Griffith
UNIVERSITY
Queensland, Australia

Australia's strategic culture and climate change

Mark Beeson

REGIONAL OUTLOOK Climate Action

Griffith Asia Institute

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

Australia's strategic culture and climate change

Mark Beeson

About the Griffith Asia Institute

The Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) is an internationally recognised research centre in the Griffith Business School. We reflect Griffith University's longstanding commitment and future aspirations for the study of and engagement with nations of Asia and the Pacific.

At GAI, our vision is to be the informed voice leading Australia's strategic engagement in the Asia Pacific—cultivating the knowledge, capabilities and connections that will inform and enrich Australia's Asia-Pacific future.

We do this by: i) conducting and supporting excellent and relevant research on the politics, security, economies and development of the Asia-Pacific region; ii) facilitating high level dialogues and partnerships for policy impact in the region; iii) leading and informing public debate on Australia's place in the Asia Pacific; and iv) shaping the next generation of Asia-Pacific leaders through positive learning experiences in the region.

GriffithUNIVERSITY
Queensland, Australia
Griffith Asia Institute

The Griffith Asia Institute's 'Regional Outlook' papers publish the institute's cutting edge, policy-relevant research on Australia and its regional environment. They are intended as working papers only. The texts of published papers and the titles of upcoming publications can be found on the Institute's website: www.griffith.edu.au/asia-institute.

This Regional Outlook working paper has been written in conjunction with the Griffith Climate Action Beacon.

'Australia's strategic culture and climate change', Regional Outlook Paper No. 67, 2021.

About the Griffith Climate Action Beacon

The challenges of the 21st century are many and complex, with climate change undoubtedly one of humankind's most pressing issues. Griffith has been a longstanding leader in the climate change space, with a proven track record in bringing about climate action. The next 10 years offers a critical window for Australia, and indeed all countries, to accelerate the transition to a net zero emissions economy and build capacity for a climate resilient future.

Driven by this imperative, the Griffith Climate Action Beacon was established—a focal point bringing together a team of experts and partners that cross disciplinary boundaries to address this critical societal problem.

Griffith's Climate Action Beacon seeks to develop the knowledge, leadership, capacity and responses to enable effective and just climate action throughout society.

www.griffith.edu.au/research/climate-action

GriffithUNIVERSITY
Queensland, Australia
Climate Action Beacon

About the Author

Professor Mark Beeson

Mark Beeson is Professor of International Politics at the University of Western Australia, and the former Research Chair of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA). Before joining UWA, he taught at Murdoch, Griffith, Queensland, York (UK) and Birmingham, where he was also head of department. He has also had visiting positions in the UK, France, Germany, China, Russia, Austria, and Hong Kong. His work is centred on the politics, economics, environment and security of the broadly conceived Indo-Pacific region. His latest books are *Environmental Anarchy? International Security in the 21st Century*, (Bristol University Press, 2021), *Environmental Populism: The Politics of Survival in the Anthropocene*, (Palgrave, 2019), and *Rethinking Global Governance*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019).

Contents

Introduction

If the policymaking elites of any country ought to know something about climate change, it's Australia's. After all, Australia is a country of 'droughts and flooding rains', as Dorothea Mackeller famously put it. Recently, however, 'weather events' that were thought to occur once in one hundred years now seem to happen every two or three.[1] Lives are routinely upended, if not lost, as a direct consequence of a rapidly changing climate that is affecting the driest continent on the planet more adversely than most. Under such circumstances, governments of all political persuasions might struggle to respond effectively to an unprecedented environmental crisis that threatens to definitively end the idea that Australia is 'the lucky country'. But it's also not unreasonable to expect Australia's leaders to at least *try* to address environmental problems, rather than continuing with a strategy of business-as-usual, which has brought the world to the very brink of potentially irredeemable catastrophe.[2]

While many of the obstacles to developing effective and sustainable environmental policies have international origins—especially the difficulty of addressing seemingly insurmountable collective action problems—some are entirely home grown. To be sure, climate change is one issue area that no country can deal with in isolation, but it's noteworthy that there is a striking disconnect between domestic and international policy. Although it may be difficult to separate 'inside' from 'outside' when it comes to policymaking in a supposedly global era, this hasn't stopped political leaders from trying, or from privileging notionally national concerns above the international variety. Given the disjuncture between the historically arbitrary nature of national borders and the transnational nature of the natural environment, however, efforts at isolated national climate mitigation are doomed to fail.[3] Paradoxically, this has not stopped some of Australia's political leaders for trying to use this as an excuse for continuing inaction and even the pursuit of national policies that the relevant scientific community has identified as irresponsible and dangerous.[4]

This all takes some explaining. After all, the first duty of political leaders is to ensure the safety of the nation and its people. Pursuing policies that are considered to do precisely the opposite in the (not very) long-term seems to fly in the face of responsible policymaking that takes account of the sorts of clear and present dangers that security specialists usually fret about. If being burned to death, drowned, or merely seeing one's livelihood and the future of one's off-spring going up in smoke isn't a real and tangible threat to security it's difficult to know what is. This claim looks doubly plausible in a country like Australia that faces no direct, immediate security threat of the sort that generations of military planners have spent their lives planning for.[5] One possible answer to this paradox, I suggest in what follows, is that Australia's 'strategic culture' encourages security analysts and the policymakers they advise to prioritise improbable traditional threats from other states, rather than the very real, immediate and increasingly visible danger posed by unmitigated climate change. The concomitant 'opportunity costs' of this sort of thinking, I argue, are immense, unjustifiable and, if they continue, likely to culminate in economic, political, social and—yes—even traditional security crises as the world descends into a Darwinian struggle for survival.[6] I develop this rather deflating but all-too-plausible thesis by firstly looking at the general relationship between security and the environment, and then by considering the consequences of Australian policymakers' short-sighted and self-absorbed approach to the greatest collective action problem the world has ever faced.

