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AUSTRALIA'S ROUTE TO AUKUS: AN ENGLISH SCHOOL ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

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1. Introduction

This dissertation was born from a personal motivation to understand how history and the legacies of the British imperial tradition continue to influence and shape contemporary international politics, most notably in Australia through the case of AUKUS, at a time of profound global uncertainties, when the whole international system faces challenges unseen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Australia's participation in the AUKUS pact, announced in September 2021, provides a case where the changing nature of global politics (and the cooperation between the states of the Anglosphere) could be grasped. More than a technical arrangement over nuclear-powered submarines, AUKUS has become a symbol of strategic alignment, cultural belonging, and political legitimacy within the Anglosphere. Understanding this agreement, therefore, requires moving beyond the usual discussions of military procurement or power balancing, and instead situating it within the deeper historical and institutional framework that has defined Australia's place in the world.

The core contention of this dissertation is that AUKUS exemplifies how historical legacies and identity narratives continue to condition the strategic imagination of states. Australia's foreign policy historically has been determined through questions of "who we are" and "where do we belong." From its imperial loyalty to Britain, through its Cold War dependence on the United States, to its recent confrontation with China, Australia has consistently interpreted its strategic choices through inherited cultural (Anglo-Celtic) frameworks and institutional commitments. Although there were episodic attempts to loosen, recalibrate or redirect these seemingly entrenched alliances and strategic traditions (most notably during the Whitlam era) such departures proved limited, reversible and unable to solidify. The enduring influence of British and, later, American strategic frameworks remained highly resilient, forming a continuous pattern of alignment that ultimately culminated in the establishment of AUKUS. This study, therefore, treats AUKUS not as a contemporary strategic development but as a living test case of how historical-institutionalist (HI) and English School (ES) approaches can illuminate the interplay between history, identity, and order.

This dissertation also intends to respond to a wider academic and political debate. In recent years, scholars and policymakers alike have grappled with the durability of the "Rule-based

International Order" (RBIO) and the uncertain future of Western-liberal cohesion (Freedman 2021; Hall 2014; Ikenberry 2009, 2018; Jacques 2012; Narine 2023; Thompson and Stannard 2008). After 2025, growing concerns emerged that identity and values might lose their significance if leading military powers increasingly disregarded international norms and reverted to power politics, raising fundamental questions about whether and how the normative dimensions of International Relations could still be meaningfully applied under such conditions. By focusing on Australia and AUKUS (a seemingly pure military project), this study contributes to these debates from a specific Anglo-Australian perspective, highlighting how "sub-global societies" (a key terminology to be explained below), such as the Anglosphere, can act as cores of strategic (normative) trust within the wider Western International Society (WIS). In doing so, it speaks to both theoretical questions in international relations and practical dilemmas in contemporary foreign policy.

1.1. Problem Statement and Literature Gap

The emergence of the AUKUS partnership in September 2021 raised a deceptively simple, yet far-reaching question, namely, why did Australia choose that particular moment to enter a trilateral security pact with the United States and the United Kingdom, and what does this decision tell us about Canberra's strategic orientation and national identity (Beeson and Chubb 2021; Davenport 2023; Kristen E. 2022). Studies in the early 2020s have largely relied on established IR theoretical frameworks, more specifically the realist narratives, to interpret AUKUS as a balancing measure against China; liberal institutionalist accounts emphasize technological and institutional benefits; constructivist perspectives sometimes gesture toward identity, but often abstractly, without grounding in historical institutional continuity (Halvorson 2024; Laurenceson 2024; Rezza 2025).

These conventional approaches, while certainly useful, capture only partial truths and remain incomplete, as realism explains threat perception but fails to account for Australia's cultural reflex to align with London and Washington rather than with regional partners. Liberal institutionalism, by contrast, emphasizes technical cooperation but tends to downplay questions of cultural legitimacy and symbolic resonance. Constructivist approaches acknowledge the role of norms and ideas, yet rarely integrate the long-term institutional patterns that persist over time. The limitation of these perspectives lies in their insufficient integration of history, identity, and institutional dynamics when explaining Australia's alignment with AUKUS.

Historical narratives and national identity dimensions are crucial to understand Australia's engagement, which this study addresses with the application of already existing literature focusing on the foreign political traditions of Canberra through the English School framework (Clayton and Newman 2023a; Cox, Cooper, and O'Connor 2023; Dean, Fruehling, and O'Neil 2024). The problem with AUKUS-research agenda is not really a (classical research) problem but rather a deficiency which comes from the fact that AUKUS was only announced in 2021 September and most of the details about the cooperation are being revealed in the upcoming decades. The dominant (international) academic and policy discourse on AUKUS frames the cooperation in three main terms.

1. AUKUS is a strategic response to China's rise.
2. AUKUS is a defence capability partnership (submarines, cyber, AI).
3. AUKUS is a part of US "containment" or "balancing" strategies in the Indo-Pacific.

Hungarian-language scholarship, similarly to the international literature, has primarily emphasized the security and defiance policy dimensions of AUKUS, largely because the trilateral alliance had received little attention in previous years. Although not with the same level of structural precision as found in the international literature, analyses have mainly focused on military policy, balance-of-power considerations, and technological challenges (Baranyi 2021; Egedy 2022; Fejérdy 2021). Alongside these approaches, perspectives of regional actors as well as reactions from France have also appeared. The topic has been addressed most systematically by the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, which published a three-part analytical series in 2022, approximately six months after the announcement of AUKUS, authored by Gergely Fejérdy (2021), Tamás Baranyi (2021), and Viktor Eszterhai (2021) (. Owing to its Anglosphere orientation, the Budapest-based Danube Institute has also periodically organized thematic lectures related to AUKUS, albeit typically within the broader context of Anglosphere studies rather than as a standalone focus. The Oeconomus Economic Research Foundation has likewise engaged with AUKUS-related issues, primarily through the work of researchers specializing in Australia and the Indo-Pacific region, such as Ádám Csenger (2023). But in a broader context, Australia's security architecture has been examined in far greater depth in the seminal work of Gergely Egedy, *Ausztrália története (2000)*. In this comprehensive study, Egedy offers a detailed picture of the key political developments shaping twentieth-century Australia. For Hungarian-based research on this subject, his work remains an indispensable starting point.

These existing perspectives on AUKUS as it was already indicated are rooted mainly in realist and liberal institutionalist traditions, emphasizing power balancing, alliance formation, and institutional cooperation. Scholarly and media accounts understandably highlight the military, geopolitical, and economic dimensions of the pact, since the perception of immediate threat always prevails against structural explanations, although this focus risks oversimplification. Historical and identity-based aspects of AUKUS have received less attention since 2021, even though there are obvious factors (such as the Anglo-Celtic self-perception of some Australians) that directly influenced the creation of the pact. Some scholars (such as Duncan Bell, Richard Hayton, Ben Wellings, Stuart Macintyre, or from Hungary Gergely Egedy, Tamás Baranyi, Gábor Csizmazia, Attila Demkó or Ádám Csenger) have touched on Anglosphere ties, democratic values, and historical alliances, yet these remarks have remained peripheral (Egedy 2022; Holland and Staunton 2024; Macintyre 2020; Peters 2021; Ben Wellings and Ghazarian 2023). In-depth, theory-driven analyses of how national identity and historical legacies influence AUKUS remain rare, leaving a clear gap to which this dissertation seeks to contribute.

The concept of the Anglosphere, which constitutes a central analytical category in this study, rests on a well-researched scholarly foundation and a substantial background of academic literature that has developed over more than a century. This research agenda provides the cultural and historical framework within which Australia has sought to position itself in the international society. While numerous attempts have been made to define who the "English-speaking peoples" are, Winston Churchill's classical formulation offers a particularly useful point of reference for understanding the normative and historical contours of this community. (Ball 2001; Churchill 1990). Winston Churchill understood the English-speaking peoples (and the "Anglosphere as a whole) not as a linguistically diverse group, but as a historically and institutionally defined political community. For Churchill, this community meant those states whose public life operated in English, whose political traditions were rooted in the evolution of English constitutionalism, and whose legal and governmental systems were grounded in the common law tradition. Churchill understood it as a civilizational community bound together by shared commitments to parliamentary government, individual liberty, and the rule of law, and endowed with a special responsibility for the global defence and preservation of these norms.

But not only Churchill attempted to define the broad spectrum of English-speaking peoples. Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand sharing a joint

language, common law traditions, democratic institutions, and strategic ties also appeared in James C. Bennett's famous work the "The Anglosphere Challenge (2007)". While Bennett's work was more normative and policy-oriented than academic in nature, it played an important role in diffusing the term, which later scholarship has subjected to more rigorous, critical analysis (Browning and Lehti 2010; Mycock 2017; B. Wellings and Ghazarian 2023). While Bennett's work is normative and culturally oriented rather than empirical, two of his claims are particularly relevant to this dissertation. First, he highlights the resilience of Anglosphere civil societies, where decentralized governance and civic engagement underpin stability and adaptability. This logic resonates with the functioning of the Rule-based International Order, often framed as an Anglosphere-led system of liberal democracy, market capitalism, and the rule of law. Second, Bennett emphasizes the Anglosphere's technological leadership, grounded in individualism and innovation. These themes are operationalized in this dissertation through the lens of AUKUS, interpreted as a techno-strategic alliance rooted in shared values and mutual trust.

The English School perspective, particularly its focus on International Society and historical continuity, has been underutilized in both AUKUS-research and broader debates on the Anglosphere. Realism remains the most common approach, treating AUKUS as a balancing reaction to China's rise (Rees 2025; Rezza 2025). While the author of this dissertation does not refuse its validity, this perspective neglects why Australia specifically returns to Anglosphere partners beyond material necessity.

This dissertation therefore argues that AUKUS can only be understood within the long trajectory of Australia's identity as an Anglosphere nation. From imperial subordination to Britain, through Cold War reliance on ANZUS and Five Eyes, to the dilemmas posed by China's rise, Australia has consistently returned to its Anglo-American roots. By combining the insights of the English School and Historical Institutionalism, this dissertation intended to address two interlinked gaps: the under-theorization of AUKUS as an identity-driven phenomenon and the lack of historically grounded, institutionally sensitive analysis. In doing so, it seeks to contribute both to the empirical understanding of Australia's 2021 decision and to the theoretical advancement of IR scholarship, showing how identity-based alliances persist beyond material necessity and how sub-global societies actively shape global order.

1.2. Hypothesis

This dissertation has a few claims that for the sake of simplicity will be named as "hypothesis", but the author needs to note here they are rather assumptions that were born prior to the actual initiation of research and influenced the direction of conducting the later examination. The assumption for example that Australia's engagement with AUKUS is not a mere reactionary strategic move driven by purely material power considerations is one of these. Rather, it is best understood as a manifestation of its historically rooted identity as part of the Anglosphere. In this sense, AUKUS exemplifies the enduring importance of history, shared culture and institutional continuity in shaping foreign policy choices. This research did not aim originally to verify or falsify these assumptions. Instead, it sought to elaborate on them by posing related questions, making the dissertation a "*research question–driven"* inquiry. While preliminary claims are presented (as will be shown below), the author approached the subject with curiosity rather than conviction, focusing primarily on formulating questions and exploring the main driving forces behind Australia's foreign policy identity. And this is something we need to stress here. This study intends to focus on Australian politics and history where the foreign policy directions and the external policies towards the traditional Anglosphere allies, the UK and the US have altered.

The central assumption or "hypothesis" therefore can be expressed as follows:

"AUKUS reflects Australia's enduring Anglosphere identity and historically embedded alliance traditions, shaping its foreign policy beyond immediate strategic interests."

This hypothesis builds on two interrelated claims.

(1) Identity dimension: Australia has consistently framed its security within the context of cultural proximity to the United Kingdom and the United States (Curran 2019; Jones 2024; O'Neil 2017). As the Australian historian James Curran argues, Australian leaders have long narrated foreign policy choices in terms of "kith and kin" solidarity, reinforcing a cultural belonging that provides both domestic legitimacy and external reassurance (Curran 2021). In this sense, AUKUS was not about submarines or balancing against China alone, but a reaffirmation of "who we are" and "where we belong."

(2) Institutional path dependency and critical junctures: Historical Institutionalism suggests that once critical choices are made, they create self-reinforcing trajectories that narrow future options (Branch 2017; Hanger-Kopp et al. 2022; Leithner and Libby 2017; Peters, Pierre, and King 2005; Pierson 2000; Schreyögg and Sydow 2010; Sorensen 2015). Australia's reliance on Britain, later transferred to the United States (as a direct consequence of the "dual shock of 1942), embedded alliance dependence into its military, intelligence, and diplomatic institutions. Alternatives such as "Fortress Australia" or Asian regionalism were politically costly and lacked the symbolic depth of Anglosphere ties (Mycock 2017; Ben Wellings and Ghazarian 2023; Wellings and Mycock 2019a) Moments of crisis have historically reinforced rather than disrupted this trajectory. The fall of Singapore in 1942, the "East of Suez" withdrawal in 1968, the Vietnam War, the War on Terror, and the COVID-19 disputes with China all led Australia to double down on its Anglo-American ties (Cramer and Witcomb 2018; Crowley 2013; Hack and Blackburn 2004; McCourt 2009). AUKUS in 2021, therefore, is less a rupture than the latest reaffirmation of this long-standing pattern.

By combining the English School and Historical Institutionalism, this dissertation hypothesizes that AUKUS embodies an identity-based continuity and institutional path dependency at the same time. It represents not only a strategic response to China's assertiveness but also an identity-constituting act within the Western International Society, privileging Anglosphere solidarity over broader multilateral or regional alternatives.

1.3. Research Question

As it was mentioned the central thread of this dissertation lies in the formulation of its research questions. While certain preliminary assumptions about the nature of the Australian foreign policy are acknowledged, they are not the main focus of verification or falsification. Indeed, the findings show that these assumptions can be hold true only in part. What truly drives the argument, however, is the research question itself, which provides the analytical and intellectual compass guiding the empirical chapters and ensures that the theoretical ambitions of combining the English School and Historical Institutionalism are consistently operationalized. In this sense, the dissertation (as it was already indicated) is less a defence of pre-set claims than a sustained inquiry, where the coherence of the study derives from following the research question across historical and theoretical terrain.

Main Research Question (RQ):

"To what extent was Australia's accession to AUKUS in 2021 determined by its Anglosphere identity and sense of belonging, as explained through the English School and Historical Institutionalism?"

With this central question the dissertation is seeking to address the empirical phenomenon (the decision to join AUKUS) and its theoretical interpretation (history, identity, and international society) at the same time. The main RQ implicitly frames AUKUS as a strategic event and as a manifestation of deeper historical and institutional continuities.

Australia's decision to join AUKUS in 2021 can only be meaningfully grasped through a theoretical framework that moves beyond conventional approaches, in which realism and liberal institutionalism play a less central role. Although these theoretical frameworks offer useful insights into alliance formation and balancing behavior but fall short of capturing the depth of historical identity and institutional continuity that underpin Canberra's choice. This dissertation therefore intends to combine two complementary perspectives: the English School (ES) of International Relations and Historical Institutionalism (HI). The ES emphasizes the role of global mechanisms of the international society, shared norms, and identity in shaping state behavior, while HI highlights the constraining effects of path dependency, institutional reproduction, and critical junctures. Together, they provide a historically sensitive, normatively attuned, and institutionally coherent framework to account for AUKUS.

1.4.1. Applying the English School

This dissertation draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: the English School of International Relations (ES) and Historical Institutionalism (HI), both are requiring further elaboration. While the English School addresses the "why" of Australia's behavior by focusing on shared identity, norms, and its sense of belonging to a specific strategic-cultural community, Historical Institutionalism explains the "how" of continuity by tracing how past alliances and political decisions structure present choices and render AUKUS a historically "predictable" (but certainly not deterministic) outcome. The selection of these specific frameworks to analyze the relationship of AUKUS and Australian national identity lies in the social and normative background of the research topic, which requires us to dedicate a few sentences to the main features of the ES and HI.

This research utilizes three core elements of the English School framework: the concept of "*international society*", the role of "*primary institutions"*, and the tension between "*pluralism and solidarism"*. These concepts are central to understanding AUKUS as a normative reaffirmation of belonging within a specific sub-global society, the Anglosphere. The English School begins from the assumption (outlined first by Hedley Bull) that states form an *international society* when they regard themselves as bound by common rules, norms, and expectations, even in the absence of a central authority (Bull 2012; Bull and Watson 1984; Buzan 2004a; Hurrell 2021). This does not imply that all states share identical material interests, liberal ideas, or human rights practices; rather, they recognize one another's sovereignty and cooperate within a structured social context (Forsyth 2023; Navari 2021). Within such a society, legitimacy arises from conformity to historically established patterns of state behavior, which provide both predictability and reassurance. These patterns are embodied in what Buzan has termed *primary institutions* (durable, widely recognized practices rooted in shared values and long-standing norms) (Brems Knudsen and Navari 2019; Buzan 2014a; Navari 2011). They are not created by treaties or imposed by formal organizations but emerge organically over time through repeated interactions.

