

The Decline and Rise of Hegemonic Narratives:

From Globalisation and the 'Asia-Pacific' to Geopolitics and the 'Indo-Pacific'

Richard Higgott





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Contents

- 4** Abstract
- 5** Introduction:
The Relationship Between Geopolitics and Economic Globalisation
- 6** From Globalisation to Geopolitics:
Some Discursive Implications
- 11** From the Political Economy of the Asia Pacific to the
Geopolitics of the Indo Pacific
- 18** Conclusion
- 20** Endnotes
- 26** The Author

Abstract

Ideas and words have consequences. The 'Asia Pacific' as an economic understanding of region is giving way, some would say has given way, to the 'Indo-Pacific' as a geopolitical understanding of region. This paper explores the ideational and discursive consequences of this juxtaposition. It focuses on the shift from the theoretical and practical implications of the waning ideational hegemony of neo-liberal economics to the growing hegemony of geopolitical security concerns. It argues that just as a neo-liberal economic approach to the Asia Pacific over-hyped the success and benefits of globalisation as an absolute wealth aggregator and underplayed its negative externalities of mal-distribution and growing inequality, the privileging of the Indo-Pacific over-hypes the concept of security and underplays the effects of 'threat inflation' and the self-fulfilling possibilities of the privileging of forward leaning geo-political analysis. By way of a short case study, the paper shows how Australia's strategic culture is now driven more by the US *security coda* of the Indo-Pacific rather than the *economic coda* of the 'Asia-Pacific'.

Introduction: The Relationship Between Geopolitics and Economic Globalisation¹

Geopolitics—overshadowed both empirically and intellectually after the end of the Cold War—is back. It is the most contemporaneously powerful ideational metaphor in the lexicon of international politics. This assertion reflects both policy 'reality' and the prevailing theories that underpin it. Empirically, we live in an increasingly conflict-ridden world but one in which most observers and states were unprepared for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza; only the latest examples of unanticipated conflict escalation at a time when a return to interstate conflict and the number of conflicts is proliferating.² Explanations for these trends are not as easy as their empirical description. The relationship between analysis and practice is not clear cut. Nothing, symbolically at least, better illustrates my argument than the changing public visibility of the economic globalisation-driven Davos Conference on the one hand and the growing visibility of the geopolitics-driven Munich Security Conference on the other.

We all too easily forget that ideas and socio-political theory cast massive policy shadows. Theory is not 'just academic': it is also purposive. As Keynes reminds us:

*The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else.*³

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to remind ourselves about the relationship between both policy practice in the global sphere on the one hand *and* the ideas that drive that practice and thinking on the other. The relationship is more intimate, more complex, and less understood than we often appreciate.

The first section of this paper looks at the changing relationship between globalisation and geopolitics as explanatory categories of action and world order. It focuses on the shift from the theoretical and practical implications of the declining ideational hegemony of neo-liberal economics to the rising hegemony of geopolitics. The second section attempts to substantiate this argument by way of an empirical case study in a regional context. The argument is that the 'Asia-Pacific', is code for an

economic understanding of region, has given way to the 'Indo-Pacific', code for a geopolitical understanding of region. To illustrate this, the paper provides a snapshot of the influence of the US understanding of the Indo-Pacific and its impact on Australia's changing strategic culture.

The paper concludes that if the post-Cold War globalisation era saw the intellectual-cum-scholarly analytical agenda dominated by the free market theories of the neo-liberal economist,⁴ then the growth of geopolitics, as both theory and practice underpinning heightened contest—especially between the US and China—dominates both the current international analytical and policy agenda. In a regional context, the ideational and discursive consequences of the instantiation of the Indo-Pacific neologism in the geopolitical imagination poses *problems of exaggeration* similar to those previously found in neo-liberal theories of globalisation. Specifically, the paper argues, geopolitics generates the prospects of threat inflation and risk-enhancing instability in both regional and international security orders.

From Globalisation to Geopolitics: Some Discursive Implications

Globalisation

The constituent elements of economic globalisation are sufficiently well understood not to detain us in this paper. We are, we might say, in the late autumn of neo-liberal economic thinking and in a new springtime for realist geopolitical analysis, after the hegemony of neo-liberal generated hyper globalisation that accompanied the end of the Cold War. We are seeing a juxtaposition in the changing fortunes of neo-liberal economics from the zenith of modern-day globalisation and the global financial crisis of 2007-8; and now

for the security analyst writ large in the age of geopolitics and the practical political and policy consequences of the shift in ideational hegemony of these ideas in these two periods.