1. Climate change and security

At this moment in human history, it is no longer controversial to suggest that unmitigated climate change and environmental degradation are problems. On the contrary, there is an overwhelming consensus about the causes of climate change and even their possible impact over the next few decades.[7] To be sure, the further out one looks, the more uncertain some of the modelling and predictions become, but most informed observers agree that we are facing a challenge that threatens the very basis of human civilisation, especially the progressive, liberal variety.[8] As potential security problems go, they don't get much more serious. To be fair, this possibility has not entirely escaped the notice of strategic elites around the world either. Since the early 2000s the idea that climate change might pose a threat to world peace has, according to Adger,[9] 'become accepted wisdom in foreign and defense ministries around the world.' And yet while there have been some suitably alarming policy documents and reports produced by leading defence establishments that reflect the emerging conventional wisdom, possible responses have been depressingly familiar.[10]

At one level this is entirely unsurprising: it is not the responsibility of agencies such as the Pentagon, for example, to develop strategies to combat climate change. The primary task of military establishments is to respond to traditional security threats that emanate from their counterparts in other states.[11] Even if some of the drivers of potential inter-state conflict and possible wars of the future are seen to be novel and rapidly changing, the responses are still overwhelmingly predicated on the logic of military threats and competition. What is more surprising, perhaps, is that the governments to which militaries are notionally responsible in democracies, at least, quite literally continue to buy into the logic of war and inter-state conflict, despite the fact that the latter has become gratifyingly rare.[12] True, there is no shortage of conflict, mayhem and coercion in the world, but they are frequently confined within the notional borders of failed states. In yet another paradox, some of the most powerful states that have been least affected by conflict or environmental degradation remain the most enthusiastic exponents of old-fashioned geopolitics and purchasers of advanced military hardware.[13] Finding a possible explanation for this conundrum involves a brief theoretical digression and consideration of the culture from within which strategic policy emerges.

Recognising a threat when you see one

Given the relative novelty of the climate problem when seen in the long-run, perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that getting 'environmental issues' on the policy agenda has proved difficult, alarmingly slow and politically contested.[14] There has been no shortage of 'virtue signalling' on the part of states that enjoy the luxury of taking such issues seriously, but for all the talk of 'joined up government' in the West, there has often been a noteworthy disjuncture between rhetoric and reality. In some important cases, there has even been an active repudiation of the scientific consensus by powerful vested interests and compliant national governments.[15] The administration of former President Donald Trump is the most consequential and baleful example of this possibility. Not only did the Trump administration undermine his own country's efforts to tackle climate change and restructure the domestic economy, but it also made the chances of developing an effective international response that much more difficult.[16]

However, it is not only the well-documented efforts of powerful economic interests and their mutually rewarding links to the domestic political class that accounts for the difficulty of shifting the conventional wisdom and injecting urgency into the climate change challenge. On the contrary, despite scholarly alarm about the possible links between

deteriorating environmental conditions and security threats, some academics were resistant to the idea that the 'traditional' security agenda should be expanded to include environmental issues as this might make the subsequent definition of security too wide to be analytically useful,[17] And yet, it is not unreasonable to suggest that if people don't *feel* secure this is and ought to be one telling indicator of the failure of states to actually provide security for the populations they claim to represent and protect. While there has been a good deal of lip service paid to the idea of 'human security' and its possible importance as a more accurate indicator of people on the receiving end of security policies of one sort or another, actually realising such goals has proved difficult.[18] In yet another paradox, one of the areas in which real 'progress' has been made—in widespread improvements in living standards in China, for example—has also been responsible for a potentially catastrophic declines in water security, soil productivity, air quality, and a host of other vital environmental indicators.[19]

The United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are also, of course, the two most important actors in the world when it comes to dealing with climate change and virtually any other international issue one might care to mention. They are especially consequential countries when it comes to the environment, because they are the two largest emitters of the sorts of greenhouse gases that are responsible for global warming. Without agreement between the US and the PRC to act on environmental issues in a cooperative and constructive way, it is difficult to see how the actions of other countries could really make that much difference to a collective action problem that necessitates hitherto unseen and frankly unimaginable levels of cooperation.[20] While there are some tentative indications that the leaders of the 'G2' actually recognise this,[21] it is not clear they are capable of overcoming their growing international competition which threatens to bring about a very old fashioned and dangerous set of security challenges.