Primary institutions thus give meaning and structure to international society by defining what constitutes legitimate behavior among its members. For example, sovereignty, diplomacy, and great-power management are classical primary institutions of the global order, within the Anglosphere, these have been historically reinforced by exclusive practices such as intelligence-sharing (Five Eyes), military interoperability (ANZUS), and shared legal-political traditions.

Finally, the English School's pluralism–solidarism debate provides an additional lens for interpreting AUKUS and the wider Anglosphere. Whereas pluralist arrangements tolerate diversity of norms and values, solidarist societies demand closer identity and value convergence (Buzan 2014b). AUKUS can be read as a solidarist turn, Australia chose to privilege the narrower but culturally proximate Anglosphere over the more pluralist, heterogeneous Western international society. In this sense, the pact is not only an alliance but also an identity statement, reaffirming Australia's role within a solidarist community of English-speaking states.

In this dissertation, "international society" is understood in the sense as Hedley Bull used, a global community of states that, despite operating in an anarchic international system (without any central authority), agree upon common rules and institutions to manage their interactions.

(Bull 2012; Hurrell 2021; Wight, Wight, and Porter 1996). Primary institutions in relation to the concept of international society also will be used as a combination of Buzan's and Bull's description. Primary institutions therefore in this study are defined as enduring practices (such as sovereignty and great power management) that shape the structure and identity of international society. They provide the normative and behavioral expectations within which Australia's alignment with the UK and US, and ultimately its engagement with AUKUS, becomes intelligible and historically continuous.

Hedley Bull, in his famous work *The Anarchical Society* (1977), identified five primary institutions, namely the international law, war, diplomacy, balance of power, and sovereignty that constitute the basic normative architecture of global international society (Bull 1977; Hurrell 2021). These institutions are shared across most states and define the rules of legitimate interaction. Bull conceived of *international society* primarily in global terms, without systematically addressing regional or sub-global variants. Subsequent English School scholarship, however, has refined this concept. Barry Buzan and Laust Schouenborg (2018) introduced an analytical distinction between *regional* and *sub-global* international societies (Buzan and Schouenborg 2018; Buzan and Zhang 2014). Regional international societies are geographically bounded and often rooted in shared historical or cultural experiences, for example, Europe with its tradition of supranationalism, or Southeast Asia with ASEAN's emphasis on sovereignty and non-intervention. By contrast, sub-global international societies are not primarily territorial but based on ideological, civilizational, or functional affinities that cut across regions. They are often less institutionalized than regional societies yet exhibit stronger ideological cohesion, such as the Anglosphere.

Both layers (regional and sub-global) are relevant to this study to the degree that the Anglosphere (the broader context of this research) represents a sub-global society, while the European Union embodies a regional society closely tied to AUKUS members. Classical ES scholars such as Hedley Bull and Adam Watson treated international society as a primarily global phenomenon, focusing on sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomacy, and international law, consolidated after 1945 in instruments such as the UN Charter (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Buchan 2008; Watson 2009). It was only after 2000, with the contributions of Buzan, Linklater, Suginami, Navari, Knudsen, Zhang, and Schouenborg, that systematic attention was given to the layered character of international society and the interaction between global, regional, and sub-global levels.

This dissertation applies this distinction directly to the relationship between the Anglosphere and the European Union. It assumes that both are integral components of a wider *Western International Society* (WIS), or in older words, the "Western bloc" (Floyd 2021; Narine 2023; Suganami 2010). WIS comprises three core pillars: the Anglosphere, the European nations, and U.S.-aligned democracies across the world (e.g. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines). While often conflated with NATO or Euro-Atlantic cooperation, WIS should be understood more broadly to include Australia, New Zealand, and other democratic allies. Together, these substructures constitute the most extensive and influential part of global international society, shaping norms and practices that underpin the contemporary order.

In concise terms, WIS can also be described as the broadest sub-global formation within the global international society. It is characterized by shared liberal norms, historical ties to European modernity, and a collective commitment to the rule-based international order (Buzan 2004b; Mellish 2024). WIS itself evolved from the nineteenth-century European international society, inheriting its emphasis on sovereignty, diplomacy, and international law, but extending it globally through Anglo-American leadership. Within WIS, the Anglosphere functions as a more solidarist, identity-driven sub-society, while the EU represents a regional structure with a distinctive institutional depth. This framework is crucial to understanding (and differentiation) AUKUS. Although rooted in Anglosphere solidarity, the pact also draws its ideological legitimacy from the broader WIS and positions itself as a defence of the existing Rule-based International Order (RBIO). AUKUS was a declaration of intent to uphold the rule-based order in the face of rising challenges of authoritarian regimes like China. The RBIO, however, is not synonymous with global international society as it is best understood as the globalized extension of norms and practices that originated within WIS. Diplomacy, sovereignty, international law, and great-power management (traditionally primary institutions central to the RBIO) were first consolidated in the Western European historical context. Thus, AUKUS represents both an act of Anglosphere solidarity and a reaffirmation of the Western-led order. This study therefore pays particular attention to how challengers of the RBIO, notably China, responded to the announcement of AUKUS. Their contestation underscores that while the RBIO aspires to universality, its legitimacy is historically rooted in the Western International Society.

1.4.2. Western International Society as a Core Concept of ES

The Western International Society (WIS), as conceptualized within the English School, refers to a *sub-global order* whose cohesion rests on a shared commitment to liberal-democratic governance, the rule of law, open markets, and multilateral institutionalism (Bellamy 2005; Brown 2001; Buzan 2014a). While its contemporary form is rooted in the transatlantic community and its like-minded partners, its historical lineage stretches back several centuries. The origins of the WIS can be traced to the *European state system* established in the aftermath of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) (STIRK 2012). This settlement marked a decisive turn towards a system of independent, sovereign states, governed by principles such as territorial integrity, non-intervention in domestic affairs, and the legal equality of states. Although the early Westphalian order was not liberal in the modern sense, it laid the structural foundation for a society of states bound together by common rules and mutual recognition.

Over time (particularly from the late 18th and 19th centuries), these foundational principles began to intertwine with *liberal political values* and *capitalist economic practices*. The Enlightenment and subsequent political revolutions introduced concepts of constitutional governance, representative institutions, and individual rights into the political vocabulary of Europe and its settler colonies. Concurrently, the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of global trade fostered an economic order increasingly based on market mechanisms, private enterprise, and the protection of commercial freedoms. This normative and economic transformation was reinforced by the *imperial expansion* of European powers, which exported both the institutions and the legal frameworks of the European order to other parts of the world. While these processes were often coercive and unequal, they nonetheless contributed to the gradual emergence of a transnational political and economic culture among Western states and their offshoots (Arneil 2024; Cain and Hopkins 2010; Etherington 1982).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and equality of states had become increasingly linked to liberal-democratic governance, open markets, and the idea that international stability required *institutionalized cooperation*. This led to the creation of early multilateral organizations from the Hague Conventions to the League of Nations which sought to codify rules for the peaceful conduct of relations and to manage the interdependence that industrial modernity had created. The transformation of this European order into a broader “Western” society was driven by processes of imperial expansion,

decolonization, and the consolidation of a transatlantic alliance in the 20th century. The aftermath of the Second World War marked the decisive institutionalization of the WIS through organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, the Bretton Woods institutions, and, later, the OECD. These structures embedded a common normative framework that emphasized the legitimacy of democratic governance, individual rights, market-oriented economic policies, and adherence to international law (Buchan 2008).

In the post-1945 era, the WIS became firmly anchored in a dense web of *multilateral institutions*, including the United Nations, NATO, the Bretton Woods system, and later the OECD and the European Community that both reflected and reinforced the shared values of the Western democracies. This post-war consolidation gave the WIS its modern character as community of states committed not just to coexisting under common rules, but to advancing a particular vision of political legitimacy, economic organization, and cooperative problem-solving on a global scale.

If we accept this model of international order provided by the English School, we also need to consider a few flaws that comes with the theory. First, despite its analytical utility, the WIS is not an easily operationalizable category. Membership is not determined by geography, ethnicity, or religion, and the boundaries of the WIS are inherently fluid. WIS is mostly understood in the ES as a normative community of western democracies which is institutionalized by the organizations of the current US-led world order (the so-called Rule-based International Order). While it is historically rooted in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, the contemporary composition of WIS extends beyond "white" or "Christian" nations to include non-Western liberal democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Israel. In practice, two factors tend to define inclusion, the adoption of liberal-democratic political systems and integration into the US-led alliance and partnership network. This means that belonging to the WIS is as much about *political alignment* and *strategic affiliation* as it is about shared values or institutional participation (Friedner Parrat 2017; Gong 1984).

In this sense Australia's integration into the WIS was both structural and cultural. Structurally, as a dominion of the British Empire, Australia inherited the political institutions, legal traditions, and strategic culture of the colonizer Great Britain. The Westminster parliamentary system, common law, and a market-oriented economy embedded Australia within the normative framework of the WIS from the outset. Culturally, its identity as an Anglo-Celtic settler society reinforced its affinity with the values and worldviews of the Western

democracies. In fact, the British Empire (much like other European imperial powers) sought to replicate, wherever possible, the model it had established in its white settler colonies. The underlying objective was to transplant European populations, institutions, and cultural frameworks onto territories deemed *uninhabited*, sparsely populated, or considered "uncivilized" by imperial standards, thereby creating new nations in the European mould (Bashford 2013; Chafer 2017; Clapton 2017; Ferguson 2004). In the imperial imagination, this was not simply an exercise in governance or trade, as one of the theoretical founders of the English School, Gerrit Gong claimed it was a civilizational project aimed at permanently transforming vast swathes of the globe into extensions of European society (Gong 1984).

If such an endeavour had been carried through to its logical conclusion, it would have required centuries to complete, entailed the deaths of millions, and brought about the erasure of countless Indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions (the cumulative product of thousands of years of history). The social and demographic engineering necessary for such transformation would have involved forced migration, displacement, and the systemic imposition of foreign legal, political, and economic systems on local populations. Yet in the imperial worldview of the 18th and 19th centuries, such a process was seen as both inevitable and desirable, a supposed march towards "progress" and "civilization" framed within the ethnocentric ideologies of the time (Etherington 1982). Had it been realized in full, this vision would have resulted in a world in which many more of today's independent states (possibly stretching across Africa, Asia, and the Pacific) would share the institutional and normative characteristics of the Western International Society. This would have meant not only integration into liberal-democratic governance structures and market economies but also alignment within the broader strategic and cultural framework of what is today termed the WIS.

1.4.3. The Rule-Based International Order as the Institutional Framework of the WIS in the English School

After the Second World War, Australia deepened its integration into the emerging Rule-Based International Order (RBIO) (the institutional embodiment of the Western International Society) by embedding itself in all three of its foundational pillars (International Crisis Group 2021; Jain et al. 2019; Narine 2023).

1. *Politically and legally* Australia became a founding member of the United Nations, thereby committing to the codified principles of sovereignty, peaceful dispute settlement, and collective security.

2. *Economically*, it joined the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and World Bank), aligning itself with the liberal economic framework of open markets, monetary stability, and cooperative development.

3. *In security terms*, it entered the ANZUS Treaty with the United States and New Zealand, binding itself to the US-led alliance system that underpins much of the RBIO's enforcement capacity.

Together, these political, economic, and security commitments anchored Australia at the very core of the post-war liberal order and gave Canberra both the legitimacy and the institutional channels to shape, defend, and benefit from the RBIO. This alignment was not merely a strategic necessity but also a reflection of shared political values and mutual recognition within the WIS. By the late 20th century, Australia had established itself as a reliable middle power within the WIS, committed to upholding the rule-based order while engaging in regionally focused diplomacy. This position gave Canberra both legitimacy and influence in multilateral forums, but it also created enduring expectations from itself and from its allies to defend and promote the norms and institutions of the WIS in the face of rising alternative models of order.

Within the English School framework, the relationship between what some scholars call the Western International Society (WIS) and the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO) is not without controversy. The WIS is a relatively recent conceptual innovation, most explicitly articulated by Buzan and Schouenborg, and it has yet to achieve broad consensus within the English School community. Many prominent ES scholars do not employ the term at all, while others question its analytical precision and practical utility. Where it is used, the WIS is generally presented as a *sub-global normative community* grounded in shared liberal-democratic values, whereas the RBIO is seen as its *institutionalized framework*. Although the two are closely related, they remain analytically distinct as the WIS refers primarily to a normative order underpinned by "primary institutions" such as sovereignty, diplomacy, and human rights, while the RBIO embodies these principles through "secondary institutions" codified rules, legal regimes, and formal organizations that regulate state behaviour (Brems

Knudsen and Navari 2019; Friedner Parrat 2017; Spandler 2015). The WIS refers to a *sub-global normative community* bound together by shared political values and common understandings about legitimate state behaviour. Its cohesion rests on primary institutions, the deep-seated, historically evolved norms and practices that structure relations among its members (Basu-Mellish 2024; Floyd 2021). These include sovereignty, diplomacy, the balance of power, international law, great power management, and, in the case of the WIS specifically, liberal democracy, open markets, human rights, and multilateral cooperation. These norms are not codified in a single legal text but are embedded in the collective identity and expectations of the community's members.

By contrast, the RBIO can be understood as the *institutionalized framework* of the WIS, the set of secondary institutions that translate these shared norms into codified rules, formal agreements, and operational organizations. Examples include the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods economic institutions (IMF, World Bank), the World Trade Organization, and regional security arrangements such as NATO and the ANZUS Treaty. These institutions perform a dual function as they embody the principles of the WIS in concrete organizational form, and they provide mechanisms for applying, enforcing, and adapting those principles in response to changing international circumstances. This distinction matters because while the WIS provides the *normative rationale* for collective action, the RBIO supplies the *procedural machinery* for implementing it. In practice, membership in the WIS is determined less by geography than by adherence to its liberal-democratic norms and acceptance of its institutional commitments, a category that encompasses not only the traditional Euro-Atlantic states but also non-Western liberal democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Israel. For Australia, this dual embeddedness in both the normative community of the WIS and the formal structures of the RBIO has been central to its identity as a middle power and to its ability to exercise influence within the broader international system.

However, even setting aside debates over the WIS label, the RBIO itself is far from a monolithic or tightly integrated entity. It is best understood as a relatively loose framework within which multiple, sometimes competing, strategic and political interests coexist. Within this order, several distinct constellations can be identified (Beeson and A. Chubb 2021; Narine 2023; Strating 2023). The *continental European powers* pursue interests that are not always aligned with those of Washington, as illustrated by the nuanced and sometimes hesitant European approach to the Russia–Ukraine war (a stance that can diverge markedly from US

strategic priorities) (Brinkel and Sellmeijer 2024; Noll and de Laat 2024). The *Anglosphere*, centered on the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), forms the most politically integrated and identity-cohesive grouping within the RBIO, sharing not only intelligence and defence cooperation but also a common civilizational narrative rooted in English-speaking liberal democracy. Finally, there are *non-European liberal democracies* such as Japan, South Korea or even Israel, whose membership in the RBIO is grounded less in civilizational affinity than in their strategic partnerships with the United States, and whose regional interests add further diversity to the order's internal dynamics.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a brief unipolar moment in which the WIS and its RBIO framework seemed poised for global consolidation. The spread of market liberalization, democratic governance, and global economic integration appeared to validate the WIS as the normative center of world politics. However, the early 21st century brought signs of systemic transition, the rise of multipolarity, and above all the ascent of China, all of which posed both structural and ideational challenges to the WIS. China's growing economic and military power, coupled with its advocacy of alternative governance models and its selective reinterpretation of international law, has questioned the universality of WIS norms and tested the institutional resilience of the RBIO. For Australia, these trends have created a complex strategic environment: it remains normatively committed to the WIS and institutionally embedded in the RBIO, yet economically intertwined with a state whose political system and strategic objectives diverge from those of the liberal order. This tension — between normative alignment, institutional obligations, and economic dependence — now sits at the heart of Canberra's foreign policy dilemmas.

1.4.4. The Historical Institutionalism

Historical Institutionalism (HI) offers a particularly useful lens for understanding the RBIO and, more specifically, Australia's path to AUKUS. From this perspective, the Western International Society (WIS) functioned not only as the incubator of key institutions that became "locked in" globally after 1945, most visibly through the establishment of the UN, IMF, and WTO, but also as the framework within which normative confrontations emerged with states that did not share WIS values (Branch 2017; Fioretos 2011; Fowler 2022; Mabee 2011; Pan,

Hosli, and Lantmeeters 2023; Rixen and Viola 2016; Thelen 1999). For Australia, HI underscores how earlier identity choices (imperial loyalty, reliance on Anglosphere alliances, and a security imagination rooted in the West) created "path-dependent" trajectories that shaped its role within the RBIO. The persistence of these trajectories meant that when normative contestation with China intensified, Canberra's most legitimate and historically "available" response was to reaffirm its Anglosphere orientation through AUKUS. In this way, HI not only explains the endurance of alliance patterns but also clarifies how past decisions and institutional legacies constrained present options and made certain identity-based alignments appear natural or "inevitable".