In brief, and as we now with hindsight understand, the neo-liberal (essentially Hayekian) economic vision—as distinct from classical liberal and welfarist economic thinking—boosted globalisation in the short term but damaged it over the longer term. It did so by over-hyping globalisation's virtues and downplaying its disadvantages. As one of its early high priests noted, it maximised and reified the benefits of unbridled, free market principles as the greatest and most efficient wealth aggregator that the world had ever seen.⁵ The case was, and largely remains, compelling. At its height in the 1990s, globalisation lifted nearly a billion people out of poverty; especially those in China.⁶

At the same time however, where it did not ignore it entirely, neo-liberal economics downplayed the massive negative distributional consequences, and accompanying political costs, of economic globalisation; especially in the industrialised West. Effectively it ignored, and by extension undermined, what John Ruggie called the 'embedded liberal compromise'⁷—in effect the practicing of Smithian economics internationally but Keynesian economics domestically—that had underwritten the socio-political and economic stability of the post-Second World War order in the major western countries. For reference, the paradoxical nature of globalisation is documented in the writings of three prominent and respected economists: Nobel Prize winner Joe Stiglitz, Dani Rodrik and Branco Milanovic.

As they explained, there is a paradox built into globalisation. While it produces economic growth, it does so with some counter-

productive negatives. Uncritical reflection on the negative externalities of globalisation—especially the generation of inequality and the insouciance of its global cosmopolitan elite beneficiaries towards the declining material fortunes and economic anxieties of the industrial working classes in the developed world—in part paved the way for the rise of *anti-globalism*, replete with opposition to open liberal trade and multilateral institutions; this alongside negative, often xenophobic and anti-immigrant populist, nationalist and nativist politics and the attendant political instability.⁸

Geopolitics

We now live in an age that prioritises the concerns associated with geopolitics rather than those of economic globalisation. Talk of conflict in the security domain grows stronger every day, while in the economic domain the US, Europe and China increasingly turn in on themselves as neo-liberal explanations of globalisation are checked. There is of course a linkage/continuity between the age of globalisation and that of geopolitics. As Farrell and Newman point out, US-centred global networks have been progressively used to weaponize economic interdependence to strategic advantage.⁹ In the US, but not exclusively so, we are seeing a new, 21st century version, of neo-mercantilism¹⁰—or what *The Economist* calls 'homeland economics'.¹¹ This is driven by growing domestic industrial policy.¹²

In today's usage, industrial policy has gone beyond its traditional instruments of trade protection and subsidy, to include other increasingly significant governmental regulatory practices aimed at securitising a state's international activities. These practices are clothed in the euphemistic language of strategic competition, some code words of which are, *inter alia*: 'resilience', 'de-coupling', 'de-risking', 'on-shoring', and 'friend-shoring'. This is a phenomenon not only to be found in the USA, but also increasingly in Europe where we are seeing stirrings of US-style industrial policy as it develops its own specific approaches to enhancing its economic security.¹³ On both sides of the Atlantic this is seen as a legitimate response to the state-based and state-driven capitalism baked into China's, or at least the Chinese Communist Party's, DNA.

None of this is the language of globalisation. Rather it is the language of economic statecraft, that itself sits comfortably within the wider language of geopolitics.¹⁴ This can be seen most precisely in the way that trade has shifted from a tool of connectivity to a weapon in the geopolitical competition between the USA and China. Rather than rejecting Trump's strategy towards China, the Biden administration—with the introduction

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of the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022/3, among other things—has refined it and incorporated it into its ‘New Washington Consensus’—most forcefully articulated by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.¹⁵ This can also be seen as part of the wider US strategy for the G7 to counter China.¹⁶

At the same time, the BRICS and the loosely configured global South, in part led by China, strive to develop an alternative to a US-led liberal order.¹⁷ We should not, however, assume that interventionist strategies axiomatically roll back globalisation. Rather, a more subtle process is in train. While in combination, these developments do weaken globalization, they do not end it. Principles of neo-liberalism live on implicitly if now no longer so explicitly. More significant is the diminishing importance that a return to geopolitics attaches, both symbolically and practically, to the erstwhile principles and practices of economic connectivity and multilateral institutional cooperation.

The discourse of geopolitics differs from the language and practices of economic globalisation. In the words of Hal Brands—the Kissinger Professor at SAIS/JHU and a prominent 21st century exponent—classical geopolitics is a ‘discipline’ reflecting a ‘distinctive’ intellectual approach to international relations that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—and one whose insights and perversions have profoundly shaped the modern age.¹⁸ In the language of Brands’ 20th century forebears—notably Halford Mackinder, Nicholas Spykman, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski—geopolitics is an essentially statist approach to international relations that privileges geography as seen through the lenses of (and the search for) state power.

While the contemporary discourse of geopolitics is more metaphorical than geographical,¹⁹ for Brands, and others of a neo-realist persuasion, the most common understanding of geopolitics is about great power competition and the ‘balance of power’.²⁰ The balance of power may be seen as the strategist’s equivalent of the economist’s ‘equilibrium’. Put the other way around, growing great power rivalry has seen a surge in geopolitics after a relatively brief post-Cold war unipolar era. Brands argues that there are two distinct intellectual strands in the origins of geopolitics: essentially a liberal one (in the limited US sense of the word) and an authoritarian one. But he offers no suggestion as to what their differences might be

when it comes to strategy and practice in the modern age. Indeed, he seems to have a somewhat monolithic view of contemporary geopolitics. Its essence boils down to great power competition.

