

DILEMMAS OF A MIDDLE POWER: AUSTRALIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

The manuscript contends that the strengthening of Australia's diplomatic relations with Southeast Asia can be attributed to the escalating threat posed by China's rise, the US's precarious role in the Asia-Pacific landscape, and the increasingly complex economic interconnections between the US, Australia, and Southeast Asia vis-à-vis China. Historically, the strategic alliance with the United States has been the cornerstone of Canberra's foreign policy framework. Nonetheless, Canberra's concerns about Washington's uncertain presence have grown as a result of the ongoing changes in US National Security Policy over the previous decade, from 2016 to 2025. In the long run, it can be argued that the dominant trajectory indicates Canberra's intention to strengthen its comprehensive strategic partnership with Southeast Asia, despite the increased complexity and fragmentation observed within Australia's multicultural society. While some analysts argue that Canberra's strategic alliance with the United States still predisposes it to prioritize the abandonment of Southeast Asia, there is a counterargument that Australia's strategic partnership with Washington is gradually dwindling after over 75 years of establishment and evolution. In light of the aforementioned circumstances, the manuscript advocates for Australia to recalibrate its domestic policies, particularly its ethnic policies concerning the Asian immigrant populace, and to leverage the existing networks of economic and social relationships with Southeast Asian nations, thus cultivating a framework of alliances among middle powers within the region, which would mitigate the risk of becoming ensnared in the strategic rivalry between the US and China in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: alliance, Australia, dilemma, the US's grand strategy

1. Introduction

Relative power constitutes a complex construct that poses considerable challenges in measurement and frequently embodies subjective interpretations: a nation possessing sufficient power to ensure its self-defense may be perceived as a potential threat by neighboring states. In response to such perceptions, neighbors, motivated by their imperative to preserve independence and ensure security, tend to enhance their own

defensive capabilities. They may embark upon preemptive measures even in the absence of an overt threat of military invasion. This phenomenon is termed the security dilemma: the fortification of one state's security apparatus incites a corresponding reaction from another, which could ultimately render the initial state less secure. The establishment of cooperative frameworks among nations to mitigate this competitive dynamic is fraught with difficulties, as the potential for one state to "cheat" could undermine the military standing of another. This engenders a pervasive fear of treachery.

Political leaders frequently fail to acknowledge the existence of this dilemma: they exhibit a lack of empathy toward neighboring states and often remain oblivious to the fact that their actions instill a sense of threat in others. The awareness, or lack thereof, among national leaders does not alter the fundamental nature of the problem. The prevailing circumstances necessitate recognition of these dynamics.

The security dilemma intensifies under two specific conditions. Firstly, when the offensive and defensive capabilities of military forces are nearly indistinguishable, states encounter difficulties in articulating their defensive intentions and limited security aspirations through the deployment of particular military assets. Any military force may be construed as indicative of offensive intent. For instance, it is a common belief that armored divisions represent the optimal means of defense against assaults from similarly equipped forces. However, armored divisions also possess significant offensive capabilities. Consequently, states equipped with such forces are unable to ascertain whether the intentions of other states are aggressive or merely defensive, thereby compelling them to adopt a pessimistic stance regarding the intentions of others.

The second condition pertains to the comparative efficacy of offensive versus defensive strategies. In scenarios where offensive capabilities surpass those of defense, states are inclined to adopt offensive postures to ensure their survival. This inclination can precipitate preemptive warfare during periods of political turmoil, as the inherent advantages of offensive action create incentives for initiating conflict whenever the specter of war looms larger. Furthermore, in contexts where offensive capabilities dominate, even a slight numerical superiority can drastically enhance the probability of achieving victory. Hence, the preeminence of offensive capabilities may provoke preventive warfare should a state attain a fleeting military advantage.

