

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PAPERS

Navigating Uncertain Times: The need for an Australian 'grand strategy'

Brigadier Wade Stothart, DSC, AM

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The author

Brigadier Wade Stothart joined the Australian Army in 1987 and, after attending ADFA, graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon. His postings have included regimental service in 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (RAR), Adjutant of the Melbourne University Regiment, 1 RAR, and Staff Officer to CDF. He commanded 3 RAR in 2008-09. His operational service has included deployments to Bosnia in 1996 on Operation OSIER, and East Timor in 2000 on Operation TANAGER and again in 2008 on Operation ASTUTE. In 2013, he deployed to Afghanistan as Commander Combined Team-Uruzgan on Operation SLIPPER.

Brigadier Stothart is a graduate of the Australian Command and Staff College, and has a Bachelor of Arts (University of NSW), a Masters of Arts in International Relations (Deakin University), a Masters of Management (University of Canberra) and has met the requirements for a Masters of Politics and Policy (Deakin University). He attended the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College in 2014, and is currently Director General Career Management - Army.

Abstract

This paper argues that while the world has enjoyed an absence of violent great power rivalry and widespread conflict since the end of the Second World War, the international system that has overseen this remarkable period of stability is now under threat. It asserts that Australia needs a revised and formal 'grand strategy' to ensure that it can successfully navigate this increasingly uncertain and challenging environment, using all the elements of national power in a sustainable and cogent way to achieve its desired 'ends'.

It contends that this grand strategy must strive to build national power in a way that will allow Australia to positively influence the regional and global environment, consistent with Australia's national interests. The strategy must be proactive, rather than reactive, and its aim should be for Australia to be domestically strong, and to seek and support a stable international system based on the rule of law and an open and free economic trading system. To achieve this grand strategy, the paper proposes a three-pronged approach, based on 'building capacity' (and developing the capacity to build), 'bridging the divide' (and crossing the bridge) and 'balancing the scale' to ensure that Australia is able to support and contribute to the maintenance of the key attributes of the current world order.

Navigating Uncertain Times: The need for an Australian 'grand strategy'¹

One of our prime ministers once talked about our country's great objective, our light on the hill, as he put it, to work for the betterment of mankind, not just at home but wherever we can lend a helping hand. To build this better world, we need to respond sensibly to the problems before us, whether through bodies such as the United Nations or in coalition with like minded countries.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, in an address to the UN General Assembly, 26 September 2014²

Uncertain times

The world currently faces a complex and challenging security environment.³ While it could be said that the world has always faced a difficult and demanding security situation, the number, diversity and magnitude of the current challenges has the potential to radically change the current international order in an enduring way. Perhaps it is the most challenging security environment since the end of World War 2 due to the large number of both traditional and non-traditional security threats accompanied by difficult governance circumstances.⁴ There are a number of key pressure points, at play simultaneously, that have the potential to seriously destabilise and potentially re-design the current world order.

The first is the rise of China, and the shift in the balance of power immediately manifesting itself in tensions in the South China and East China Seas over territorial and maritime boundary claims. The second is the crisis in the Ukraine, as Russia resists Western influence on its borders, indicating that Europe is not immune to the threat of nation-state aggression, with profound consequences for the European Union and NATO.⁵ Third are the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, as part of a larger failure of the 'Arab awakening', and the transfer of radical Jihadism from South Asia to the Middle East.⁶ The fourth is the recent fighting between Israel and the Palestinians, indicating that no sustainable peace will be possible in the current circumstances.⁷ The fifth is the ongoing threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran and further developments in North Korea. Lastly, non-traditional security threats are ever present, such as the Ebola pandemic in West Africa,⁸ as well as cyber security, water security⁹ and climate change concerns.¹⁰

These challenges are manifesting themselves in many guises. The world has enjoyed an absence of violent great power rivalry and widespread conflict since the end of the Second World War. However, the international system that has overseen this remarkable period of stability is now under threat. The basic unit in the international system, the nation-state, is being subject to a number of pressures.¹¹ Either weak states cannot control their territory and are being subject to sectarian and ethnic conflict that threatens their existence¹² or they are fostering rampant nationalism and encouraging historical enmity that is straining relationships.¹³ The situation is made even more complex by the economic weakness affecting the Western world since the global financial crisis. Additionally, there are broader concerns with the debt and dysfunction of many democratic governments,¹⁴ with some commentators predicting political decay and disorder on a scale that will increasingly lead to unstable, destitute and fractured societies.¹⁵

Australia, as a liberal democratic middle power, is not immune from these global trends and threats. Indeed, the events described above are directly affecting Australia. As a middle power, Australia is heavily reliant on the free market global economy and the security arrangements that support prosperity. There is real concern that Australia's period of prosperity and relative strength during the global financial crisis is about to end and that more difficult economic times are ahead.¹⁶ The rise of China and the relative decline of the US have also led some commentators to predict that Australia will eventually face a dilemma between its closest security partner, the US, and its largest trading partner, China.¹⁷

The international order that has overseen great stability and prosperity in much of the world since 1948 now stands at a turning point. Many nation-states are weakened, the global economic system is fragile, and liberal democracy is in need of overhaul. Australia, as a middle power in this international system, is both strong and vulnerable. Global economic and military power is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and Australia needs to adjust. But how will Australia meet this changing environment?

This paper will argue that Australia needs a revised and formal 'grand strategy' to ensure that it navigates the current and future international environment, using all the elements of national power in a sustainable and cogent way to achieve its desired 'ends'. This grand strategy must strive to build national power in a way that will allow Australia to positively influence the regional and global environment, consistent with Australia's national interests.