All other elements of global conflict should be seen as secondary yet related to great power geopolitical competition.²¹ Brands says this notwithstanding the considerable differences between the current age and the Cold War. Notably, the US and China are economically interdependent in a way the US and the Soviet Union never were. Similarly, notwithstanding Biden's democracy versus authoritarian divide, neither of the two great powers are leaders of coherent ideological blocs of secondary powers. Without elaboration here, the world may be bifurcated but it is neither bipolar nor disciplined. It is, as Simon Reich and I have argued, 'fuzzy'.²²

In the context of growing strategic rivalry, geopolitics has become a metaphor for international political security relations with a focus on geographical, bilateral, and transactional great power security competition and preparation for conflict. It has little room for multilateral collective action problem solving and the autonomous action of actors other than partnership with, or support for, one or other of the great powers. In one variant this process has recently been described by two scholars as 'militarised neo-liberalism' that enhances economic, industrial and security partnerships between allies. As section two of the paper will show, the development of the AUKUS agreement between the US, UK and Australia may be seen as a quintessential example of this process in action.²³

I therefore pose a cautionary note for the relationship between the primacy of current geopolitical practice in international relations and the theoretical ideas-base, or scholarly discourse if you will, that underpins it. If these kinds of thinking and practice are integrated the prospects of them having a self-fulfilling impact on the militarisation of geopolitical strategy cannot be ruled out. This cautionary note is perhaps best understood when posed as a question and set in an empirical context:

'Is it possible that modern western geopolitical analysis, in its search for threats and enemies, will not simply analyse, but in fact exacerbate, politico-strategic competition and conflict between the US and China?'

My proposition here is that both neoliberal economics and its geopolitical equivalent—hard-edged realist geopolitical analysis—can be fuelled by the zealotry of their advocates acting as potential incubators, leading to extreme prescriptive policy positions. Indeed, the analysis of geopolitics by large elements of the security studies community—notwithstanding an accompanying and always vague discourse of deterrence—the illusion that wars can be won without fighting—tends to privilege Thomas Hobbes’s ‘disposition to war.’

This is not to suggest much prevailing western geopolitical analysis is wrong. There is much evidence that China’s policy practice, especially under Xi Jinping, exhibits very little of the good and much of, in CSIS’s Scott Kennedy’s words, ‘the bad, the ugly and the mean’.²⁴ At the very least, China is an authoritarian country with a poor human rights record that has regional and global aspirations for an instrumentalist strongly China-focused revision of world order.²⁵ China needs to be watched closely. The issue is how it is watched by the scholar and practitioner and, more importantly, the applied policy prescriptions that flow from, or more precisely are often extrapolated from.

We should remind ourselves of the parallel with neo-liberal economic globalisation. While globalisation was seen in much vaunted fashion to be a major growth accelerator, it was also, in less vaunted fashion, a major cause of distributive inequality. In similar fashion, while much security analysis, with a focus on geopolitics, can indeed heighten awareness of risk, it can simultaneously exacerbate risk and insecurity. It boosts the prospect of what one observer calls ‘threat inflation’.²⁶ There is a fine line between deterrence and provocation.

Threat inflation can be seen, especially nowadays, in Western security analyses of whatever China does. Often regardless of context, China’s behaviour is invariably assumed to be a precursor to future aggression. In the parlance of the dominant contemporary Western strategic discourse, China is what the US military and its mission partners in APAN call the ‘pacing threat’.²⁷ As I suggest in the next section, Australia, along with the US, has developed an excessively unhealthy focus on China as a threat. Indeed, almost anything China does is seen in zero sum terms. These comments are neither as conspiratorial nor as anti-geopolitical and security focused as it might at first seem. With both the US and China being more activist, and the nature of global order changing rapidly, the need for good geopolitical analysis is crucial for governments.

A reading of the post-Cold War global economic order shows that the evidence is in: we simultaneously understand the benefits of liberal globalisation and the negative impact of hyper neo-liberal economics on globalisation. The evidence from our newfound love affair with geopolitics in both the analytical and policy-focused security community is not yet in. It behoves us to learn that just as insufficient consideration was given to the negative externalities of economic globalisation in its heyday, we should not make the same mistake with the turn to geopolitics. Serious consideration must be given to the potential negative externalities of geopolitical analysis in the contemporary era. Of course, such an assertion needs some kind of empirical substantiation. The second section of the paper attempts to do exactly that. It does so by looking at the changing nature of the evolving discourse of the Indo-Pacific and the implications of this change for security in the region.

From the Political Economy of the Asia Pacific to the Geopolitics of the Indo Pacific

The analytical trends identified in the previous section need to be empirically contextualised. Most importantly, the assertion that the influence of modern-day mainstream security analysis is fulfilling a role not dissimilar to that of neo-liberal economics in the last decades of the 20th Century needs to be substantiated. Provocative to be sure, I am suggesting that much modern-day mainstream security thinking is to geopolitics what neo-liberal economics was to globalisation. If Hayekian neo-liberalism was economics *without* liberalism—much more than simply free and unfettered markets—then much geopolitically-driven security analysis is international relations without diplomacy. If the language of neo-liberal economics drove the idea of the 'Asia-Pacific', then the language of geo-politics is driving the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific'.