HI operates through three main factors as follows:

1. **Path-dependence**: Path dependence refers to the idea that initial institutional choices or events create trajectories that are difficult to reverse, even if the original conditions that justified them no longer exist. This is due to the "stickiness" and high changing costs of established practices and institutions. Path dependence in this research helps to explain why Australia's strategic alignment with Anglosphere powers (primarily the US and UK) continues despite changing global conditions, without falling into the trap of historical determinism.
2. **Critical junctures**: Critical junctures are moments of institutional fluidity during which significant change becomes possible (but not necessary) even if there is a path-dependence due to shocks, crises, or transitions, after which a new institutional path is "locked in." The AUKUS announcement (2021) can represent a critical juncture**,** a moment when **e**xternal pressures created a window for significant institutional innovation.
3. **Institutional reproduction**: Institutional reproduction refers to the processes through which institutions (even primary institutions) persist and maintain stability over time, without formal enforcement mechanisms. The English School is well-suited to explaining how international societies sustain themselves through shared norms and institutions. HI in this manner helps to explain how this reproduction occurs across time, particularly in Western-centered normative orders.

We need to make a couple of footnotes to the above-mentioned categories. First of all, path dependency has a crucial importance when the RBIO comes to the table, since it is not a value-neutral setup of the Global International Society (GIS). Not all members of international society

perceive its rules as equally beneficial, as the RBIO reflects the West's unique path of modernization and therefore carries inherent potential for tensions over values and norms as the example of Russia or China illustrates. For Australia, this mattered profoundly as its integration into the RBIO was not simply about strategic calculation but about anchoring its identity within an order that privileged Anglo-American traditions and institutions. This made Australia's alignment through AUKUS less an opportunistic choice and more a reaffirmation of its historically embedded identity path.

Second, HI and ES institutions must be clearly distinguished. While the English School conceptualizes institutions as shared norms and practices that sustain international society (primary institutions), Historical Institutionalism focuses on the formal and informal rules, norms, and organizational routines that structure state behavior and political decision-making *(Mabee 2011; Thelen 1999)*. This dissertation does not apply the two definitions of "institutions" interchangeably. Instead, it combines them as HI traces how these norms are historically embedded and reproduced, while the ES explains their constitutive role in international society. In the Australian case, this dual approach helps clarify why institutions such as ANZUS or Five Eyes carried not only functional security value but also deep symbolic legitimacy rooted in Anglosphere identity.

Third, HI's emphasis on sequencing and temporal causality also informs the methodological design of this dissertation, which heavily relies on the Australian experience of foreign policy history. The "periodization" of Australia's foreign policy alignment (from the British Empire through ANZUS to AUKUS) follows the HI logic of punctuated continuity, where change is understood not as a radical break but as a layering upon pre-existing institutional frameworks. The Australian trajectory thus exemplifies how inherited identity commitments constrained the menu of available options. While regional engagement or neutrality were possible alternatives, they never gained comparable traction because they lacked the institutional continuity and historical resonance that Anglosphere alignment provided. AUKUS, in this sense, is intelligible as the latest institutional expression of a long-standing path dependency in Australian strategic culture.

1.4.5. Applied Terminologies

This dissertation uses terminologies that are all extensively detailed and explained in the main argumentation of this study but still it is worth shortly clarifying the meaning of the most

important ones. This section serves only the purpose of transparency and provides a short glossary of definitions:

1. Anglosphere: A geopolitical and cultural term referring to those English-speaking countries with shared historical roots in British colonization and liberal-democratic values, that perceive themselves a member of this category. We understand most commonly Australia, the US, Canada, and New Zealand and UK under core members of this category.

2. European International Society: The European International Society (EIS) refers to the historical origin of modern international society, the 18th–19th century European state system, which institutionalized norms like: Sovereignty, Diplomacy, Balance of power or International law and War (the main primary institutions outlined by Hedley Bull). EIS served as the "blueprint" for what later expanded into the Global International Society (GIS), especially after the end of the Second World War, decolonization, and the UN Charter.

3. Anglo-Celtic: It is a sociological or ethnic term used in Australia to describe people of British and Irish (Celtic) descent. This dissertation utilizes this terminology when Australian national identity or British ancestry comes to the table especially in relation to the concept of White Australia.

4. Anglo-Saxon: This dissertation attempts to limit the usage of this terminology as it historically refers to early medieval ethnic groups in England; politically, sometimes (especially in Europe) used to describe a particular model of capitalism or Western liberalism. But in IR, this term is increasingly outdated, sometimes seen as Eurocentric or racialized, and best avoided unless in historical/critical usage.

5. Western International Society: The Western International Society (WIS) is treated in this study as a sub-global international society that evolved from the European one, expanding after World War II to include not only European states but also the Anglosphere (Australia, the UK, the US, Canada, and New Zealand) and key U.S.-aligned democracies such as Japan and South Korea. WIS is characterized by its normative cohesion around liberal democracy, market capitalism, rule of law, multilateral cooperation, and institutionalized alliance structures such as NATO and AUKUS.

6. Rule-based International Order: The Rule-Based International Order (RBIO**)** is understood as the globalized extension of WIS norms, promoted through international institutions like the UN, IMF, and WTO. While formally inclusive, the RBIO is normatively anchored in Western liberal values and disproportionately shaped by WIS members. This dissertation views WIS as the ideological and institutional core of the RBIO, and AUKUS as one of its latest strategic manifestations.

7. ANZUS: The security treaty signed in 1951 between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, which institutionalized Australia's post–World War II alignment with the US. Though New Zealand's role diminished in the 1980s, ANZUS remains a cornerstone of Australia's strategic orientation.

8. Forward Defence: A strategic doctrine central to Australian security thinking during the Cold War, which assumed that Australia's safety depended on projecting power and contributing forces abroad alongside allies rather than relying solely on continental defence.

9. Fortress Australia: A counter-strategy that emphasized self-reliance, continental defence, and reduced external entanglements. While never fully realized, it periodically resurfaced in political debates as an alternative to alliance-dependence.

10. White Australia Policy: The immigration restriction regime formally introduced in 1901, designed to preserve Australia's Anglo-Celtic identity by excluding non-European migrants. It remained in force in various forms until its dismantling in the 1970s and is crucial for understanding identity debates in this dissertation.

11. Sub-global International Society: A concept from the English School (Buzan & Schouenborg), referring to geographically fragmented but culturally bounded clusters of states (e.g., Anglosphere) that develop distinctive norms and institutions while remaining part of the wider Global International Society.

1.5. Methodology and Case Selection

The methodological approach of this dissertation is designed to examine the historical and identity-driven dimensions of Australia's accession to AUKUS. Since the pact was announced only in September 2021, much of the existing commentary (until the closure of this manuscript in 2026) remains either speculative or narrowly policy-oriented. This study therefore seeks to move beyond such limitations by offering a historically and theoretically grounded, empirically well-grounded analysis that combines qualitative methods with interpretative historical tracing.

This dissertation employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study approach, combining historical analysis with interpretive methodology grounded in the English School (ES) of International Relations and Historical Institutionalism (HI).

1.5.1. Case Study Design

The dissertation adopts a single case study design, focusing on Australia's participation in AUKUS. Case studies are particularly well suited for uncovering complex causal mechanisms that cannot be captured through quantitative or large-N approaches (Creswell and Creswell 2018). By concentrating on one case, this research can systematically trace the interplay of historical legacies, identity narratives, and institutional constraints in shaping strategic decisions.

Australia was chosen to understand AUKUS deliberately. As a middle power with deep historical ties to both Britain and the United States, Australia represents a paradigmatic case of how identity and path dependency shape foreign policy alignment. Its decision to join AUKUS was not inevitable, yet it was heavily conditioned by inherited traditions and institutions (Pierson 2000). Exploring this case allows the dissertation to test the hypothesis that identity-based path dependency significantly narrows the horizon of legitimate foreign policy alternatives.

1.5.2. Interpretative Historical Tracing

The primary methodological tool is historical process analysis, which reconstructs the sequence of events, choices, and institutional developments that culminated in the AUKUS decision. Interpretative Historical Tracing is particularly valuable in historical institutionalist research because it enables scholars to identify critical junctures and mechanisms of path

dependency (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Pierson 2004). While this study employs a historical tracing of critical junctures and sequences, it does not claim to apply process tracing in the strict methodological sense (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Instead, the approach is closer to a historically grounded interpretive reconstruction, informed by the logics of Historical Institutionalism. The methodology combines a qualitative case study design with historically grounded tracing of sequences and critical junctures (inspired by but not identical to process tracing).

Therefore in this dissertation, Interpretative Historical Tracing is applied to five key junctures in Australian strategic history:

1. The fall of Singapore in 1942 and the turn to the United States.
2. The British withdrawal "East of Suez" in 1968 and the end of the "Imperial Era".
3. The Vietnam War and the consolidation of ANZUS.
4. The post-9/11 War on Terror and Australia's deepened economic engagement with Beijing.
5. The deterioration of Sino–Australian relations during the COVID-19 era and the announcement of AUKUS in 2021

Each juncture is analyzed not only as an external shock but also as a moment of identity redefinition, where Australian leaders framed strategic choices through narratives of belonging, legitimacy, and reassurance. This approach highlights how change occurred not as radical rupture but through layering on pre-existing institutional frameworks, a pattern central to HI.

1.5.3. Sources and Data Collection

The dissertation relies on sources below detailed:

- **Primary documents:** defence white papers of Australia (e.g., from 2009, 2016), official speeches (Australian PMs like Whitlam, Howard, Rudd, Gillard, Morrison, Albanese), parliamentary debates, and policy statements by the Department of Defence and DFAT. Texts of official alliance declarations (e.g. ANZUS agreement, AUKUS declaration etc.)

- **Secondary literature:** British, Australian and Hungarian scholarly works on the Anglosphere, alliance politics, the English School, HI, and Australian foreign policy with a particular attention to Australian historiography where the works of Allan Gyngell, James B. Curran, Donald Horne, Stuart Macintyre and Rory Medcalf are indispensable (D. Horne 2009; Macintyre 1999; Medcalf 2020a). Hungarian works from Gergely Egedy, Tamás Magyarics or Gábor Csizmazia are also taken into account.

- **Media and think-tank reports:** Commentary from the Lowy Institute, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Australian Broadcasting Corporation and international outlets to contextualize the policy debate.

These sources allow triangulation between official justifications, public narratives, and scholarly interpretations, ensuring a comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis.

1.5.4. Scope of Research

Within these methodological boundaries outlined above, the scope of this dissertation is defined along four interrelated dimensions:

1. **Identity and historical path dependency:** The study interprets AUKUS not as a technical arms procurement or a narrow reaction to China's rise, but as the reaffirmation of Australia's long-standing identity trajectory within the Anglosphere. By applying Historical Institutionalism, the dissertation highlights how early identity choices and institutional commitments from imperial loyalty through ANZUS and Five Eyes to the War on Terror created path dependencies that made AUKUS possible, intelligible, and legitimate. The focus is thus on why Canberra's choice was historically conditioned, rather than whether it was materially optimal.

2. **The Anglosphere as a sub-global society:** While situating AUKUS within the broader Western International Society, the research emphasizes the Anglosphere as a distinct normative and cultural community. Building on English School theory, the dissertation treats the Anglosphere not as political rhetoric but as an analytically meaningful sub-global society whose shared norms and institutions generate strategic trust. This perspective explains why Australia instinctively anchored itself in Anglosphere solidarity at moments of crisis, even when alternative regional alignments (e.g.,

ASEAN, China, or multilateralism) were available but lacked comparable legitimacy or continuity.

3. **Single case study of Australia:** The dissertation as it was mentioned deliberately selects Australia as a critical case. Among AUKUS members, Australia is the most revealing as it is geographically embedded in the Indo-Pacific yet historically and culturally aligned with the Anglosphere. Unlike the US (as order-leader) or the UK (bound by the special relationship), Australia faced genuine strategic alternatives. Analyzing Canberra's choice therefore illuminates how identity and path dependency narrow the horizon of legitimate foreign policy options and provides broader insights into alliance politics within international society.

4. **Contribution to theory and policy:** The dissertation seeks to advance International Relations theory by synthesizing the English School and Historical Institutionalism, demonstrating how identity-based alliances persist beyond material necessity. *The author of this dissertation is personally motivated to advance the English School framework, as it remains the only major theoretical tradition in International Relations that allows for genuinely historical inquiry. This study not only applies the English School but also seeks to contribute to its further development by demonstrating how historically grounded analysis can illuminate the identity-based and path-dependent foundations of contemporary politics.*

At the same time, this study was designed to contribute to policy debates by highlighting the structural risks embedded in AUKUS for Australia, particularly its reinforced dependency on Anglo-American security guarantees, the potential fragility of its legitimacy in a multicultural society, and the narrowing of its strategic imagination at a time of global uncertainty. This study however does not attempt to evaluate the technical or operational aspects of nuclear submarines, nor does it provide a cost–benefit analysis of defence procurement. Instead, its scope is clearly delimited, to explain *why* Australia joined AUKUS by tracing the historical, institutional, and identity-based dynamics that made this decision appear both natural and to a certain degree "necessary".

1.6. Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five substantive chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The structure reflects both the sequencing of the research questions and the logic of the combined theoretical framework of the English School and Historical Institutionalism since each chapter was intended to build upon the preceding one, moving from historical and identity foundations to contemporary strategic choices and, finally, to theoretical and policy implications.

The first chapter of this dissertation as it was meant to be sets out the core theoretical foundations of the study. It introduces the key concepts and terminologies employed, outlines the methodological framework, and formulates the central problem statement together with the identified literature gap. In doing so, it establishes the basis upon which the subsequent chapters build.

The second chapter establishes the conceptual and historical foundations of the study. It highlights the role of imperial legacies, propaganda, and cultural myths in shaping Australian strategic identity and situates AUKUS within the longue durée of Anglo-American institutional and normative traditions. Drawing on English School concepts of international society and Historical Institutionalism's insights on path dependency, it shows how belonging to the Anglosphere was historically normalized as Australia's default strategic orientation.

The third chapter examines how Australia's identity gradually evolved away from Britain while becoming increasingly dependent on the United States. It analyses the leadership of Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, and John Howard as emblematic figures at key junctures, illustrating how strategic autonomy, regional engagement, and renewed Anglosphere loyalty coexisted in tension. This chapter demonstrates how U.S. alignment gradually supplanted imperial ties, embedding dependency within Australia's strategic imagination.

This chapter analyses Australia's shifting perceptions of China from the late Cold War through the early 21st century, with a particular focus on 2007–2017. Framed through the concept of the Western International Society, it shows how initial optimism about China's integration into the liberal order gave way to mistrust, asymmetry of interests, and normative disputes over the RBIO. It highlights how identity-based anxieties and liberal-democratic commitments narrowed Australia's options for managing the rise of China.

The fifth chapter explores the acute deterioration of Sino–Australian relations from Liberal Party factionalism after 2018 to the COVID-19 origins investigation and Beijing's trade retaliation. It interprets these disputes as a critical juncture that reinforced dependence on the Anglosphere. Internal leadership instability, securitization of China, and economic coercion converged to eliminate hedging strategies and set the stage for Canberra's embrace of AUKUS.

This chapter examines AUKUS as both an institutional outcome and an identity-constituting act. It situates the pact within the Western International Society but emphasizes the Anglosphere as a distinct sub-global society of strategic trust. By analyzing domestic debates and international reactions, it demonstrates how AUKUS reaffirmed Australia's identity as a frontline defender of the RBIO and revealed the narrowing of alternative strategic futures in favour of deeply embedded Anglo-American alignment.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the findings and reflects on the theoretical and policy implications of the study. It was designed to reiterate that AUKUS cannot be reduced to short-term strategic necessity but must be understood as an identity-driven, path-dependent outcome. The conclusion highlights the contribution of combining ES and HI, underlines the broader implications for Australia's foreign policy and society, and suggests avenues for future research on the Anglosphere, sub-global societies, and the fragility of the RBIO.

2. Contextualizing AUKUS: History, Identity and Cultural Foundations

2.1. History, Identity, and the Problem of Understanding AUKUS

AUKUS is often described in public debate as a strategic masterstroke or, conversely, as a reckless gamble. Both framings, however, risk obscuring a deeper reality, the agreement cannot be understood in isolation from the historical legacies and identity structures that have long shaped Australia's foreign and security policy which have ultimately led to the sign of the treaty in 2021. The reality of AUKUS lies in the Anglo-American influenced nature of Australia's political history. To treat AUKUS simply as a technical arrangement over nuclear-powered submarines, a tactical hedge against China or a pure military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region is to overlook the (British-American) cultural and institutional foundations that made such an agreement possible and politically legitimate in the Australian context (Beeson and A. Chubb 2021; Medcalf 2014).