While it must be proactive, the strategy needs to set realistic goals for a 'middle power' and be flexible enough to deal with the unexpected. Importantly, it must clearly prioritise what is most important to Australia, so that scarce and valuable resources can be applied skilfully and not squandered. Australia is a resilient and strong country. To remain so, it needs a formal, unifying grand strategy to navigate the difficult security, economic and political challenges that it faces.

This paper will define and describe 'grand strategy'. It will then examine the international environment and how it is affecting Australia. The paper then discusses Australia's strategic culture, identity and national interests. It will then examine Australia's current grand strategy and propose a revised approach. Lastly, the paper discusses some principles to guide the pursuit of this grand strategy.

Grand strategy

Before defining 'grand strategy', it is important to define 'strategy'. In its narrowest definition, 'strategy' is the art of using battles to win a war.¹⁸ Its broader definition is 'the calculation of objectives, concepts and resources within acceptable bounds of risk to create more favourable outcomes than might otherwise exist by chance or at the hands of others'.¹⁹ It is about plotting a path to success. A strategy acknowledges the complexity, uncertainty, threats and opportunities present in the environment in which success is sought. While the original usage of the word 'strategy' is focused on warfare, the term 'grand strategy' has a far broader application.

'Grand strategy' is defined by Colin Gray as the 'purposeful employment of all instruments of national power'.²⁰ Like strategy, it is about ends, ways and means: 'ends' being the objectives sought, 'ways' the possible options to achieve them, and 'means' the instruments and resources employed. Grand strategy differs from strategy in three very important ways. Firstly, grand strategy focuses on the development, husbanding and managing of the 'means' to achieve the desired 'ends'. Good grand strategy considers the people, money and material needed to pursue a strategy, and includes their development as a necessary component of its execution. Economic power is a critical element of grand strategy.

Secondly, grand strategy acknowledges the vital role of diplomacy in both peacetime and wartime to improve a nation's position and chance of success or victory. Understanding other nations' positions, gaining allies, winning the support of bystanders and reducing the number of those who are opposed to one's goal is the critical role of diplomacy. Lastly, grand strategy addresses national morale and political culture. For grand strategy to be successful in liberal democracies, it must have the support of the population for the 'ends' sought, the burden of sustaining the 'means' and the acceptability of the 'ways'.²¹ While strategy is technically focused only on warfare—and is the art of generalship—grand strategy directs all the elements of national power in peace and war and is the responsibility of national leaders and statesmen and –women. As summarised by Paul Kennedy:

The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in policy, that is, in the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term [that is, wartime and peacetime] best interests.²²

A grand strategy is important for a nation as it states a clear goal for achievement, and aligns resources to achieve that goal. To not have a grand strategy is to 'bumble along' hoping that the many seemingly minor decisions interspersed with major decisions that a government makes will ultimately achieve long-term gains. The discipline of devising and articulating a grand strategy requires our leaders to think about the big picture, the long-term, and the obstacles that may be in the way of achievement. It should prevent national leaders from being overly affected by the emotion of an issue they are facing, leading to an over-reaction or over-reach.²³ A grand strategy should also provide the context and logic that justifies difficult decisions to domestic and broader audiences.

To not have a grand strategy is to take many risks. These include making policy on the run, overly focusing on one element of national power to the detriment of another, or not balancing the goal or 'ends' with the 'means' or resources. A formal grand strategy should prevent policy makers from taking a narrow view of complex problems. It should also ensure a coordinated approach and, most crucially, an integrated implementation.²⁴ As articulated by Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, grand strategy serves several purposes, including:

- Aiding policymakers to view issues and relationships holistically and understand how they are entwined;
- Guiding decision-makers in setting priorities and allocating scarce resources;
- Assisting bureaucracies in coordinating separate activities by understanding those priorities and the relative importance of particular objectives;
- Communicating national interests and intentions to justify decisions to domestic constituents, reassure allies, deter adversaries and reduce the likelihood of miscalculation;
- Improving the accountability of leaders and their policies by providing clear goals by which success or failure may be evaluated; and
- Forcing decision-makers to think systematically about the medium to long term, instead of focusing merely on urgent short-term pressures and emotional issues.²⁵

Grand strategy is a proactive approach to the environment and accepts the importance of seizing opportunities and managing risks. A state employs a grand strategy to get where it wishes to go. It might or might not succeed but the intention is clear and results known. Grand strategy tries to make the future how a state would like it.²⁶ Grand strategy may be formally expressed in a policy document or in a series of documents, although this may also be the exception rather than the rule.²⁷

On occasion, a grand strategy, or aspects of it, will prove erroneous. As examples, Daniel Drezner cites the US retreat into isolationism after World War 1, and the expanded US involvement in the Vietnam War and the Iraq war of 2003.²⁸ Ultimately, these poor decisions were reversed or discontinued as a result of the institutional checks and balances within the US system of government that prevented 'strategic miscues from becoming permanent reversals'.²⁹

However, Drezner also argues that grand strategies are essential during times of radical uncertainty, which can be caused by either massive global disruption (such as a war, revolution or economic depression) or a power transition that leads to profound uncertainty.³⁰ Drezner contends that both the weakening of the global economy caused by the global financial crisis and the re-distribution of power in the international system due to the rise of China, presents the world with a period of radical uncertainty. Consequently, nation-states hoping to successfully navigate this uncertainty need a grand strategy. This paper will now examine Australia's international and domestic environment.