As Amitav Acharya reminds us, the modern understanding of the Asia-Pacific is a concept coined by economists, and Indo-Pacific by strategists.²⁸ Indeed, the very language of the 'Indo-Pacific' and talk of strengthening military alliance structures in the region reflects the privileging of the security agenda. It is the very antithesis of the neo-liberal privileging of the economic agenda embodied in the discourse of 'open regionalism' and APEC prior to the global financial crisis of 2008. By way of example, this section of the paper illustrates how this new language—especially its anti-Chinese tone—operates and indeed emanates from both the practice and analysis of a range of actors in both the official and unofficial security policy communities of the USA and Australia. There is a huge literature on this that probably needs to be at least alluded to, if not referenced explicitly.

By way of parenthesis, I am not suggesting here that the US and Australia are the only states of the region interested in an Indo-Pacific understanding of region. Notably, Indonesia developed its own understanding of the Indo-Pacific, now instantiated in its *2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. But this reflects a different conception than that of the US and Australia, and indeed the wider QUAD. It is more inclusive and open, rather than simply strategic. It is also absent the anti-Chinese underpinnings.²⁹

The United States

Economics, more than security, drove the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership as the centrepiece of President Obama's 'pivot to Asia'. Donald Trump, as one of his very first acts—indeed, on the first full day of his Administration—withdrawed the USA from TPP. The US Department of State formalised its use of the idea of the Indo Pacific in 2019 with the concept of a *Free and Open Indo Pacific* in conjunction with, and as a way of boosting its relationship with, its QUAD partners: India, Australia, and Japan.³⁰ President Biden, showing more continuity than change from the Trump era, refocused US attention on the region writ large. But his priorities were/are driven first by geopolitics and security, and then by economics. He has not proposed re-joining (CP)TPP. His primary aim has been to build a grand alliance against what he sees as the systematically competitive growth of Chinese power.

While important in their own right, economics and technology—accelerated by both the Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS and Science Act—have been effectively, and not for the first time, 'securitised' by the US foreign policy community.³¹ Under Biden, the dominant voice in the US security community towards the Indo-

Pacific is, at best, driven by a desire to contain, if indeed not rollback, China's progress. Writing in the *Washington Quarterly*, Bruce Jentlesen demonstrates how, pushed by household names in the academic and think tank security studies community, a concern with China came to be at the heart of US Grand Strategy. Through a process of extensive and precise citation, he documents how concerns about Chinese aspirations for regional, and even global, domination pepper both the scholarly and applied think tank literature.³² To say so is in no way to downplay the aggressive and forward-leaning nature of Chinese policy in recent years. Rather, as some scholars and analysts suggest, the view that Chinese behaviour is axiomatically an 'existential threat' to the US might just be over played³³

In this alternative view, China is not looking for war. Its concerns are more the prospects of the 'secession' of Taiwan rather than a desire for imperial expansion. But China sees itself as the world's new economic superpower and, perhaps not unreasonably, assumes it deserves to be treated with a little more respect by the other global superpower than is currently the case.³⁴ This is unlikely to happen while Sinophobia is one of the few issues that can create a sense of bipartisanship in the US domestic polity.

But, the discourse of geopolitics, as Brands shows in his reading of the classics, requires that all policy domains be cast in the language of the security threat. As Van Jackson notes, the new China-demonising US Congressional Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party has variously insisted that:

'... China poses not only a threat to allies, democracy, the U.S. military, innovation, U.S. technology, and human rights, but also a threat

*to food supplies, public health, medical supplies, the stability of our healthcare system and the minds of children.'*³⁵

At the policy advisory level, the dominant discourse, especially in the serious foreign policy thinktanks—the CFR, CSIS and the Atlantic Council, and not to mention the highly partisan tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the CATO Institute—is, with a few exceptions, one of geopolitics and rivalry; not one exploring avenues for cooperation or conflict mitigation.³⁶ At the extreme, in 2019, the old Cold War Committee for the Present Danger: Soviet Union underwent a new iteration to be recommissioned as the Committee for the Present Danger: China (CPD:C).³⁷ While not as hysterical as the CPD:C, the geopolitical imagining of the Indo-Pacific metaphor nevertheless has the China threat at its centre. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific, according the 2022 US National Security Strategy, is the 'epicentre of 21st Century geopolitics.'³⁸ Fuelled by anxieties over China's influence, the Indo-Pacific is not a neutral description of region, but one designed to counter a China-dominated regional order.³⁹

But an Asia-Pacific economic agenda—as opposed to an Indo-Pacific security agenda—still exists. At the time when governments across the OECD world are relearning 'homeland economics', we can still see an Asia-Pacific interest in *regional* economic multilateralism. For example, the heir to the TPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—as well as agencies like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank—are important elements of an emerging East Asian economic institutional statecraft.

