Australian Diplomacy amid US-China Strategic Competition

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1. Underlying thoughts in Australian Strategy

To Australian strategists, the destiny of Australia seems to be dictated by the tyranny of geography. Huge geographical distance from the Northern Hemisphere provides security as well as insecurity to Australia. Traditionally, Australia has felt safer due to isolation, since they believed that foreign invasion was very unlikely in the sense that Australia is surrounded by the sea, which serves as a moat. They call such a geographical character as the 'Air-Sea Gap.' At the same time, Australia has always felt isolated due to its geopolitical gap in the Southern Hemisphere and knows that it can’t provide sufficient national security on its own. What’s more, in the past, the range of strategic bombers and ICBMs was somewhat limited, therefore they were not a serious security threat to Australia. Yet, some potential enemies, including North Korea, are equipped with long range ICBMs, which has changed Australia’s strategic calculation.

That is why Australia believes that it is essential to its national security to have reliable allies on whom it can always trust with its security. Australia also is bearing the cost of the alliance, knowing fully well that there are no free rides in an alliance.


2) Malcom Davis, 'Australia as a Rising Middle Power' p8 RSIS Working Paper No. 328
And Australia has not been lazy in looking for alternative allies to replace old allies if it saw any danger of abandonment from its allies. Australia is well aware of the physiology of these alliances, so it has walked cautiously on a tight rope of choice between abandonment and entrapment of the alliance and has even changed alliance partners when necessary.

For some time, Australia has begun to doubt whether it will be able to fully entrust its security to the United States as before, as the national power of the United States is declining. Thus, it was no secret that Australiapondered whether it would be wise to strengthen strategic cooperation with newly emerging China. After years of review, Australia appears to have made a strategic decision. Since the United States is in decline, it has realized that if the United States cannot provide all the security guarantees by itself, it is advantageous for Australia to help the United States maintain international order together. It is also well aware that there is a risk that Australia may become involved in a US-China conflict if it helps its ally, the US, as strategic competition between the US and China intensifies.

However, Australian came to the conclusion that conflict is less likely to occur when allies stand with the United States together, rather than leaving the United States alone to handle the competition, and they believe this would serve its national interest. Thus, even in the case of QUAD Security Dialogue, with which they had stopped participating in 2011, we have seen an Australian return in 2017 and they have since agreed to upgrade the meeting to that of a summit level in 2021.

In addition, Australia has been putting into practice since 2017 its plan to strengthen its own security cooperation with middle-power countries, which are in a similar security situation. In a diplomatic white paper published at the end of 2017, the Australian government singled out Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and India as four countries to strengthen strategic cooperation with. As progress was slow in seeking ways to strengthen strategic cooperation with Korea, Australia joined hands with Vietnam to strengthen strategic cooperation, which has the same strategic dilemma of 'Relying on America for Security and on China for Economy'. Australia and Vietnam began to raise their guard against China's aggressive foreign policy in 2012, after Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power. As a result, counter-balancing and hedging policies began to be adopted to reduce the risk from China. Australia and Vietnam have not only begun to strengthen relations with Western countries in various ways, but also have upgraded their relations step by step, Australia and Vietnam took their bilateral relationship to the next level in 2015 as an 'upgraded comprehensive partnership'. At the 2018 summit meeting, they agreed to upgrade the relationship to a 'strategic partnership', in Canberra.

And even when US President Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), these two countries worked together to create the CPTPP as an alternative to the TPP and contributed to maintaining its framework. And both countries are conducting naval exercises together in the South China Sea under the belief that the South China Sea should be regarded as a high sea so that many regional countries can navigate it freely, with no regard to China's claim of its own territorial waters.

In September 2021, the leaders of the US, UK and Australia held a video summit, and at the end of the meeting, the three countries announced the launch of AUKUS, a trilateral military alliance. This announcement was so shocking in its method and so unanticipated in its contents that it sent shockwaves not only to China but also many to Western countries, including France. The launch of AUKUS insinuated that it will bring about changes in the world order and alliance network in the future.