The impediments to cooperation within the realm of international relations underscore the challenges that emerge when centralized authority within multiethnic states begins to fragment. The security dilemma influences interactions among groups in a manner analogous to that observed between sovereign states. These groups additionally confront the complex task of reconstructing new state entities from the remnants of defunct empires, rendering them doubly susceptible to vulnerabilities.

2. Literature Review

The high dilemma represents an exceedingly complex predicament wherein subjective reconciliation proves unattainable, while objective reconciliation remains feasible; thus, genuine conflict, although not a foregone conclusion, is not entirely precluded. Conversely, the latent dilemma embodies a scenario in which both objective and subjective dimensions can be harmonized, concurrently rendering the emergence of real conflict extremely improbable. In contrast, conflict materializes as a circumstance

wherein both objective and subjective elements remain irreconcilable, yet the occurrence of actual conflict is likewise quite unlikely. Butterfield (1951) does not underscore the significance of an absent world government in precipitating the dilemma. Rather, Butterfield (1951) posits that the absence of clear malicious intent among states constitutes a significant contributing factor. Hertz (1966) broadened Butterfield's perspective by incorporating additional variables that engender dilemmas, encompassing both objective elements such as power competition and subjective components such as mutual apprehension. Jervis (2001) subsequently advanced Hertz's framework by introducing novel factors, including adverse outcomes and the condition of anarchy. In summary, a dilemma can be characterized as a subjective irreconcilability associated with a hypothetical yet incompatible situation, wherein conflict is neither predetermined nor impossible. Dilemmas emerge from anarchy, fear or perceived threats, ambiguous intentions or expectations, and power struggles. While dilemmas serve as a critical impetus for warfare, they do not account for the causation of all conflicts.

There are three primary conclusions that can be drawn from the aforementioned analysis. Firstly, the dilemma is likely explicable and foreseeable through the magnitude of military conflict among the emergent "client" groups, which have arisen from the disintegration of their "patron" counterparts. Secondly, the dilemma indicates that the peril associated with these conflicts is considerably elevated. Numerous underlying factors contributing to conflict and warfare are elucidated by the dilemma that is profoundly manifested within "client" groups that have dissociated from their "patrons." The military capabilities that clients initially possess, along with their divergent interpretations of historical events, frequently catalyze rivalries and engender apprehensions towards their patrons. Varied models of social governance, in conjunction with rapidly evolving and asymmetrical political dynamics, have established incentives conducive to latent warfare. Moreover, swift capital accumulation has engendered additional motivations for the amassing of armaments. Finally, those external actors seeking to comprehend and mitigate the potential for conflict must evaluate the circumstances from the strategic standpoint of the internal groups.

3. Results

3.1. Dilemma in determining the identity of national political culture

Culture constitutes a multifaceted and extensive historical-social phenomenon. It embodies a system of both material and spiritual values generated by human beings, which aids society in maintaining a state of dynamic equilibrium while continually enhancing itself to adjust to shifts in the natural and social milieu. Culture is perpetually augmented within the developmental continuum of history. Humans serve as both the agents of cultural creation and the products of culture, which functions as a vehicle for communication and education. The existence of culture is predicated upon human activities related to material and spiritual production, with ethnic exchange activities representing a vital component of these endeavors (Truong Thi Chuyen, 2007). Scholars dedicated to the field of cultural studies present a plethora of diverse perspectives regarding culture. Consequently, the notion of national cultural identity is equally varied (Doan Duc Thanh, 2009). The concept of identity can be traced back to 1932: "identity: akin to 'true face', the visage, the essence of an individual or an object - the authentic condition of something or someone, which also implies content" (Dao Duy Anh, 2005).