Consequently, there are two particularly important, interconnected reasons why the bilateral relationship between the US and the PRC is especially crucial at this juncture. First, and most problematically, there is an intensifying geopolitical competition between the world's two greatest powers, which makes cooperation inherently problematic.[22] Both states labour under the illusion that they are fulfilling historical missions and the standard bearers of different forms of political and economic governance.[23] The US is currently preoccupied with trying to reclaim its role as leader of the 'rules based international order', while China is busily trying to develop its own alternative version.[24] Significantly, China is both resentful of the historical privileges and impact of American hegemony and keen to cultivate supporters of its own by leveraging its growing geoeconomic power. For many analysts in both the PRC and the US, the chances of outright conflict between the two superpowers has never been higher.[25]

The second reason that relations between the PRC and the US are especially fraught, therefore, is because the vast majority of policymaking elites in both countries subscribe to a view of the world in which conflict is endemic and national security continues to be determined largely by the possession of superior weapons systems.[26] Despite much academic innovation in recent years, what international relations scholars describe as 'realism' continues to dominate the thinking and actions among strategic elites in both the US and the PRC, and the overwhelming majority of the so-called 'international community', for that matter. Indeed, in yet another paradox, the routinely invoked idea of the international community is strikingly at odds with the realist view of an ungoverned, self-help system where states must rely on their own resources to ensure security and the capacity to influence and/or deter others. Ideas about the nature of possible threats and the best ways of countering them reflect the distinctive 'strategic cultures' of different countries.[27] Despite some noteworthy differences, the strategic cultures of different states share some surprisingly durable and influential views about the best ways of achieving security. It is worth spelling out just what a potential obstacle such inherited views and traditions are when it comes to dealing with new problems such as climate change.

Strategic culture and its consequences

Culture of all sorts is a still a relatively neglected aspect of the study of international relations. Given that the PRC and the US are very different countries and at least some of these differences can be attributed to their distinctive historical experiences, it is important to consider what kind of role culture might play in this. Geertz[28] famously defined culture in general as an 'historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about state breakdown or crisis'. The point to emphasise is that cultural traditions and historical legacies can explain the distinctive ideas that some countries have about their national identities and even their role in the international system. The US is the most consequential example of this possibility in recent history, but it is impossible to understand the attitudes of the PRC's current leadership or of many Chinese people more generally, for that matter, without taking account of the so-called 'century of shame' caused by European imperialism.[29] Attitudes toward Hong Kong and Taiwan in particular are the direct result of this traumatic and humbling period. The leadership of the PRC may subscribe to a broadly conceived realist worldview, but it is one that is imbued with distinctively Chinese characteristics and specific national goals.

One way of conceptualising such differences and accounting for the different priorities national military establishments attach to various ideas and policies is through the lens of strategic cultures. The possible significance of differing strategic cultures and the impact this may have on national strategy was dramatically highlighted during the Cold War when George Kennan's famous 'long telegram' warned of the impact of the Soviet Union's deep-seated anxieties about security, which were the engrained product of a unique historical experience.[30] Nor are such differences simply a curiosity of interest to military historians, either. On the contrary, apart from the potential impact of such ideas on traditional security issues, they also have the potential to profoundly influence domestic policy agendas and the attitude states may have to development and the environment. It is important to remember just how much importance both the Soviets and China under Mao Zedong attached to economic development at all costs, not least because of its possible role it might have in underwriting national military security.[31] The consequences for the natural environment in both countries were simply appalling.

The idea that distinctive and different national strategic cultures might be significant was highlighted by Graham Allison's (1971) seminal analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, which drew attention to the potentially pivotal role of individuals and the contingent historical context in which they operated.[32] Colin Gray (1981) developed this notion to analyse the very different strategic cultures that existed in the US and the Soviet Union, and the possible impact of socialisation processes in determining attitudes toward apparently common 'structural variables' such as nuclear weapons.[33] While this may seem somewhat unremarkable in hindsight, it still marks a major departure from most forms of realist thinking, especially the pared-back 'parsimonious' version developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979) and his followers which studiously ignores domestic differences when analysing strategic behaviour and the respective priorities of policymakers.[34]

Analysts who do take strategic culture seriously, do so because it highlights the importance of 'a set of shared beliefs, and assumptions derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which influence the appropriate ends and means chosen for achieving security objectives'.[35] Such definitions highlight the way in which at least some varieties of international relations theorising have evolved to take account of and explain the influence of the social construction of reality—even the strategic reality. The possible importance of distinguishing between putative friend and enemy and the profound impact this might have on the attitudes of policymakers is startlingly clear when consider that Canada and the US have the longest undefended border in the world. It

really makes a difference who the neighbours are and how policymakers expect them to behave as a consequence. Even in rather narrowly conceived military terms, therefore, Bradley Klein (1988) suggests that strategic culture may be thought of as describing:

> ... the state's war-making style, understood in terms of its military institutions and its accumulated strategic traditions of air, land and naval power. But strategic culture is more than mere military style, for it emerges from an infrastructure of technology and an armaments sector. Most importantly, it is based upon the political ideologies of public discourse that help define occasions as worthy of military involvement.[36]

Klein was writing toward the—entirely unpredicted—end of the Cold War and was consequently preoccupied by with the production of (American) hegemonic power and the manner in which great powers were embedded in a web of international relationships, 'both diplomatic and economic'. It is not only the failure of mainstream strategic analysts to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union and the (short-lived) triumph of the US-led international order that makes Klein's analysis look remarkably prescient, however. On the contrary, in the intervening thirty years or so we have witnessed the similarly unforeseen 'rise of China' and the monumental failure of American grand strategy—not least because American strategic thinkers disastrously failed to recognise or take seriously the distinctive cultural and social context of the countries they tried to transform in the Middle East.[37]

