

Navigating Great Power Rivalry: Australia Between the United States and China

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Abstract

The growing rivalry between the United States and China represents a major strategic challenge in contemporary International Relations, with significant implications for regional stability in Asia. Scholars such as Hugh White warn that the absence of a cooperative relationship between the two powers may lead to long-term instability, affecting regional actors, including Australia. Caught between its security alliance with the United States and its deep economic interdependence with China, Australia faces a complex strategic dilemma. While the United States remains Australia's primary security partner, China has become its largest trading partner, placing Australia in a vulnerable position amid intensifying great power competition. Using a qualitative literature review, this article examines Australia's potential role in facilitating improved US-China relations while balancing its strategic and economic interests. It argues that Australia must adopt a nuanced and proactive strategy to manage great power rivalry and safeguard its national interests.

Keywords; *Australia; United States; China; Great Power Rivalry; South China Sea Dispute*

1. INTRODUCTION

The threat and risk of growing conflict between China and the United States in the near future continues to be covered in the International Relations discourse. Hugh White, a former deputy secretary for strategy and intelligence in Australia's Department of Defence, argued that if America and China fail to establish a peaceful relationship in the future, it would have a negative impact on the future of Asia and Australia (White, 2011). Therefore, Australia needs to promote a new order in Asia that accommodates China's rise and encourages the United States to accept China's new role in the region (Clarke, 2025; He, 2021; Laurenceson, 2025). Australia needs to encourage cooperation between China and the United States to be a regional leader together. Australia also needs to prepare for the possibility that Asia will remain a contested and dangerous area in the future (White, 2011).

The rivalries between Washington and Beijing have placed Australia in an unstable triangular relationship in which Australia is caught in the middle (Geoffrey, 2011). Both China and the US play important roles in Australia's security and prosperity. Australia is America's longstanding ally; the country needs the alliance with the US for its military security (see for example Chang, 2025; Hains, 2025; Palazzo, 2025). On the other hand, the rise of China has a significant impact on the growing trade relationship between Australia and China, with important implications for the Australian economy. This is the first time Australia's number

one trading partner has not been an ally or partner of an ally. Good relations between the U.S. and China would be beneficial for Australia, as it would avoid a difficult position with them.

This article will discuss Australia's role in fostering a more positive relationship between the United States and China. There are two strategic options available to Australia. The first potential option is to foster an improved relationship between the US and China, and the second is to balance its relations with both the US and China, as both countries are important to Australia. This article will examine the strategies Australia can adopt to achieve the aforementioned objectives. Furthermore, this article will explore how Australia can achieve this. For this reason, the article will be divided into several subheadings. The text discusses several key topics: first, the importance of the US-Australia security alliance; second, an examination of Australia-China economic relations; third, an explanation of a significant issue between China and the US, specifically the South China Sea dispute. Ultimately, it examines the strategic role Australia could play in enhancing relations between China and the United States. Additionally, it emphasises the need for Australia to balance its relationships with both China and the US, as the country relies on connections with both nations.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This article utilises a descriptive qualitative research method combined with a literature review approach. Data were collected by reviewing a variety of relevant secondary sources, including reputable academic journals, books, and articles authored by scholars and policy analysts in the field of international relations. Additionally, official government documents and publications from national and international research institutions were examined. These sources were analysed to identify key patterns, arguments, and dynamics in the strategic rivalry between the United States and China and to explore their implications for Australia's foreign policy and position

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The US-Australia Alliance

In December 1949, the Liberal-Country Party Coalition led by RG Menzies came into office, and Percy Spender was appointed as Minister for External Affairs. The new government proposed forming an alliance with the U.S. Spender's strategic foreign policy aimed to improve relations between the U.S. and Australia (Edwards, 2021; Furso-Roberts, 2022). Australia's interest in forming an alliance with the United States became a significant concern for the US in June 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea. At the same time, the Soviet Union decided to boycott the United Nations Security Council. Thus, America needs a new ally in the Asia Pacific region, particularly one that respects the US-Japan soft treaty. America saw Australia as a perfect candidate. This moment is a notable milestone in the relationship between Australia and the U.S. The ANZUS Security Treaty, signed on 1 September 1951, became effective in April 1952 (Edwards, 2005). This treaty can be seen as a commitment by these three countries to strengthen their security relationship.