Consequently, the purpose of this first chapter is to establish the historical and identity-based context within which AUKUS became conceivable. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive history of Australian foreign policy (that is taken up in later chapters) but rather to highlight the key narratives, myths, and institutional legacies that continue to shape Australia's strategic imagination. In doing so, this chapter sets out the historical trajectory from imperial loyalties through cultural myth-making to contemporary path dependency. It draws attention to how propaganda, national identity construction, and inherited alliances created the conditions of possibility for AUKUS (Wellings and Mycock 2019b).

Additionally we need to note, this dissertation regards history as a cornerstone and primary driving force of political development, fundamentally shaping the range of possibilities and strategic options available to Australia today. History matters here therefore in two distinct but related ways. First, Australia's security imagination has always been deeply conditioned by its place in broader imperial (British) and post-imperial (US-led) networks. From the late

nineteenth century, Australian elites saw their national survival as inseparable from membership in a larger Anglosphere community, whether under the British Crown, through ANZUS, or in the intelligence-sharing framework of Five Eyes. AUKUS thus represents not a radical innovation, but the latest manifestation of a historical pattern of strategic dependency framed as cultural belonging (Meaney 2001).

Second, identity is an inseparable aspect of AUKUS because it mediates how material choices are interpreted and legitimized not only towards the states of the international community but to the domestic audience as well. Australia's decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines is not merely a military calculation, it is interpreted domestically as a reaffirmation of "who we are" and "where we belong." When confronted with such questions, Australia historically gave two distinct responses (the British-American orientation and the regional autonomy), the nature of which will be examined in detail in the second chapter of this dissertation. As English School theorists argue, states do not operate in a vacuum of material power or institutional coerce alone but within broader networks of international societies that are sustained by shared values, norms, and narratives of legitimacy (Bellamy 2005; Brems Knudsen and Navari 2019; Buzan 2004a). For Australia, that society has been historically imagined as a particular sphere of the global international society, namely the Anglosphere, a cultural and strategic family to which it naturally belongs.

In this dissertation the problem of understanding AUKUS, therefore, is not simply one of assessing costs and benefits in realist or neo-institutionalist terms. It requires unpacking the historical narratives and cultural myths that continue to shape Australian self-perception and strategic alignment. Without this dimension, AUKUS appears arbitrary, as though a middle power suddenly chose to shoulder unprecedented risks in great-power rivalry. With it, AUKUS becomes intelligible as the culmination of a long process whereby Australia has repeatedly sought reassurance, legitimacy, and purpose by anchoring itself in Anglosphere solidarity. This historical-identity lens (though the frameworks of Historical Institutionalism and English School) also highlights why alternative strategic imaginaries, such as deeper engagement with Asian regionalism, or reliance on multilateral institutions have so long struggled to gain similar traction. They lack the symbolic depth, emotional resonance, and institutional continuity that the Anglosphere narrative provides and which through Australia as a nation was born. The choice for AUKUS, therefore, is less the result of short-term strategy than of long-term

historical conditioning, in which propaganda, cultural myth-making, and institutional evolution converged to normalize alignment with Britain and later the United States.

2.2. Imperial Legacies and the Roots of Australian Identity

Australia's national identity cannot be understood without reference to its imperial origins. From the establishment of the first penal settlements in 1788 to Federation in 1901, colonies of the Australian continent spent more than a century under direct British administration. This period fundamentally shaped the institutional and cultural development of the later Australian society, as well as the security narratives through which the newly formed federation conceptualized its place within the British Empire (Bashford 2013). This imperial inheritance profoundly shaped perceptions of belonging and security, while also narrowing the scope for autonomous identity formation.

The most obvious manifestation of this legacy was Australia's "dependent ally" role. As a distant settler colony situated in a geopolitically vulnerable region, Australia relied heavily on imperial defence. London's strategic umbrella was not merely a military guarantee but also a source of legitimacy: the presence of the Royal Navy in the Pacific was perceived as indispensable to the survival of the young nation. In this sense, Australian identity was inseparable from the assumption of being protected by the imperial center (Meaney 2001). This does not imply an absence of serious debate about the future defence of both Australian territory and economic interests. When the federation was established in 1901, after decades of preparation conducted with the active involvement of London, even one of Australia's most loyalist leaders, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, acknowledged the necessity of developing a self-reliant national naval capability. The tension between Australia's long-standing reliance on British protective power and the geographical realities of the continent (most notably Britain's distance from the South Pacific) was already apparent to the founding fathers, and calls for an independent Australian navy emerged at an early stage (Bashford 2013). Concerns, however, over the defence of Australian soil were only partly related to the prospect of direct foreign invasion. This has centered on the perceived need to protect Anglo-Celtic Australian society from sociocultural "aliens," particularly Asian populations. Such an understanding of security was institutionalized through the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 (most vehemently supported by the Labor Party at the time) and a series of related measures aimed at regulating

and excluding non-English migration, later collectively referred to as the "White Australia Policy" (Jupp 1995)

The imperial connection also established a powerful cultural hierarchy between London and the Australian colonies. British institutions, legal traditions, and political practices were transplanted to the Australian continent and imbued with a sense of inherent superiority, a mindset that was reflected in Australia's limited engagement with its Asian neighbours and, over time, in the growing perception of Japan as a strategic and civilizational threat (Tranter and Donoghue 2007). This cultural orientation towards "Britishness" extended well beyond formal governance and into language, education, religion, and social norms, reinforcing the perception that Australia functioned as an extension of the metropole rather than as an autonomous society in its own right. Even after the establishment of the Federation, when Australia formally became a self-governing dominion, national identity remained deeply embedded within the imperial framework.

This continuity was also evident in the social conflicts that characterized Australian society, many of which closely mirrored those of Britain. Sectarian tensions between Catholics and Protestants, class-based divisions shaped by industrialization and labor politics, and debates over moral discipline, authority, and social order were not newly generated phenomena, but rather conflicts transplanted from Britain and Europe. Migrants frequently carried with them pre-existing social divisions, political ideas, and cultural anxieties, which were then reproduced and adapted within the Australian context. As a result, imperial identity shaped not only Australia's external orientation but also its internal social structure, reinforcing patterns of continuity between British and Australian society well into the twentieth century. (Ward 2019).

The deep attachment to Britain created a paradox. On the one hand, it offered stability, protection, and international recognition. At the same time, it also significantly constrained the development of an independent sense of nationhood and indirectly contributed to Australia's participation in two identity-forming world wars, in which the country made enormous sacrifices that ultimately reinforced its sense of belonging within the imperial community. Loyalty to the Empire, ritually reinforced through military participation in various imperial wars, ceremonial links to the monarchy, and the maintenance of racial hierarchies within the framework of the White Australia Policy prevented the articulation of a pluralist or regionally embedded identity (Curthoys and Lake 2020; Gray 2021; Lake 2004). The privileging of Anglo-Celtic heritage thus generated cohesion within the newly born nation and exclusion of those

who were not part of this community, entrenching settler narratives while marginalizing Indigenous voices and non-European communities (Hodgins, Moloney, and Winskel 2016).

Australia's early national identity was not forged in isolation but rather as a derivative of imperial belonging. The reliance on British defence, the replication of British institutions, and the persistence of cultural hierarchies embedded Australia firmly within the Anglosphere long before the term itself entered strategic discourse. These legacies would endure well into the twentieth century, structuring the ways in which Australians perceived themselves and their place in the world, and leaving a lasting imprint on the nation's subsequent strategic alignments. The imprint of imperial traditions was equally visible in the sphere of foreign and defence policy (Babbage 1988; Department of Defence 2009). Imperial strategy motivated Australian leaders to think of security not in terms of the continent's isolation, but as part of a broader imperial network of forward positions. There were of course critical voices, but the doctrine of "Forward Defence" exemplified this outlook as Australia participated in imperial wars and later maintained forces well beyond its borders, whether in the Middle East during the First World War, in Europe and Asia during the Second World War, or in subsequent Cold War interventions in Korea and Malaya. This orientation reflected a deeply internalized sense of duty to project power outward in defence of the Empire, reinforcing the belief that Australian security depended on distant battlefields rather than continental self-sufficiency (Robb and Gill 2015).

By contrast, an alternative vision (the so-called "Fortress Australia") highlighted the continent's geographic isolation and advocated a defensive posture centered on the protection of the homeland (Edwards 2015). This approach stressed self-reliance, the development of local defence industries, and the safeguarding of the Australian continent as an impregnable bastion. Although never fully realized, the Fortress Australia concept periodically resurfaced, especially during moments when faith in imperial guarantees have shaken. Its very existence underlined the persistent tension between inherited traditions of external projection and the pragmatic recognition of Australia's unique strategic geography. The dialectic between Forward Defence and Fortress Australia was itself a product of imperial legacies. On the one hand, British precedents normalized outward projection and alliance dependence; on the other, Australia's distinct geography encouraged strategic debates about autonomy and self-reliance. This duality became a recurring feature of Australian strategic culture, shaping the choices and anxieties of policymakers throughout the twentieth century.

Imperial connections also profoundly shaped the institutional and strategic architecture of Australian foreign policy. The very organization of the Department of External Affairs (later the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), the command structures of the armed forces, and the practices of intelligence cooperation were all modelled on British precedents (Widmaier 2024). These institutions embedded what scholars have termed "imperial reflexes," whereby policymaking was guided by assumptions of alignment with the metropole and the expectation of consultation within a shared Anglophone diplomatic culture (Bridge and Fedorowich 2003). Imperial traditions also facilitated Australia's early integration into what can retrospectively be seen as the foundations of an "Anglosphere international society". Membership in the British Commonwealth provided not only a legal and symbolic bond with Britain but also a sense of belonging to a wider English-speaking community (Millar 1968). This identity orientation paved the way for deeper collaboration in intelligence and defence, prefiguring arrangements such as Five Eyes and, ultimately, AUKUS. Thus, even when the structures of Empire receded, the normative and institutional habits of "belonging to the English-speaking world" persisted (Vucetic 2011; Wellings and Mycock 2019b).

The first half of the twentieth century was, for Australia and the other dominions, largely defined by the search for an appropriate place within the British Empire—or, in some cases, at its margins. Given the sheer size and global reach of the Empire, serious doubts emerged not only about its political cohesion but also about the feasibility of economic integration. As a result, debates over imperial tariffs and systems of preferential trade moved to the center of imperial politics, most notably championed by Joseph Chamberlain, whose advocacy of Imperial Preference sought to bind the Empire together through protected intra-imperial trade. This debate vitalized British public life from the first decade of the twentieth century (Eichengreen and Irwin 1995; Porter 1999).

In Australia, tariff policy had already played a significant role in domestic politics in the early years of Federation, as reflected in the ideological divisions between Protectionist and Free Trade parties (Conlon 1994). However, after 1918, these debates were increasingly subsumed within the broader political cleavage between Labor and non-Labor forces, which came to dominate Australian political life in the interwar period (Bramston 2004). Australia's relationship with the Empire during the interwar years was marked (more so than in the case of several other dominions) by pronounced loyalty to London. This orientation was consistently reflected in Australia's stance at successive Imperial Conferences, where Canberra tended to

support imperial cohesion rather than press aggressively for constitutional separation (Hedges 1937; Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931). At the same time, the extraordinary sacrifices made by the dominions during the First World War strengthened their claims to greater diplomatic autonomy. These demands were articulated most clearly at the Paris Peace Conference, where dominion participation signaled the beginning of a broader rethinking of imperial governance. This process found expression in a series of institutional milestones. The Balfour Declaration of 1926 articulated the principle that Britain and the dominions were equal in status, united by common allegiance to the Crown but no longer subordinate to one another (albeit without immediate legal force). This principle was subsequently codified in the Statute of Westminster 1931, which granted full legislative autonomy to the self-governing dominions. Although Australia delayed the formal incorporation of the Statute into its domestic legal system, these developments nonetheless marked a decisive step toward a redefined imperial order and laid the constitutional foundations for Australia's later assertions of sovereignty within, rather than outside of, the imperial framework.

Economic dependence reinforced these orientations in the inter-war period. Britain remained Australia's principal export market well into the mid-twentieth century, with preferential trade agreements and imperial shipping routes dictating the priorities of Canberra's external policy. Protecting sea lanes and ensuring access to imperial markets encouraged participation in forward military commitments across Asia and the Middle East. The idea that Australia's prosperity depended on maintaining imperial trade flows lent strong economic logic to the Forward Defence approach (Eichengreen and Irwin 1995; Lloyd 2002). If Australia were to become a 'fortress' and downsize its supply chains from Britain, many feared that not only would the well-being of the continental nation come to an end, but its very existence would be questioned. The imperial legacy generated a paradox in strategic identity where Fortress Australia reflected rather a dream for self-reliance and a recognition of the continent's self-sustainability and defensibility than a strategic reality for most of the 20th century. On the other, most of the policymakers were drawn to the notion of imperial responsibility, projecting power abroad alongside Britain, as a means of maintaining prestige, recognition, and membership within the "club" of "civilized nations" (Fidler 2001). This duality highlighted the enduring tension between autonomy and alignment, a structural dilemma that remained embedded in Australian strategic culture long after the formal end of empire (Donelan 1984; Meaney 2001).

This constitutional inheritance was not without controversy. The continued presence of the Crown in Australian politics repeatedly raised questions of sovereignty and democratic legitimacy. Even after the already mentioned *Statute of Westminster* (in 1931) formally granted legislative independence, doubts persisted about the degree to which the British Parliament or the monarch's representative could intervene in Australian political life (Bashford 2013). For many Australians, the very existence of the Governor-General as "Her Majesty's representative" symbolized an incomplete sovereignty, casting a shadow over the idea of a fully autonomous nation (McDougall 2015). These tensions reached their most dramatic expression during the Whitlam dismissal in 1975, when Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed the elected Labor government (Twomey 2017). Constitutionally, Kerr acted within the reserve powers of the Crown, yet the decision unleashed a profound legitimacy crisis. To critics, it revealed the fragility of Australian democracy namely an unelected vice-regal representative could remove a prime minister commanding a parliamentary majority, what did independence truly mean? The crisis sparked not only immediate political turmoil but also enduring questions about whether foreign authority (however symbolic) should play any role in the governance of a modern democracy (Hocking 2017).

In the decades that followed, successive appointments of Australian-born Governors-General and the gradual localization of the office helped to mitigate some of these anxieties (Carr and Jones 2013; McAllister 2001). Yet the Whitlam affair left a lasting imprint on political culture. It demonstrated that, even in the late twentieth century, Australia's constitutional order remained inseparable from its imperial heritage. The 1999 republican referendum, though ultimately unsuccessful, underscored the depth of national ambivalence toward the monarchy (Egedy 2000). For some, retaining the Crown symbolized continuity, stability, and historical identity; for others, it represented an anachronistic relic of colonial subordination and the obstacle in the face of a modern Australia.

The unresolved nature of British legacy ensured that debates over the monarchy continue to flare in moments of political tension. The central question remains whether British-derived institutions should continue to define the sovereignty of a modern, multicultural nation, or whether a genuinely republican settlement is required. As such, the monarchy remains not only a constitutional arrangement but also a strategic symbol of Australia's struggle to reconcile imperial inheritance with democratic self-definition (Galligan and Uhr 2006; McKenna 1996). The institution of monarchy and imperial ideology framed historically Australia's self-

conception as a civilizational nation where as a dominion on the edge of Asia, Australia saw itself as a bastion of Western civilization in an otherwise "alien" region. This belief legitimized the White Australia Policy and underpinned paternalistic attitudes toward neighboring Asian societies. The language of a "standard of civilization," drawn from nineteenth-century international law, resonated strongly in Australian discourse, positioning the nation as both guardian and beneficiary of a supposedly superior Anglo-Celtic order (Lake and Reynolds 2008). Such attitudes extended beyond immigration control: they also influenced regional diplomacy, where Australia sought to act as a stabilizing force in the Pacific, often in ways that reinforced hierarchies of race and civilization.

In this sense, AUKUS can be understood not as a sharp departure from Australia's past but as a return to deeply ingrained imperial habits and a return to Australia's imperial legacies. The agreement reflects the enduring gravitational pull of Britain and the wider Anglosphere, demonstrating how traditions of dependence and cultural affinity continue to structure Australia's strategic choices. Far from being solely a twenty-first century response to the rise of China, AUKUS embodies a longer historical trajectory in which Australian governments have repeatedly sought reassurance in their "kith and kin" connections during moments of insecurity. This tendency reveals a form of historical determinism. While political debates from the mid-twentieth century onward questioned the monarchy, republicanism, and independence, the framework within which these arguments unfolded was still defined by imperial inheritance. The formation of AUKUS thus illustrates how the legacies of empire were not transcended but reactivated, shaping the contours of Australian foreign policy well into the present.