As articulated by Luong Kim Dinh, cultural identity encapsulates characteristics of culture that are simultaneously universal and particular, as well as hierarchical. Identity represents the core, fundamental, and essential values of culture, the most quintessential and intrinsic values, deeply rooted in national identity, manifested across all cultural domains, and gradually shaped through the historical processes of nation-building, consolidation, and development (Hoai Minh, 1985). Truong Luu (1995) posits that identity is the most concentrated essence that engenders national characteristics and should not be conflated with cultural values. Ha Van Tan (2019) similarly contends that national cultural identity comprises a system of unique cultural values that are collectively acknowledged by the entire nation, deemed appropriate, and operationalized to meet the developmental needs of the nation within a specific historical context. However, Ha Van Tan further asserts that national cultural identity encompasses values shared by the entire population. "The differentiation in identity among ethnic groups does not reside solely in a compilation of attributes but predominantly in their structural organization. This distinction arises as a result of functioning under the influences of both natural and social environments" (Tran Ngoc Them, 2013). This perspective can be interpreted as an endeavor by Ha Van Tan to reconcile contradictions by both defining cultural identity as a system of core, fundamental, and characteristic cultural values embraced by the nation, along with tangible/material evidence. As a constellation of attributes, national cultural identity delineates the culture of a specific community from that of others, thereby showcasing the creative spirit of that community in its adaptation to living conditions conducive to development (Pham Vu Dung, 1996). In a similar vein, national identity encompasses not only intrinsic core strengths, which hold the potential for predominance, but also external manifestations in the customs, habits, and lifestyles of the nation (Vu Khieu, 1996). Cultural identity serves as an internal impetus that fosters traditional ethnic culture while assimilating the advancements of human civilization. It is crystallized in ideological values, literature, art, ethics, and quotidian lifestyles; thus, cultural identity is intimately correlated with specific historical and social contexts, embodying both relatively stable foundational elements and evolving epistemic factors throughout the historical continuum (Truong Thi Chuyen, 2007).

Clarke (2008) posits that values, attitudes, customs, social groups, and cultural identities play a critical role in shaping human cognition, as well as influencing interpersonal interactions and behaviors. Consequently, cultural attributes exert an impact on the foreign policy decisions of various nations through an intricate and protracted historical trajectory. Identity encompasses not only an individual's self-awareness and emotional perception regarding themselves as derived from quotidian activities and social engagements (Erikson, 1980) but also the manner in which a nation articulates its objectives through its self-conception in relation to other sovereign entities and its recognition within the global context (Pham Thuy Tien, 2015). The formulation of an entity's identity is subject to the influence of numerous other entities and prevailing social contexts. The processes of identity formation are shaped by contradictions, which may involve challenges, incompatibilities, inconsistencies, or even confrontations, ultimately leading to synthesis and resolution (Goossens, 1995). The global milieu of the 1980s and 1990s in the twentieth century fostered an emergent consciousness regarding the individual's role within society, wherein each person was perceived as a global citizen, thereby rendering borders as obsolete barriers, and envisioning all nations coexisting within a "global village" (Putri, 2017). This phenomenon represented a significant catalyst in the evolution of postmodern consciousness that emerged in the aftermath of

World War II. The advent of postmodernism necessitated a redefinition of national identity. In the face of postmodernism, nations were compelled to discover methods to adapt and broaden the parameters of national identity. Confronted with the forces of globalization and the postmodern paradigm, the constructs of ethnicity and citizenship underwent transformation, leading to the understanding that a nation's identity comprises the multiplicity of identities present within that nation, thus representing a reconceptualization of national identity.