When the treaty was first established, the Australian Government explained that the alliance aimed to tie Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. together in working to respond to common threats and take action to counter those threats in accordance with the constitutions of each country. In addition, this alliance is primarily a defence relationship aimed at enhancing Australia's ability to defend itself and preserve its interests. This is achieved by providing access to world-leading defence hardware and technologies, as well as training courses and combined exercises, and vital intelligence capabilities. Following the 11 September terrorist attacks and the declaration of the global terrorist threat, this partnership expanded its mutual aims, which now include the commitment to support anti-terrorism and anti-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2012). For Australia, access to advanced U.S. defence technology is beneficial in improving its own defence. While the alliance is of central importance to Australia's security, for the US, the US-Australia alliance is one of many alliances it maintains, which is not necessarily its most important one.¹ The rise of China has been strengthening the Australia-China trade relations while at the same time, Americans do not see it as positive as Australia and regard it as a threat, which puts Australia in a difficult position.

In July 2012, as part of preparing the draft of the next Australian Defence White Paper, Ken Henry stated that Australia would focus on its relationships with Indonesia, India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam (Jennings, 2012). Discussing Australia's position in the Asia-Pacific century cannot be separated from the United States, as the US is a crucial actor in maintaining the region's stability (Apriliana, 2024; Rees, 2025; Saraswati & Indrawati, 2025; Vuving, 2020). Two of Australia's focus countries, Japan and South Korea, are also formal allies of the United States, while the other three (Indonesia, India and Vietnam) are developing countries which have closer strategic and defence relations with the US. The US-China relations are seen as a key factor impacting global stability. This is the first time for Australia that the largest trading partner is not a close ally. Thus, Australia needs to manage its relations with China while also sustaining its alliance with the US (Jennings, 2012). This illustration has given us an overview that both the U.S. and China are important for Australia's security requirements. Therefore, to have smooth relations with both the US and China is important for Australia.

The Australia, New Zealand, United States security treaty (ANZUS) of 1951 was established to provide for defence in the Pacific region (Jennings, 2012). The formation of ANZUS marks the beginning of Australia's alliance and close relationship with the US. Moreover, under Prime Minister John Howard, Australia demonstrated its greatest support to the US through consistent backing of American strategic policies and initiatives at both global and regional levels. Australia became the first country in the Asia-Pacific region to initiate a Free Trade Area (FTA) with the US in 2004. To strengthen this FTA, both states agreed to form an agreement on the joint development of a missile defence shield. Furthermore, Australia strengthened its relations with the US through joint military exercises involving US troops on Australian soil and also participates in the development of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Moreover, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack can be seen as a moment which awakens the alliance that has slept for so long. As a commitment to the alliance, Australia

participated by placing its troops in Afghanistan to fight al-Qaeda and the global war against terrorism. Moreover, Australia also provided diplomatic support to the United States at the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) (Siracusa, 2005). Australia adopts this strategy to expand interoperability, partnering with the US in the military and defence industries.¹ This cooperation has shown the importance of the alliance for Australia.

While the alliance remains relevant to both parties, it needs to be revised to reflect the changes in the geostrategic environment. For Australia, yielding to US demands may not always serve its interests. Australia understands that, as a state located in a geographically remote position and compared to its western security partner, it needs to strengthen its relationship with its Asian neighbours (Paik & Poling, 2025; Tekiteki & Kabutaulaka, 2025). The rise of China has strengthened trade relations between Australia and China. In contrast, Australia's trade relationship with the United States is facing challenges due to a lack of complementary interests (Tow & Hay, 2001a). On the other hand, economic cooperation with China presents a very promising prospect for Australia.

China's Significance for Australia's Economic Prosperity and National Security

Alan Dupont of the Lowy Institute suggests that Australia's success in this century depends on its ability to work effectively with China. This achievement will also depend on the success of avoiding conflict with China (Dupont, 2011). The best thing that Australia can do is create a cooperation focusing on the export of raw materials. A misguided approach to China could have serious economic consequences for Australia (Bassi, 2025; Xue, 2023; Yang, 2023). Australia sees China as an important export market and the source of International students. The number of Chinese students in Australia has increased tenfold, from 15,000 students in 2000 to 150,000 students in 2010. In the market area, Australia's merchandise trade with China is growing rapidly (Dupont, 2011). In 2011 alone, it was recorded that Australian merchandise trade with China increased 22.5 per cent, which amounted \$ 71,561, while Imports from China grew 7.4 per cent, amounting \$42,144.2. Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd argued in favour of Australia's long-term need for China (Dupont, 2011). Australia relies heavily on China for its economic prosperity.

