra and nationally.

Indeed, the origins of SDSC and start of serious public debate about Australia’s post–Forward Defence grand strategy can both be traced to the same event: the publication in 1965 of Tom Millar’s ground-breaking monograph on Australian defence policy, *Australia’s Defence.* Its theme was announced on the dustcover flap in bold type: ‘Can Australia Defend Itself?’ This simple, weighty question became the focus of the national defence debate over the next decade and beyond, and has in some ways remained the core focus of SDSC’s best work ever since.

The debate back then, however, had a distinctive tone. It was energised by the trauma of the Vietnam War, which made defence and strategic policy the most important and divisive issue in national politics throughout the later 1960s and early 1970s. It engaged strong arguments and deep emotions on both sides of politics, on both sides of the argument, and divided Australian society like no issue since. Moreover, it became a proxy for deeper questions about Australia’s identity, its relations with Britain and the United States, and its future in post-colonial Asia. These questions were debated with a vigour and brutal clarity that surprises us today.

Few people now recall that Donald Horne’s *Lucky Country*—perhaps the most influential book ever written about the Australian identity—was an exploration of these questions. Writing in 1964, Horne conjured the idea that Australia is destined to be severed from our Anglo-Saxon roots and
New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0

instead ‘peopled from all over Asia’.\(^3\) No one then believed that Australia would not have to make some momentous choices as it adapted to life in a fast-changing Asia. To Horne and his contemporaries, today’s mantra of ‘we don’t have to choose’ would have seemed simply absurd.

Another factor that affected the tone and substance of the strategic debate at that time was the personal experiences of those who took part in it. Bob O’Neill again invoked that experience last night when he recollected listening around the family radio on 8 December 1941 to the news of Japan’s assault and the coming of the Pacific War. Likewise, Coral Bell’s brief memoir opens with her recollection of where she was and how she felt when she heard the news of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima that brought the war to an end.\(^4\) This generation—all of them—had direct personal experience of major-power wars in our region, of the stressing and collapse of regional order, and of direct threats to Australia by major powers. Many of them had of course served themselves in these wars. Perhaps most importantly, their direct experience of alliance failure was central to their understanding of strategic risks and strategic policy imperatives and shaped their ideas and debates in ways that we today seem too easily to overlook.

The result of this long, deep, serious debate against the background of the momentous changes taking place in our region and beyond was a very marked shift in the balance of Australia’s defence policy from alliance dependence to self-reliance. It took 20 years in all, with many important steps along the way, but as it happens this year (2016) marks notable anniversaries of the two most important of them. In 1976, 40 years ago, the Fraser Government released the first of Australia’s modern Defence White Papers, Australia’s Defence, which set out with great clarity the central idea that the principle purpose for which Australia’s armed forces should be designed and built was the self-reliant defence of our own continent rather than the support of allied operations beyond it. And in 1986, 30 years ago, the Dibb Review set out in great detail and sophistication how that should be done and what forces were needed to do it.

The ideas developed in these documents remain in many ways the conceptual foundation of Australia defence policy today, although they have often been rather poorly understood by many people both within

the defence establishment and outside it. This is not the place to explore and correct the misunderstandings. Suffice it to say here that the ‘Defence of Australia’ policy, or DoA as it became known, both expanded and contracted the key purposes our forces were designed to fulfil. They were required to defend the continent independently, but only against the modest forces of a local regional power—Indonesia, in reality. They were not designed to fight the forces of a major Asian power either in the direct defence of Australia or to support allies in the wider region. That posture was credible only because we were confident that the United States would remain the uncontested primary power in Asia, thus precluding the possibility either of a major-power threat to Australia or of a major-power challenge to the United States’ position serious enough to require Australian military support. It was the uncontested primacy of the United States in Asia that made Australia’s DoA policy possible.

This helps explain why, somewhat paradoxically, the era of self-reliance has become a golden age for Australia’s alliance with the United States. In the 1980s, the fierce contentions of the Vietnam era had fizzled and died. Fervent support for the alliance became universal across the political spectrum. And why not? With Asia stable and peaceful under uncontested US leadership, the strategic interests of Australia and the United States were clearly aligned and very cheaply achieved. Australia demanded nothing of the United States, and it demanded very little indeed of Australia. As the memory of the tough choices and hard debates of the 1960s faded, it was easy for the US alliance to become somewhat romanticised. It was even easier when the Cold War ended and the United States emerged as the global hyperpower of the unipolar era. Australia envisaged a flattering place for itself as the very closest ally of the world’s preponderant military, economic, political and cultural power. Not surprisingly, the uncertainties about the alliance that had driven the strategic debates of 50 years ago dropped away. It became easier and easier to assume that the United States would always, far ahead as we can see, have the power and the will to remain the dominant power in Asia and the sure protector of Australia’s security. Not surprisingly, our strategic policy swung back to depending on our allies rather than fending for ourselves.

‘Self-reliance’ has become an empty term, interoperability with US forces has become, it seems, the primary factor in capability planning, and the focus has swung sharply from conducting independent operations to contributing contingents to US-led coalitions. Australia today is more comfortable relying on our allies for our security than we have been at
any time since 1880. Indeed, in the post–Cold War era it has seemed as if Australia has returned to the happy situation that we enjoyed in our strategically innocent national adolescence before 1880 as a close strategic partner of the globally dominant Anglo-Saxon hyperpower that is the uncontested leading strategic power in Asia. Why then worry much about our own defence? Why fend for ourselves when we have such an ally to rely on?