Since its inception, Australia's foreign policy has been driven by a desire to align with Western lines and power centers in order to preserve a strong nationalist sentiment toward Britain. The origins of Australia's suppressed nationalism can be traced back to the dilemma faced by Australian nationalism during its founding period: wanting independence from Western power centres to ensure national territorial integrity while also responding to the mother country's call to send troops to fight anywhere. With its geographical location far from the mother country, Australia had to seek assistance from a country with British origins, which was an ally of Britain in two world wars and was a persistent presence in the region, namely the United States. Australia saw itself as vulnerable to invasion from all corners of its land, therefore its "forward defense" posture against its Asian neighbours necessitated the presence of the US. Southeast Asia, like Australia's strategic position for the United States as a frontline against the spread of communism from the Soviet Union and China to Southeast Asia, only recently came to Australia's attention due to its critical geostrategic position for Australia's defense and security. Australia's defense and security-oriented connection with Southeast Asia has resulted in comparatively little research on the region's economic, cultural, and social dimensions. In short, Australia primarily supports Western capitalism's dominance of the international political and economic system, attempting to adapt the international system to meet new needs rather than confronting the international capitalist political and economic system or advocating for radical change. Australia considers radical challenges to the international capitalist political and economic system to be detrimental to its own interests. Two fundamental factors that play a decisive role and dominate Australia's foreign policy are the capitalist nature of the Australian political-economic system, which leads to Australia's primary goal of maintaining friendly relations with the Western capitalist world (This is a great similarity in the foreign policies of the Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition, but a great difference from the typically nationalist foreign policies of Southeast Asian countries).

Australia entered a period of deep integration with Asia, with a commitment to linking its development to that of the Asia-Pacific region. When Keatings became office, he declared: "Therefore, more than ever, Australia is ready, both locally and globally, to become part of Asia" (Huynh Tam Sang, 2019). The "National Policy on Languages" (Lo Bianco, 1987) was a significant step forward, encouraging immigrant groups to study English as a "language of economic and strategic relevance" while still maintaining and strengthening their mother tongue. If we talk about the most notable example of multiculturalism under Prime Minister Hawke, we must include the "National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia," which he personally introduced in 1989. The reinterpretation of multiculturalism under Prime Minister Bob Hawke demonstrates that the continued pursuit of multiculturalism is a necessary result of the waves of immigration that have prompted the Australian government to re-evaluate its policies and find solutions to national identity issues. Thus, up to this point, through strong support for multiculturalism, Australia has

made efforts to demonstrate that the ethnic communities existing in this country are an important part, from which, in terms of policy and development strategy, Australia has answered the question "who am I," and in terms of "social and political picture," Australia has determined its multicultural identity.

In that context, the Australian Labor government expressed concern about the conflicts in Cambodia, not only by refusing to recognize the People's Republic of Kampuchea, but also by opposing the withdrawal of aid packages to Vietnam, then supporting the withdrawal of diplomatic relations with the Khmer Rouge, aid to Vietnam, and condemning any bilateral or multilateral alliance involving Pol Pot forces. Australia's cooperation with Asia was also highlighted by the founding and continuation of APEC, as well as involvement in the ARF. Following the formation of APEC, Prime Minister Paul Keating introduced the "Bogor Goals," which called on countries to remove tariff barriers and enhance investment and were approved by members (Andrew Elek, 1991). Prime Minister Keating advocated creating a "Asian identity" for Australia. While economic integration policies with Asia are highly regarded for their practicality, the idea of adjusting Australia's identity is met with mixed opinions and is fundamentally judged to be ineffective due to differences in regional perceptions of Australia and vice versa, due to Australia's British origins and lack of struggle for national independence, due to its Western lifestyle and cultural traditions that are different from the region.

By Howard's time, Australia had abandoned its efforts to seek Asian identity. According to the Australian Government's (1997) White Paper, "continuing to develop important bilateral relationships that have been established, carefully nurturing new relationships that contain important Australian interests, and expanding other relationships that can bring opportunities for Australia will be the core of Government's diplomatic activities". Australia's identity, Western values, and interests in Asia were gradually harmonized through a "reshaping" process in the development stream. Importing foreign cultures created a unique feature for the country and people of Australia, neither Occident nor Orient, but an Australia that integrates both (Bui Khanh The, 1999). According to Chengxin Pan (2018), Australia's values-based identity aligns with the "international rules-based order," which serves as the foundation for its values and approach to the world. John Howard prioritized Australia's presence in Asia while retaining commercial ties with G20 countries (Vu Tuyet Loan, 1998). The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper reiterated that Australia does not intend to impose its ideals. Australia wishes to strengthen cooperation with the region's leading democracies. Australia wishes to retain the status quo, even though it is growing more challenging (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). The measures surrounding the South China Sea conflict also demonstrate Australia's bridging character, as it actively participates in military exercises and acquires weaponry from the United States, and has recently signed security cooperation, maritime, and joint exercises agreements with India and Japan (Huynh Tam Sang, 2019).