The growth of support for these institutions has put the US in a position it may well come to regret. It is at present a member of none of these organisations, but its refusal to participate in them has not had the debilitating effect on them that was initially assumed; especially at a time when Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—the November 2023 San Francisco Summit notwithstanding—has clearly run out of steam as a vehicle for US regional economic leadership in the Pacific. The US, in what we might call its 'second geopolitical pivot to Asia'—its Indo-Pacific pivot—is trying to add an economic pillar to its security driven Indo-Pacific strategy via the May 2022 introduction of the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity*.⁴⁰ But this initiative, on even the most optimistic of readings, has had little impact on the regional economic discourse to date.⁴¹

Australia

Perhaps an even more interesting example of the geopolitical urge and security discourse overtaking the neoliberal economic discourse of globalisation is to be found in the changing attitudes and practices of the US's closest Indo-Pacific ally: Australia. This change reflects a fundamental watermark in the evolution of Australian strategic thinking since the end of World War Two. Several stages can be identified. In truncated form only here:

- (i) The first phase commenced with the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951, noting that it contained no NATO-style Article 5. Rather, the relationship saw the flow of support going in the other direction, with Australia providing support, at considerable material and human cost, to the US for its wars in Korea and Vietnam.
- (ii) The second phase, in the wake of President Nixon's 1969 'Guam doctrine' announcement, saw a growing Australian focus on its own defence. The post-Vietnam 1976 Defence White Paper was effectively the first Australian articulation of the practical and financial arguments for self-defence. This bipartisan approach was to become the driving motivation of Australian security doctrine for over three decades until the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

What AUKUS illustrates is that the evolution of Australia's strategic culture is now driven more by the security dynamic of the Indo-Pacific rather than the economic dynamic of the Asia-Pacific, which dominated Australia's regional relations in the post-Vietnam War years.

Obama's pivot to Asia and the advent of the Abbott Government in Australia reflected the beginning of an Australian commitment to the US's increasing confrontational policy on China; this even while believing it could have also have close economic relations with China. This approach was reflected in the behaviour of both the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments.

- (iii) The third phase began with the 2018 arrival of the Morrison Liberal Government and culminating in the Albanese Labor Government's wholesale support for AUKUS; Australia has gone from being one of China's strongest partners—built on an economic assumption of free trade, 'open regionalism', and greater Asia Pacific economic cooperation and inclusiveness—to being the US's strongest regional ally in the growing contest with China.

As one seasoned observer noted:

[E]very Australian government since Gillard's has led Australia into an embrace of US Indo-Pacific re-posturing against China—quietly, slyly, progressively conceding sovereignty and diverting effort and scarce resources from our own hard-won and capable sovereign defence prowess.⁴²

From the end of the Cold War, Australia had been a leader of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation movement, alongside Japan, as it built a strong, multilateral dialogue open to economic cooperation with China.⁴³ This was hardly a defection from the West, as the late Samuel Huntington believed it to be.⁴⁴ But there was little doubt that the Labor governments of the time, led by prime ministers Bob Hawke

and then Paul Keating, were seeking to move Australia from being a European-American-oriented Pacific outpost to being a nation not only *in*, but also *of*, the Asia Pacific.

But Australia's close relationship with China deteriorated rapidly under the Morrison Administration during the period of COVID-19. A security-driven assessment of the geopolitics of the region replaced the long-standing privilege that it had accorded to a cooperative, open, and economic dynamic in the Asia Pacific. This deterioration can be accounted for in the failure of Australia's once reasonably sure-footed 'middle power' foreign policy geared towards overcoming its regional liminality, moving it from the margins to the centre of the Asia Pacific's international relations.⁴⁵ In former Prime Minister Paul Keating's words, the aim was for Australia '... to find its security *in* Asia, not *from* Asia'.⁴⁶

Nowadays, Australia is less intent on being 'a good international citizen' and middle power; reflective of its late 20th Century foreign policy meme.⁴⁷ Rather, Australia now acts as a client state faithfully supportive of the strategy of its major ally, more so than at any time since Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt, at the height of involvement in the Vietnam War, declared Australia was 'all the way with LBJ'.⁴⁸ One recent critic even argued, hyperbolically for sure, that Australia had become a 'frontline state in a new Cold War'.⁴⁹ The modern-day closeness of the relationship is illustrated by activities such as the joined-up discourse of the Annual AUSMIN meetings⁵⁰ and the unprecedented creation of a Combined Intelligence Centre (CIC-A), with officers from the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) resident in the Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) in Canberra.

At the very least, these activities provide a direct presence of the American perspective on the world into the thinking of Australian policy makers.⁵¹ In so doing, this further facilitates the growing hegemony of the geopolitical discourse of the Indo-Pacific, as opposed to the economic discourse of the Asia-Pacific, within the Australian security community. As one former senior Canberra public servant, Mike Scrafton, notes: 'Australian-American national security and foreign policy documents are replete with jargon, phrases and concepts of American origin.'⁵² Scrafton's views are obviously as much normative and judgmental as they are empirically observable, but the logic behind them is not unreasonable. There is an abundance of good literature that identifies the ways and means that major powers, especially the US, wield asymmetrical influence over both the foreign policy thinking and practice of their junior allies.⁵³

Changes in Australian foreign policy thinking over the last decade have also been accompanied by an increasing lack of sure-footedness in its diplomatic practice. Nothing better illustrates this point than the trust-busting, and at times crude diplomacy, of the last Liberal National Coalition government of Scott Morrison. His out-of-the-blue call for an inquiry into China's responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting an implicit desire to do the US' bidding, turned the Australian economic relationship with China on its head virtually overnight. Following a range of punitive economic responses by a diplomatically aggressive China, the relationship is still to fully recover some four years on.