The Blob

The presidency of George W. Bush will forever be associated with the calamitous intervention in Iraq, which must be considered one of the greatest strategic failures in American history. One might be forgiven for thinking that this episode would have marked the proverbial turning point in American strategic thinking, not least because of the ruinous cost in blood and treasure that it inflicted on the United States itself.[38] And there is some merit in this argument. The presidency of another Republican leader, Donald Trump, suggests that individuals not only make a difference in determining domestic *and* foreign policy outcomes and objectives, but that they can also materially affect the way even the most powerful states interact with the world. Trump's transactional, America first approach to foreign policy is a notable departure from Bush's and even Barak Obama's.[39] And yet, having said that, the election of Joe Biden has led many commentators in the US to claim that the world will see a return to geopolitical business as usual, as the so-called 'Blob' reasserts its influence on American foreign and strategic policy.[40] Given the influence of the US on Australian foreign policy it is worth saying something about the continuities, disjunctures and even the continuing primacy of what is still the most powerful state in the world and the notional guarantor of Australia's security.

In retrospect the Bush administration's disastrous war in Iraq looks a good deal less aberrant than the chaotic, unpredictable domestically-driven foreign policy that developed under Trump. After all, George Washington's famous admonition about the dangers of 'foreign entanglements' notwithstanding, the history of the United States has been punctuated by frequent and often violent interventions overseas. Indeed, it is frequently claimed that the United States has been at war for more than 90 per cent of its history as an independent nation.[41] For a country that sees itself as the quintessential expression of good governance, liberalism, enlightened values and a role model for the world, this is a somewhat surprising historical record that takes some explaining. A generous interpretation might be that defending freedom and defeating despots is something that only the US has been able to do in the modern era, and that this is part of *America's* national identity,[42] even if it is frequently overlooked by scholars from that country. Whatever one thinks of that claim, it is generally the case that analysts in the US see it as an essentially benign hegemon and a force for good in the world.[43] The fact that

much of the world—including the former Soviet Union and more recently and consequentially the PRC, of course—see America's dominance in very different terms is another reminder of just how historically contingent and different such perspectives can be.

The intensifying economic and strategic competition with China is likely to reinforce American efforts to curb the PRC's influence and reassert the primacy of the US. Whether this will actually be feasible given the high levels of interdependence that exist between the two rivals and the diminished material position of the US relative to China is another question.[44] What we can say with some confidence is that the Blob, or America's foreign policy establishment and the received wisdom that permeates it, has become reascendant under Biden, and this is a good thing according to its many defenders. Brands et al (2020) suggest that:

> ...the foreign policy establishment is not a closed cabal, American statecraft has not been a giant failure, and scrapping professionalism for amateurism would be a disaster...the establishment's practical track record has been impressive, with some well-known fiascos outweighed by many quiet successes. And the current [Trump] administration's foreign policy blunders—including in its response to the current pandemic—demonstrate what happens when the establishment's experience and expertise are rejected. In short, the Blob is not the problem. It is the solution.[45]

However, when the recent record of the US is considered the 'fiascos' are arguably far more striking and consequential than the 'quiet successes'. It is for this reason that some prominent American realists argue that 'today's foreign policy elite is a dysfunctional caste of privileged insiders who are frequently disdainful of alternative perspectives and insulated both professionally and personally from the consequences of the policies they promote'.[46] Some commentators go further and argue that '...with respect to China, the foreign policy establishment's world view, and the discursive practices it employs, make it unlikely that the USA will be able peacefully to accommodate China's rise'.[47]

To be fair, there are signs that the foreign policy establishment recognises the folly of some policies and the necessity of others: the decision to pull out of Afghanistan and the importance attached to making progress on climate change mark a significant recalibration of America's foreign policy priorities.[48] And yet even those who may welcome either or both of these developments would have to concede that such changes were adopted without consulting key allies or considering the difficulties they may cause the leaders of countries such as Australia. In yet another paradox, Australia's historical relationship with the US is causing problems for one of America's staunchest allies and supporters. As we shall see, this is arguably a consequence of the ideational hegemony of Australia's own version of the Blob, which is a product of its own very distinctive strategic culture.

2. Strategic culture with Australian characteristics

Australia is a country like no other. True, much the same claim could be made about any other state, perhaps, but no other country enjoys the exclusive possession of an entire continent. Australia's relative immunity to the recent COVID-19 epidemic has dramatically highlighted the advantages of being an island continent. One might be forgiven for thinking, therefore, that being relatively isolated and a long way from some of the world's strategic flashpoints might have given Australian policymakers a heightened sense of security, even relative invulnerability. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, from its relatively recent origins as a notionally independent country, Australian policymakers have felt anxious, strategically isolated and in need of the support of what former prime minister Robert Menzies famously called 'great and powerful friends'. Indeed, so influential was this sense of insecurity and reliance on the help of more powerful allies, that despite its independent status, Australian policymakers did not take responsibility for their own foreign policy until the exigencies of war forced them to during the Second World War.[49]