3.2. Dilemma in Australia's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in the field of socioculture

According to Ngo Van Le (2016), Australia is characterized as a contemporary nation-state that has been constructed from three principal components: the indigenous population inhabiting the Australian continent prior to European discovery in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Asian-African demographic that immigrated to Australia during the era of capitalist development, and the British community which serves as the foundational core of contemporary Australian nationalism and ethnic identity. The evolution of these three

distinct communities, which vary significantly in terms of demographic composition, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and ethnic heritage, coincides with the broader development of Australian culture across different historical periods. Following the establishment of the nation, the cessation of immigration restrictions coincided with substantial upheavals in East Africa, East Asia, and South Asia, resulting in a significant influx of migrants from India, Egypt, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and various Eastern European nations into Australia. While these Asian-African communities have not yet assumed a dominant role in shaping the core cultural and political dimensions of Australian life, their presence has undeniably introduced novel cultural attributes into the multifaceted and vibrant Australian cultural mosaic, serving as a catalyst for robust cultural interactions in Australia that are grounded in principles of equality and mutual respect. In 2007 just more than 41 per cent of immigrants who arrived in Australia for permanent settlement were born in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia (ABS 2007). These changing demographic trends indicate a marked Asian presence in Australian cities and towns. Like many other migrant groups, Asian Australian communities have brought a range of cultural and economic accoutrements such as businesses, cuisine, religion and community organisations that have produced a visible geographic and architectural change to Australian urban settings. With their rank and abilities, they made significant socioeconomic contributions to all six colonies, but they were still primarily colored workers who worked for white employers to make ends meet. In addition, significant minority of Australians have showed an interest in learning an Asian language or culture. Those who are born overseas, live in urban areas, earn a relatively high income and work in professional occupations are also more likely to have lived, travelled or worked in Asia compared with those born in Australia, those living in rural areas, on lower incomes and working in non-professional occupations. A considerable number of Australia's accomplishments in fostering economic relationships with Southeast Asia since the 1960s would have been unachievable without the networks established with regional scholars and practitioners through educational initiatives (Lowy Institute, 2022). The Colombo Plan cohort of scholars who pursued their studies in Australian universities from the late 1950s until the 1980s has predominantly entered retirement. This phenomenon is already observable in the evolving composition of cabinet ministries within the region: both the cabinets of Singapore and Indonesia now contain merely one minister each who has received education in Australia, representing a significant reduction in comparison to a decade prior. The role of Australian alumni was markedly less pronounced in President Joko Widodo's inaugural cabinet. Similarly, in the first cabinet of Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2004), five individuals educated in Australia occupied cabinet positions. However, in Lee's current cabinet, only one Australian alumnus, Transport Minister S. Iswaran, retains such a position (Tim Lindsey & Dave McRae, 2018). Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, who pursued his studies at Monash University under the Australia Awards in the 1990s, is ostensibly the most senior alumnus of an Australian institution presently serving in government in Southeast Asia. This decline can be attributed, to a significant extent, to evolving economic relativities. In 1980, Australia's economy constituted approximately 85 percent of the aggregate economies of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Even when excluding ASEAN's more recent member states such as Vietnam, these combined economies now approximate double the size of Australia's. The burgeoning and affluent middle class within the region is no longer dependent on Australia for educational opportunities, as domestic access to higher education has significantly increased.