2.3. Mateship, ANZAC, and the Myth of the Lucky Country

To understand how AUKUS is interpreted within a specific Australian context of history, it is necessary to examine the cultural narratives that have compensated for the nation's structural vulnerabilities. Australia has often been described as a state with weak national cohesion, unlike many European countries where a shared history of national uprisings and famous political leaders created a strong nationalistic sentiment, Australia was not forged by revolutionary upheaval or centuries of warfare, nor by great statesman but rather as a settler society transplanted from empire (Bedford and Kerby 2024; Tranter and Donoghue 2007). This lack of

a unifying founding moment created a vacuum in which myths, rather than political programs, became central to the articulation of national identity.

Three such myths stand out as particularly formative in shaping how Australians have come to understand themselves and their place in the world where Donald Horne's provocative depiction of Australia as "*The Lucky Country"*, the ANZAC legend born out of Gallipoli, and the ethos of mateship have paramount role (Dyrenfurth, Murphy, and Quartly 2006; H. M. Horne 2009; Packer, Ballantyne, and Uzzell 2019). Each emerged at different historical junctures, yet together they created Australians a narrative of resilience, solidarity, and survival in the face of perceived fragility. These stories did not simply reflect national experience, they actively moulded it, providing symbolic resources through which Australians could interpret their fortunes, explain their anxieties, and justify their alliances.

This dissertation holds that in the context of AUKUS, revisiting these myths is crucial. They reveal how Australians reconciled dependence with pride, how external protection was reimagined as a marker of loyalty and sacrifice, and how a society with few revolutionary traditions nonetheless fashioned a powerful sense of collective identity. By interpreting *The Lucky Country*, the ANZAC legend, and mateship, we can better understand why appeals to shared values and cultural continuity resonate so deeply when Australia binds itself once more to its "great and powerful friends."

When the famous journalist, political and social historian Donald Horne published *The Lucky Country* in 1964, he coined what has since become one of the most enduring, and frequently contested, labels for Australia (D. Horne 2009). At the time, the nation was experiencing unprecedented prosperity (annual 5% growth of GDP), with rising living standards, secure trade links, and a confident middle class. Yet Horne turned this optimism on its head as his phrase captured a paradox, namely that Australia was "lucky" not because of inspired leadership, visionary nation-building, or cultural ingenuity, but because it had been endowed with natural advantages (vast mineral wealth, fertile land, and a relatively small population enjoying the benefits of abundance). Geography also played its part as Australia was situated far from the Cold War's main theatres and shielded by the presence of "great and powerful friends" such as Britain and the United States, Australia had avoided the devastation that befell Europe and Asia in the mid-twentieth century.

In Horne's acerbic reading, the country prospered *despite itself*. Rather than crediting political foresight or civic imagination, he argued that Australians had stumbled into affluence, protected by circumstance rather than propelled by strategic planning or cultural dynamism. The institutions of government appeared complacent, the business elite unimaginative, and the broader political class uninspired. Australia, he suggested, had never been forced to test the strength of its political culture or to cultivate a deep national vision because fortune had repeatedly intervened on its behalf. This critique struck at the very heart of Australia's self-image in the 60s. Since Federation, Australians had taken pride in their democratic traditions, their social egalitarianism, and their role as loyal participants in imperial and later allied wars. Horne's argumentation questioned whether such pride was warranted. Could a nation so reliant on circumstance, insulated by geography, and dependent on external protectors truly claim to possess a coherent and independent identity? Or was Australian nationhood, as Horne implied, more the product of historical luck than of deliberate effort or collective genius? The questions were (and are) hardly rhetorical in the sense that Australia faces serious challenges in its self-determination where AUKUS might have a crucial role.

Seen through the lens of AUKUS, Horne's provocative arguments received renewed significance. The very reliance he criticized (on circumstance, geography, and "great and powerful friends") remains central to how Australia conceives its security in the twenty-first century (Cheng 2022; Eckstein 2023). AUKUS exemplifies this continuity rather than signaling a break with dependency as it reaffirms the habit of seeking protection and legitimacy through Anglosphere alliances. The "Lucky Country" myth, far from being a relic of the 1960s, continues to frame debates about whether Australia's prosperity and security are products of its own strategic vision or the enduring shelter of external partners. This is why Horne's diagnosis still matters seven decades later as it highlights the unresolved question of whether Australia can ever fully escape the gravitational pull of "luck" and imperial heritage, or whether its national identity is destined to be defined by these inherited dependencies.

The debate Horne ignited also resonated with older cultural myths that had long functioned as substitutes for weak national cohesion. Cultural narratives stepped in to provide the symbolic glue where chief among these was the ANZAC legend (Donoghue and Tranter 2015; Ubayasiri 2015). Emerging from the trauma of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, ANZAC transformed what was in military terms a disastrous defeat into a foundational myth of courage, sacrifice, and solidarity (McKay 2018; Simpson 2010). The fallen soldiers, or "diggers," (named after the

Wester Australian gold rush) were portrayed not as victims of poor strategy and imperial miscalculation but as embodiments of a new Australian character (stoic, resourceful, and uncomplaining in the face of adversity).

The ANZAC narrative thus reimagined Australians as egalitarian and resilient, bound together by loyalty to one another even under overwhelming odds. What might otherwise have been remembered simply as a tragic defeat was instead reframed as a foundational moment of national character. This interpretive move stands in striking contrast to much of continental Europe. Across Britain, France, and Germany, the memory of the First World War became synonymous with futility, disillusionment, and immense human loss (Hunter 2017; McDonald 2017; Packer et al. 2019). It was the "Lost Generation" that defined the interwar years, and cultural memory focused less on collective triumph than on the senseless destruction of millions of young lives. The war was memorialized in poetry and literature as a testament to the absurdity of modern conflict, and national identity was often marked by mourning rather than by cohesion. In Australia, by contrast, the Gallipoli campaign, despite its military failure, was reinterpreted as a crucible of nationhood. Instead of emphasizing waste and tragedy, the narrative highlighted courage, endurance, and solidarity. The fallen were depicted not as victims of a pointless imperial venture but as the embodiment of distinctively Australian virtues: mateship, egalitarianism, and resilience. This inversion of meaning allowed Australians to turn loss into legitimacy, transforming an imperial campaign fought far from home into the symbolic birthplace of national consciousness. Where European societies saw trauma and fragmentation, Australians saw an opportunity to forge unity and pride. Gallipoli thus became not merely a site of remembrance but the cornerstone of an enduring myth that has continued to shape Australia's national character well into the twenty-first century (De Witt 2021). The power of the ANZAC legend according to many Australian historians lay in turning suffering and loss into proof of maturity as the nation could claim that it had "come of age" on the shores of Gallipoli, demonstrating courage and endurance even in the face of overwhelming failure (Clark 2017; Gammage 2007; Hawkins 2015; Scates et al. 2014). This narrative offered Australians a source of pride despite the absence of a traditional heroic victory, allowing the community to see itself as united by sacrifice rather than divided by blame.

Over the decades, ANZAC became more than an annual commemoration of war dead. It evolved into a cultural cornerstone, a shorthand reference for collective endurance and sacrifice invoked across politics, education, and even sport. Politicians from both sides of the spectrum

regularly drew upon ANZAC imagery to evoke national unity or to legitimize military commitments abroad (Peucker et al. 2021; Rowe 2018). Sporting events echoed the "ANZAC spirit," framing contests as tests of courage and solidarity. Even in popular culture, the "digger" archetype came to represent the quintessential Australian, modest, laconic, tough, yet deeply loyal to his comrades (Dyrenfurth et al. 2006). In this way, ANZAC functioned as both a commemorative practice and a civic religion, embedding itself in the very fabric of national life.

Closely intertwined with this narrative was the ethos of "*mateship" the third myth (beside the ANZAC and "luckiness")*. Though the concept had colonial roots, emerging from convict solidarity, goldfield struggles, and bush life, it was the battlefield experience that gave it renewed symbolic authority. At Gallipoli and in subsequent campaigns, mateship was elevated from an everyday survival mechanism into a national ideal (Dyrenfurth et al. 2006). It came to valorize camaraderie, equality, and mutual reliance, elevating the idea that Australians were at their best when standing shoulder-to-shoulder, regardless of class, wealth, or background. Mateship suggested that the nation's strength did not lie in hierarchy or inherited status but in the bonds of trust between ordinary people. Unlike other institutions, mateship very much was informal, visceral, and experiential, qualities that resonated in a settler society still grappling with questions of cohesion and belonging. In a young federation marked by regional rivalries, social divisions, and cultural anxieties about its distance from Britain, the ethic of mateship provided a unifying narrative of what it meant to be Australian. It carried democratic undertones, asserting that all men (and later, more inclusively, all citizens) were equals when tested in conditions of hardship. More than an ethic of friendship, mateship was represented as a moral code: a refusal to abandon one's companion, a commitment to mutual support, and an implicit critique of selfishness or elitism.

Together, ANZAC, the myth of the Lucky Country and mateship created a cultural framework that allowed Australians to imagine themselves as a distinctive national community. They compensated for the absence of grand revolutionary moments or a unifying founding myth by transforming hardship and solidarity into national virtues, although both the ANZAC and the mateship were concepts that were unimaginable without the British imperial legacy. In this sense, these narratives done the work that politics and institutions could not, supplying Australia with a sense of identity that was simultaneously humble, egalitarian, and resilient.

2.4. Propaganda and the Making of National Belonging

Political propaganda and public discourse have long played a decisive role in shaping how Australians understood their place in the world and, more specifically, their imagined belonging to the Anglosphere (Donoghue and Tranter 2015; Holbrook 2021). From the First World War to AUKUS, governments and opinion-makers mobilized images of sacrifice, loyalty, and shared struggle to transform what might otherwise have appeared as dependency into a marker of fidelity and national pride where propaganda in this sense was not only instrumental messaging but also a mechanism of identity-building, filling the gaps of a fragile and derivative national cohesion with narratives of duty, sacrifice, and cultural kinship.

The announcement of AUKUS itself also contained a strong propagandistic element with its the language of liberal internationalist norms (such as "rule-based order" and "regional stability") political leaders deliberately invoked the affective vocabulary of Anglosphere unity. Morrison's emphasis on a "forever partnership" and "family of nations" echoed older wartime slogans like "Together for Victory," reactivating the long-standing narrative of cultural solidarity across Britain, the United States, and Australia (H. M. Horne 2009; Kelly et al. 2021; Pretorius 2016). This rhetorical strategy reinforced the sense that AUKUS was not merely a technical defence arrangement, but the latest reaffirmation of belonging to an imagined Anglosphere community bound together by history, sacrifice, and shared destiny.

Considering the role of Anglo-American propaganda in the identity-creation of Australia the First World War provided the foundational case. Gallipoli, though a disastrous military defeat, was discursively reframed through the official war correspondent Charles Bean, the writings of Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, and wartime commemoration as a "baptism of fire" in which a new nation came of age (De Witt 2021; McDonald 2017; McKay 2018; Simpson 2010). Through speeches, editorials, and ceremonies, the ANZAC was constructed as the embodiment of courage, egalitarianism, and resilience. This was propaganda in the sense that it turned vulnerability into virtue and presented Australia's sacrifice alongside Britain as proof that it belonged to the community of "civilized nations." Whereas European remembrance culture after 1918 often emphasized futility and a "lost generation," Australian discourse inverted defeat into triumph, embedding imperial loyalty within a distinctly national myth.

This propaganda then continued to be there during the Second World War too. Official propaganda portrayed Australia as Britain's faithful junior partner, fighting for "freedom" and

“civilization” against totalitarianism (National Archives of Australia 1942; Widmaier 2024:1). Posters and films showed the Union Jack beside the Southern Cross, while radio broadcasts stressed the moral duty of “kith and kin” to defend civilization together. The fall of Singapore in 1942, however, exposed the limits of imperial protection where rather than breaking the narrative, propaganda adapted Australian Prime Minister John Curtin’s famous declaration that Australia must now look to America was framed not as an abandonment of Britain but as a natural transfer of guardianship within the Anglosphere (Hedinger 2017). The seamless rhetorical shift from London to Washington demonstrated how propaganda could maintain continuity of belonging even amid strategic upheaval (Edwards 2015).

1. Figure: A propaganda poster from 1942 encouraging unity between labour and management of General Motors.

2. Figure: A World War II British propaganda poster titled "Together" depicts servicemen from various British Commonwealth nations, including Canada, India, South Africa, and Australia. Standing united, these soldiers represent the diverse backgrounds of individuals.

3. Figure: A poster of the United States Shipping Board and Emergency Fleet Corporation, advocating that navy, factory workers and army need to work together for victory.

4. Figure: "United We Win," The poster urges black people to take part in war efforts. During WWII, millions of African-Americans moved into new factory towns, where racism often erupted into violence. United States, Washington, D.C., 1942

The visual propaganda during the Second World War well illustrates how the language of "togetherness" was applied across the Anglosphere to legitimize war efforts and strengthen a shared sense of belonging, where AUKUS today utilizes similar instruments. British posters such as *Together* (Figure 3) depicted soldiers from across the Commonwealth, Canada, India, South Africa, and Australia, marching in unity under the Union Jack. The poster not only reinforced loyalty to Britain but also presented the war as a collective civilizational struggle, transforming imperial (and even racial) diversity into a symbol of cohesion. Similarly, American propaganda drew heavily on the rhetoric of solidarity and the 1942 poster *United We Win* (Figure 4), portraying black and white workers side by side in the factories of the wartime economy, urged Americans to overcome racial division for the sake of victory. A related poster issued by the United States Shipping Board, *Together We Win* (Figure 3), represented sailors, soldiers, and industrial workers marching shoulder to shoulder, explicitly linking the battlefield and the home front. In parallel, corporate (private owned) propaganda such as General Motors' *Together We Can Do It!* (Figure 1) encouraged unity between labour and management, framing industrial production as an essential part of the national war effort.

All in all the Second World War demonstrated how propaganda cultivated not only compliance but also an affective sense of solidarity between Anglo-Saxon nations. The emphasis on *togetherness*, whether between races, classes, or nations, sought to naturalize the idea that the Anglosphere itself was bound by ties of kinship and shared sacrifice (Adir, Pascu, and Adir 2021; Chambers 2012; White 2016; Yesil 2004). The rhetorical and visual motifs of "united we win" or "together for victory" thus determined the language of later discourses, including those surrounding AUKUS, where the legitimacy of strategic alignment rested as much on emotional appeals to unity and belonging as on calculations of material security.

The sense of imperial and allied "togetherness" required deliberate reinforcement by Australian governments, particularly after 1942, following the unexpected and traumatic fall of Singapore and its occupation by Imperial Japan. In that year, Australia arguably experienced an unparalleled sense of strategic isolation (Steward 2017). British naval and military resources were overwhelmingly regrouped to the European theatre, leaving Australia dangerously exposed to the threat of Japanese advance from the north. This moment of unwanted solitude, however, proved to be formative for Australian national identity. The central war myth of the Second World War in Australia emerged precisely from this experience, especially after Japanese forces advanced into Australian-administered New Guinea and sought to capture Port

Moresby in order to establish forward positions from which the Australian mainland could be bombed. The campaign along the Kokoda Track came to symbolize Australian resilience and self-reliance under extreme pressure. The performance of Australian troops (the "diggers" as many referred to them) demonstrated that Australia was capable of defending itself in the absence of immediate imperial protection, a lesson reinforced when Japanese forces were ultimately repelled. In the post-war period, state-sponsored narratives surrounding the Kokoda campaign became a powerful instrument of national myth-making. Subsequent Australian governments drew on the symbolism of the Kokoda Track to glorify military sacrifice, consolidate national identity, and integrate the experience of vulnerability and self-reliance into a broader narrative of belonging within the Allied—later Anglo-American—security community.

