

The implications of climate change
for Australian strategic and defence
policy in relation to the alliance
and Pacific island states

Brendan Sargeant

REGIONAL OUTLOOK Climate Action

Griffith Asia Institute

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Regional Outlook

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Introduction

When the Australian government published the Defence Strategic Update in 2020 (2020 DSU), it signalled a more pessimistic view of Australia's strategic outlook. While there are a number of strands to the argument presented in the document, they come down to the reality that the potential threats to Australian security have increased and the timeframe within which they might emerge has reduced. The strategic policy response set out in the 2020 DSU committed to the framework of shape, deter, and respond.¹ Australian strategic and defence policy would be directed at *shaping* the regional environment in ways conducive to its national interests. It would develop the capability to *deter* potential threats, and it would possess the capacity to *respond* should a range of threats be realised. The 2020 DSU recognised that the Indo-Pacific is in a period of strategic order transition. The emergence of China as a major regional power and a strategic response by the United States that seeks to place limits on how China might exercise its emerging power has resulted in strategic competition, the outcome of which is uncertain and may take many decades before a new order is established. The 2020 DSU suggests that change of this magnitude is a major crisis.

The other major crisis that has been developing for decades but has increased in intensity in recent years is climate change. In the 2020 DSU, there was one only mention of climate change – as one of several compounding threats to human security.² Climate change is an existential crisis because, unchecked, it can destroy the foundations of life as we presently know it. It is a crisis that affects every aspect of national and international life. The challenge for Australia is that the crisis of a changing strategic order and climate are interacting with compounding effects. Australia has never in its post-settlement history had to deal with interacting crises of this magnitude or complexity and, accordingly, will need to develop strategic policy responses that both comprehend the scale of the emerging climate change crisis while meeting the challenge of a changing strategic order. What is becoming evident, particularly if we consider the South Pacific, is that these are not separate challenges. Strategic policy needs to recognise the interaction between the two system-level changes occurring and respond in a way that mitigates the risk that arises from both.

In this essay, I discuss the Australian strategic and defence policy response to climate change in relation to the United States–Australia Alliance and the Pacific island states. This is a subset of a larger discussion about the nature of the security challenge that climate change presents.³ My approach is to begin with a discussion of the guiding assumptions underpinning Australian strategic and defence policy to identify how they reflect and shape a particular perception of the Australian strategic environment and the nature of potential security threats that might arise. From this, I discuss how Australian strategic and defence policy has understood the security challenges of climate change. I then discuss how the United States and the countries of the South Pacific understand security and the underpinning assumptions upon which they have built a security narrative that places climate change at its core. Finally, the essay concludes by discussing how Australia's perceptions of security and the strategic responses that might be appropriate diverge from both the United States and South Pacific.

1. Climate change as a strategic force

As a strategic force, climate change manifests in two ways. The first is the changes it brings to the natural environment, with the multitude of consequences that flow. These affect every element of community life, from the nature of the environment within which people live to their economic, social, and political security. Climate change also acts as a strategic force in its capacity to reshape perceptions of the utility of the strategic order within which countries function. In an environment where climate change represents an existential threat, traditional security frameworks do not necessarily make sense in terms of the policy priorities that they might mandate.

The challenge of climate change for Australian strategic and defence policy will increase over time as its impact on Australia and regional countries grows. As currently formulated, it is not equipped to respond to the full dimension of the security challenges that climate change will present. Australia's policy response is also increasingly divergent from the policy responses of our most important ally and trading partner, the United States, and the Pacific countries in our immediate neighbourhood.

2. Australian strategic and defence policy—guiding assumptions

Australian strategic and defence policy has been guided by assumptions about the nature of the world and how it works. The most important of these include the idea that Australian prosperity and security derives from its support for and participation in a strategic order shaped by the predominant power of the United States. Another is that Australia's geography functions as a strategic asset, but in certain circumstances, also as the location and vector for security threats. It has also rested on the assumption that maintaining strategic stability across the archipelago to the north through support for state sovereignty strengthens Australian security. These assumptions have shaped how Australian governments have used Defence capabilities and engagement to support regional security.