2. Australia–China Tug of War

The conflict between Australia and China will intensify with the launch of AUKUS, but the conflict between the two countries had already become irreversible when the Australian government enacted the Foreign Interference Act at the end of 2017. Later, in May 2018, the Australian government made public the world's first decision to ban the use of Chinese Huawei's 5G telecommunications equipment in its own network, which seriously soured the relationship.
between the two countries, Relations between the two countries further strained as the Australian government subsequently withdrew business approvals for more than 10 infrastructure-related projects and other investments pursued by Chinese companies in Australia on the basis of national security reasons, What fueled the conflict between the two countries was the Australian government’s proposal to the international community to form an independent committee to investigate the source of COVID-19. As the Australian government officially made a statement discrediting the credibility of China’s measures to contain COVID, China’s feelings towards Australia would become decidedly worse.

Australia’s anti-China move, despite China’s economic retaliation, seemed to be too stubborn in the eyes of Koreans, but if we analyze the reasons, we can see that it was a decision made after careful consideration, China, which was opposed to Australia’s actions, began to impose economic retaliatory measures against Australia as expected. Since 2019, China’s restrictions on imports of Australian coal, beef, barley and wine have hurt these industries. At first, everyone expected that Australia would have an economic setback, but instead, the rise in iron ore prices actually increased Australia’s total exports to China in 2021. In addition, when China suffered power shortages after long restrictions on coal imports from Australia, China realized that it had shot itself in its own foot.

It seems that Australia, which has gained self-confidence after going through a tug of war with China for two years, decided to participate in the formation of AUKUS. With that, Australia wanted to become a top priority ally that must be safeguarded even if the United States’ military forces are on the wane. Since this AUKUS alliance has many new implications in terms of international politics, it is necessary to reconsider those implications. First, AUKUS draws attention in that it takes the form of a trilateral alliance, which was not often seen in the American conventional alliance system. In the ‘Hub & Spokes System’, which can be seen as the US alliance system of the Pax Americana era after World War II, the trilateral alliance didn’t exist, but now it has suddenly appeared. The fact that the trilateral alliance is starting to emerge suggests that the international situation has become unstable and the shadow of war is looming on the horizon. Such trilateral alliances were prevalent during the inter-war period in the first half of 20th century. Second, all three countries participating in AUKUS are Anglo-Saxon and maritime countries. In addition, the values shared by the three countries are also the same, so it can be said that the identity of the three countries is almost the same. Some experts portrayed it as an ‘Anglosphere Coalition’ and former President Bush mentioned that this kind coalition is stronger than an alliance. Now, it seems that the era will come when it is a priority to hold hands only with countries that are truly trustworthy and have a similar identity. It also needs to be noted that the launch of AUKUS was carried out very secretly to the extent that the French foreign minister used the expression, “The three countries stabbed daggers in the behind of France.” In the past, when the international situation was fluctuating, such secret diplomacy was rampant during the so-called inter-war period, but it is anticipated that this kind of secret diplomacy may be witnessed more often in the future after the case of AUKUS.

Finally, an era of harsh realism may be approaching, in which norms and fidelity may not matter that much in international relations. France had to give up its defense contract for Australian submarines, which was worth about 74 trillion won. France, which believed in signing a contract with Australia, was in a state of significant disappointment. The U.S. has also advocated nuclear non-proliferation as an inviolable principle for several decades, but gave up it lightly for its own national interests. Australia also made a cool-headed decision to turn a cold shoulder to France in order to strengthen its national defense capabilities. Looking back at Australia’s moves over the past three years, it can be said that Australia is pioneering its own path with confidence while continuously canvassing the changes in the international situation and thinking deeply about the strategic situation.