The Cold War only reinforced further these patterns, embedding them within the global ideological confrontation between East and West (Blaxland, Kelly, and Brewin Higgins 2020; Foster 2012; Propaganda 2013). The signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951 was not merely introduced as a security guarantee but as a cultural affirmation. The gradual erosion of British imperial power, the accelerating process of decolonization, and Prime Minister Harold Wilson's explicit commitment to withdraw British forces from positions "East of Suez" by 1971 fundamentally altered Australia's relation to London and its strategic environment. Together, these developments removed any remaining ambiguity about Britain's capacity to serve as Australia's primary security guarantor and made closer strategic cooperation with the United States not only logical but increasingly unavoidable. Political speeches, commemorative ceremonies, and visual imagery portrayed the ANZUS pact as confirmation that Australia belonged irrevocably now not only to the British Empire but to the US-led "free world." The rhetorical emphasis on freedom, democracy, and civilization was framed not only in contrast to communism but also as a natural extension of Australia's long-standing ties to Britain and the United States (Piccini 2016; Robb and Gill 2015). The symbolism of "kith and kin" that had once legitimized imperial loyalty was thus rearticulated in Cold War terms, presenting Washington as the new guarantor of civilizational security in much the same way as London had once been. Propaganda during the Vietnam War for example drew even more explicitly on these inherited narratives where recruitment posters, official broadcasts, and ministerial speeches consistently linked the unpopular policy of conscription to the mythic tradition of Gallipoli and Kokoda. By evoking the ANZAC spirit, government rhetoric suggested that military service in Southeast Asia was not an violence against international law but a

continuation of the sacrifices that had defined the nation since the First World War (Curran 2014). Sacrifice, mateship, and loyalty to allies were presented as timeless obligations that transcended the immediate politics of the conflict.

This discourse was particularly significant given the scale of domestic opposition. Anti-war demonstrations, student protests, and union campaigns highlighted the unpopularity of Australia's involvement, which were heavily based Australia's anti-conscription tradition. Yet the government's messaging sought to delegitimize these voices by contrasting it with the imagined tradition of unity and endurance. The rhetoric of "national service" reframed conscription not as coercion but as a patriotic duty, an opportunity to stand in the footsteps of the "diggers", the pioneers of Australian nationhood. By symbolically extending the ANZAC ethos into the Cold War struggle, propaganda created a legitimizing narrative that sought to neutralize criticism and anchor Australia's controversial commitment to Vietnam in its deepest cultural myths (Cramer and Witcomb 2018; Miller 1970; Morris and Riseman 2019).

It was under Robert Menzies' Liberal government (1949–1966) that this discourse reached its strongest articulation as Menzies consistently used and utilized the language of duty, sacrifice, and kinship with Britain and the United States to justify Australia's involvement in Southeast Asia, embedding conscription within a wider moral narrative of allied solidarity (Bongiorno 2005; Chalmers 2011; Gray 2021; Howard 2014). By contrast, subsequent Labor governments, particularly under Gough Whitlam (1972–1975), sought to dismantle the rhetorical and institutional legacies of Cold War propaganda. Whitlam's critique of conscription, his pursuit of regional engagement, and his insistence on a more independent foreign policy reflected a deliberate move away from reliance on ANZAC mythology as legitimizing discourse (Curran 2014; McDougall 2015). In this sense, Cold War propaganda did more than justify individual conflicts. It demonstrated the adaptive capacity of cultural myths: Gallipoli and Kokoda could be mobilized just as easily against Nazi Germany as against communism in Asia. The historical language of mateship and sacrifice proved remarkably versatile, enabling successive governments, though unevenly, to present alliances and interventions not as policy choices open to debate but as natural continuations of Australia's identity and its place in the Anglosphere.

By the time of AUKUS (in 2021), the rhetorical legacy of British-American propaganda language became a long internalized element of Australian politics and Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the trilateral agreement in terms of "forever partnership" and "family of

nations," invoking familiar images of mateship and shared destiny rather than purely technical arguments about submarines (DAVENPORT 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affaires Malaysia 2021; U.S. Department of State 2023). Media commentary and political speeches cast AUKUS as a reaffirmation of values and identity which stands with Britain and the United States. It was represented as the natural course of history, the latest proof of loyalty in a chain of sacrifices stretching back to Gallipoli and Kokoda.

In this sense, propaganda operated (and still operates) less as manipulation of the domestic popular opinion than as cultural manifestation of the Austral national self-consciousness. It provided the vocabulary through which dependency was reframed as belonging, and strategic necessity was presented as fidelity to a "civilizational community". Propaganda contributed to the creation of historical myths such as ANZAC and mateship supplied symbolic material, while successive governments reactivated them to legitimize new alignments. From Gallipoli to AUKUS, this process ensured that strategic dependency was rarely perceived as weakness but instead internalized as evidence of Australia's loyalty to the Anglosphere and its role as a "frontline defender" of Western civilization.

2.5. From Historical Narratives to Strategic Path Dependency

The historical persistence of narratives in Australia highlights a deeper dynamic that can be understood through the lens of Historical Institutionalism. Early identity choices, such as imperial loyalty, Anglosphere solidarity, and reliance on external guarantees, created institutional and cultural "paths" that became self-reinforcing over time (Branch 2017). Once embedded, these trajectories made alternative options politically costly and difficult to sustain. In this sense, contemporary strategic choices actively structures and constrains Canberra's behavior, shaping what is politically thinkable and legitimate.

Australia's strategic path dependency can be seen in three interrelated dimensions. First, institutional arrangements such as ANZUS, the Five Eyes intelligence network, and routine military interoperability created material "lock-ins". Having built its armed forces, intelligence services, and diplomatic structures in close coordination with Anglosphere partners, Canberra faced high costs in attempting to pursue a fully independent or regionally oriented security policy (Bridge and Fedorowich 2003; Cartmell 2023; Widmaier 2024). Second, cultural myths reinforced these institutional patterns. Narratives of ANZAC, mateship, and the Lucky Country

naturalized dependence on “great and powerful friends.” They created symbolic expectations that strategic partnerships with Britain and the US were not only prudent but expressions of who Australians were. Politicians who sought to chart different courses (such as Gough Whitlam’s emphasis on regionalism and multilateralism) encountered fierce resistance, precisely because their policies appeared to violate the inherited logic of belonging (Camilleri 2007). Third, propaganda and political discourse repeatedly reactivated these traditions. Each new alliance or intervention was narrated as consistent with long-standing habits, making it ever harder to imagine alternatives. The “stickiness” of these narratives produced what Historical Institutionalists call “*increasing returns”* meaning that the more Australia invested in Anglosphere identity and institutions, the more costly deviation became (Mahoney 2015; Pierson 2004).

The consequence is that AUKUS appears not as an abrupt strategic innovation but as the logical culmination of inherited trajectories which embodies the convergence of imperial legacies, cultural myths, and institutional path dependency into a single framework. Efforts at Asian engagement or greater autonomy have never entirely disappeared, but they lacked the symbolic resonance and institutional reinforcement of Anglosphere belonging. This demonstrates a key statement of Historical Institutionalism, that only “*critical junctures*” (moments of systemic rupture such as the fall of Singapore in 1942, the Whitlam government’s experiments with regionalism, or the shocks of 9/11) can temporarily unsettle entrenched paths. Yet even such junctures often result not in fundamental transformation but in the reassertion or adaptation of pre-existing trajectories (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007).

By highlighting this path dependency, the dissertation advances a broader claim namely that Australia’s foreign and security policies cannot be explained alone by immediate material or strategic pressures. They must be understood within the “longue durée” of historical narratives and institutional inheritances that continuously shape the field of possible choices. In this spirit, the study embraces a form of historical determinism, not in the sense of inevitability, but in recognizing that certain narratives and institutions strongly predispose Australia towards particular courses of action where AUKUS should be read less as a rupture and more as the reactivation of deeply ingrained traditions that have defined Australia’s identity and strategic orientation within the Anglosphere for over a century.

3. Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy (1970s–2010s)

3.1. The Australian Departure from British National Identity

This section serves a dual purpose. It examines the key turning points in Australian foreign policy during the post-war decades, while also demonstrating how external factors and second-party narratives (such as the subject of this sub-section, namely the transformation of British national identity) contributed over time to the reshaping of Australia's own identity. Given its strongly history-driven approach, the analysis applies a combined analytical framework drawn from the English School and Historical Institutionalism. These frameworks are essential to understand how the transformation of British national identity played a crucial role in the renewal of Australian national identity. By the end of the twentieth century, Australia had found multiple new ways to express "Australianism", for example, through putting greater emphasis on inclusiveness and multiculturalism, a critical reassessment of its British heritage, and efforts toward reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples (Chesterman and Galligan 1997; Hodgins et al. 2016; Levey 2008).

These developments were essential, yet they would not have been possible without a political distancing from the former colonizer and an explicit intention to initiate a national discourse on how Australia should be defined and what constitutes its identity. This process unfolded in parallel with (and was closely connected to) the "imperial debate" of the 1950s to the 1980s in Great Britain and other English-speaking nations, which sought to reassess the historical role of the British Empire and confront the moral responsibility that "burdened the white man" for the exploitation of other nations, a responsibility largely neglected for decades, if not centuries (Clayton and Newman 2023b; Tout, Alley, and Strakosch 2025; Wolfe 2006). In this respect, Australian national identity remained closely tied to the British experience. The disintegration of the British Empire compelled its former colonies and dominions (particularly "white settler colonies" such as Australia and New Zealand) to reckon with histories rooted in the colonization of already inhabited lands and in the loyal service of London's strategic and economic interests (Ferguson 2004). This reckoning also generated considerable uncertainty, as the British heritage and the notion of Australia as the "eastern outpost of European civilization" had long served as

cornerstones of the national self-perception (H. M. Horne 2009). After the Second World War, however, these concepts increasingly became the political narrative of the Liberal Party rather than a broadly shared national consensus. Over the longer term, the redefinition of national identity and the gradual distancing from the British legacy helped to lay the groundwork for Australia's deepening transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security cooperation, culminating in contemporary initiatives such as AUKUS.

The "national role" that Australia and Great Britain taken within international society before the Second World War was radically transformed in the context of the unfolding bipolar world order. Analyzing how Britain's imperial heritage, strategic culture, and self-perception both shaped and were reshaped by its relations with former dominions such as Australia offers a valuable lens for understanding the deeper historical background of AUKUS. Historical Institutionalism complements this by emphasizing the path-dependent nature of such transformations, tracing how enduring imperial legacy interacted with critical junctures, including the Second World War, the 1956 Suez Crisis, and the United Kingdom's late-1960s decision to withdraw from "East of Suez." Together, these perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of how shifts in Britain's identity redefined its strategic priorities and, in turn, shaped Australia's recalibration of its foreign and security policy.

The shift in Australia's strategic thinking towards the Indo-Pacific region and the continent's immediate security challenges was directly linked to the gradual transformation of British foreign policy after the Second World War (Asari, Halikiopoulou, and Mock 2008; Braun 2003; Liddell Hart and Hart, B.h.liddell 2011; Waters 2001). British "national role" (long intertwined with its imperial heritage) in this sense proved increasingly difficult to sustain, and Australia, despite its enduring optimism regarding London's future role in world affairs (especially under the premiership of Robert Menzies in the early 50s), was ultimately deemed to find new directions in its foreign policy. This process ultimately fostered closer ties with Washington, not only because many strategic positions formerly held by Britain were overtaken by the United States, but also due to a prevailing consensus among the Australian elite (both the Liberal Party and the Labor) that Canberra could safeguard its vast continent only under the protection of a powerful ally. This alliance-oriented approach to Australia's strategic thinking remained a central pillar of its foreign policy formulation in the subsequent decades and has continued to play an essential role ever since.

The Second World War and the 1956 Suez Crisis made it clear to Australia that London was no longer capable of providing the kind of security umbrella that had once protected its former dominions (McCourt 2009; Peden 2012). This realization, reinforced by the United Kingdom's 1968 decision to withdraw from "East of Suez," set the two nations' foreign policy trajectories on diverging paths (Bowker 2021; Glantz 1988; Gray 2021). While Australia (initially with some reluctance) opened a new chapter in its trade and political relations with regional actors, including Japan and China, the United Kingdom redirected its focus towards European integration, formally joining the European Economic Community in 1973. This shift not only deepened London's cooperation with the Continent, which already accounted for a substantial share of its export market, but also symbolically closed the long-standing and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to transform the Commonwealth into a global player, as envisioned decades earlier by Churchill. The imperial legacy embedded in British national identity receded into the background, giving way to a new Euro-Atlantic phase in which Australia and the other former dominions could play only a minor role. In the longer term, this strategic reorientation reinforced Australia's gradual pivot towards the United States, laying part of the groundwork for twenty-first century initiatives such as AUKUS.

3.1.1 Imperial Heritage, Global Britain, and the Revival of a Defence Community with Australia

British and Australian security interests were historically interconnected for as long as London maintained strategic military commitments in the Indo-Pacific, with Canberra acting as a principal guardian of imperial interests. From the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, this alignment was institutionalized through imperial defence arrangements, joint operations in conflicts such as the Boer War (where thousands of Australian volunteers fought for the empire) and the World Wars, and shared military infrastructure stretching from the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific (Carver 1999; Chamberlain 1982). Although the Imperial Fleet and the naval base established in Singapore theoretically served purposes in times of war such as protecting Australia and far eastern possessions, in reality, London used its fleet to defend itself first.

The Second World War, and its immediate aftermath demonstrated that the "interests of the British Empire" were effectively synonymous with the immediate interests of Great Britain

itself. When Australia, in 1942, faced the first direct threat of invasion in its history, Britain, fearing a naval assault on its own shores, ordered its fleet to remain for home defence (Kovner 2021; O'Neill 1975; Shinobu 1989). As a result, Australia was left exposed to Japanese attack, and until the United States entered the war, its territory was poorly defended and its principal ground forces inadequately equipped. Despite Canberra's longstanding loyalty to the Empire and its consistent efforts to aid London in nearly every major conflict of the first half of the twentieth century, Britain proved reluctant to dispatch meaningful assistance to its eastern dominion once the Japanese threat became a reality.

The year 1942, therefore, meant a dual shock for Australia. Not only did Canberra's primary security guarantor suffer a catastrophic failure with the fall of Singapore, the Empire's principal naval stronghold in Southeast Asia, but Australia also faced the unprecedented reality of a direct threat to its mainland following Japanese air attacks on Darwin. This moment has burned into Australian historical memory as the "dual shock of 1942" and triggered long-lasting strategic shifts in Australia's security thinking and alliance orientation. This experience had two enduring consequences. First, faith in the British Empire as a reliable protector was deeply shaken by the wartime disappointments. Second, Australia's national awakening acquired a distinctly military dimension: the recognition that the country must not only send volunteers to defend imperial interests abroad, as in the First World War and the Boer War, but also develop the infrastructure, industrial capacity, and legal framework necessary to sustain a standing army capable of defending the continent itself.

The next major disappointment occurred when Britain in 1968 decided to withdraw its main forces from "East of Suez" (McCourt 2009; McDougall 1997). This has marked the end of its permanent strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific and, with it, the dissolution of the direct operational interdependence that had long characterized UK–Australia security relations. While the two countries remained formal allies (mutually involved in frameworks such as the ANZAM (Australia–New Zealand–Malaya) arrangement) the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, and NATO's broader Cold War strategy, their immediate strategic theatres diverged (Danchev 2006; O'Neil 2017). During the Cold War, common interests persisted in countering Soviet influence, maintaining open sea lanes, and supporting US-led operations, as illustrated by British–Australian cooperation in the Korean War, Vietnam War (where Britain provided diplomatic and logistical backing), and in Indian Ocean naval exercises (Woodard 2017). From an English School perspective, this was a period in which Britain and Australia still shared a

"national role" within the Western international society, but their spheres of action were geographically and institutionally more distinct than in the imperial era. The imperial defence community persisted as an institutional legacy, but in a dormant, path-dependent form without the constant operational reinforcement of a shared theatre.

It was Brexit (interpreted here as a critical historical juncture) that re-opened the strategic space for a more deliberate convergence of UK and Australian security interests. Freed from the policy constraints of EU membership, Britain's Global Britain narrative explicitly re-embraced an Indo-Pacific role, reviving aspects of its maritime strategic culture and reactivating dormant defence ties within the Anglosphere (Egedy 2016; Gamble 2021; Hayton and Wellings 2025). The culmination of this renewed alignment came with AUKUS, which translated shared identity markers (English-speaking alliance networks, and a common strategic orientation towards the Indo-Pacific) into concrete, high-technology defence cooperation (Bisley 2024; Cheng 2022). In this sense, AUKUS represents both a return to long-standing patterns of partnership and a reinvigoration of the direct strategic engagement that had been attenuated since the "East of Suez" withdrawal.

This process was already visible from the late twentieth century, as demonstrated by Britain's capacity and willingness to project power globally in conflicts such as the Falklands War (1982), its substantial military contribution to the US-led coalition in the Gulf War (1991), and its leading role in NATO operations during the Kosovo conflict (1999) (Givhan 1996; Mello 2014). Alongside these interventions, the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force maintained a continuous presence in the Persian Gulf, reinforcing the image of the United Kingdom as a global maritime power rather than a purely European actor, which culminated in the Brexit referendum. This reorientation of the UK in the 2010s coincided with Australia ending a two-decade-long balancing act between its alliance with the United States and engagement with regional partners, especially China. For Britain, NATO membership, proximity to allied states, and the absence of direct military threats to its home territory meant that security concerns centered on Northern Ireland and border control, while Australia faced with an increasing Chinese influence (Egedy 2020). Brexit, occurred in 2016 as a critical juncture, triggered a reevaluation of Britain's global role, giving rise to the Global Britain narrative under Theresa May (Landsman 2021). Conceived initially as a Conservative political project, Global Britain sought to counter fears of economic decline after leaving the EU and to project an alternative vision for British foreign policy which involved the Indo-Pacific region having critical strategic

importance to London. This expressed deep-seated identity desires, casting Britain as a sovereign global actor in the maritime Anglosphere, opening the possibility of strategical realignment for Great Britain and Australia.