Equally diplomatically disastrous was Morrison's ham-fisted abrogation of the submarine contract with France prior to its substitution with the AUKUS agreement with the US and the UK; subsequently rupturing bilateral relations.⁵⁴

What AUKUS illustrates is that the evolution of Australia's strategic culture is now driven more by the security dynamic of the Indo-Pacific rather than the economic dynamic of the Asia-Pacific, which dominated Australia's regional relations in the post-Vietnam War years. The security dynamic believes in national boundaries and grand strategy, not the integration and interdependence of regions central to the economic dynamic of the Asia-Pacific.

I am not suggesting a crude US imposition of these views on Australia; the latter has always been a willing partner in the relationship. This current focus is not an overnight phenomenon in Australian thinking, nor is it a strategy that has been developed in a clandestine fashion. Australia was an early promoter of the Indo-Pacific narrative. In its 2013 *Defence White Paper*, the zone of strategic interest was defined by the idea of growing geopolitical anxieties enshrined in an Indo-Pacific and strategic lexicon.⁵⁵ Picking up on the later US interest, Australia's use of this neologism was fully realised in the 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* which, along with the introduction of AUKUS, brought Australian strategic thinking on the Indo-Pacific fully into alignment with US policy in the region. This reflected an explicit assumption of the growing importance of the alliance.⁵⁶ It represents a gamble by Australia on what Van Jackson sees as its 'strategically inconsistent' ally.⁵⁷ The gamble assumes that the return of a Trump Administration would have little or no effect on the AUKUS pact. It is of course possible, indeed highly probable, that it would dramatically, and negatively, alter US policy towards its allies.

The ideas-base underpinning this shift to a regional geopolitical strategy reflects an infusion of thinking from a range of separate, but not discrete, sources from the public and

Australia's desire
to be of the
region with its
Asian partners,
especially
ASEAN, as
opposed to
simply *in* the
region is sorely
challenged
by AUKUS.

private parts of the Australian and US defence policy making communities, in addition to the scholarly and policy (especially think tank) worlds. This Indo-Pacific ideas-base is underwritten by a sense of threat accentuating the pace and nature of Australia's strategic and security thinking. The threat, of course, is China.

While Australians no longer use the racist concept of the 'yellow peril'—originally coined by Halford Mackinder, long rooted in Australian history and driving the White Australia policy for many years—its sentiments, as detailed by James Pearcey, remain present beneath the surface of some of the more forward leaning anti-China commentary.⁵⁸ Some have even gone so far as to identify Australian thinking on China as representing a new 'Domino Theory.'⁵⁹ In the contemporary era, however, think tankers and analysts from established bodies (DoD, ONA, ASIA, ASIO) have bought lock, stock and barrel into the argument that 'China is an existential threat' to peace in the Indo-Pacific and Australia in particular; albeit in a more measured applied policy discourse. Strong intellectual support can also be found in the National Security College at the ANU, the Australian Security Policy Institute (ASPI) and newspapers such as *The Australian*.⁶⁰

That think tanks and newspapers run an anti-China line is not uncommon nor even unacceptable. But a think tank like ASPI, for example, does not present solely as an autonomous actor. Its role is, to the outside observer at least, a quasi-governmental one. Most researchers are of, or from, government or the defence sector. ASPI relies heavily on funding from the Australian Department of Defence, as well as the US and Australian defence industries. It occupies a position of prominence in the Australian strategic policy community. As such, its view of China has assisted the creation of a one-sided *discursive disequilibrium* in the Australian security studies community. It is almost certainly ASPI that the significant Sydney historian James Curran is thinking of when he talks about an environment in which 'the more vocal think tanks stoke the contemporary debate with fear and loathing ... trapped within the emotional straitjacket of the Cold War'.⁶¹ They do so within what some see as the 'Canberra security bubble' where Australian foreign policy is dominated by what Geoff Raby, a former Ambassador to China, openly calls the 'China Threat Industry'.⁶²

Of course, Australia is a diverse democracy: discussion is robust and alternative political cultures and analytical voices exist. While there is a strong, and at times slavishly unthinking, pro-Washington strategic culture in the public and private defence establishment, there is also a more nuanced diplomatically, economically and culturally focused community too. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the trade policy community—alongside the more diplomatic international relations focussed think tanks such as the Australian Institute of International Affairs and its journal the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, and the newish journal *Australian Foreign Affairs*—exhibit a different, variegated political culture to that of their more conservative counterparts. The Lowy Institute has carved out a strong niche for itself with a sophisticated view of the security-regional diplomacy nexus.