The current international system

The international system can be viewed as displaying characteristics of both anarchy and hierarchy.³¹ At a structural level, the international system is described as being anarchic in that there is no supreme or over-arching government directing or controlling nation-states. In a technical sense, all countries are equal in terms of their sovereign rights.³² However, within this system there are many rules and conventions that govern how states interact with each other. Not all nation-states are equal in a practical sense. Some, due to their wealth, military power, diplomatic effort and strong identity, wield more influence than others. The nation with the most influence is deemed to have a hegemonic or leadership role in the international order. Power shifts in the international system as nations get stronger and some get weaker. Sometimes tension between nations leads to violent conflict as interests overlap and conflict.

It is clear that the current international order, largely fashioned by the US with the support of its major allies at the end of the Second World War, is undergoing a series of challenges and flashpoints.³³ The

defining attributes of this American-dominated international system are liberal democracy, industrial capitalism and secular nationalism.³⁴ This paper will now briefly describe the pressure being exerted on the international order and its effect on Australia.

Democracy in decline

Democracy is in decline.³⁵ In the second half of the 20th century, democracies had spread and taken root in difficult circumstances, evidenced in Germany, India and South Africa, as well as many states created in the post-World War 2 period of decolonisation. In 2000, Freedom House, an American think-tank, classified 120 countries or 63 per cent of the world's states as democracies, although this figure has now reduced,³⁶ with many democracies sliding towards autocracy.³⁷ These regimes maintain the outward appearance of holding democratic elections but they do not have the required rights and institutions that are equally important parts of a functioning democracy. Where autocratic regimes have been driven from power, their opponents have mostly not been able to create viable democracies, as has occurred in Libya and Egypt.³⁸

Even established Western democracies are struggling. Dissatisfaction with government performance, low voter turn-out and the rise of single-issue parties have created very difficult governance arrangements, as asserted by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge:

Such antipathy towards politics might not matter much if voters wanted little from the state. But they continue to want a great deal. The result is a toxic mixture: dependency on government, on the one hand, and disdain for the government on the other. The dependency forces governments to over-expand and overburden themselves, while the disdain robs government of their legitimacy and turns every setback into a crisis. Democratic dysfunction goes hand in hand with democratic distemper.³⁹

There are three main reasons for this crisis in liberal democracy. First is the unsustainable debt that many Western states are carrying as a result of an 'all you can eat buffet' social welfare safety net, ageing and shrinking populations, and stimulus borrowing as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis. Second is the failure of Western governments to adopt and harness the power of modern information technology. Lastly, the impressive success of governance models such as the modernising authoritarianism demonstrated by China and Singapore has fed further dissatisfaction with current forms of liberal democracy, with Micklethwait and Wooldridge asserting that:

The twenty-first century is sure to be shaped by even fiercer competition between states to figure out which innovations in governing yield the best results. The liberal democracies of the western world still enjoy a significant leg up in terms of wealth and political stability. But it's not yet clear whether the West will be able to summon the sort of intellectual and political energy that, for the past four centuries, has kept it ahead in the global race to re-invent the state.⁴⁰

Not all commentators agree with this dire assessment of liberal democracy's future. Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry argue that the inherent weaknesses in autocratic regimes will prevent them from truly challenging democracy as the most complete form of government, concluding that despite the current problems facing democratic nations, there is still only one path to modernity and that it is liberal in character.⁴¹

Australia is representative of these global trends. It has suffered through a 'hung' parliament in the last term of the previous government, corruption inquiries have made adverse findings about politicians, and the current government faces a hostile Senate. Indeed, dysfunctional government in Australia has created a crisis of faith in politics, with one-in-four Australians purportedly convinced that democracy is not working.⁴² Respected Labor politician John Faulkner has asserted that many Australians have 'come to see our parliaments, our governments, our political parties and our politicians as practising not politics but its opposite: a values-free competition for office and the spoils it can deliver'.⁴³

The global economy – staggering along

The global financial crisis of 2008 has stalled the global economy for the past six years. Even now, the future is uncertain. On the one hand, the economies of the US and UK appear to be heading for sustainable growth. Unemployment in the US has fallen below 6 per cent (as at September 2014) and Britain's industrial output has climbed by 3.2 per cent.⁴⁴ However, the news elsewhere is not as positive. Europe is

at risk of a triple-dip recession as Germany's economy slows sharply and doubts increase about the economic situation in Greece. Italy has been in recession for two years and France's economy has been stagnant for months. Japan continues to struggle to recover from its near two-decade slump. Growth in China is slowing after providing much of the global expansion over the past decade.

While the outlook for the US and UK is improving, there is a risk that Europe and Asia could drag them backwards.⁴⁵ This weakness is causing stress in the multilateral bodies that oversee the global economy, and individual countries are taking unilateral or bilateral action outside of these forums, with Philip Stephens contending that:

The open trading system is fragmenting. The collapse of the Doha round of free trade talks spoke to the demise of global free-trade agreements. The advanced economies are looking to regional coalitions and deals—the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Pact. The emerging economies are building south-south relationships. Frustrated by a failure to rebalance the International Monetary Fund, the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] are setting up their own financial institutions.⁴⁶

Australia also faces an uncertain economic future. Its economy has been well served by the twin effects of a 'productivity boom' after the recession in the early 1990s and the 'China boom' that inflated prices for Australian iron ore and coal. But these two booms appear to be over, with reform-driven productivity growth turning negative, China's growth slowing, and global prices for natural resources also falling, with the *Australian Financial Review* asserting that:

The force that drove the rising living standards of the past decade—the fourfold rise in mining investment and the tripling of mineral process in a decade—is now evaporating. Iron ore prices have dropped to a five-year low. And the reform-driven productivity growth that underpinned the first decade of prosperity has turned negative. So real wages are falling. Unemployment is rising. Companies are generating profits by cutting their costs rather than by generating revenue growth. Australians need to understand that while they are prosperous, this prosperity is now receding. Without genuine effort, we cannot count on it picking up strongly again. Unless we want to bet on luck.⁴⁷

Ongoing economic growth and national prosperity in Australia is not assured and it will require skilful political leadership to make the tough decisions to ensure it does.⁴⁸

Secular nationalism – under strain

A further pressure on the international order is that secular nationalism is under great strain. 'Secularism' is defined as the view that public education and other matters of civil policy should be conducted without a religious element.⁴⁹ Nationalism can be a powerful unifying factor in that it demands the subordination of all identities (including religious), values and interests to the welfare of the state. Nationalism can also be a very exclusivist. It demands that people have allegiance to only one state and that they place the interests of their nation above their other motivations, including individual, family and religious.⁵⁰

National secularism is under threat in many established Western democracies. Increased migration and globalisation have brought Christianity and Islam in close proximity to each other and have weakened the public monopoly of single religions, causing mutual suspicion, distrust, hostility and conflict. This is evidenced in the UK, Germany and specifically France—with the banning of the Muslim headscarf—and also in the Netherlands.⁵¹ More recently, this divide has been evidenced by the radicalisation of Muslim youth in Western countries and their desire to travel overseas and fight in Syria and Iraq or conduct 'lone wolf attacks' in their home countries.⁵²

Australia is not immune to this trend. More than a quarter of Australians were born overseas and, despite historically high levels of support for immigration, there is also clear evidence that there is a high level of concern that there is too much deference to religious minorities in Australian political activity, 'especially the Muslim communities, at the expense of mainstream values', with Natasha Robinson arguing that:

The divisions that have emerged in Australian social and political life—amplified in recent months following the rise of Islamic State—have thrown the values that define Australian nationhood into sharp focus.⁵³

As well as these systemic weaknesses in the current international order, there are a number of significant changes or flashpoints in the global geostrategic balance. Some of these pressures are closely related to the trends described above, if not symptomatic of them, and the manner in which these issues are resolved will have an impact on the type of change and the scale of that change in the international system.

The first is the rise of China, and the shift in global economic and military power. Global power is shifting from the Atlantic Ocean—and from North America and Europe—to the Asia Pacific (and the Pacific and Indian Oceans).⁵⁴ China is rising as a global power and India's potential is starting to be realised. China displaced Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2010 and is expected to overtake the US as the largest economy in the world within the next ten years.⁵⁵

This economic growth has allowed China to considerably increase its military spending. China has become more assertive in its foreign policy aims since its economic and military power has increased. It has made claims over much of the South China Sea, exacerbating longstanding disputes with Vietnam and The Philippines, in particular. China also disputes Japan's control of the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) Islands.⁵⁶ China seeks to be regarded as a great power and is frustrated by what it sees as the West's bias. To counter this bias, China, along with Brazil, Russia and India, is planning to create a development bank, contingency fund and infrastructure bank as alternatives to the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank, with an editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* noting that:

Like the West's regional trade deals, China's institution building looks benign in isolation. Yet its flurry of initiatives, which conspicuously excludes rich countries, may signal a strategic shift. Rather than take more responsibility within the existing system, China seems to be creating a rival one.⁵⁷

Great power tension has also occurred in Europe. Russia's actions in Ukraine have shocked world leaders. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has allegedly distorted reporting of the situation in Ukraine and twisted international law and precedent to justify his actions and suit his political purposes. This may have terrible consequences for the next iteration of the world order as it foreshadows a world where rules are ignored, 'words are bent, borders ignored and agreements broken at will'.⁵⁸ Russia's actions certainly seem to threaten a stable, rules-based global order.

The failure of the so-called 'Arab awakening' and the movement of extreme Jihadism from South Asia to the Middle East also have far-reaching consequences. Repressive state authority in the Middle East has not been replaced with democracy and tolerance; instead, the almost total collapse of state authority has led to a retreat towards primitive alignments and religious hatreds.⁵⁹ The most far-reaching of these is the widening schism between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, most graphically demonstrated by the action of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

While much of the world's focus on the Middle East is currently on the situation in Iraq and Syria, two other, more serious problems deserve continued focus. The first is the simmering Israel-Palestine conflict that has traditionally been the greatest focus of international Muslim concern⁶⁰ and which, to many observers, is representative of the tension between East and West.⁶¹ The second is the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran. Efforts to prevent Iran from further developing its nuclear weapons capability must be sustained, as failure to do so will likely have serious consequences.⁶²

Climate change also poses serious security challenges. The US Department of Defense has recently released a report which asserts that climate change will increasingly threaten national security, and has articulated a 'roadmap' to meet this challenge.⁶³ Added to this non-traditional security threat is the risk of global pandemic, as demonstrated by the Ebola crisis emanating from Western Africa that has now infected over 9000 people.