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3. Lessons learned from Australian case

As the old diplomatic proverb says, 'No one picks up a chestnut in the fire for someone else's interest. Now is the time for us to seriously think about our future so that we won't become chestnuts left alone in the fire. In all transactions and bargaining, there is a process of pushing and pulling between buyers and sellers. Similarly, in diplomacy and negotiations, various types of push-and-pull are engaged between two negotiation parties, coaxing and putting pressure on each other. Right now, such a back-and-forth diplomacy is unfolding between Australia and China, and it is drawing world-wide attention. When the Labor government led by Prime Minister Albanese came to power through general elections in May 2022, the Chinese government sent a conciliatory gesture to the Australian side. China might expect to loosen up relations between the two countries that had been strained since 2018. China's new ambassador to Australia explained in a lecture given at the University of Sydney that China's trade restrictions on Australia were not actions of the Chinese government, but the result of consumers' refusal to buy. He also proposed that the two countries cooperate in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2022. Moreover, it declared that the list of 14 grievances issued by the Chinese Embassy in Australia in 2020 was not an obstacle to improving bilateral relations. This is a significant softening of China's position, which has insisted that the Australian government must change its behavior in order to improve the relationship, since it was the Australian government that has deteriorated the relationship between the two countries.

High-level contacts between the two countries have been suspended for the past three years. When Australian ministers tried to visit China, China refused to let them come. However, at the G20 meeting held in Indonesia in July 2022, China agreed to have a meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries. There appears to be several reasons for China's change in attitude. First, there is no sign that Australia will change its attitude despite China's economic retaliation, Second, restrictions on imports of iron ore and coal from Australia have badly hurt the Chinese economy itself. Third, China may have judged that Australia's new Labor government, unlike the previous Liberal Party government, could be pro-China to some extent. Thus, China might have thought that it would be advantageous to plot towards a public opinion division in Australia by blaming the Liberal Party government for the aggravation of relations. Fourth, allowing Australia to get too close to the US runs counter to China's strategic interests.

At the foreign ministers' meeting with Australia, China's Wang Yi said, 'I am willing to review the bilateral relationship based on the principle of mutual respect,' but did not forget to convey four demands. The requirements are: 'First, treat China as a partner, not a competitor. Second, seek for agreement, sideling disputing factors. Third, manipulation by third countries must be rejected. Fourth, it is necessary to build public support for bilateral relations based on practicality.' With regard to China's demands, the new Australian Prime Minister Albanese made it clear that he would reject them if they became a precondition for improving bilateral relations. Even after the change of government, Australia still maintains the position that the deterioration in bilateral relations is not because Australia has changed, but because China has changed. And by dismissing China's view of shifting responsibility to the previous Australian government, it blocked the Chinese plan to divide public opinion in Australia. As the Australian government maintains its bipartisan stance on foreign affairs and security issues, the Chinese government is showing a bit of a puzzlement. China's prestige would be damaged if China were to first extend its hand of appeasement and thereafter retaliate against Australia, because the Labor Party government does not show a change in attitude. So, in this push-and-pull diplomacy, it seems that Australia has the upper-hand so far. Through this case, it can be seen that in push-and-pull diplomacy, it is important to maintain one's convictions and policy based on one's own identity and principles and show the tenacity to withstand retaliation.
Hawaii: The Frontline and Collaboration Hub of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

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1. Introduction

In early August, I visited security-related institutions in Hawaii (INDOPACOM, APCSS, Pacific Forum, Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs at the University of Hawaii, East-West Center). For us, Hawaii is known as an island of romance and relaxation. However, we often overlook how crucial the island is to the U.S. in the context of U.S.-China competition. The people living in Hawaii consider themselves to be on the frontline. They have already experienced various wars (Pacific War, Korean War, Vietnam War) in this region, and these experiences are heavily reflected in various containment policies against China, from military preparedness to all other areas. I would like to discuss the historical significance of Hawaii, the Indo-Pacific Command as the frontline command post in the U.S.-China competition, and the optimal location for U.S.-South Korea-Japan cooperation.