The cumulative ramifications of these transformations indicate that Australia can no longer presume the assumption that it will be the educational institution for the forthcoming generation of Southeast Asian leaders. Over the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, Australia experienced a diminished share of international students originating from Southeast Asia. Data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reveals that in 2010, Australia welcomed 57,142 international students from Southeast Asia, which constituted 26 percent of all international students from the region. While total enrolments from Southeast Asia increased by 33 percent to reach 75,925 in 2019, Australia had diminished in relative significance as a destination for students from Southeast Asia, accounting for merely 22 percent of all students from the region. The importance of Australia as a destination has waned relative to students from Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam (UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

Australia has augmented its market presence in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and particularly in the Philippines. Between the years 2010 and 2019, enrolments in Vocational Education and Training (VET) experienced a twofold increase, rising from 17,000 to 35,000. In contrast, enrolments in higher education (university) stagnated at approximately 21,000 (Australian Department of Education). This pattern, however, is not uniformly observed across the region; specifically, higher education enrolments from more developed nations—such as Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia—exhibited a steady decline throughout the decade. Conversely, enrolments from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia have all shown an upward trajectory, with Vietnam emerging as the predominant source of higher education enrolments from Southeast Asia. The increase in Indonesian higher education enrolments was minimal over the ten-year span.

The stagnation of university enrolments from Southeast Asia aligns with the conclusions drawn from the annual survey of Southeast Asian policy elites conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies–Yusof Ishak Institute. In the inaugural survey of 2019, Australia was identified as the preferred destination for tertiary education by approximately 25 percent of respondents; however, this figure diminished to a mere ten percent by 2022 (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies–Yusof Ishak Institute). This decline was prevalent across nearly every Southeast Asian nation, including Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The Lowy Institute Indonesia Poll 2021, a nationally representative survey encompassing approximately 3,000 Indonesians, similarly indicated that only four percent of respondents favored Australia as a study destination abroad, trailing behind Japan (23 percent), the United States (17 percent), South Korea (seven percent), as well as Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom (ranging from four to five percent) (Ben Bland et al., 2021). It is plausible that perceptions may improve in the wake of Australia's reopening of international borders in 2022 following the Covid-19 restrictions (Tim Dodd, 2022). Determining the precise reasons for the relative decline of Australian universities as a destination for Southeast Asian students proves challenging. Similar to all international students, numerous factors influencing decisions will revolve around affordability (including work rights) and perceptions of student safety. However, anecdotal evidence from experts in the higher education sector suggests several determinants that may specifically influence the choices of students from Southeast Asia. Australian universities, when evaluated on an international scale, are characterized by their considerable size and exhibit a mixed performance regarding the provision of a rewarding experience for international students. In contrast, certain institutions in the United States or the United

Kingdom deliver a more personalized learning experience, which may elucidate why comparative surveys indicate that international students report higher levels of satisfaction with their experiences in these countries than in Australia. Furthermore, Australia may not be regarded as a technologically advanced or highly innovative economy when juxtaposed with its competitors.

Some Australian academics with lengthy involvement in supervising students in Australia under the Australia Awards argue that the program is not successfully building influence with a cohort of potential future leaders from Southeast Asia. They note that the program is increasingly focused on master's degrees, rather than doctoral studies, though graduates of the former are less likely to develop an enduring connection to Australian institutions. Some also argue that the target fields of study are too restrictive, preventing talent-spotting of top achievers. Finally, there is a perception that initiatives such as the "Australia for ASEAN scholarships" only reshuffle and rebadge existing programs, causing confusion and generating little overall effect.

In Australia today, only 11 tertiary institutions offer Indonesian language, and only five offer Vietnamese, despite the fact that Vietnamese is now the fourth most widely spoken language after English in Australian homes. Other Southeast Asian languages such as Cambodian, Javanese and Filipino have 'entirely disappeared' from Australian tertiary degrees altogether. How are Australian graduates to build better ties with our ASEAN neighbours if they hold no understanding of its languages or cultures?