While none of these actors is anti-American, they usually reflect a less ideological, more nuanced, and more analytically focused approach. For example, echoing the several themes of this paper Dr Heather Smith, a former distinguished senior public servant and the current National President of the AIIA, alluded in a major address to the:

*hijacking by the security establishment of the economic establishment. The Economist, in labelling it the era of 'homeland economics', describes it as the biggest economic policy shift in a generation. ... I tend to concur with The Economist's, typically pithy assessment, that the world may well come to regret this shift.*⁶³

Perhaps the major contemporary vehicle for an alternative voice in the analysis of Australian foreign policy is the increasingly widely read

online public policy journal developed by former senior public servant John Menadue: *Pearls and Irritations*.⁶⁴ Through the journal, prominent Australian political figures, analysts and academics—as in the recent call by former foreign ministers Bob Carr and Gareth Evans for détente between the USA and China—seek to influence government to de-escalate regional tensions.⁶⁵ There is an asymmetry, however, of influence. Their call for US-China détente and a regional balance of power has been largely dismissed by the anti-China lobby as the naïve, or in Carr's case, instrumentalist ramblings of an out-of-touch pro-China lobby.

What I have identified as a discursive disequilibrium has distorted the debate within the Australian analytical community over what the journal *Australian Foreign Affairs* calls 'the most consequential and expensive decisions in recent Australian history': namely the AUKUS partnership as part of a wider military build-up and a desire to enhance the defence industrial integration of the USA, Australia, and the UK. Indeed, AUKUS should be seen as much as an exercise in economic opportunity as it is an exercise in grand strategy; particularly on the part of self-interested actors, including former politicians, joining defence industry corporate boards. Opposition voices are unlikely to make inroads into an analytical and applied policy community with a spending commitment of AUD\$368 billion and the opportunities it provides.

There is a well-documented growth in the relationship between the core elements of what Sian Troath calls Australia's military, industrial (and academic) complex (MIAC). As she notes: 'The patchwork of overlapping and competing economic and strategic interests driving Australia's militarisation is a key component of Australia's approach to its military and

alliance relationships'.⁶⁶ The relationship's influence on Australia's geo-strategic thinking, ideas, and interests (both government and corporate) is consequential in the formulation of both strategic theorising and practical security relations. This shift in thinking reflects the growing US-China competition in the region as a driver of evolving Australian regional strategy.

Australia's desire to be *of* the region with its Asian partners, especially ASEAN, as opposed to simply *in* the region is sorely challenged by AUKUS. Beyond the extant ANZUS alliance, AUKUS has locked Australia into the US desire for continued strategic primacy and the containment of Chinese power in the region. As the Biden Administration's US Asia lead Kurt Campbell noted: '[AUKUS] gets Australia off the fence and locks it in for the next forty years.' AUKUS assumes that Australia has left itself little option but to support the US in any major conflict with China; this at a time when US supremacy and reliability as an ally is under question, especially if Donald Trump were to return to the White House.

Domestic concerns in Australia are growing, and not without substance. Notable here are questions of not only cost and technical considerations, especially the courageous faith placed Britain's role in the submarine manufacturing process. British ability to deliver expertise is at best problematic and in any case secondary to its commercial opportunism and visions of renewed post-Brexit global grandeur. Even the pro-AUKUS expert mood in Australia is less than sanguine on this score.⁶⁷ But perhaps most importantly are questions of a strategic and political nature.

Australia's foremost strategic studies scholar and distinguished former defence policy practitioner, Hugh White, has made the most

detailed and compelling argument to date as to why AUKUS is 'the most disastrous defence-policy mistake in Australia's history'.⁶⁸ White, writing as an outlier within the Australian strategic studies community, argues that the AUKUS plan, with its overly elongated time frame for implementation, questionable political viability and commitment on both sides, may well never be realised.⁶⁹ While Australia assumes no loss of sovereign action in purchasing the submarines, the US would certainly assume Australian commitment in the event of outright conflict with China. But how, White asks, 'can the AUKUS plan survive this yawning gap between American expectations and Australian commitments?'⁷⁰ White is not on his own. Many of his views are echoed by Sam Roggeveen, a former Office of National Assessments and Defence Intelligence Organisation analyst and Director of the International Security Program at the mainstream Lowy Institute. Roggeveen describes AUKUS as 'a project of vaulting ambition that is out of step with Australian tradition as a middle military power, wildly at odds with our international status and, most importantly, a wasteful expenditure of public money that will make Australia less safe'.⁷¹ The Australian debate over AUKUS will only grow as its implications become clearer.

Conclusion

This essay has juxtaposed the ideational and practical fortunes of neoliberal economic globalisation and geopolitics. The juxtaposition is more than simply a rhetorical device. The policy shadows it casts are significant. In this context the message of this short provocation is 'be careful what you wish for'. Ideas and words have consequences, and the growing privileging of the geopolitical security problematic over the global economic problematic has both

regional and global and economic and political consequences. The balance between economic globalisation and geopolitics is clearly a difficult one. But it is not unreasonable to suggest that presently the geopolitical tail is wagging the economic dog, with attendant implications for the functioning of both global and the regional orders. The growing primacy of geopolitics appears to be creating a new mental map of a region, effectively privileging the Indo-Pacific discourse.⁷²

The Indo-Pacific is a region built less on those intersubjectively shared preconditions that are widely understood to drive region formation: proximity, interests, and identity.⁷³ Rather, we are seeing a regional dialogue driven by the imperatives of geostrategic competition. The prescriptive nature of much geopolitical analysis, albeit unintentional, makes the prospects of threat inflation more likely. This, in turn, appears to be intensifying great power rivalries and exacerbating regional security dilemmas. The paper has illustrated this at an empirical level, in its discussion of the changing nature of the US-led regional security dialogue currently taking place and how Australia sees its role in it.