There is the potential for closer economic cooperation between Australia and China in the future. Australia, rich in mineral and agricultural resources, makes it an important energy and material supplier for China in its economic rise. For instance, as China's economy continues to grow, there is a corresponding increase in its demand for Australian imports, including various products, such as Australian beer. Furthermore, China's increasing production of iron and steel has made it reliant on Australia for iron ore. China is now the world's largest producer of iron and steel. Moreover, China's demand for oil and gas is expected to increase as the economy continues to grow. Australia is one of the countries that can help fulfil China's demand (Mai & Adam, 2005). In 2011, Australia's crude petroleum exports to China amounted to \$ 2,902 million (National Geographic Kids, 2012). In addition, China's demand for advanced farming and technology, as well as management, will likely drive investment between these countries in the near future. On the other hand, China has become a main supplier of labour-intensive manufactured goods to Australia (Mai & Adam, 2005). Good relations in the future will be beneficial for Australia and China.

Along with the increasing trade relations between China and Australia, the level of Chinese investment in Australia has also increased. Australia is now the top investment destination for China (apart from Hong Kong), which has further positioned China as one of the most important trading partners for Australia. Australian investment in China remains limited, however (Mai & Adam, 2005). It is undeniable that China is one of Australia's most important economic partners, as it will likely remain the largest trading partner for the near future (Mai & Adam, 2005). It can be said that Australia and China have an interdependent economic relationship. However, when it comes to investing, it can be said Australia needs China more than vice versa, given the amount of Chinese investment in Australia is higher than Australian investment in China, as described above. Thus, maintaining smooth relations with China will help to preserve the current scenario, in which both sides can derive benefits from the relationship.

US–China Strategic Competition in the South China Sea

One of the problems that can be an issue in triangular relations, such as America-Australia-China, is the South China Sea dispute, as this dispute places China and America in opposing positions. Balancing relations between the US and China is required for stability and security in the Asia Pacific, which is necessary for Australia. Thus, tensions between the two sides will have a bad impact on the region. These tensions are longstanding and have resulted from a convergence of several factors, including issues concerning Taiwan and, more recently, the South China Sea dispute.

The South China Sea is enclosed by the west coast of mainland Southeast Asia, Borneo and the Philippine Archipelago. This area is rich in hydrocarbons and fish stocks; more than one-third of the world's cargo travels through this lane (Weasley, 2012). The importance of the South China Sea as one of the main passages is unquestionable. Through these sea lanes, oil and many other commercial resources flow from the Middle East and Southeast Asia to Japan, Korea and China. Safety and freedom of navigation and aircraft over the area are in the US' strategic interest. The dispute over the ownership of the South China Sea has been ongoing for a long time (Schneider, 2018; Triki, 2026; Trisni et al., 2016, 2018). There are two kinds of claims here. The first claim comes from China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, which claim all areas, including islands and reefs in the sea. The other claim is from Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines, which claim some of the Spratly islands (Bateman, 2010).

For China, maintaining control of the South China Sea is crucial for its security, as its productive centre is clustered along its eastern coastline, making it vulnerable to any sea-based attack. The South China Sea is a major shipping route for China's commercial vessels, providing access to the Pacific Ocean. China will not give up its claim over the South China Sea, because to do so could weaken its dignity and claims to other territory, such as Tibet and Taiwan. China's 1992 Territorial Law classified the South China Sea as its exclusive economic zone. According to China, every ship and plane that passes through this area must do so with Beijing's consent; each submarine is required to surface. Furthermore, China reserves the right to deny passage to ships and planes from other countries (Weasley, 2012). As described above, it is clear that the South China Sea is crucial for China, not only because it serves as a vital

shipping lane, but also for the sake of securing its national interests. Therefore, the South China Sea will continue to be important for China.