3.3. Dilemma in Australia's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in the field of economy and politics

Australia occupies a unique geopolitical position as a nation that encompasses an entire continent and serves as a bridge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans; thus, it is recognized as the largest island globally. The geographical separation of Australia from Asia is maintained by the Arafura and Timor Seas, while the Coral Sea is situated off the Queensland coast, and the Tasman Sea lies in proximity to New Zealand. Leszek Buszynski posits that Australia possesses the capacity to navigate potential entanglements within East Asia, which could otherwise entrench it further into the escalating conflict between the United States and China. Should the ability to mitigate the repercussions on Australia's strategic interests become significantly constrained, the security environment of Australia will inevitably be influenced by the ongoing discord in the South China Sea. The South China Sea constitutes a critical component of Australia's overarching interests, as the majority of its principal partners engage in trade via this maritime route. This underscores Australia's vested interest in maritime security matters specifically, as well as regional security issues more broadly. Positioned at the southernmost extremity of the "Indo-Pacific" strategic crossroads, Australia's geostrategic dynamics exert considerable influence on the regional geostrategy. Although the contemporary global order is characterized by multipolarity, the predominant geopolitical phenomenon shaping the "Indo-Pacific" strategic landscape is the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States. The rapid ascent of China over recent decades has fundamentally transformed its role within the "Indo-Pacific" context. Both the United States and China are, and will continue to be, principal powers that exhibit interdependence and exert substantial influence over other regional actors, particularly the strategic allies of these two nations. The realization of Australia's national interests is contingent upon its ability to foster a conducive environment through the establishment of comprehensive

cooperative relations with regional countries, facilitated by both multilateral and bilateral frameworks. In addition to its abundant natural resources, Australia's geographical positioning assumes a pivotal role amidst the backdrop of US-China tensions. Notwithstanding the geopolitical rivalry that exists between Australia and China, the bilateral economic relationship remains multifaceted and interdependent, characterized by both collaborative efforts and competitive dynamics. Should Australia successfully maintain equilibrium between the two superpowers, the United States and China, it stands to gain significantly. Nonetheless, the endeavor to sustain a strategic alliance with the United States while simultaneously managing increasingly strained relations with China presents a formidable challenge.

The Southeast Asian region, which is Australia's immediate neighbor, exhibits considerable diversity across various domains, including economy, politics, society, religion, ethnicity, culture, resources, and raw materials, particularly spices; thus, it has consistently been a focal point for Western capitalist nations. Consequently, the emergence of a novel socialist element, particularly Maoism, within this region has heightened Australia's apprehension regarding potential security instability more than ever before. This context elucidates the rationale behind the formulation of Australia's Forward Defense Policy, which serves as a strategic mechanism to fortify the presence of the United States in Southeast Asia, thereby ensuring a form of security 'protection' for Australia. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has proactively employed commercial instruments alongside the augmentation of its military capabilities, the enhancement of naval forces, and the expansion of maritime activities, thereby increasingly intervening in the internal affairs of neighboring states and intensifying its competitive influence vis-à-vis the United States in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific region. When the bilateral relationship aligns with China's strategic interests and adheres to its intentions, China is inclined to engage in constructive diplomatic actions, a practice often referred to as "carrot and stick" diplomacy. Notably, the comprehensive promotion and consolidation of amicable diplomatic relations with neighboring countries has been prioritized within the overarching framework of China's foreign policy. Nevertheless, China grapples with numerous internal contradictions and conflicts, including the complexities associated with the implementation of its anti-corruption campaign dubbed "fighting tigers and flies," the implications of national development disparities, the urban-rural divide, the distinctions between coastal and inland regions, particularly between the Eastern and Southwestern territories, as well as issues related to industrial and agricultural sectors, separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang, employment challenges, environmental degradation, an aging populace, social stratification, economic inequalities, cultural integration, immigration, and the marginalization of certain societal groups. These aforementioned advantages and challenges have compelled China to recalibrate its foreign policy approach in order to expedite the reforms and opening-up processes, achieve national rejuvenation, and realize the "Chinese dream." The "One Belt-One Road" initiative offers China the prospect of fortifying relations with a diverse array of nations, including those characterized by lower developmental levels, thereby facilitating the expansion and deepening of diplomatic engagements with neighboring countries and enhancing multifaceted relations with Southeast Asian nations, which in turn will augment the network of trusted allies. This strategic maneuvering will enable China to mitigate some of the competitive pressures exerted by the United States and its allies within the region, while simultaneously broadening China's trajectory towards global leadership. In summary, the primary impetus behind China's concerted efforts to cultivate new-style major country