Australian thinking and policy are underpinned by two tenuous assumptions. Firstly, that the US will hold back China's dramatic 21st Century rise in wealth and power, maintaining the US-led regional order. It is not necessary to share Kishore Mahbubani's view of Asia's inevitably China-led regional future to recognise that the US view is, at best, unlikely.⁷⁴ Secondly, the strategy assumes that US foreign policy in the region will remain consistent. It ignores the fact that US foreign policy, and by extension its support for Australia, is at the whim of any president and implicitly assumes (or at least hopes) policy will not once again be in the hands of Donald Trump; with all the attendant consequences and risks imposed by his globally destabilising 'America first' ideology.

The shift in Australian thinking—from its privileging the idea of the Asia-Pacific to its current usage of the Indo-Pacific—represents a sea change in its understanding of region. This in turn captures a shift in Australia's foreign policy practice: from that of a respected middle power looking to be a good regional and international citizen to that of junior partner in a US-led regional security regime. It is band-wagoning of a recklessly high order. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Disclaimer and Acknowledgments: While this report has some of the trappings of scholarship (lots of references and empirical commentary) it is not a scholarly paper. It is far too high on assertion and personal judgement reflecting my frustration with (and disappointment with) the direction of recent international relations scholarship on the one hand and the foreign policy practice of the USA and, my chosen homeland, Australia on the other. I would like to thank several colleagues and friends for their comments on this paper—Amitav Acharya, Erik Jones, Richard Robison, Kanishka Jayasuriya, Anthony Milner, Tim Wright, Tim LeGrand, Simon Reich, Giulio Pugliese, Michael Reiterer and especially Kevin Hewison, Mark Beeson, and Kim Nossal. They carry no responsibility for the views expressed here.
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The Author

Professor Richard Higgott is Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, Brussels School of Governance, VUB and Visiting Fellow, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute.

Any correspondence to richardhiggott0@gmail.com.



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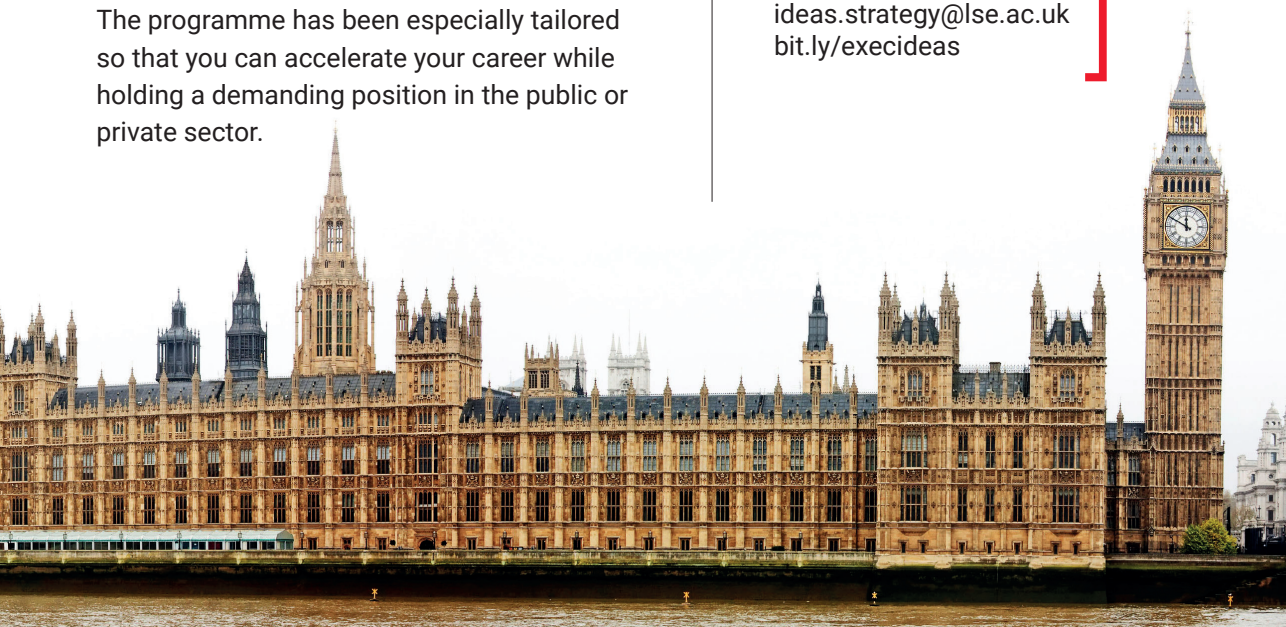
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