For decades, the overriding goal of Australian Defence and Strategic Policy has been to ensure the strategic stability of the archipelago to Australia's north extending around to the island states of the South Pacific. Policy debates have focused on two major questions. The first is the extent to which defence capabilities should be deployed beyond Australia's shores in order to intervene in crises to forestall the emergence of potential threats closer to Australia. The second has been the extent to which defence capabilities should be focused more directly on the defence of Australia. The question that climate change poses is whether assumptions concerning the Alliance and Australia's strategic geography are helpful in guiding future policy in an environment where climate change not only operates as a force that changes the nature of the operating environment, but also as a force that changes regional perceptions about the nature of potential security challenges.

The alliance

Successive Australian governments have identified the United States–Australia alliance as foundational to Australia's defence capability. Without the Alliance, Australia would be much less militarily capable. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper described the Alliance as central to Australia's approach in the region, as 'Without strong US political, economic and security engagement, power is likely to shift more quickly in the region and it will be more difficult for Australia to achieve the levels of security and stability we seek'.⁴

At the heart of this relationship is a shared understanding of the nature of the strategic environment and the importance of US strategic primacy to Australian and US interests. One of the key features of Australian strategic and defence policy is the requirement to manage participation in the Indo-Pacific in ways that are broadly congruent with US strategic aims. While there is often disagreement on specific issues, there is broad agreement on how the Indo-Pacific should function and Australia's role within it. These shared interests were reaffirmed during the 2021 Quad meeting, where President Biden emphasised that 'a free and open Indo-Pacific is essential to each of our futures'.⁵ Prime Minister Morrison reiterated Biden's point, 'the Indo-Pacific that will now shape the destiny of our world in the 21st century', and affirmed Australia's commitment to working with ASEAN to secure 'an open, inclusive — inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific'.⁶ One way of reading recent Australian strategic and defence policy is to see it as an attempt to strengthen Australia's capacity to support US strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific during a period of major change.

In recent years, US policy in relation to the Indo-Pacific has become more uncertain in response to political changes in Washington. There has been pressure on Japan and Korea

to contribute more to their defence. The relationship with the Philippines has been volatile as President Duterte has played the US against China and vice versa. There has been a shift in the US strategic policy position in relation to China, including a stronger posture against China in the South China Sea. In this environment, Australia has sought to strengthen its ties with Washington and has been a vocal supporter of continuing US strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific. One of the consequences of the Trump period has been less confidence in US strategic commitment and less certainty about how the US might respond to a range of potential crises. The advent of the Biden administration has seen attempts to re-establish confidence in US strategic engagement. However, the underlying shift in power relativities between the US and China and the increasingly adversarial nature of the strategic competition suggest that the strategic environment will remain volatile and uncertain into the future.

The convergence of perceptions of the strategic environment has many implications for how Australia might relate to its neighbourhood. Over the years, we have seen various caricatures of Australia as an uncritical US proxy,⁷ a deputy sheriff to the US,⁸ a country that adheres to outdated Cold War frameworks,⁹ and so on. These are caricatures of Australia's position, but they point to a reality that Australia exercises limited agency at the strategic level outside the framework of the strategic order established and sustained by the US. This means that a significant focus of defence policy relates to alliance management and the terms of participation within the alliance, both strategically and operationally. What this can mean in practice is that a challenge, such as climate change, that does not easily fall within this strategic policy framework, may not get the attention that it deserves or is framed in ways that do not speak fully to the challenge it presents.

Strategic geography

The focus of defence policy concerning Australian geographical circumstances is to try and answer the questions: what does our strategic geography enable, and what does it constrain? The answer varies with circumstances and policy adjusts accordingly. Australia is an island continent spanned by an archipelago that extends from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and includes the island states of the South Pacific. This archipelago links the North Pacific and the Asian landmass, creating a very complex and diverse environment.