A sense of isolation, vulnerability, distance from like-minded friendly powers, and a pervasive ambivalence—and ignorance—about 'Asia' were, therefore, the principal early influences on the development of Australian strategic thinking.[50] While this may have been understandable—even forgivable—given Australia's modern origins as a small colonial outpost a long way from the 'mother country', it is remarkable how enduring some of these ideas and culturally-inspired sentiments and orientations have proved to be. Even when Australia's economy began its long turn toward Asia as a consequence of the remarkable and largely unexpected economic development that occurred to its north, this was not met with universal enthusiasm.[51] It still isn't. On the contrary, the current crisis in relations with the PRC highlights just how contentious relations with some Asian states can be, and how attractive the idea of trade diversification to more familiar economic partners remains. The instinctive distinction between 'friends' and potentially 'enemies' remains a potentially powerful influence on strategic thinking in Australia.[52]

The anxious ally

From its inception, then, Australia has been an 'anxious' nation,[53] continually fretting about its literal and figurative place in the world. The search for more powerful allies has been, and remains, a central concern of governments of all political persuasions. In this context, it is hard to overstate what a profound shock it was for Australian policymakers and the population more generally when the British were unceremoniously ejected from South East Asia by the Japanese during World War II. The ignominious fall of Singapore marks a real watershed in Australian history, one that culminated in the abrupt strategic reorientation from Britain to the US—a relationship that endures to this day, and which forms the bedrock of Australia's overall strategic posture. Ever since, as former prime minister Malcolm Fraser (2014) rather belatedly pointed out, Australian policymakers have felt obliged to participate in any conflict the US found itself engaged in, no matter how remote or tenuous the supposed threat to Australia might actually have been.[54]

For students of the politics of strategic relationships, such developments and the possible costs of alliances are not surprising. Alliances are invariably between stronger and weaker states; asymmetries of power and influence are central to the relationship and the thinking of both parties. For less powerful, dependent states, such as Australia, there is a continuing fear of 'abandonment', which invariably trumps concerns about 'entrapment' or the

possibility that weaker states may feel obliged to behave in ways that they otherwise might not, all other things being equal. Paying the 'insurance premium' that is presumed to ensure continuing American military support has seen Australia participate in wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and even Syria, where possible Australian strategic interests seem implausibly remote, to put it mildly. But as one of the leading analysts of alliance politics points out, 'commitment weakens bargaining power. The more firmly one is committed to the alliance, the less credible, and therefore the less effective, are threats to withdraw support from the ally or abandon the alliance'.[55]

Consequently, generations of Australian policymakers and the security specialists who advise them have felt they had little choice other than to actively recommit themselves to the alliance, no matter how remote the supposed threat to Australia may actually have been. Not only is this 'band wagoning' behavior at odds with what mainstream IR theory might lead us to expect, but it reinforces the dominance and leverage of the more powerful alliance partner.[56] Even when the notoriously unreliable, erratic figure of Donald Trump—who had little sympathy for, or commitment to, even long-standing allies in Europe—demonstrated just how uncertain this strategy might be, Australian policymakers went out of their way to curry favor and demonstrate their dependability, no matter who occupied the White House.[57]

A number of points are worth making about the Trump presidency in particular and the role of the US more generally in this context. First, the idea that smaller states might enjoy increased bargaining power that reflects their possible independence and status as potential 'swing states' seems unavailable to enthusiastic alliance supporters such as Australia who risk being taken for granted by the US. The currently fashionable idea that less powerful states might 'hedge' or even play off one great power against another,[58] always looked like a triumph of hope over experience, but in Australia's case it is simply not plausible that Australia would not actively support the US, much less side with the PRC. Put differently, for all of the claims made about Australia's ability to act as an independent 'middle power', its political leaders and strategic analysts generally lack the political will or imagination to act or even think differently.[59]

Second, the US alliance system has been a deeply embedded and institutionalised part of the security architecture of the region of which Australia has been a part for more than half a century. As Victor Cha points out, the 'hub and spoke' relations that the US established in East Asia after World War II meant that 'it exercised near-total control over the foreign and domestic affairs of its allies, and it created an asymmetry of power that rendered inconceivable counterbalancing by these smaller countries, on their own or in concert with others'.[60] Moreover, in Australia's case in particular, the relationship has been consolidated by the creation of key institutions and regular bilateral meetings which gave crucial ballast to the alliance, despite the fact the ANZUS Treaty itself notoriously failed to oblige either nation to more than 'consult' in the unlikely event of a direct threat to either country.[61] Indeed, the only occasion on which the ANZUS Treaty has been invoked was when John Howard offered Australian support in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

A possible third point to make is more contingent and perhaps less enduring, or even a source of tension with Joe Biden in the White House:

> The Morrison and Trump administrations had similar views when it came to climate change and the continuing importance of fossil fuels. Importantly, neither the Morrison government nor the Trump administration considered climate change to be something they needed to address, much less a direct threat to the security of the nation and its people.[62]

Since the election of Joe Biden, the priorities of the US appear to have changed quite dramatically, the influence of the Blob notwithstanding. The question now is not only

whether Australia's strategic culture will pose a possible obstacle to addressing environmental issues, but whether it will actually damage relations with the country's most important ally.[63]

Future threats aren't what they used to be

One of the most significant consequences of the distinctive strategic culture that has emerged in Australia is its resistance to change. Perhaps we should not be surprised that security planners and analysts trained to think of security primarily in military terms might find it difficult to think about the nature of threats from other causes. But as Bloomfield and Nossal (2007) point out, even an effort to make Australia more strategically self-reliant in traditional military terms was 'half-hearted', and a consequence of a form of what might be described as ideational path-dependence:

> *When decision-makers were faced with the challenge of changing objective circumstances, therefore, the old strategic traditions were, in a sense, 'ready-made', easily understandable, and culturally palatable'.[64]*

While a degree of intellectual inertia may be a familiar feature of large organisations where conformity and adherence to the conventional wisdom are seen as desirable qualities, it is important to recognise that such behaviours are a consciously reinforced and cultivated part of strategic thinking generally in Australia. This is particularly true of the inviolable place of the alliance as the central part of Australia's overall security posture.[65]

One of the reasons the alliance—and all of the thinking that it inspires among Australia's strategic elites—remains so dominant is that it is institutionalised in highly influential organisations and networks that are specifically designed to reinforce its authority and influence. While participants in bodies such as the Australian American Leadership Dialogue (AALD) might not see themselves as actively involved in the 'social construction of reality', in many ways that's precisely what they are doing. As Vince Scappatura (2014) notes, however, 'the AALD departs from other [Track 2] initiatives or "epistemic communities" to function more like a pro-American lobby group engaged in an effort to protect Australia's 'special relationship' with the US.'[66] Much the same observation could be made about the more formal 'Track 1' AUSMIN talks, in which the foreign and defence ministers of the US and Australia meet each year.[67] While these have been an important mechanism for 'alliance maintenance' and socialising participants into the existing normative and conceptual order, ironically enough they may be about to become a source of tension rather than ideological consensus.

While strategic thinking in Australia remains preoccupied with traditional security threats, there are credible signs that the Biden administration has recognised that such views are no longer an accurate reflection of the challenges that actually face the world. The very fact that members of the Blob in the US realise that security is no longer something that individual countries or even limited alliances of states can achieve acting alone may prove to be something of a watershed in strategic thinking and priorities. Joe Biden's recent 'Leaders Summit on Climate' revealed major differences between his administration and the Morrison government on the importance attached to climate change as a key threat, and the willingness of his government to try and do something about it. Importantly, the US is now placing direct pressure on the Morrison government to play a more active and effective part in addressing climate change and greenhouse gas emissions.[68] Australia's principal ally, in other words, is helping to turn Australia into an international outlier, if not pariah, when it comes to fostering international cooperation to deal with the greatest collective action problem the world has ever seen.

But the Morrison government in particular will find it hard to respond. On the one hand, the Coalition government is hostage to its own 'base' and the powerful vested interests that have been such an important source of political donations for the conservative side

of politics for many years.[69] On the other hand, however, some of the principal sources of strategic advice, such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) are still prioritising very traditional-looking threats that revolve primarily around the rise of China. It is not unreasonable to assume that the reason ASPI invariably recommends investing more in military hardware as the best policy has at least some connection to the fact that the organisation receives lavish finding from major weapons manufacturers and the federal government.[70] At the very least, there would seem to be a potential conflict of interest and real questions about ASPI's ability to objectively respond to what ought to be a rapidly shifting calculus of concern.

As a consequence of Australia's distinctive history and the pervasive sense of strategic insecurity that pervades a very small 'epistemic community' of like-minded experts, its strategic culture has proved durable and relatively impervious to change.[71] When combined with a limited number of powerful and influential media outlets that support both the alliance relationship with the US *and* a policy agenda that privileges economic development over environmental threats, then it is not hard to see why some ideas about security may prove hard to change, despite Australia experiencing some of the most unambiguous deleterious impacts of climate change. There are, however, signs that even in the Coalition's electoral heartland sentiment about the reality of climate change may be changing in the face of continuing environmental catastrophes.[72] The question is whether the Morrison government in particular and the small group of strategic experts that advise them is capable of recognising the profound shift in the very real threats that confront Australia, its people, and to the existing economic paradigm—in which coal remains very significant.

If the overwhelming scientific consensus about the dangers of climate change is not sufficient, perhaps the new economic opportunities that some think are available to Australia may influence thinking in the Morrison government. There is no shortage of plausible-looking models for turning Australia into a renewable energy superpower,[73] after all. And yet the Morrison government in particular has proved resolutely impervious to advice of experts—when they come from outside the existing community of influential lobbyists, political donors and the epistemic community that continues to dominate debates about strategic policy, at least. But even this latter group may find it hard to reconcile a continuing privileging of traditional threats from other nation states when the country that is seen as the bedrock of national security is pressuring Australians and their policymakers to change. If the US can seemingly overturn the assumption that its grand strategy remains constant,[74] then it is not unreasonable to assume that Australia may have to fall into line as it always does when its more powerful alliance partner demands it.

Conclusion

Despite the very visible, increasingly frequent and destructive impact of climate change on Australia, coalition governments in particular have been reluctant to commit themselves to addressing it in a serious way. At the same time, however, resources can be found—even in the midst of a major economic downturn—to purchase expensive weapons systems that many think will be outdated before they are ever delivered and unlikely to influence the behaviour of possible adversaries. Such views are entirely in keeping with the conventional wisdom among Australia's small but influential strategic community, which continues to pay next to no attention to what is arguably the single greatest threat to the security of ordinary Australians there has ever been. Even the most thoughtful Australian analysts continue to focus exclusively on conventional security. Hugh White's recent opus, *How to Defend Australia*,[75] for example, contains not a single reference to either the environment or climate change in the index. Even scholars dedicated to the pursuit of peace and the repudiation of militarism, such as Alex Bellamy, fail to take climate change into account when thinking about how we collectively avoid war.[76]