2. The Repeating History of Pacific War in the context of U.S.-China Competition

The U.S. has already had combat experience in the Pacific against Japan. This experience in the Pacific has been incorporated into the U.S.’s strategy to counter China. For example, after Japan initiated the Pacific War with the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, most of the war was fought in the middle of the Pacific, with naval battles and various landing and defensive operations to recapture islands. These experiences are reflected in current U.S. operational concepts such as Air-Sea Battle, Joint All-Domain Operations, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, and Multi-Domain Operations. This is a very important lesson in the context of U.S.-China competition, and the U.S. will continue to develop strategies and plans based on this experience.
The experience of the Pacific War is important because China is following the same path that Japan took 80 years ago. Last May, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the Solomon Islands. China has been actively conducting "dollar diplomacy," promising massive funding to the Solomon Islands if it breaks diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Perhaps because of this, Manasseh Sogavare, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, severed ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China in April 2019. At the time, the Australian ABC broadcast network reported that "the Solomon Islands severed ties with Taiwan due to the financial support of 500 million dollars (about 620 billion won) provided by China."

It was puzzling why China was investing in the Solomon Islands, a small island nation in the Pacific. However, various U.S. media outlets reported that the U.S. and Australia were surprised and alarmed by Wang Yi’s visit. After coming to Hawaii and reviewing the history of the battles in the Pacific between Japan and the U.S. during the Pacific War, I was able to understand how important this visit was. China also knows the lessons of the Pacific War. Those lessons are as follows.

Guadalcanal is the largest island in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, where the capital, Honiara, is located. From August 7, 1942, to February 7, 1943, the most important battle between U.S. and Japanese forces took place on this island, on land, at sea, and in the air, changing the course of the Pacific War. At the time, the Japanese forces, trying to make up for their defeat in the Battle of Midway, occupied the islands in the South Pacific, including Guadalcanal, to block the joint operations of the U.S., Australian, and New Zealand forces. In particular, the Japanese forces planned to build an airfield on Guadalcanal to bomb the U.S. forces stationed in Australia. The U.S. forces landed marines on Guadalcanal to retake the airfield to thwart the Japanese operation. The Japanese forces also launched a counterattack by deploying large numbers of ground, sea, and air forces. After a fierce offensive and defensive battle with the Japanese forces, the U.S. forces completely occupied the island. Afterward, the U.S. forces used Guadalcanal as a base to occupy Guam, Saipan, and Okinawa. Guadalcanal was a strategic point in the Pacific War. At the time, the U.S. won the Battle of Guadalcanal, blocking Japan's advance into the South Pacific, and was able to win the Pacific War using the Solomon Islands as a stepping stone.

The Solomon Islands, where the Battle of Guadalcanal took place 80 years ago, is still a strategically important point in the South Pacific. In particular, the U.S. and China are fighting for dominance over the Solomon Islands, as if they are fighting a ‘second Pacific War.’ The Solomon Islands is a strategic point located 2000 km from Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory, located in the north of Australia, and 3000 km south of Guam, the U.S.'s Pacific military base. The U.S. is building a large air force refueling facility and a new naval base near Darwin as a backup for the Guam base.

China has secured a strategic position that could create a hole in the AUKUS (Australia, UK, U.S.) alliance according to a security agreement with the Solomon Islands. There are even predictions that China will be able to militarily pressure Hawaii, where the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific Command is located. A notable point in China's South Pacific expansion strategy is that it has borrowed the same strategy as Japan in the past. Beginning in the 1920s with the Caroline Islands and continuing into 1942 following the start of hostilities with the allies, Japan aggressively expanded into the islands of the South Pacific. China has been studying the Pacific War since the 1980s and has been focusing on analyzing the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway, and the Battle of Guadalcanal.

In this context of U.S.-China competition, the war between Japan and the U.S. 80 years ago
is silently taking place again, this time between China and the U.S.

3. Why is Hawaii the Frontline of the Indo-Pacific Strategy?

I suggest three reasons why Hawaii is the frontline of the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.

First, the Indo-Pacific Command is located in Hawaii. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, based in Hawaii, is the largest Unified Combatant Command, commanding approximately 360,000 U.S. military personnel, including U.S. Forces Korea. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has a mission to quickly deploy reinforcement forces to the Korean Peninsula in the event of a contingency under the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, so it is very important to South Korea’s security.