The framework for the development of strategic and defence policy developed in the *1987 Defence White Paper* remains in place with subsequent defence white papers contextualising it within the particular strategic circumstances in play when they were written. The *1987 Defence White Paper* grounded its analysis of Australia's strategic interests in Australia's geography and prioritised force structure development in a hierarchy that had as the first priority the capacity to defend the Australian continent.¹⁰ Its next priority was the security of the near region, which incorporated the archipelago and chain of islands to the north extending around to the South-West Pacific. Its third priority was the ability to contribute to coalition activity in the wider Asia Pacific region or beyond, depending on government decision-making at the time. While the *2016 Defence White Paper* did not seek to establish in its policy framework priorities between the defence of Australia, Australian security in the region, or engagement in the wider Indo-Pacific and global environment, the 2020 DSU reverted to the more traditional policy framework, established in the *1987 Defence White Paper*.

Paul Dibb, framing the security challenges facing the Pacific as an 'arc of instability', identified Australia's strategic priorities in its immediate neighbourhood. He argued that unstable or weak Pacific states pose a security risk to Australia. He noted in his 1986 Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities, the Pacific 'is the area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed'.¹¹ The idea that, under certain circumstances, the geographic structure of the archipelago can amplify threats to Australia has shaped the direction of strategic policy to emphasise stability, the continuation of the existing strategic order, the importance of state integrity, and the

importance of maintaining a permissive environment for future **Australian Defence Force** (ADF) operations.

At the current moment, there is considerable anxiety in the government about the extent to which the increasing Chinese presence is reducing our geographical advantage in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. However, the more significant issue at stake is the extent to which our perception of our geography conditions our understanding of Pacific Island countries' strategic perceptions and security challenges. A focus on strategic geography as a vector for threat reduces our capacity to understand and respond to the agency that those countries might seek to exercise. At a basic level, this can lead to a mismatch of perceptions about the nature of the security environment, the threats that might occur, and the relative priority that we might give to them. Climate change is a security challenge where the divergence of perceptions about the nature of the security challenges it presents can have very significant consequences, both in terms of potential policy responses and capacity for action.

3. Australian strategic and defence policy framing of climate change

Climate change has been recognised as a factor in defence planning since the *2009 Defence White Paper*. However, while the 2009, 2013, and 2016 defence white papers recognised climate change as a security risk and a threat multiplier, in the recent 2020 Defence Strategic Update, climate change was only mentioned once.¹² The 2020 DSU positioned climate change as part of a broader range of threats of human security, and suggested the response of defence planning be increased disaster response and resilience measures.¹³

Prior to 2020, successive white papers had positioned climate change as a factor that is affecting the nature of the ADF operating environment and a source of increased risk both to capability and to the capacity to operate. While these papers acknowledged the increased security risk of climate change, they built on an established policy framework which is guided by an understanding that the regional environment is subject to natural disasters that may require crisis intervention of which strategic purpose has been to maintain stability and support for the existing strategic order. As the *2000 Defence White Paper* noted, 'ADF units, including Reserve units make a major contribution to disaster relief in Australia and our immediate neighbourhood'.¹⁴ The *2009 Defence White Paper* similarly identified that: 'Given our size and resources, Australia will be expected to take a leadership role within the South Pacific if these states are overwhelmed by a natural or man-made crisis'.¹⁵

Each successive document emphasised that many countries in the region were especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The *2009 Defence White Paper* noted that: 'The security effects of climate change are likely to be most pronounced where states have limited capacity to respond to environmental strains'.¹⁶ As a result, the 2009 document argued that they may require external assistance to manage and respond to the consequences of climate change.¹⁷ The *2013 Defence White Paper* similarly acknowledged that the major challenges facing the region would be 'compounded by the effects of climate change'¹⁸ as the risks associated with resource insecurity may be exacerbated by climate change.¹⁹ The 2013 document argued that this would lead to an increased demand for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and stabilisation operations from the ADF over coming decades.²⁰ Similar to the 2009 and the *2013 Defence White Papers*, the *2016 Defence White Paper* noted the centrality of climate change to Australian defence and strategic planning in the coming decades, identifying it as one of the 'Six Key Drivers' that will shape Australia's strategic environment. The paper identified climate change as a factor which will contribute to instability for some countries in the South Pacific, and dedicated ADF resources to 'mitigating the destabilising effects that climate change will have'.²¹