The narrative supported by the British political elite, particularly within the Conservative Party, regarding the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Commonwealth played a significant role in shaping modern British national identity. In British political culture, the United Kingdom's 1973 accession to the EEC was long perceived less as a desirable strategic choice than as a geopolitical constraint, given that membership required the abandonment of preferential Commonwealth trade arrangements in order to participate in the Common Agricultural Policy (GILLI 2019). For decades, the deepening influence of European institutions on domestic policy fuelled perceptions of national identity dilution, particularly as sovereignty was pooled with continental states. British political thought has historically been wary of continental unification, whether under dynastic, imperial, or cooperative frameworks, viewing any such project as inimical to Britain's maritime and global vocation. In English School terms, the EU's solidarist integration goals clashed with Britain's self-conception as a distinct, pluralist naval power with responsibilities beyond Europe (Ahrens and Diez 2015; Buzan 2014b).

Fourteen years of Conservative governance from David Cameron's victory in 2010 to the devastating defeat of Rishi Sunak in 2024 further shaped Britain's identity trajectory through a succession of destabilizing crises: the Brexit referendum of 2016, which redefined the UK's institutional alignment and triggered its departure from the European Union; the Covid-19 pandemic of 2019, which placed unprecedented strain on domestic governance and economic resilience; and the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, which tested the UK's capacity to respond to European security challenges while pursuing a global strategic outlook (Seldon and Egerton 2024). These shocks reinforced existing path dependencies, entrenching the course of de-Europeanisation and accelerating a pivot towards closer strategic and operational alignment with the United States. The landslide electoral victory of Keir Starmer's Labour Party in 2024 did not mark a rupture with this trajectory, instead, the new government explicitly assumed responsibility for deepening the special relationship, sustaining Britain's Indo-Pacific engagement, and consolidating its post-Brexit strategic posture.

From an English School perspective, the announcement of AUKUS in 2021 thus represents a clear line of continuity across political administrations, affirming the United Kingdom's

enduring self-image as a global maritime power and a leading member of the Western International Society. The third anniversary of AUKUS in 2024 was marked by a joint statement reaffirming commitments to both Pillar One and Pillar Two (Asia Society Policy Institute 2025; Christianson, Monaghan, and Cooke 2023). This echoed the maritime strategic community of the imperial era, albeit recast as an equal-partnership defence network rather than a hierarchical dominion system. Britain's persistent perception of itself as "more than European" as a maritime nation with global duties has enjoyed renewed political vitality since Brexit, compelling its leaders to seek frameworks that maintain Britain's relevance on the world stage. The signing of the Submarine Tendered Maintenance Period (STMP) agreement in August 2024 was emblematic in this regard. By codifying joint maintenance procedures for Virginia-class submarines and integrating Australian crews into their upkeep, the STMP not only advanced Pillar One objectives but also symbolically reaffirmed Britain's role as a technological and operational partner in Indo-Pacific security.

In terms of Historical Institutionalism, the STMP and related AUKUS measures can be seen as the most recent expression of a long-standing, path-dependent strategic pattern whereby the United Kingdom leverages maritime power partnerships to reinforce its historical imperial role and project influence beyond Europe. Britain found its foreign policy upon its deep institutional roots, dating back to the imperial era when Britain relied on naval supremacy and forward-deployed alliances, often centered on dominions such as Australia, to secure global sea lanes and extend its political reach. These traditions sharing a joint historical experience, will lead in the first half of the 21st century Canberra and London to have a closer strategical and military cooperation through AUKUS. Even after the dissolution of the formal empire, these practices persisted in adapted forms and the STMP agreement, by embedding Australian forces into the maintenance cycle of advanced nuclear-powered submarines, not only advances operational interoperability but also symbolically reasserts Britain's relevance as a global naval power within the Western international society, thereby sustaining a strategic tradition that has been continuously reinterpreted for over a century.

3.2. Australian National Identity and US Dependency After 1945

Similarly to the evolution of British national identity, Australian self-perception also underwent significant change in the final decades of the twentieth century, although the first signs can be detected after the end of First World War. This process can be traced not only to the decline and transformation of the British Empire (which, until the 1950s, had provided the

principal framework for both Australian foreign policy and national identity) but also to the deepening cooperation with Washington, which ultimately became a central pillar of Australia's national security.

From the perspective of Historical Institutionalism, the shift in Australian national perception after the Second World War was a direct outcome of the institutionalized network of dependencies developed over centuries of British imperialism. The collapse of the British Empire meant only the end of the London-centered structure, not the long-established and deeply embedded network of Anglo-Saxon states. What had been a hierarchical structure with Britain at its center evolved into a more horizontal arrangement. Historical Institutionalism interprets this not as the erosion of institutionalized cooperation between Anglo-Saxon states, but as its restructuring, driven by the gradual transfer of power from London to Washington.

Australia's reliance on British protection was rooted in the structural and institutional practices of the British Empire, which underwent profound change after the Second World War. In this context, Canberra gradually accepted and adapted to the strategic shift towards Washington. This structural transformation of the Anglo-Saxon networks from a hierarchy-based framework to a more horizontal set of relationships coincided in Australia with the evolution of an already unsettled national identity into a modern form that was less British, less white, and less elitist.

The debate about whether Australia is a multicultural and multiethnic society merged with the question of whether Australia is an Asian nation or a distant relative of the European nations (Mackie 1987). The question roots back far to the mid-nineteenth century when the first goldfields were discovered in Victoria and New South Wales. (Maddock and McLean 1984) Similarly to the Californian gold rush (beginning a few years earlier in 1848) Australia (though the federation was only created in 1901) experienced the pressure of immigration in the first instance. In 1851 when the news about gold deposits started spreading a huge number of (European and Asian) immigrants arrived in Australia to take part in mining. Racial tensions erupted between European and Asian settlers amidst the gold rush, as Chinese workers' mining techniques sparked resentment and violence since they applied a more effective way of extraction. The dramatic population increase raised concerns about the sustainability of immigration, prompting calls for restrictions, especially targeting immigrants from non-European countries.

The transformation of Australia's national identity from being "British, white, and elitist" towards a more inclusive and pluralistic self-conception was rooted in profound social and cultural changes from the 1970s onwards (Benvenuti 2022; A. H. Henry 2020; McDougall 2015). The dismantling of the White Australia Policy, formally initiated under the Holt Government in the late 1960s and completed by the Whitlam Government in 1973, opened the way not only for significant Asian immigration, reshaping the demographic and cultural composition of the nation, but to the reconciliation with the native population of Australia. The same period witnessed the formal adoption of multiculturalism as state policy, with the Whitlam administration championing cultural diversity and the Fraser Government ensuring its consolidation.

Parallel to this demographic transformation, the position of Indigenous Australians gained unprecedented prominence in the national discourse (Chesterman and Galligan 1997; Harris, Onus, and Barwick 2023). Landmark developments such as the 1992 *Mabo v Queensland (No. 2)* decision, which overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*, and the establishment of National Sorry Day in 1998 signaled an ongoing process of historical reckoning and reconciliation. These shifts eroded the old hierarchical and racially exclusive model of "Britishness" as the default national identity, replacing it with a narrative of "Australianism" that was more civic, multicultural, and regionally embedded.

At the same time, the strategic dependency once directed towards London was progressively transferred to Washington. As Britain's capacity and willingness to project power into the Indo-Pacific diminished after the "East of Suez" withdrawal, the United States assumed the role of Australia's primary security guarantor (McLean 2006). This reorientation was not merely a matter of military pragmatism but also an identity shift: foreign policy discourse increasingly framed Australia's international role in terms of its contribution to U.S.-led alliance structures, most notably ANZUS, and its reliability as a partner in defending the Western-led order in Asia and the Pacific (Alves 1987). In this sense, the decline of the imperial connection and the rise of American security dependence were two sides of the same process, jointly shaping a modern Australian identity that balanced its British heritage with an American-anchored strategic orientation.

The Second World War marked the beginning of a dual orientation first towards both London and Washington, and later more closely to Washington. As it was already mentioned the fall of Singapore in February 1942 fundamentally undermined Australian confidence in Britain's

ability to guarantee its security, prompting Prime Minister John Curtin's landmark declaration that "Australia looks to America" for protection (Hack and Blackburn 2004; Paterson 2008). From that point onwards, the United States became an indispensable military partner, with General Douglas MacArthur establishing his headquarters in Australia and the continent serving as a major base for Allied operations in the Pacific. Nevertheless, this did not immediately replace the British connection, rather, a dual dependency emerged. Britain retained political, cultural, and economic primacy, while the United States increasingly dominated the military dimension of Australian security.

This parallel structure became institutionalized during the early Cold War. The signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951 formalized U.S. security guarantees, but Australia continued to participate in British-led operations such as the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) and the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in Southeast Asia (Bongiorno 2005; Chalmers 2011; Gray 2021). Intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes network (established in 1946) exemplified the way in which both the United Kingdom and the United States remained integrated into Australia's security architecture. During the Korean War (1950–1953), Australian forces fought alongside U.S. troops under United Nations command, while in Southeast Asia, Canberra often operated under British strategic direction.

The decisive shift towards exclusive U.S. dependence came with the United Kingdom's 1968 decision to withdraw military forces from "East of Suez" by 1971. As noted at the outset of this section, Australia and Great Britain shared joint strategic interests for as long as Britain maintained a physical presence in the Indo-Pacific. This situation changed in the late 1960s, leading to the emergence of an explicit strategic dependence on the United States. This policy of Britain, aimed at reducing London's global defence commitments in favour of European integration, effectively ended London's direct strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific, a process that the UK attempts to reverse from the 2010s. For Australia, the withdraw of British military forces from "East of Suez" created a security vacuum that only the United States was capable of filling. The Vietnam War accelerated this process, with Australian combat forces integrated into U.S. command structures and dependent on American logistics and air support (Cramer and Witcomb 2018; Miller 1970; Woodard 2017). Even when the Whitlam Government (1972–1975) adopted a more independent foreign policy stance, criticizing U.S. actions in Vietnam and opposing nuclear testing, the structural reliance on American intelligence, military technology, and strategic deterrence remained firmly in place.

By the 1980s, the United States had become the uncontested cornerstone of Australian defence policy. The 1987 Defence White Paper articulated a doctrine of "self-reliance within alliances," yet in practice Australia continued to rely on American weapons systems, joint exercises, and access to U.S. intelligence facilities such as Pine Gap and Nurrungar (Babbage 1988; Frühling 2014). The British relationship, by contrast, had largely shifted into the realms of diplomacy, limited scale of trade, and cultural exchange, without a direct operational role in Australian defence.

This reorientation represented a redefinition of Australia's "national role conception." Whereas the pre-war identity was centered on imperial loyalty to Britain, the post-1970s role increasingly positioned Australia as a reliable junior partner in the U.S.-led Western alliance system. This was not merely a strategic adjustment but an identity transformation: participation in American-led coalitions, from the Gulf War in 1991 to Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, became central to Canberra's self-image as an active contributor to the defence of the liberal international order. From a Historical Institutionalism perspective, the shift from British to American dependency illustrates how critical junctures (Singapore 1942, the East of Suez withdrawal, and the Vietnam War) interacted with pre-existing alliance patterns to produce a path-dependent outcome. The imperial dependency structure did not disappear, it was simply repurposed, with Washington replacing London as the primary source of security, technology, and strategic reassurance.

In the twenty-first century, the AUKUS agreement has layered a renewed, though more technologically focused, British role onto the enduring American strategic foundation. While the United States remains Australia's principal security guarantor, AUKUS reintroduces the symbolism of a trilateral Anglo-Saxon defence community, recalling but not replicating the hierarchical imperial model. This dual dynamic, American strategic dominance combined with British technological partnership, both reflects and reinforces the evolution of Australian national identity towards a synthesis of inherited imperial ties and entrenched U.S. dependency.

3.3. Whitlam's Attempt at Independent Foreign Policy (1972-1975)

The transition from British imperial protection to American strategic dependence, as discussed in the previous section, had become firmly embedded in Australia's political and institutional framework by the early 1970s. Within this context, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam

sought to redefine Australia's place in the world in a rather unique way. His foreign policy vision aimed to loosen the structural reliance on great power patronage and foster a more independent, regionally engaged, and internationally responsible Australia. This ambition can be interpreted through the lens of the English School as a deliberate redefinition of Australia's role within both regional and global international society. Whitlam envisioned an international order in which states demonstrated greater mutual solidarity and international organizations possessed not only respect but also a minimum degree of authority to uphold the stability of the system. Within the framework of the English School, this corresponds to a "thick" or solidarist international society (one in which members are bound not only by conventional rules or "primary institutions") but also by the authority of international organizations and by collective action from the rest of the international society in response to rule-breaking (Ahrens and Diez 2015; Buzan 2014b; Kaplan 2018). Whitlam's foreign policy can be divided into three distinctive fields of agenda (Curran 2014; A. H. Henry 2020; Twomey 2017).

Regional integration and "Asianization" (1): Shifting from entrenched British–US dependence towards deeper regional integration through ASEAN engagement

International law and UN focus (2) Pursuing strategic autonomy via multilateral diplomacy and international law, including UN initiatives and the ICJ case against French nuclear testing

Decolonization and moral diplomacy (3) Accelerating Papua New Guinea's independence as part of a broader post-colonial identity transformation.

Whitlam's premiership can be interpreted as a social and political response to the ideational dilemmas confronting post–Second World War Australia, a period in which the former cornerstones of "being Australian" were increasingly questioned. Long-standing assumptions about the nation's British heritage, racial homogeneity, and deferential alignment with imperial interests were challenged by changing global norms, decolonization, the rise of multiculturalism, and the push for Indigenous reconciliation. Whitlam's reform agenda sought not only to modernize Australia's domestic institutions, but also to redefine its identity in a manner less dependent on imperial legacies and more reflective of an independent, inclusive, and internationally engaged state. In his 2007 analysis, the Australian philosopher and political scientist Joseph Camilleri delved into similar question regarding Australia's identity and future place within the global political order and offered an accurate depiction of the nation's historical identity and its traditional place. He attributed features to the continent-island such as

"preoccupation with external threats, the perception of a racial divide between Asia and Australia, the emotional association with Britain, the psychological comfort derived from the cultural and political status quo, dependence on great power protection, and the belief in the effectiveness of forward defence." (Camilleri 2007) These were all features of Australia, as described by Camilleri, that Whitlam sought to replace with an alternative approach, one that was more regionally oriented and less dependent on great powers. Camilleri's characterization applies well to post–Second World War Australia and accurately reflects the conditions prevailing during the Menzies era, circumstances that remained largely unchanged until the 1970s and Whitlam's election into office.

Whitlam's attempt to open up Australia to "Asianization," regional integration, and active participation in international institutions was an ambitious experiment to break with long-standing habits and strategic reflexes (Goldsworthy 1974; Tow 2017). Recognizing the geopolitical and cultural gap that had persisted between Australia and its Asian neighbours, he initiated a series of measures aimed at alleviating the tensions that had accumulated over the previous decade. Foreign policy assumed a decisive role in his premiership for three main reasons, the first being his determination to replace Australia's entrenched reliance on British and US security guarantees with a regionally anchored strategic outlook. Central to this vision was the deepening of ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), culminating in Australia becoming its first official dialogue partner in 1974. This engagement was reinforced through increased aid, regular high-level visits, and efforts to institutionalize channels for cooperation, signaling a deliberate pivot from a purely alliance-dependent stance towards a multilateral, Asia-focused strategy.

Whitlam believed that Australia's future required the confidence and maturity of a fully-fledged regional nation, capable of setting its own independent agenda in world affairs. Whitlam regarded Australia's longstanding dependence on Britain and, increasingly, on the United States as a symptom of political adolescence, a reluctance to assume full responsibility for its own strategic choices. In his view, the habit of deferring to great power patrons limited Australia's capacity to act as an autonomous and respected member not only the international community but the Anglo-Saxon nations as well. Such dependence, while historically grounded in security concerns and cultural ties, had become a constraint on the country's evolution into what he saw as a "mature" nation (one that could define and pursue its interests without reflexive alignment). His foreign policy was therefore designed not only to diversify Australia's international relationships but also to cultivate the self-confidence of an independent regional

actor, capable of engaging with its Asian neighbours on equal terms (Benvenuti 2022; Halvorson 2024; Laurenceson 2024).