On the other hand, the South China Sea is also in America's interest. As a strategic pathway, America requires freedom of navigation and aircraft over the SCS. Thus, China's claim bothers America. One event that was considered as the initial trigger for the escalation of the situation in the South China Sea was the incident between a Chinese vessel and a US vessel in the South China Sea in March 2009. The American vessel was harassed by China's navy because China argued that the US vessel was conducting marine scientific research, which, according to China, requires its consent. The U.S. argued that the operations they were conducting were legal because, according to the freedom of navigation, marine scientific research is permitted in other states' exclusive economic zones. This incident is considered to have increased tensions between the US and China. China's sensitivity on the one hand, about US operations in the South China Sea and US sensitivity on the other hand, about the Chinese threat to freedom of navigation in that area and possibly freedom of flight too (Bateman, 2010).

For the United States, the interest in the South China Sea is related to the viability of its sustained presence in the Western Pacific. Even though China promises to respect the freedom of passage of all ships and aircraft en route to another destination, it prohibits military exercises, the collection of intelligence, or the gathering of military useful data within what it declares to be its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The US strongly argues that the South China Sea is international water and therefore every country can conduct military exercises or collect useful data in this area. To lose freedom of navigation in the South China Sea means losing its foothold in the Western Pacific (Weasley, 2012). Therefore, as China and the US will not surrender to each other's claims, tensions between them have risen.

The rising tension relating to the ownership of features and territory in the SCS has raised some difficult questions for Australia's strategic policy. Australia has an interest in stability in the SCS. Much of Australia's trades with North East Asia pass through this region (Uren, 2024). Furthermore, a prominent Australian energy company, BHP Billiton, holds exploration rights in the Spratly Islands, one of the islands that are contested in this dispute. Hence, the Chinese military's build-up in and around the South China Sea is one of the big concerns of defence planners (Storey, 2010). However, the most important thing for Australia is the stable atmosphere of this region because disturbance of the balance in this area will further impact the stability of Australia.

Balancing Relations between the United States and China

US-China disputes over the South China Sea and Taiwan have put Canberra in a difficult situation. Australia needs both the US and China. Under the Bush Administration, however, the US suggested that China was a long-term strategic threat, and Australia, as a US ally, was expected to be on the US side. Further, this situation has led Beijing to warn Australia to stay neutral in this issue (Malik, 2012). Moreover, Australia's former Prime Minister Paul Keating has also warned that this country is too close to America and needs to be more independent in its approach to rising China (Filton, 2012). For example, Australia's decision to station 2,500

US troops in Darwin was perceived by the Chinese as an attempt to contain China, which was criticised by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai. Cu criticises Australia's deepening military relations with the US, claiming a resurgence of a Cold War mentality (Herscovitch, 2012). In addition, Song Xiaojun, a former senior officer of the People's Liberation Army, said to *The Age* that Australia depended on economic to China, one example is Australia's iron ore export to China; however, Mr Song said that Australia never tried to build political relations as well as economic relations with China (Wen, 2012). Australia finds itself in a complex position where the two requests from the US and China are in conflict with each other. On the one hand, the United States' demand for continued support as a commitment in the alliance between them, and on the other hand, China's demand not to interfere in any of the problems faced by China and the U.S.

The Australian suggests that Australia does not need to choose between a strategic alliance and Chinese economic relations, as both countries have different roles, making it beneficial for Australia to maintain relations with both (The Australian, 2012). Furthermore, Australia may help create a harmonious relationship between the two, so that it does not face difficult conditions and is not caught in the middle.

To improve the situation between China and America, Australia should encourage both countries to collaborate and foster cooperation in Asia through diplomacy. America's position would be much more challenging because the U.S. would have to relinquish its power. Australia's influence should be greater than that of China. Australia should persuade the U.S. to relinquish its dominance and support the establishment of collective leadership in Asia, adhering to the principles of the UN Charter. Australia should also encourage the U.S. to recognise China as an equal partner in addressing issues between them, such as Taiwan (White, 2011). Michael Weasley suggests that Australia can play a greater role in mediating tensions in the South China Sea. Given its close relationships with both China and the United States, Australia could act as a mediator to ease tensions between the two countries (Marcer, 2012). Diplomatic campaigns are viewed as an effective way to encourage both countries to lower their egos and collaborate.