These strategic documents position the defence policy response, including deployment of the ADF, to the likely increase in natural disasters across the Indo-Pacific as one of management and mitigation. It argues that the ADF will, over time, adapt its capabilities to this changing environment. This policy governs how defence understands and manages its training and operating environment within Australia, and how it might need to put in place systems and processes that account for changes wrought by climate change. It also includes recognition that defence will have an increased role in responding to what is likely to be an increasing suite of major disasters resulting from the impact of climate change on the natural and urban environment. However, it does not include a recognition that the

capacity and capability of the ADF to respond to natural disasters can be affected by its commitment to its other priorities, both domestic and international. The Royal Commission into natural disaster arrangements following the 2020 bushfires has highlighted this issue. It identified the ADF as central to Australia's ability to fight bushfires. While the ADF has been positioned as central to disaster relief both in Australia and in the Pacific, as the Royal Commission acknowledged, responding to domestic natural disasters is not the role of the ADF as the ADF has finite capacity and capability.²²

Current policy places climate change and its effects in a similar category to such forces as cyber and terrorism. These are threats that emerge as elements of the operating environment, but do not represent a fundamental change to the environment to the extent that might challenge the role, function or major capabilities of the ADF. More broadly, the emergence of climate change in strategic policy documents does not suggest that climate change is considered as a factor or a force that might challenge some of the underpinning assumptions that shape policy. In this respect, current policy does not see it as a strategic force that needs to be accounted for. The focus of strategic policy continues to be the preservation and defence of Australia's interests in the existing strategic order and the development of the capacity to resist state level coercion through the deployment of military force.

4. Pacific islands framing of climate change

Pacific islands do not see regional security through the same lens as Australia. As then Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Meg Taylor stated in 2019, ‘the highest priority for our region is climate change mitigation and adaptation’.²³ The Pacific islands have developed different conceptions of security and have used different enabling metaphors to construct an alternative framing and narrative. This has in turn influenced their own sense of agency and community in developing strategic responses to security challenges, of which the most important is climate change. At the core of Australia’s strategic relationship with Pacific island states, there is a very different perception about the nature of the challenge that climate change represents for security and the policy responses that might be appropriate.

An important statement about the nature of the South Pacific strategic environment was issued by the Pacific Islands Forum Leadership Summit in Tuvalu.²⁴ The *Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now*, ‘Securing the Future of Our Blue Pacific,’ articulated a very different framing of the strategic environment within which these islands are located. The strategic environment was described as the ocean, as ‘the Blue Pacific Continent’.²⁵ This enabling idea serves to reposition and reframe the oceanic environment in relation to the islands that exist within it. It challenges the idea that security is just a question of state sovereignty that can be satisfied within the confines of the interests of the individual nation state. It recognises that the prosperity and agency of individual countries is dependent on the maritime environment that they are located within, and that this dependency is inextricably linked with the interests of other countries in that environment. The health and state of that environment is the critical determinant of the capacity of those countries to prosper and achieve security in the broadest sense. It repositions the security discussion to one of the state of the ocean environment that surrounds these countries, and within this context climate change becomes the overriding security concern because of the existential threat that it represents.

The logic of the reality of climate change in conjunction with the understanding of the ocean as the strategic environment requires that security rests on an understanding of interdependence, rather than the capacity for independent action. The security of each country is bound up in the security of the whole which rests on the foundation of an ocean that is healthy. This perspective reframes priorities and puts into a different perspective many of the traditional enablers of state sovereignty and security. If climate change is the existential threat, then all other policy frameworks that might shape security agendas become subordinate. The test for strategic and defence policy in this context is the contribution that it makes to the mitigation of the climate change threat, and the capacity for effective response should threats be realised. It also recognises that not all threats that might arise from climate change are amenable to traditional defence policy responses.