relations stems from its aspiration to attain a position of power characterized by shared interests with the United States, coupled with China's recognition of the necessity to engage with global challenges in concert with the US rather than in isolation, thereby positioning itself on an equal footing within the global strategic milieu. With the objective of bolstering its military capabilities through an ongoing modernization program, China aims to further extend its influence across Asia and Southeast Asia, while concurrently exerting pressure on sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, with the ultimate goal of constraining the United States' influence in this region. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States launched a war on terrorism in the Middle East. However, the decline in US grand policy interest in Southeast Asia in particular, but not completely ignoring this region because of its important strategic position with tens of thousands of tons of goods passing through every day, being a potential economic gold mine, and a macro base to coordinate with fleets in Northeast Asia and the Pacific when incidents occur that threaten the interests and the world leadership role of the United States in general, has created China has influenced the United States' grand strategy. This pushes the US grand plan to adjust to the new situation.

Australia has agreed to increase the presence of US troops in the country and upgrade joint Australian-US military bases, including the global satellite spy base Pine Gap, the North West Cape base used by the US during the Iraq war, and the military base in Darwin, the Northern Territory's most populous city. The largest military exercise between Australia and the United States, Talisman Sabre, began in 2005 and is held every two years with mixed land, air, and sea scenarios between the two countries' combined air, land, and sea forces, which is not only technically significant but also geographically significant because the exercise takes place in the Northern Territory. The two countries have also agreed to execute a road plan for gradually reducing and eliminating tariff barriers in order to build a common free trade area. This is also an opportunity for Australia to strengthen its economic integration with the United States, increase its prosperity, and promote global and regional trade liberalization while reducing the difficulties in negotiating and signing, even if Australia must accept delays in accessing the US agricultural market and a weakening of Australia's pharmaceutical sector. Although maintaining that it will not be economically dependent on China, declaring: "The United States is Australia's big brother" (Billy Hughes); "The United States is Australia's shield" (Harold Holt); and "The United States is an ally for many years to come" (Julia Gillard). However, the reality of Australia's heavy reliance on Chinese raw materials and minerals, fierce protests and unresolved controversies warning Australia not to become a strategic colony of the US in the Asia-Pacific, and concerns that valuable US military bases in Australia that share intelligence could become targets for terrorist attacks, have made balancing Australia's relations with the US and China an unprecedented challenge.

4. Conclusion

The link between Southeast Asia and Australia has lasted more than 50 years. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States' role in the Asia-Pacific area has diminished, allowing China to grow its influence in the region. Faced with the prospect of losing power in the region, the United States has modified its grand strategy to restore control and limit China's influence at sea. The strengthening of relations with Southeast Asia to establish a series of sub-multilateral mechanisms and enhance cooperation to ensure freedom of navigation in the region surrounded by the Asia-Pacific strategic belt to

contain China demonstrates Australia's determination to have China follow the rules of the game established by the US in the region. To curb China's influence, Australia must secure a US military presence in the region. However, in the face of a rapidly changing international and regional scenario, Australia, despite its long-standing historical relationship and vital position with the United States, cannot have a clearer solution than a hedging policy to protect the nation-state's interests.

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