In addition, Jane Golley of East Asia Forum suggests that Australia has a role in improving the US-China relationship, as Australia has a more positive view of China's rise compared to the US. Australia can maintain its relationship with China while respecting both this country and the US. Australia can help promote open trade, investment, and dialogue between these two countries across the Pacific (Golley, 2008). Due to its high interest to both countries and the benefits it gains with China's rise, Australia can play a role, as mentioned above, in improving U.S.-China relations.

Furthermore, Australia may have to balance its relations with both China and the US. In doing so, Wen suggests that Australia should accommodate China's strategic ambitions. Great powers need strategic space; if this strategic space cannot be provided, they will take it (Edwards, 2005). In addition, White suggests that Australia has to carefully calculate the costs and risks of accommodating China and the costs and risks of confronting it (White, 2011). Thus, rather than choosing between the US and China, the best thing for Australia is to maintain

a balanced relationship with both parties. Moreover, W.T. Tow and L. Hay suggest that Australia's better approach to balancing its relations with both countries is to discuss its fundamental strategic interests with both Beijing and Washington. Australia may assure both countries that Australia is an independent country, so the possibility of having a different perception of China and America is widely open. Thus, all sides should respect the triangular relations that they have. However, both may play an important role in balancing China and persuading it to join a future regional order in which China has substantial influence. Embracing China is a better approach than confronting it (Tow & Hay, 2001b).

Australia cannot afford to strain its relations with either China or the US, as they play a crucial role in Australian security. The most effective way to maintain relations with both China and the US is through ongoing dialogue and consultation. In order to do this, Australia need to utilise dialogue mechanism that has been created before, such as the Sino-Australian political-military talks and military-military talks in order to remind China that: Australia has an independent foreign policy; Australia has no desire to contain China; and at the present Australia has no desire to engage in missile defence deployment as military cooperation with the US. On the other hand, Australia should be careful with America's view on the Australian-Chinese dialogue. Thus, Australia needs to simultaneously strengthen its policy coordination with the US and demonstrate to the US that Australia respects and still values its ally relations (Tow & Hay, 2001b). While maintaining its relations with China at the same time. If improving relations between China and the US does not work, then Australia should be able to maintain good relations with both sides, so it does not interfere with Australia's welfare.

4. CONCLUSION

The re-emergence of China has brought some effects to China-Australia-America strategic relations. Both America and China are important for Australia, America for its military security and China for its economic security. The US has become Australia's ally since 1953, with the formation of ANZUS, Australia's strategic defence policy. The US supports every security policy applied by the US, a traditional rule in alliance. However, China is also a key important factor for Australia's economy. Australia and China's trade has grown rapidly and is expected to continue in the near future. Growing production in China has led to increased demand for agricultural exports and iron ore. Furthermore, the number of Chinese investors has increased annually, as has the number of Chinese tourists visiting Australia. Moreover, the number of Chinese students in Australia increased tenfold from 1,500 in 2000 to 15,000 in 2010. This is the first time Australia has had a close trading partner outside of an Ally or a partner of an Ally.

However, the rise of China and its military modernisation has increased the suspicion of the United States. Furthermore, China's claim to ownership of the South China Sea has strained relations between the US and China. China's claim over the South China Sea has led the US to get involved in this dispute. The US argue that the South China Sea is international water and thus it does not require China's approval to travel and conduct military exercises there. The US is concerned about freedom of navigation over the South China Sea.

These conflicts put Australia in a difficult situation. On one hand, America, as Australia's ally, expects Australia's support. On the other hand, China has warned Australia to stay out of the conflict. Both China and America are important to Australia, so Australia cannot choose between them. There are two ways that Australia could address this problem. First, Australia could try to improve relations with the US and China by actively supporting strategic dialogue and forums for discussion between the two, in order to foster trust between them. Australia should be able to encourage the US to relinquish its dominance and support the creation of collective leadership in Asia. Moreover, Australia can help to promote open trade, investment and dialogue across the Pacific between these countries. Second, Australia must balance its relations with both countries by conducting constant dialogue and consultation with China and the US, thereby demonstrating its interest in their relations. On the one hand, Australia should convince China that its interest lies in independence and that Australia has no desire to contain China. On the other hand, Australia needs to be careful of America's negative view of Australia's and China's relations. Australia needs to simultaneously strengthen its relations with the US and demonstrate to the US that Australia respects and still values a strong relationship with the US. Moreover, Australia may maintain its relations with both countries by utilising the existing dialogue mechanism to strengthen its ties.

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