The last challenge is the declining power of the US and its role as a global hegemon. After ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a global financial crisis, the power of the US has lessened. Europe is still suffering the effects of the economic downturn with a consequent reduction in its global standing.⁶⁴ The distribution of power within the existing international order is changing quickly. After a significant period of stability since the end of World War 2, strategic uncertainty is rising across the world, with Thomas Carothers and others contending that:

None of the current flashpoints is undermining the overall international order yet, however they are all of considerable significance beyond the harm they are inflicting because they are manifestations of longer-term, deep-reaching trends in the international system.⁶⁵

There have been clear signs that the primary architect of globalisation, the US, is no longer willing to be its guarantor. Some commentators assess that the US does not see upholding an order that redistributes power to rivals as a vital interest. Although China and India do not like this, they are unwilling or unable to step up and lead multilateral approaches.⁶⁶ Without a guarantor, globalisation will weaken and the international system may return to multipolarity or, as one commentator has put it, 'no one's world'.⁶⁷

This section has described the international system, and analysed contemporary trends in the current global order and how they are reflected in Australia. It then examined current geopolitical trends and made the assessment that the international system and the current global order are in a period of radical change. How severe or minor the effects of these changes will be is yet to be determined. However, Australia's future prosperity and growth will be largely dictated by how well it adapts and influences. The next section will examine Australia's national interests within this environment and propose a grand strategy for Australia.

Australia's approach to the world is fundamentally linked to its strategic culture and national identity. These three factors, environment, culture and identity, determine Australia's enduring national interests. This section of the paper will review Australia's strategic culture, its identity as a middle power and its enduring national interests.

Australia's strategic culture

Aligned with strategy and grand strategy is the concept of strategic culture. National culture is widely recognised as a key dimension in strategy, including the impact of culture on a country's tendency to use military power as part of national power.⁶⁸ According to Brice Harris, the principal factors contributing to a state's strategic culture are political culture and ideology, military culture, geo-politics, international relationships and bureaucratic organisation.⁶⁹

Several theorists have convincingly argued that grand strategy derives from strategic culture rather than from the conscious decisions of leaders. Grand strategic behaviour also tends to be independent of the political orientation of governments. Indeed, David Kilcullen has argued that the choices and specific policies of political parties are more derived from the circumstances in which they find themselves than from ideology.⁷⁰

Michael Wesley asserts that Australia has always been a rich but isolated *status quo* state.⁷¹ However, Australia's isolation, small population, resource riches and reliance on trade have played on the national consciousness, creating feelings of vulnerability. This has led to a strategic culture that is focused on how to deal with a perceived lack of power, that instability must be avoided, and a clear understanding that world events will affect Australia.⁷² In summary, Australia sees itself as isolated in a complex world, and Australian strategic culture is focused on the state and oriented towards maintenance of the balance of power and the importance of alliances to balance prospective threats.

A middle power – more or less

Australian leaders have traditionally aspired for Australia to be a 'middle power'.⁷³ There is much academic debate about the definition of the term.⁷⁴ There are two schools of thought; one focuses on the capabilities of the nation and the other on behaviour.

Not only is it problematic to define 'middle power', it is also difficult to classify countries. Based on both capabilities and behaviour, Australia is a serious candidate for middle power status but does not meet every criteria in comparison to others. Some commentators assess that the influence of Australia and Canada in the international system is being squeezed by a new cadre of rising middle powers and that the relationship of these two countries with the US assisted their incorporation into the G20.⁷⁵ On balance, 'a consensus has developed that states such as Australia, Canada, Norway and Sweden are middle powers'.⁷⁶

Australia and Canada perform the classical middle power role of stabilising and legitimising the current world order. They aim to support the norms and rules of the international order and perform certain roles that maintain and strengthen that system.⁷⁷ Classical middle powers are *status quo* middle powers. The next section will detail Australia's national interests.

Australia's national interests

'National interest' is defined by Feng Zhang as:

[A] consistent set of objectives designed and sought by central policymakers to enhance the material utility and ideational values of the country as a whole.... Clearly the national interest can be both material (for example, security, wealth, power) and ideational (for example, values, status), originating from the intrinsic qualities and needs of the state itself, as well as the role, identity and culture that the state inhabits.⁷⁸

There is no formal, comprehensive list of Australia's national interests.⁷⁹ However, in 2005, John Howard, then Prime Minister of Australia, gave a speech about Australia's place in the world where he stated that:

History's legacy is a global outlook. We are overwhelmingly a country of migrants and their descendents. We are an open economy, dependent on global markets. And we are a Western liberal democracy with a profound interest in the structures and ideas that govern the international system. It is true that Australia's most immediate interests and responsibilities will always lie in our region. But we have global interests that require strong relationships with all centres of power.⁸⁰

This paper assesses that Australia has four major national interests. The first is a cohesive, multicultural society. Australia's social construct is of a migrant nation. One-in-four Australians were born overseas, and multiculturalism is a cornerstone of Australian identity.⁸¹ Recent research has shown that Australians strongly support migration and multiculturalism, even in the midst of tough policies against boat arrivals and fears about the radicalisation of Australian Muslims.⁸² This level of support soars above similar nations.⁸³

The second is access to global markets. Australia is a trading nation, with one-in-five jobs directly related to trade.⁸⁴ Australian trade is largely focused on the Asia Pacific region, with over 70 per cent of trade transactions taking place with nations that belong to APEC. Australia needs access to global markets to trade and expand economically.

The third key national interest is the security of Australian sovereignty. Australia must retain the ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat attacks on Australian territory. Australia's alliance with the US is a pillar of Australia's strategic and security arrangements.⁸⁵ A strong and consistent US presence in the region is essential to provide confidence in the Indo-Pacific region, as it has done since World War 2.

The last key national interest is a stable and rules-based global order.⁸⁶ Australia lacks the national power to directly shape its strategic environment and independently guarantee its security. Consequently, Australia has a regional and global outlook that seeks an order which restrains aggression, monitors and pursues compliance with international law, and collectively manages emerging threats.⁸⁷

This section has examined Australia's strategic culture, its identity as a middle power and described its enduring national interests. The next section will describe Australia's current grand strategy and propose a revision to best address these uncertain times.