This understanding of the oceanic environment also reframes the understanding of the broader Indo-Pacific strategic environment. To the extent that the Indo-Pacific is an arena for emerging strategic competition and a struggle for establishment of the future strategic order, the question for policy in the South Pacific is the extent to which this struggle will support or detract from their ability to respond to climate change.

Many of these ideas find expression in the *Boe Declaration* which presents an expanded conception of security, ‘inclusive of human security, humanitarian assistance, prioritising

environmental security, and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change'.²⁶ It assumes strategic interdependence between the countries that have signed up to it, which includes Australia. It also recognises, and this has been repeated many times by leaders within the South Pacific, that no country can deal with climate change alone, but that it has to be a collective effort. Notwithstanding Australia being a signatory to the declaration, the framing of climate change as a strategic issue is at variance with the priority that Australia would give to it.

5. The impact of climate change on Australian strategic and defence policy

There has been much discussion in policy and academic circles about the scale and nature of change in the Indo-Pacific strategic environment, but no disagreement that major change is occurring. The two big drivers of change, as discussed above, are climate change and the changing strategic order. Climate change along with population growth and the pressure on natural resources, is creating enormous stresses on the biosphere. These changes are interacting with change in the strategic order in unpredictable and compounding ways.

Climate change is a challenge for strategic and defence policy in a multitude of ways. Climate change is a feature of changes in our regional strategic environment. At a minimum, climate change increases the size of unknown strategic risk. Climate change is also shaping the environment in which change is occurring. Perhaps the most important feature about climate change both as a force, and as a defining feature of the emerging strategic and operating environment, is that it challenges traditional frameworks for strategic policy. It does this in two ways. First, climate change is a force which will create potential political and social upheaval which may require intervention by Australia, including with the use of the ADF. The dilemma for defence policy is how it adapts the force to respond to a potential spectrum of threat that spans traditional nation state conflict and the exercise of coercion, through to the capacity to support response to political, social, and economic fragility and potential state breakdown.

Perhaps most importantly, climate change is a systemwide challenge for which no single country can resolve without the assistance of other countries. Climate change emphasises the interdependencies of countries and the need to respond in an integrated way that ensures that each country's individual response strengthens the response of all countries. As a security issue, climate change challenges traditional security frameworks that privilege national interests over the collective interest. Traditional security frameworks bias policy towards national responses that focus on the manifestations of climate change, rather than the causes.

Australian strategic policy has adopted the enabling idea of the Indo-Pacific. At one level, the Indo-Pacific idea is a conceptual framework that seeks to reposition China in the region's strategic architecture. In this sense it is an idea that brings the Pacific islands into view as a location of competition, rather than as countries with individual agency. As the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* stated, the stability and economic progress of the Pacific region are of fundamental importance to Australia.²⁷ Prime Minister Morrison, during a visit to the Solomon Islands, stated that 'The Pacific is front and centre of Australia's strategic outlook'.²⁸ The challenge for the defence policy in this context is to reconcile the requirement to develop policies that respond to the reality of China's increasing presence and strategic contestation in the near region while at the same time responding to the very different strategic and security perceptions of the Pacific island states.

For Australia, the principal vehicle for achieving stability in the region is through the *Pacific Step-Up*, which recognises and responds to the challenges in the region as identified by Pacific leaders and communities. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has described the *Pacific Step-Up* as one of Australia's 'highest foreign policy priorities'.²⁹ The

Pacific Step-Up is particularly focussed on strengthening climate and disaster resilience, sustaining economic growth, and supporting efforts to promote healthy and educated populations. It is a significant policy response to security challenges for Pacific island states driven as much by strategic competition in an environment that is attracting increased attention by external powers as it is a response to the needs of individual countries.