The area that the Indo-Pacific Command is responsible for covers more than 50% of the world. The other five regional commands are connected centered on the Indo-Pacific Command. Unlike other combatant commands, the Indo-Pacific Command has all component commands (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Space Force), all of which have substantial forces. It is the strongest combatant command in the U.S. in terms of operational area and composition of components.

Second, it is a command that has a region where authoritarian regimes, including China, are located within its operational area. Hawaii is one of the 50 states that is closest to China and Russia, which the U.S. has defined as major threats. It is the closest of the 50 states to China and along with Alaska, Russia, and if a war breaks out, it is likely to occur in the operational area of the Indo-Pacific Command.

Therefore, the Indo-Pacific Command is concerned about how to conduct operations in a situation where air and sea control is not secured under China’s A2AD, how to return to pre-conflict conditions in any contingency in Taiwan, and how to effectively carry out freedom of navigation operations related to the nine-dash line claimed by China in the South China Sea.

Third, it plays a significant role in diplomacy as the frontline of the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific Command has five component commands (Pacific Fleet, Pacific Army, Pacific Marine Corps, Pacific Air Force, and Pacific Space Force) under its command. Each commander is a four-star general, and there is a diplomatic aide under them. These people, who are diplomats at the level of a director in the U.S. Department of State, advise on how to transform the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific strategy into military operations and how military operations in the Indo-Pacific region can contribute to the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

4. Optimal Location for U.S.-South Korea-Japan Cooperation

The most important factor in a full-scale war against North Korea is the help of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and the UN Command’s force-sending states. The common point of these two forces is Japan. Support from the U.S.-South Korea alliance is based on the U.S.-Japan alliance. Also, Japan is not one of the 16 UN Command sending states, but it plays a very important role in managing seven rear bases of the UN Command. For South Korea’s national security, in addition to strengthening the alliance with the U.S., security cooperation with Japan, which supports the alliance from behind, is also important.

So why is Hawaii suitable for U.S.-South Korea-Japan security cooperation?

First, Hawaii is a place for diplomacy. This year alone, there have been several high-level U.S.-South Korea-Japan meetings such
as "U.S.-South Korea-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, U.S.-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Chiefs of Defense meeting, U.S.-South Korea-Japan National Security Advisors' Meeting etc. Geographically, Hawaii is a good place to meet with Pacific countries. And who would refuse if someone suggests having a meeting in Hawaii? They are making good use of this advantage in education and network programs at APCSS. The infrastructure for meetings, such as hotels, meeting halls are also well-equipped, minimizing additional efforts for the host to plan.

Second, it’s a place for military diplomacy. One of the characteristics of Hawaii is that it’s an island. In particular, Hawaii is surrounded by the sea, and the nearest continent is over a thousand kilometers away. Therefore, there is less maritime traffic and fewer aircraft passing through, making it an ideal place for military training. This makes it a suitable place for various branches of the military to gather for training and military diplomacy.

Third, it is geographically in the middle of Asia and America. Geography is important. For high-ranking officials, leaving their country for a long time is a very burdensome task. Especially, it reduces the burden of attending meetings if it is a place where you can return quickly in case of an emergency. Hawaii is in the middle of the Pacific, a central point for both North America and Asia, with good accessibility for everyone, and all countries in the Pacific can access it within 9 hours.

The U.S. wants South Korea to contribute more as an ally. The commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific says to visitors from South Korea, "Let's train together," but there is a complaint on the ground that South Korea is still hesitant to cooperate with the U.S., compared to other countries. However, if various cooperatives, especially U.S.-South Korea-Japan, are discussed here in Hawaii, it can send a stronger message to North Korea and play an important role in strengthening the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

5. Conclusion

Hawaii is not a romantic and relaxing island not only to the U.S., but also to South Korea. We need to understand the region to respond to a wide range of threats, from North Korea (direct threat) to non-traditional threats.