Australia's current grand strategy

In 2012, the then Australian Prime Minister released the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper.⁸⁸ It was a 'plan to build on our strengths and shape our future',⁸⁹ with a stated aim to 'secure Australia as a more prosperous and resilient nation that is fully part of our region and open to the world'.⁹⁰ The White Paper was comprehensive, however, it was criticised for its lofty rhetoric, apparent inconsistencies and lack of resources.⁹¹ Its focus was also almost exclusively internally, making no statement of what type of region or world that Australia seeks. With the election of the Abbott Government in 2013, the paper was 'consigned to history',⁹² and has not been replaced.

Some commentators have assessed that Australia has been pursuing a 'hedging' strategy, albeit unstated, since the end of the Cold War.⁹³ Australia has actively pursued and supported an open and integrated global and regional political order through bilateral and multilateral forums such as the UN, APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit and the G20. Australia has also sought to strengthen and reinvigorate the Australia-US alliance and upgrade its strategic links with Japan and South Korea.⁹⁴

Concurrently, Australia has also been very supportive of China's involvement in regional structures. Australia has also pursued much-needed upgrades to its military forces, particularly relating to air and naval capabilities. Collectively, these efforts indicate a hedging strategy.⁹⁵ That is, Australia is 'hedging' against increased strategic uncertainty in the region by a combination of 'soft balancing' (seeking to have the US and China as active participants in regional and global institutions), 'external balancing' (by improving its alliance relationship with the US and other allies and partners in the region) and 'internal balancing' (by improving domestic military capabilities in the event of conflict).

The need for change

While this grand strategy has been effective for Australia until now, this paper contends that the pace of change in the global security environment—and the current and potential future difficulties in the world and domestic economies—means that this traditional approach needs to be reviewed. The first step on this revised approach is engagement with the people of Australia.

Firstly, there must be a public narrative that informs the Australian people of the complexity, fragility and potential threats evident in the current international system. Much of the Australian public is aware of the various crises and developments occurring around the world but they may not be cognisant of their direct and indirect impact on Australia. Broadening the level of public debate is essential so that the government-of-the-day can take the necessary actions to navigate these uncertain times with an appropriate response. The best way to do this would be via the existing process of producing a White Paper, detailing Australia's grand strategy to address the current domestic, regional and international environment. The desired end-state would be public support and legitimacy.

At the heart of the White Paper must be a clear statement of what Australia seeks. This grand strategy, by definition, must be proactive, not reactive. The aim should be for Australia to be domestically strong, and to seek and support a stable international system based on the rule of law and an open and free economic trading system. This paper proposes a three-pronged grand strategy for Australia, to 'build', 'bridge' and 'balance'.

Build capacity and capacity to build

Australia must first focus on its domestic capacity. This involves building and improving Australia's political, economic and social solvency. Without these three fundamental capabilities, Australia will not have the national power or 'means' to shape the regional and international environment in pursuit of its interests, the 'ends'.

The first priority must be political cooperation. Our governments must be able to govern but, increasingly, entrenched partisan positions are preventing the government-of-the-day from pursuing its agenda. According to Paul Kelly, 'Australia risks heading to a new status as a stupid country—a nation unable to solve its public policy problems and, even worse, a nation incapable of even conducting a public debate about them'.⁹⁶

Fault lies on all sides but it is salutary to be reminded that many of the important economic reforms of the 1980s occurred with bipartisan support.⁹⁷ Prime Minister Abbott has stated that he intends to become a more inclusive and more consultative leader, and the Labor Party has mostly offered bipartisan support for recent national security measures.⁹⁸ This has resonated with the Australian public.⁹⁹ Debate on reform should continue but it should focus on what type of reform and not reform *per se*.¹⁰⁰

The second is ongoing economic growth and reform. The Australian economy is in need of reform if it is to maintain the prosperity Australians have enjoyed over the past two decades. According to Peter van Onselen:

For Australia to stay ahead of a global downturn and a fundamental change to our government's capacity to fund imbedded policy scripts we need to adjust the budget structurally.... If we do not, the economic events we cannot control will determine Australia's future. Make no mistake, the prosperity and growth Australians have long enjoyed is threatened by domestic and international change.¹⁰¹

Structural change in the Australian economy is required to rein in the deficit and make industry more competitive in a gloomy international environment. To achieve this requires bipartisan support for the budget and an open approach to the big reform needed in areas such as federation, tax, health care, education and the pension age.

The third is social cohesion. Australia's multicultural society and immigration policies have been a very effective social construct, and have delivered economic growth and development. Australia must not expect that multiculturalism will automatically lead to social cohesion without community effort and understanding. The radicalisation of Australian Muslims is a real threat.¹⁰² Concerted and targeted policy must address this issue. English, education and employment are a start¹⁰³ but specific policies need to be developed and implemented that reach out to young Muslims and counter any sense of alienation.¹⁰⁴

Australia needs political progression, economic reform and social cohesion to ensure that it can maximise its national power and take steps to shape its external environment. The first step in achieving a grand strategy for Australia is to ensure that it is governed well, economically strong and socially cohesive.

Bridge the divide and cross the bridge

The complexity of the developing geostrategic environment will mean that strategic choices will not be 'binary or exclusive'. Australian policy makers will be presented with decisions on relationships with and among states that encompass cooperation, competition, independence and interdependence.¹⁰⁵ 'Bridging' is defined as reaching out to other regional and like-minded nations to pursue common interests. Bridging aims to address strategic uncertainty and the competition between nations through promoting confidence-building measures, interdependence, partnerships and collective responses to areas of mutual concern. The aim of the bridging aspect of Australia's grand strategy is to promote cooperation between nations and prevent competition between them from becoming conflict.¹⁰⁶ Australia's focus should be regional but not neglect global forums, and should highlight diplomatic and economic means.