In very traditional terms, the challenge that China presents is the potential for the exercise of coercive power that raises the level of potential threat against Australia and its interests. Australian policy has always worked to prevent the emergence of a foreign power in the near region that has the capacity to directly or indirectly threaten Australia. The potential for China to establish a strategic position in the near region goes directly against very long-standing perceptions of Australia's strategic interests and how they might be sustained. However, from the perspective of the Pacific islands, the major threat to security arises from the reality of climate change. The 'Boe Declaration on Regional Security' outlined the centrality of climate change as a security threat.

We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement.³⁰

The central concern of the Pacific islands is climate change, both as an existential threat of sea level rises that make life on the Pacific islands unsustainable, and as a cause of natural disasters which in their increasing frequency and intensity are likely to make normal life impossible. Climate change is a threat to the functioning of societies at every level. For the Pacific islands, great power competition is very much a secondary concern. To the extent that Australia is unable to recognise this reality and incorporate it into its policy frameworks, its approach will continue to lack credibility. This in turn will place limits on the nature of the strategic relationship with the Pacific islands and the capacity to develop broad agreements on the nature of the security environment.

The focus of the 2020 DSU was very much on the emergence of an environment where the strategic order was changing and the potential for state-on-state conflict was increasing. This suggests that policy frameworks for understanding the strategic implications of climate change have not shifted, and that the prevailing perspective is that climate change will affect the operating environment but will be less relevant to the main strategic preoccupation which is the changing strategic order. For the Pacific islands, this suggests that there will continue to be little scope for the development of a shared perspective on the nature of the security environment and the challenges facing it. Australian and Pacific Island perceptions are likely therefore to continue to diverge, and this will create a continuing strategic opening for China.

In this respect, not only is climate change a biophysical force in the world, but it is also an arena for a political struggle concerning the perception of how the strategic order should work. For some states, such as the Pacific islands, the reality of climate change is so overwhelming in its implications, it is a major, if not the major, consideration in shaping strategic policy. For other states, like Australia, current strategic and defence policy focuses on the first element, but not the second.

The impact of climate change on the alliance

The Biden administration has prioritised climate change as its overriding strategic priority. In its presentation of the challenge, it has argued that it is a challenge that no single country can deal with by itself, and that no national level policy can mitigate the impact of climate change on an individual country. In President Biden's Inaugural Address, he identified seven policy areas as immediate priorities, positioning the climate crisis directly after the COVID-19 crisis.³¹ One week after taking office, President Biden signed an *Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*. Biden described the

executive order as necessary to 'confront the existential threat of climate change'.³² The executive order presents a whole-of-government approach to tackle the climate crisis as necessary to deal with the climate crisis that threatens the 'ability to live on this planet'.³³

Secretary John Kerry echoes Biden's rhetoric of describing climate change as an existential security threat and 'among the most complex and compelling security issues that I think we have ever faced'.³⁴ In an address to the UN Security Council, Kerry described climate change as 'the challenge of all of our generations' and 'so massive, so multi-faceted, that it's impossible to disentangle it from other challenges that the Security Council faces'.³⁵ Reiterating the urgency of climate change, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated, 'today, no nation can find lasting security without addressing the climate crisis'.³⁶

Biden's opening remarks at the Leaders' Summit emphasised the need for global cooperation. He argued, 'no country can overcome this existential threat alone ... We're in this together ... And what each of our nations does or does not do will not only impact people of our own country, but people everywhere'.³⁷ The language of the Biden Administration is very similar to the language of the countries of the South Pacific, which describes climate change as 'the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific'.³⁸ The *Kainaki II Declaration* signalled the strongest collective statement the Pacific Island Forum Leaders have ever issued on climate change. In the declaration, the leaders noted 'escalating climate change related impacts, coupled with the intensification of geostrategic competition, is exacerbating the region's vulnerabilities'.³⁹

With the Biden administration's focus on responding to climate change as the overwhelming strategic priority of the present moment, it is still an open question as to the extent to which this shift in global strategic priority by that administration will call into question the framing of security challenges, particularly in the context of climate change. The Administration has positioned China as a strategic competitor but noted that it will need China's cooperation if it is to develop a truly global response to climate change. As the *US-China Joint Statement Addressing the Climate Crisis* stated, 'The United States and China are committed to cooperating with each other and with other countries to tackle the climate crisis, which must be addressed with the seriousness and urgency that it demands'.⁴⁰

It is an open question as to whether this emerging feature of US strategic policy might reframe an understanding of the nature of the security challenge in the South Pacific from the perspective of the United States, and the extent to which this might in turn influence Australian policy and perceptions of the security environment.