Ironically enough, however, it has dawned on at least some realists that 'the world's great powers are far more threatened by climate change than they are by each other.'[77] There are some signs that the magnitude of the threat to states of all varieties is finally being recognised, too: the Biden administration's apparently sincere and well-intentioned recent multilateral initiatives represent an important change in the thinking that underpins security policy in what is still the world's most powerful state. This has major implications for ostensible friend and notional foe alike. Given the forbiddingly truncated timeframe in which to actually act effectively and overcome major obstacles to collective action, it may also be the last chance we have. The fact that even close, otherwise enthusiastically supportive allies such as Australia remain reluctant to join this effort is, however, a painful reminder of just how difficult the challenge actually is, and how many otherwise well-informed supposed experts still fail to grasp the existential threat climate change poses.

If the leadership of one of the most fortunate countries in the world is not prepared to share the burden of addressing climate change and the concomitant need to rapidly and radically restructure economic activity and our overall relationship to the natural environment, it is difficult to see why the likes of India, Indonesia or even China should. In the increasingly likely event that we collectively fail to do so, it will be of little comfort to be proved correct about the pernicious, short-sighted and misguided impact of our strategic culture.

Notes and references

1   Hughes, L, Steffen, W, Mullins, G, Dean, A, Weisbrot, E and Rice, M, 2020, *Summer of Crisis*, Climate Council.

2   Morton, A, 2021, 'Australian scientists warn urgent action needed to save 19 'collapsing' ecosystems', *The Guardian,* 26 February.

3   Beeson, M, 2019, *Rethinking Global Governance,* Palgrave, Basingstoke.

4   Holmes à Court, S, 2020, 'When it comes to emissions, the "too small to matter" argument is absurd, reckless and morally bankrupt', *The Guardian* ,9 January.

5   Beeson, M, 2021, *Environmental Anarchy? International Security in the 21st Century,* Bristol University Press, Bristol.

6   Dyer, G, 2010, *Climate Wars: The Fight for Survival as the World Overheats,* Oneworld, Oxford.

7   Steffen, W, Rockström, J, Richardson, K, Lenton, TM, Folke, C, Liverman, D and Schellnhuber, H, 2018, 'Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* vol. 115, no. 33, pp. 8252–9.

8   Lieven, A, 2020, *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 116.

9   Adger, WN, 2010, 'Climate change, human well-being and insecurity', *New Political Economy*, vol. 15, no. 2, p.280.

10 Campbell, KM, Gulledge, J, McNeill, JR, Podesta, J, Ogden, P, Fuerth, L, Woolsey, RJ, Lennon, AT, Smith, J and Weitz, R, 2007, *The Age of Consequences: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Global Climate Change*. Washington: Centre for Strategic & International Studies.

11 Brooks, R, 2017, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon,* (New York: Simon and Schuster).

12 Pinker, S, 2012, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined,* New York: Viking.

13 Ghosh, Iman, 2020, 'Mapped: The Countries With the Most Military Spending', *Visual Capitalist,* September 24, https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-the-countries-with-the-most-military-spending/

14 Fischer, F, 2019, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: on the social construction of alternative facts', *Critical Policy Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 133-52.

15 Jacques, PJ,2012, 'A general theory of climate denial', *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 9-17.

16 Nichols, T, 2017, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters,* Oxford University Press, Oxford.

17 Deudney, D, 1990, 'The case against linking environmental degradation and national security', *Millennium - Journal of International Studies,* vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 461-76.

18 Paris, R, 2001, 'Human security: Paradigm shift or hot air?', *International Security,* vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 87-102.

19 Economy, EC, 2004, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

20 Beeson, M and Li, F, 2016, 'China's place in regional and global governance: A new world comes into view', *Global Policy,* vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 491-9.

21 Myers, SL, 2021, 'Despite tensions, US and China agree to work together on climate change'. *New York Times,* 17 April.

22 Wei, L and Davis, B, 2021, ' China's message to America: We're an equal now'. *Wall Street Journal,* 12 April.

23 Zhang, F, 2013, 'The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations,* vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 305-28.

24 Beeson, M and Xu, S, 2019, 'China's evolving role in global governance: The AIIB and the limits of an alternative international order', in K Zeng, *Handbook of the International Political Economy of China*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 345-60.