Australia has very well-established diplomatic and economic links in the region and they need to be strengthened with key countries and multilateral bodies. Most importantly, Australia's relationship with Indonesia needs to be improved. Indonesia's transformation to a vibrant democracy has been very impressive. It is a middle power on a growth trajectory to 'great power' status. However, Australia's relationship with Indonesia has been stagnating.¹⁰⁷ The recent spying allegations and the Abbott Government's policy of turning back boats have negatively impacted the relationship.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, business links between the two countries are weak and mutual public perceptions are poor.

Nevertheless, with the spying allegations now resolved, Australia should seek to comprehensively enhance the relationship as a priority. The economic, security and strategic potential of a close relationship between Australia and Indonesia is great. Indonesia will assume greater strategic power as it develops, and Australia should seek the opportunity to elevate its relationship to a fully-fledged strategic partnership as soon as possible.¹⁰⁹

Australia should also seek to strengthen and broaden its ties with China. As Australia's largest trading partner, Australia's economic well-being is directly linked to further growth in the Chinese economy.¹¹⁰ Australia's relationship with China is already dominated by these economic links with much mutual benefit. Other aspects of the relationship could be strengthened further to complement and balance. This deeper relationship could also serve to 'reassure' Australia of China's intent to pursue 'peaceful development' and commitment to the core principles of the current world order.¹¹¹ That is not to say that as power shifts, the world order does not need to change. This is inevitable. But the key tenets of the current world order do not necessarily have to change as the world order takes on an Asian view.¹¹²

The region is already well served with multilateral bodies. The ASEAN Regional Forum, APEC, the East Asia Summit and associated bodies all address issues of shared interest. There does not need to be additional forums. However, increasing the capacity of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to

support them would strengthen Australia's efforts and increase its influence. Many of these regional bodies have been criticised for much talking but producing little in the way of concrete outcomes.¹¹³ However, they have made headway.¹¹⁴ Their maturity and capacity will be tested as more global power is located in the region and more difficult issues need to be addressed. Australia should provide assistance to the secretariats of these bodies to increase their capacity.

The close connections between security and economics must be leveraged in the current environment.¹¹⁵ Bilateral and multilateral trade agreements need to continue to be pursued both regionally and globally to stimulate economic growth and improve security. The Trans-Pacific Partnership—a plurilateral trade agreement involving the US, Japan and ten other countries, including Australia, that together account for a third of world trade—could become one of the world's most expansive trade agreements.¹¹⁶ Not only would arrangements such as this accelerate trade, which globally is in decline,¹¹⁷ but they would also enhance the security outlook as countries increase their interdependence. The Australian Government's focus on economic diplomacy is a welcome and timely initiative, with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop recently saying that:

If the goal of traditional diplomacy is peace, then the goal of economic diplomacy is peace and prosperity. Australia's prosperity is dependent on regional and global prosperity.¹¹⁸

Australia should also act to support and improve confidence measures further afield. While Australia's closest neighbours and the countries of the Indo-Pacific are of great importance to Australia, developments outside of this region will also influence Australia's interests. Developments in the Americas, Europe and Africa have always had an effect on Australia. Accordingly, Australia should be prepared to engage in global forums that shape international actions in these areas as appropriate.

Indeed, in the latter part of 2014, Australia deployed personnel to the Ukraine and Iraq, and was under pressure to contribute personnel to Africa to assist with efforts to contain the Ebola epidemic. As a middle power, Australia has been very active on the global stage, most recently as the holder of a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Australia is privileged to be a member of the G20 and had the added responsibility of hosting the 2014 series of meetings, including the Leaders' Summit in Brisbane in November. Australia should actively seek a leading involvement in global bodies that will influence the Indo-Pacific region and Australia.

Australia must take an active part in shaping the regional and global environment, within its means. The most effective means to achieve this is to engage creatively and expansively with those nations and multilateral forums that have shared interests with Australia. In this way, active attempts can be made to shape an international system that is based on the rule of law, is stable and has an open and free economic trading system.¹¹⁹

Balancing the scale

'Balancing' is defined as the preparations that Australia will make, and actions that it may take, as a *status quo* middle power, to support the maintenance of the key attributes of the current world order. Whereas 'bridging' was about the cooperative pursuit of common interests, 'balancing' is about the capabilities, preparations and actions that may be needed if the key attributes of the current order are not being adhered too or are being ignored, and the scale of Australia's national interests demands action.

It is to be expected that rising powers will legitimately attempt to influence the international system in their interest. It is also to be expected that other powers may resist this attempt to redistribute power. As power recedes in some areas, other actors may seek to fill the void and, while this may not be of key importance to a great power, it may be to Australia. This interplay could see competition tip into conflict, and not necessarily between great powers. Balancing, both internally and externally, is designed to deter conflict and, if necessary, defeat an adversary.