In contrast to the US, Prime Minister Morrison has presented climate change as a national challenge. Likening it to the challenge of COVID-19, he has argued that climate change is a challenge that countries must address in unique individual ways. Accordingly, Morrison has framed the climate challenge as a technological challenge, one that requires capacity and capability building as opposed to a whole of government response.⁴¹ In an address to the OECD Council, Morrison stated, 'Performance on climate change matters at least as much as ambition on climate change'. In other words, our focus should not be on setting emissions targets, but on actually reducing emissions. According to Morrison, Australia's highest priority should remain 'the security and prosperity environment that is created by ensuring we address the great powers strategic competition that is occurring within the Indo-Pacific region'.⁴²

Morrison, like the 2020 DSU, positioned regional stability as separate from climate change, while the US and Pacific perceive them as inextricably linked. Morrison views climate change as requiring a 'technological solution', one which is led by the market. He presented climate change as not just the role of 'advanced economies', stating: 'Carbon

emissions don't have national accents ... they don't speak with that wonderful Irish lilt or an Australian twang'. As such, he suggested technology is the solution, technology that all countries can adopt. He shifted the focus from individual actions by countries to action by technological companies.⁴³ Morrison, in a statement to Parliament House in late 2020, drew attention to both the Australian and US responses to climate change: 'like President-Elect Biden, we are committed to developing new technologies to reduce global emissions as we tackle climate change'.⁴⁴ Morrison again positioned climate change as a technological challenge and not an existential threat.

Conclusion

It is a legitimate question to ask whether strategic and defence policy can address the challenge of climate change given that it is a much larger strategic challenge that cannot be dealt with through the application of strategic and defence policy alone. In this sense, the focus on adaptation and capacity for crisis response may represent a feasible approach. There is some validity to this argument, particularly as Australian strategic and defence policy has been designed to deal with a certain set of challenges arising out of the interaction of states within a larger strategic system. However, climate change as a strategic force changes the nature of the system because if unchecked it puts all countries within that system at risk. There is consequently an overriding imperative to recognise the reality of interdependence, and to acknowledge that giving expression in action to this interdependence may be a more pressing requirement than the traditional focus on the preservation of state sovereignty. In other words, there is perhaps the need for a strategic policy that mandates a much larger conception of security and the reimagining of the role of strategic and defence policy in the face of climate change.

There will continue to be an emerging strategic environment of contestation between powers. There will continue to be a requirement for countries to support their security through the development of defence capability. There will continue to be a struggle to establish a new strategic order across the Indo-Pacific. However, the challenge that climate change presents is that it demands that these challenges are seen in a different and larger strategic context. The purpose of this would be to enable the development of policies and approaches that recognise the interdependency of countries and the larger imperative to take action to guarantee the survival of all countries.

As presently formulated, the Australian strategic and defence policy does not recognise the interdependency that is emerging as the governing strategic policy framework within the international community to guide the development of national level policy and approaches to climate change. In this respect, the challenge of climate change continues to be subordinate to the challenge of a changing strategic order. The argument of this essay is that these challenges are convergent, and that climate change is the more significant challenge when considered over the longer term. Given the direction of US policy and the reality of the increasing impact of climate change, it is arguable that Australian approaches, including its framing of security and its positioning of defence within that framework, is increasingly not fit for purpose. In relation to the Pacific islands, this means that increasingly Australian strategic and defence policy will lack credibility because it is only a partial response to the strategic challenges that they face, and that Australia's role as a security provider will be increasingly diminished.

Notes and references

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