Which brings us to today and what are surely the most important questions confronting Australian strategic policy-makers and analysts in the late 2010s. Can this last? Will the swing from fending for ourselves back to relying on our allies work for us in the coming decades? The answer in turn depends on some further questions. How confident can we be that the United States will in future still play the role in Asia and in Australia’s security that it has played over the past couple of decades? Above all, will it remain the uncontested primary power in Asia? And if not, what will happen to us, and what can we do about it? These are the biggest and most consequential questions confronted by Australian strategic policy since the great strategic upheavals at the time SDSC was founded 50 years ago. They arise today because of the immense shift in the distribution of wealth and power that has occurred as Asia’s economies have grown, especially with the rise of China. That, in turn, has fundamentally transformed China’s strategic objectives from those it adopted when Nixon met Mao in 1972. As a result, the United States no longer enjoys uncontested strategic primacy in Asia. Instead, we have seen, over about the past decade, a resurgence of strategic rivalry between the United States and China of a kind we have not seen since before 1972.

This is a fundamental shift in the position of our major ally in Asia and hence in our strategic circumstances. Australia’s strategic policy has yet to address it coherently. There have been three Defence White Papers since this shift became plainly evident, in 2009, 2013 and 2016. All of them show deep ambivalence and uncertainty about how to respond. All acknowledge, to different degrees, the scale of the shift in wealth and power that is reshaping our strategic circumstances in Asia. All nonetheless conclude that no basic change in Australia’s defence policy or broader strategic posture is necessary. All express confidence that the role of the United States in Asia and its support for Australia’s security will not change within the next three decades, if ever. All of them attempt to conceal these complacent conclusions by overhyping what are in reality modest and
very distant increases in naval capabilities. And, tellingly, each of these three documents has expressed more confidence about the future of US strategic leadership in Asia than its predecessor.

So we need to do better. That means addressing and debating more clearly and forcefully two big sets of questions. The first concerns the seriousness of the challenge to the US-led regional order on which our present policy so completely depends. That involves judgements about China’s intentions, its power and its resolve. It also involves judgements about US intentions, power and resolve. Too many of us for too long have been content to assume that the United States will always remain decisively more powerful than China and more determined to preserve the US-led order in Asia than China is to replace it. It has therefore been too easy to assume that China can easily be persuaded to settle for little, if any, change in its relationship with the United States or increase in its regional leadership role. Those assumptions now require very careful scrutiny.

The second set of questions concerns the consequences for Australia if the challenge to the US-led order does indeed prove to be more serious than most of us assume. We need to explore the different kinds of new order that might emerge to replace it, the consequences of different future orders for Australia’s security and prosperity, and the implications for the kind of order that we should be aiming to promote or avoid. The second concerns Australia’s options for positioning ourselves as well as possible in whatever new order emerges—whether or not it be one that suits our interests. This has big implications both for our diplomacy and for the way we develop our armed forces. It will involve a rethink of our foreign and defence policies comparable in scale to the one that occurred in the decades after 1966.

I fear that future historians will find it remarkable, and regrettable, that so little attention has been paid to these questions both within government and in the wider strategic and foreign policy community over the past decade or more as the trends driving fundamental strategic change in Asia have become clearer and clearer. I think they will judge that we have failed to address the second set of questions because we have not yet got past the first. We have been in denial about the dynamics driving strategic change in Asia even as we celebrate the economic transformation that underpins it. We have collectively acquiesced to the assumption that Asia can be
utterly changed economically yet remain quite unchanged strategically when any serious, historically aware study of strategy should warn us that this is most unlikely.

It seems likely that we have so readily acquiesced to the assumption because abandoning it implies such unsettlingly radical shifts in our foreign and defence policies. It suggests we must face up to choices we have no wish to make and that both sides of politics are equally unwilling to contemplate. In part that is because the practical, and particularly the fiscal, implications of some of those choices are so unwelcome. But more deeply it is because they go to questions of our national identity that we do not wish to expose and address. The questions Donald Horne raised back in 1964 remain difficult and sensitive ones for us today. For Horne and his generation, it was obvious that Australia did have choices to make between its history and its geography. Our generation welcomed John Howard’s assurance that this was not so. He persuaded us that the United States’ enduring preponderance meant that such choices need never be made. We have been reluctant to see the mounting evidence that he was probably wrong.

It has been easier for us to ignore this mounting evidence because our thinking about the alliance has been increasingly divorced from any historical context. This is not a failing in the areas of foreign and defence policy alone: Laura Tingle has written very tellingly about Australia’s broader problem of political and policy amnesia. But it is perhaps particularly serious in our field of policy where hard data is so scarce and the lessons we can glean from history are correspondingly more important. Today, our thinking about the future of our alliance with the United States and America’s role in Asia is hampered by the pervasive illusion that our allies and our alliance have always been just as strong and indubitable as so many of us imagine them to be today. We have forgotten Asia’s history of power politics and strategic rivalry. We have forgotten Australia’s history of alliance uncertainty and outright failure, including the fall of Singapore and the Guam Doctrine. We have forgotten too much of Australia’s history, and of SDSC’s own history, to see our future as clearly as we should if we are to sustain SDSC’s proud record of service to our country. We need to do better.

---