Australia has a broad range of security capabilities that can be employed to defend Australian territory and its national interests. Over the past decade and a half, successive Australian governments have invested in military, police and intelligence capabilities. As a country with a small population, Australia seeks to have a technological edge over most other militaries in the region. However, this capability edge is being eroded quicker than expected. Australia will need to keep regularly investing in military, police

and intelligence capabilities to maintain this capability edge.¹²⁰ Australia has deployed soldiers and police into its immediate region a number of times over the past 15 years to stabilise and build order to good effect. Consequently, Australia's immediate region is more stable than many but instability can emanate far from one's own shores.¹²¹

Australia has been deepening its relationship with its major security partner, the US, and also with other allies of the US.¹²² Intelligence arrangements, an emphasis on interoperability, exercises and operational deployments in the Middle East, as well as basing arrangements under the 'pivot', all ensure that the US is close to Australia and 'locked into the region'. The reason for this deep relationship with the US is to secure Australia's strategic interests and balance against growing strategic uncertainty.¹²³

China has legitimate and growing interests in the Indo-Pacific region. These interests and growing power engagement do not mean that China wishes to fundamentally change the current tenets of the world order. Indeed, China has been at pains to declare its aim is to develop peacefully. This is reassuring but it is not to say that at some time in the future China will seek to change the world order in its favour. This question may not be even broached if China's growth plateaus and the US economy picks up as is currently forecast. While there is strategic competition between the US and China, there is also much cooperation. China has many internal issues that it is grappling with, and it needs its economy to keep growing.¹²⁴ The US is China's major export market and China holds considerable US debt. China and the US need each other. Australia is managing its relationship with each of them well and should continue to do so.

This grand strategy seeks to ensure that the fundamental principles of the current world order—rules-based, stable and an open market—endure as power shifts towards Asia in the international system. The grand strategy will support this by building domestic capacity, strengthening regional and broader relationships and, lastly, preparing to directly act when key Australian national interests are threatened.

Principles of pursuit

Obviously, though, the grand strategy must be affordable. The 'ends' must be measured against the cost of the 'means'. Australia must generate the economic growth required to maintain its status as a middle power and be careful not to over-reach. Objectives, as components of the grand strategy, must be prioritised to ensure that resources are applied in accordance with their importance and, as appropriate, reallocated to other, potentially more important goals.

Wherever possible, the grand strategy should be pursued proactively, seeking to shape and influence before it has to accept and adjust. Australia should also seek to bind together with like-minded countries to seek mutually-agreeable solutions. While proactive, the strategy must prepare for adjustment as circumstances change. Finally, the grand strategy must be reflective of the Australian identity, culture and view of the world. This will give the Australian government the authority and mandate to pursue difficult policy objectives with scarce and valuable national assets.

Conclusion

The world is at an inflection point. China rises, Russia re-asserts itself and the schism between Sunni and Shiite widens. The future of the US is uncertain as it faces multiple crises. The balance of power in the existing world order is shifting.¹²⁵ At the same time, the world economy is struggling, democracies are experiencing difficult governance circumstances and secularism is under great pressure. However, it is not yet clear how far the balance is shifting and what the consequences will be for the current rules-based, stable and open free-trade order. In the words of President Obama, 'the central question of the global age is whether nations moved forward in a spirit of mutual interest of respect, or descended in to the destructive rivalries of the past'.¹²⁶

This period of radical uncertainty calls for a formal, Australian grand strategy. This paper has argued that Australia, as a middle power, needs a revised and formal grand strategy to navigate the current and future domestic and international environment. This grand strategy must harness all the elements of national power in a sustainable and cogent way to achieve its desired 'ends'. The current reactive and hedging approach will not prepare Australia for the coming challenges. The Government should adopt a proactive

grand strategy for Australia to be domestically strong and to seek and support a stable international system based on the rule of law and an open and free economic trading system.

This paper has proposed a three-pronged grand strategy for Australia. First, the Government must engage the people of Australia with a convincing narrative detailing the complex, fragile and uncertain global environment. The narrative needs to include the need for a revised national approach and sacrifice to ensure that Australia navigates these changing circumstances as effectively as possible. Australia needs a new White Paper to detail the challenges, the tools and the way forward.

To 'build' national capacity, the Federal Parliament must find ways to better cooperate and improve governance. There is a desperate need for economic reform to address the structural deficit and increase productivity. Social cohesion must be supported by targeted policies to prevent the further alienation and radicalisation of young Australians.

To 'bridge' is to work with like-minded countries to mutual benefit. Collective effort, either on a bilateral or multilateral basis, must be sustained and strengthened to address common issues. The Australian Government should better resource the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to allow the best use of diplomatic and economic power. A strategic partnership with Indonesia should be pursued quickly to the benefit of both countries. Australia must also support free trade and economic arrangements that will stimulate economic growth and improve security between countries and within regions. While these bridging actions should be primarily focused on the region, Australia should also support global forums and initiatives.

To 'balance' is to be prepared to act when the key tenets of the current international system are threatened. It is crucial that the Australian Government continues to invest in military, police and intelligence capabilities and is prepared to use them as the national interest requires. Australia's relationship with the US must be maintained and its relationship with China strengthened.

The future is more uncertain than it has been for a generation. Australia needs to realise that the current tenets of the world order may not endure and the alternative may be inimical to Australia's interests. Australia must chart a careful course through these changing times to its preferred destination. A formal grand strategy will provide the tools by which to navigate this course. In this way, Australia can support the maintenance of the key attributes of the current world order, adjust to the changed geostrategic and domestic circumstances, and prosper into the future.

Notes

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- ¹ An abridged version of this paper was published in Issue No. 196 (March/April 2015) of the *ADF Journal* and was awarded the 'best article' prize for that issue: see <http://www.adfjournal.adc.edu.au/UserFiles/issues/196%202015%20Mar_Apr.pdf>
 - ² See transcript 'Prime Minister Tony Abbott MP Address to the United Nations General Assembly', available at <<http://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2014/09/26/prime-minister-tony-abbott-mp-address-united-nations-general-assembly-united>> accessed 6 March 2015.
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