25 Allison, G, 2017, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?,* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston.
26 Johnston, AI, 1995, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History,* Princeton University Press, Princeton.
27 Bloomfield, A, 2012, 'Time to move on: Reconceptualizing the strategic culture debate.' *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 437-61.
28 Geertz, C, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* vol. 5019, Basic Books, New York, p. 89.
29 Callahan, WA, 2010, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation,* Oxford University Press, Oxford.
30 Kennan, G, 1997, 'The sources of Soviet conduct', in, JF Hoge and F Zakaria, *The American Encounter: The United States and the making of the Modern World*, Basic Books, New York, pp. 155-69.
31 Shapiro, J, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Ziegler, CE, 1990, *Environmental Policy in the USSR*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.
32 Allison, G.T. (1971) *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis,* (New York: Little, Brown and Company).
33 Gray, CS, 1981, 'National style in strategy: The American example', *International Security* vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 21-47.
34 Waltz, KN, 1979, *Theory of International Politics,* McGraw-Hill, New York.
35 Glenn, J, 2009, 'Realism versus strategic culture: Competition and collaboration?', *International Studies Review,* vol. 11, no. 3, p. 530.
36 Klein, BS, 1988, 'Hegemony and strategic culture: American power projection and alliance defence politics', *Review of International Studies,* vol. 14, no. 2, p. 136.
37 Bacevich, AJ, 2008, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism,* Metropolitan Books, New York.
38 Stiglitz, JE and Bilmes, LJ, 2008, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict,* WW Norton, New York.
39 Beeson, M, 2020, 'Donald Trump and post-Pivot Asia: The implications of a 'transactional' approach to foreign policy', *Asian Studies Review,* vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 10-27.
40 Ashford, E, 2020, 'Build a better Blob: Foreign policy is not a binary choice between Trumpism and discredited elites', *Foreign Affairs*.
41 Oord, C, 2019, 'Believe it or not: Since its birth the USA has only had 17 years of peace', *War History Online*, https://www.warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/usa-only-17-years-of-peace.html
42 Smith, T, 1994, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century,* Princeton University Press, Princeton.
43 Mandelbaum, M, 2019, *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth,* Oxford University Press, Oxford.
44 Layne, C, 2012, 'This time it's real: The end of unipolarity and the Pax Americana', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 203-13.
45 Brands, H, Feaver, P and Inboden, W, 2020, 'In defense of the Blob: America's foreign policy establishment is the solution, not the problem', *Foreign Affairs*, 29 April.
46 Walt, SM, 2018, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy,* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p. 93.
47 Layne, C, 2017, 'The US foreign policy establishment and grand strategy: how American elites obstruct strategic adjustment', *International Politics,* vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 260–75.
48 Gearam, A, 2021, 'With Afghan pullout, Biden aims to reset global agenda', *The Washington Post,* 13 April.
49 Millar, TB, 1978, *Australia in Peace and War: External Relations, 1788-1977,* Australian National University Press, Canberra.
50 Burke, A, 2001, *In Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety,* Pluto Press, Sydney.
51 Capling, A, 2008, 'Twenty years of Australia's engagement with Asia', *The Pacific Review* vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 601-22.
52 Wilson, JD, 2018, 'Rescaling to the Indo-Pacific: From economic to security-driven regionalism in Asia', *East Asia,* vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 177-96.
53 Walker, D, 1999, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.
54 Fraser, M, 2014, *Dangerous Allies,* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

55 Snyder, GH, 2007, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, p. 168.

56 Walt, SM, 2009, 'Alliances in a Unipolar World ', *World Politics,* vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 86-120.

57 Karp, P, 2021, 'Scott Morrison accused of "pandering" to Trump and damaging relations with Biden', *The Guardian*, 20 January.

58 Ciorciari, JD, 2019, 'The variable effectiveness of hedging strategies', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 523–55.

59 Beeson, M and Higgott, R, 2014, 'The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia's middle power moment?', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific,* vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 215-37.

60 Cha, VD, 2016, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 4.

61 Fernandes, C, 2018, *Island Off the Coast of Asia: Instruments of Statecraft in Australian Foreign Policy,* Rowman & Littlefield, Lexington.

62 Morton, A and Murphy, K, 2021, 'Biden administration says Australia needs to cut greenhouse gas emissions sooner', *The Guardian* 22 April.

63 Jotzo, F, 2021, 'The US climate target blows Australia's out of the water', *The Guardian* 23 April.

64 Bloomfield, A and Nossal, KR, 2007, 'Towards an explicative understanding of strategic culture: The cases of Australia and Canada', *Contemporary Security Policy,* vol. 28, no. 2, 294-95.

65 Scappatura, V, 2019, *The US lobby and Australian defence policy*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton.

66 Scappatura, V, 2014, 'The role of the AALD in preserving the Australia–US alliance', *Australian Journal of Political Science,* vol. 49, no. 4, p. 600.

67 Wesley, M, 2020, 'The Canberra–Washington bubble', *The Saturday Paper,* 1 August.

68 Morton, A, 2020, ' Malcolm Turnbull says Morrison was 'dazzled and duchessed' by Trump on climate policy', *The Guardian,* 24 November.

69 Pearse, G, 2007, *High & Dry: John Howard, Climate Change and the Selling of Australia's Future,* Viking, Camberwell; Riordan, P and Smyth, J, 2020, 'Australian mining lobby's power endures despite wildfire crisis'. *Financial Times,* 17 February.

70 Reubenstein, M, 2020, 'ASPI rakes in millions of dollars from Commonwealth Government contracts while publicly driving the "China Threat" narrative', *Michael West Media,* 1 July.

71 Bisley, N, 2016, *Australia's Strategic Culture*. Washington: National Bureau of Asian Research.

72 Smyth, J, 2019, 'Australia calls emergency meetings as climate crisis intensifies', *Financial Times,* 9 February.

73 Garnaut, R, 2019, *Superpower: Australia's Low-Carbon Opportunity,* Black Inc. Melbourne.

74 Porter, P, 2018, 'Why America's grand strategy has not changed: Power, habit, and the US foreign policy establishment', *International Security,* vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 9-46.

75 White, H, 2019, *How to Defend Australia,* La Trobe University Press, Melbourne.

76 Bellamy, AJ, 2019, *World Peace and How We Can Achieve It*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

77 Lieven, A, 2020, *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. xii.