Central to this vision was the idea of "becoming an Asian nation" in diplomatic posture, embracing regionalism not as a concession, but as a natural expression of Australia's geographic reality and political adulthood (Huf 2024; Jones and Smith 2000). This approach was symbolized by his efforts to forge a lasting relationship with ASEAN as it was mentioned, with Canberra becoming the organization's first official dialogue partner in 1974. Whitlam regarded a strong and cohesive Southeast Asia as essential to Australia's long-term security and prosperity, envisioning a regionally interconnected and peaceful partnership between East Asia and Australia. His aim was not to replace Australia's strategic dependence on the United States with ASEAN relations (an objective he recognized as neither feasible nor realistic given the region's limited military capacity and the geopolitical dominance of the Cold War superpowers). Rather, he believed that cultivating wider regional connections was indispensable for building a stable strategic environment, reducing the risk of conflict on Australia's doorstep, and creating new possibilities for trade and diplomatic influence. Whitlam hoped that deeper engagement with Southeast Asia would enable Australia to play a constructive role in regional institution-building and conflict prevention, while also embedding the country more firmly in its immediate geographic context. At the same time, he understood that ASEAN's capacity to serve as a collective security provider was limited; his expectations were therefore pragmatic, focusing on fostering trust, economic integration, and cooperative diplomacy rather than seeking a full security guarantee. To advance this goal, his government expanded development aid and intensified high-level diplomatic engagement, laying the groundwork for deeper, long-term regional cooperation.

A second pillar of Whitlam's foreign policy besides regionalization was his conviction that international law and active engagement with the United Nations could underpin Australia's emergence as a mature and independent actor in world affairs (Danielsson 1984). Whitlam's multilateral strategy reflected his belief that Australia could make a meaningful contribution to global governance beyond the confines of its alliance with the United States. He saw international law as a practical means of easing US dependency by working through multilateral institutions, while also providing a legal framework to safeguard Australia's regional interests. In practice, however, the Cold War's geopolitical realities, the limited enforcement capacity of international law, and Australia's modest influence constrained the effectiveness of this approach. While Whitlam's initiatives demonstrated that Australia could act independently and

constructively within the rule-based order, they did not fundamentally alter the structural dependence on the United States (Antonello 2013; Wanna 2007).

Whitlam hoped that relying on international organizations would strengthen Australia's strategic autonomy, enhance its regional legitimacy, and position the country as a principled advocate for nuclear non-proliferation, decolonization, and the Rule-based International Order. His vision rested on the belief that Australia, as a middle power, could exert disproportionate influence by aligning its foreign policy with broadly accepted international norms and by working through multilateral institutions. He was well aware, however, of the constraints: Australia's material influence remained modest, Cold War rivalries frequently paralyzed the United Nations, and building genuine trust with regional partners would require sustained, long-term engagement beyond the lifespan of a single government. A prominent example of this strategy was his coordinated protest with New Zealand Prime Minister Norman Kirk against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. In 1973, Whitlam and Kirk jointly brought a case against France before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, arguing that the atmospheric tests were contaminating their countries' territorial waters and threatening public health (Chen 2013; International Court of Justice 1980). Although the legal outcome was limited (since France continued testing before later moving underground) the action symbolized Canberra's willingness to defend regional security and environmental integrity through the rules and institutions of international society, rather than relying exclusively on great power patronage. Whitlam hoped such initiatives would demonstrate Australia's commitment to principled diplomacy but also gradually foster a regional order in which cooperation, law, and shared responsibility could supplement, though not replace, its traditional security alliances.

A third defining element of Whitlam's foreign policy was his active support for abolishing the remnants of the colonial past (Benvenuti 2004; Davis 2021; Ferns 2025; Linstrum et al. 2022). Whitlam's commitment to abolishing the remnants of the colonial past carried profound significance for Australia's national consciousness. The persistence of British imperial legacies (even in distant territories) implied that Australia had not yet achieved full independence, either politically or in terms of identity. Retaining colonial authority projected an image of Australia as a residual outpost of the British Empire rather than as a fully sovereign state capable of independent strategic thinking. In Whitlam's view, this hindered the emergence of what he considered "mature" national behavior, a concept closely tied to his broader vision of "Asianization" and regional integration.

By accelerating Papua New Guinea's independence, Whitlam hoped to achieve several objectives. First, he sought to enhance Australia's international prestige by aligning the country with the prevailing global norms of decolonization, strongly endorsed by the United Nations (Nelson 2000). Second, he aimed to secure regional legitimacy, enabling Australia to be viewed as a credible partner by the newly independent, post-colonial states of the Asia–Pacific. Third, he intended to reshape the national self-image, transforming Australia from a peripheral extension of Britain into an autonomous regional actor. Finally, he believed that embracing a post-colonial status would contribute to strategic autonomy, reducing the rationale for dependence on the United States by cultivating equal, trust-based relationships with neighbouring states.

The global shift towards decolonization, combined with a growing recognition in the West of both the moral responsibility and the strategic disadvantages of 19th-century imperialism, prompted a reassessment of colonial relationships in a process that affected Australia as well. The global shift towards decolonization, combined with a growing recognition in the West of both the moral responsibility and the strategic disadvantages of 19th-century imperialism, prompted a reassessment of colonial relationships in a process that affected Australia as well. Yet within Australia, this reassessment was far from unanimous (Johanson and Glow 2008). While Whitlam saw the dismantling of colonial governance in Papua New Guinea as a necessary step toward national maturity and regional legitimacy, many within the political and public spheres questioned both the timing and the strategic wisdom of such a move.

Critics in the Opposition, particularly within the Liberal–National coalition, argued that rapid decolonization could create instability on Australia's doorstep (initiating a domino effect of secessionist movements), leaving a security vacuum that regional powers or even the Soviet Union might exploit (Hiller 1987). Some defence analysts warned that Papua New Guinea's limited administrative capacity and fragile political institutions could lead to unrest, which in turn might draw Australia into costly intervention. Others feared the loss of economic and strategic assets, including control over maritime approaches and resource-rich territories. For Whitlam, however, these risks were outweighed by the diplomatic and moral gains of aligning Australia with post-colonial norms. He believed that supporting self-determination would strengthen Australia's credibility in the Asia–Pacific, improve relations with newly independent states, and reinforce its position in the United Nations. Yet the domestic debate underscored a deeper divide in Australian strategic culture between those who embraced a post-imperial,

regionally integrated identity and those who continued to see value in retaining elements of the old imperial framework.

In 1973, Whitlam accelerated Papua New Guinea's path to independence, completed in 1975, bringing an end to Australia's formal colonial governance. While aligning with prevailing international norms and strengthening Australia's standing in the United Nations, the decision provoked sharp domestic debate. Critics within the Liberal–National opposition and segments of the public warned that hasty decolonization risked with the loss of strategic depth in the Pacific. Some feared that fragile institutions in Port Moresby could collapse. The move also became a partisan fault line: for Whitlam, it was a statement of national maturity and a step towards reducing dependence on the United States; for his opponents, it was an unnecessary gamble with Australia's regional security and influence. (Lynch 1980)

3.3.1. Domestic Political Challenges and Whitlam's Dismissal

Whitlam's goals and ideas all pointed in the same direction: to build a modern, regionally integrated Australia that was less dependent on the United States and free from its traditional reliance on both Washington and London. Some strands of post-war political thought, particularly within the Liberal–National Coalition, imagined that Australia could aspire to become a major power on the scale of the United States, a vision justified by the country's vast agricultural land, abundant mineral resources, and the potential for sustaining a much larger population and a stronger industrial base (Hamilton, Nyberg, and Bowden 2023; Lundström 2025; Park and Gunaydin 2024). This belief, however, proved illusory. While advocates of the "populate or perish" policy sought to dramatically increase immigration to underpin economic growth and military strength, Whitlam followed a different course. He envisioned Australia not as a "would-be great power" defined by sheer demographic or military weight, but as an open, inclusive, and regionally engaged society whose influence would derive from its values, diplomacy, and constructive role in fostering stability in the Indo-Pacific.

In his view, social cohesion, multiculturalism, and active participation in international institutions were as essential to national strength as economic and military capabilities.(Rutland and Encel 2009) This gave a basis of Whitlam's domestic policies as well. Upon taking office in December 1972, Whitlam moved swiftly to enact sweeping social reforms. He abandoned the long-standing "populate or perish" approach to demographic growth, rejecting the idea that

national strength depended primarily on population numbers and military-industrial capacity. Although he introduced more liberal immigration policies, allowing for a selective but significant increase in non-European and refugee arrivals, and signaling a symbolic break from the remnants of the White Australia Policy. This inclusivity extended to diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China, which reinforced his foreign policy turn towards Asia.

Whitlam also made Indigenous rights a central pillar of his domestic program, seeing it as a moral and historical obligation as well as a statement of national maturity. His government established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and commissioned the Woodward Royal Commission to investigate Aboriginal land rights in the Northern Territory. The resulting Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (passed only under his successor) granted Indigenous Australians legal title to their traditional lands. This was a landmark achievement, directly linked to Whitlam's broader vision of Australia as a post-colonial nation capable of engaging its neighbours as an equal, rather than as a former colonial administrator.

These progressive policies, such as the liberalization of immigration rules and the opening of diplomatic relations with China—were deeply unpopular among Liberal–National politicians and their core supporters, as they ran counter to long-standing conservative principles on national identity, social cohesion, and strategic alignment (Dehm and Vogl 2022). The abandonment of the "populate or perish" policy not only replaced the focus on high-volume, primarily European immigration with a more selective and culturally diverse intake, but also opened the door (even if cautiously) to refugees and non-Christian migrants. To conservative nationalists, this challenged the demographic and cultural foundations they believed were essential for preserving a cohesive, predominantly Anglo-Celtic society closely aligned with Western powers (University of New South Wales, AU and Levey 2019). Even more contentious was Whitlam's determination to address the historical injustices suffered by Aboriginal Australians. His government treated Indigenous land rights as a moral imperative, directly confronting more than a century of dispossession, forced removals, and assimilation policies.

This narrative clashed with the Liberal–National framing of Australian history, which tended to emphasize national unity and the achievements of European settlement, rather than its costs to Indigenous peoples (Rumsey 1989). By recognizing Aboriginal land claims and initiating restitution measures, Whitlam effectively challenged established property and resource interests, particularly in the mentioned Northern Territory, but also symbolically recast Australia's national identity in a way that questioned the moral legitimacy of colonial-era

governance. For many within the Liberal–National tradition, both the migration reforms and the Indigenous rights agenda represented a departure from their vision of Australia as a culturally homogeneous, strategically Western-aligned nation. Whitlam's approach signaled an Australia that was more pluralistic, post-colonial, and regionally integrated—an identity shift they viewed with deep suspicion. (McDonald 2007).

Political opposition to such initiatives, however, was strong at the time of Whitlam's premiership and meant a serious challenge to the Labour government. The support of liberal-national parties was crucial for Whitlam because the federal election in 1972 got only the House of Representatives under Labour control. The Senate remained under the control of the liberal-nationals and other opposition parties, as the Australian constitution prescribe Senate elections every three years, with half of the Senate up for re-election. The last election occurred in 1970, and while the next was slated for 1973, it was not conducted as planned (Sawer 1977). Instead, Whitlam initiated a double dissolution process, calling for elections for both houses of parliament, which was crucial for gaining control of the upper house. Without the Senate's approval, Whitlam faced significant challenges in passing the national budget, resulting in government budget bills being blocked. The 1974 double dissolution did not solve the situation and the government party gained only a few seats in the Senate leaving the political balance unchanged.

As Whitlam's political career neared its end, his government became embroiled in the "Loans Affair," a controversy that would mark one of the final and most damaging episodes of his premiership. In an effort to secure funding for his ambitious reform agenda (including the Medibank universal healthcare scheme, the abolition of university tuition fees, and expanded social welfare) Whitlam's cabinet authorized attempts to raise substantial loans from unconventional sources, particularly financiers in the Middle East, bypassing traditional Treasury channels (Epstein 1976; Mallory 1980). While not illegal, the opaque process fuelled accusations of poor judgment, secrecy, and disregard for established financial procedures. For the Opposition, the affair became emblematic of what they portrayed as a reckless and unaccountable government. In the already polarized climate of 1975, it deepened the political stalemate with the Senate, hardened partisan divisions, and further eroded the authority Whitlam needed to push through both his domestic and foreign policy reforms.. (Archer and Maddox 1976; Mallory 1980; McKay 2022) On Whitlam's advice a new governor-general was appointed. Sir John Kerr was believed to support the Labour government in solving the political deadlock.

According to Section 57 of Chapter 1, Part III of the Australian Constitution, the Prime Minister can advise the Governor-General to convene a joint sitting of Parliament. This joint sitting, comprising both the House of Representatives and the Senate, forms a temporary general assembly to vote on a proposed law that has caused a deadlock between the two houses (Archer and Maddox 1976). Only once in Australian history has such a joint sitting been convened; on that occasion, all six bills under consideration were passed, meeting the constitutional requirement of an absolute majority vote from the combined House of Representatives and Senate. By late 1975, however, the political climate was far more hostile.

The Loans Affair had provided the Opposition with a powerful narrative of government impropriety, eroding public trust and giving the Liberal–National Coalition a pretext to escalate the confrontation. In November 1975, Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser used the Senate's control over supply to block the Whitlam government's appropriation bills, effectively threatening to shut down the functioning of government. He warned that the blockade would continue unless Whitlam called a general election for the House of Representatives, and went further by privately urging Governor-General Sir John Kerr to dismiss the Prime Minister if he refused. Whitlam, seeking to break the deadlock without conceding to Fraser's demands, requested that Kerr call a half-Senate election—an option that could have altered the upper house's composition in Labor's favour. In a dramatic and unprecedented move on 11 November 1975, Kerr instead dismissed Whitlam and appointed Fraser as caretaker Prime Minister. This decision, made without prior notice to Whitlam, triggered one of the most significant constitutional crises in Australian history, cementing the dismissal as both the abrupt end of Whitlam's reform program and a defining moment in Australia's political development.

The ambitious projects of Whitlam for social reform and a foreign policy redirection designed to diversify Canberra's external connections through a more multilateral approach ultimately fell short during his tenure. While Whitlam's dismissal was not directly caused by his foreign policy, the scale of his reform agenda, combined with deep political polarization and the fierce battles he fought at home, created the conditions in which the constitutional crisis unfolded. The domestic controversies—ranging from the Loans Affair to his contentious immigration and Indigenous rights reforms—eroded his political capital, making it harder to defend and sustain his international initiatives.

3.4. Australia in Asia: From Fraser to Howard (1975–1996)

Whitlam's dramatic dismissal in 1975 marked not only the end of an ambitious reformist experiment but also the beginning of a twenty-year period in which successive Australian governments across the political spectrum sought to stabilize and adapt the foundations he had laid. Whitlam's legacy, both in domestic politics, through reforms in areas such as healthcare and social justice, and in foreign policy, through his commitment to multilateralism endured well beyond his time in office. Successive governments, including the next three administrations (Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating), retained much of his policy framework, demonstrating the lasting influence of his vision on Australia's national trajectory. Between 1975 and 1996, Australia's foreign policy was shaped by the interplay of three enduring imperatives:

1. Preserving the security guarantees of the American alliance

2. Deepening regional engagement in the Asia–Pacific

3. Promoting Australia's interests through an expanding web of multilateral institutions.

Under Malcolm Fraser (1975–1983), a Liberal–National Coalition government restored a more conservative strategic framework, re-emphasizing ANZUS and ideological alignment with the West during the late Cold War yet quietly retaining many of Whitlam's regional initiatives (Dobell 2015; Fraser 2006; Smit 2010). The Hawke Labor government (1983–1991) then gave this framework a new dynamism by linking sweeping domestic economic reforms to a foreign policy that prioritized Asia-Pacific economic integration and the institutionalization of multilateral diplomacy (Bramston 2004; MCDOUGALL 2001). Paul Keating (1991–1996) pushed this trajectory further, placing unprecedented rhetorical and political weight on Australia's identity as a regional actor embedded in Asia, even as the US alliance remained a constant.

This period did not produce a single, unbroken strategic doctrine; rather, it reflected a pragmatic balancing act between inherited security commitments (above all the ANZUS alliance with the United States and the integration of Australian defence planning into broader Western Cold War strategy) and the evolving geopolitical and economic realities of the Asia–Pacific, including the rise of newly industrialized economies, the deepening of ASEAN as a

regional bloc, the strategic significance of the South Pacific, and the shifting balance of power following the Vietnam War (Alves 1987; Woodard 2017). The result was a foreign policy that, while ideologically contested, gradually normalized the idea that Australia's prosperity and influence depended on active regional engagement and a Rule-based International Order. By the mid-1990s, this approach had created a stable platform for John Howard's later policies: the institutionalization of Asia–Pacific engagement through mechanisms such as APEC and ASEAN dialogue, the proven viability of combining strong US alliance ties with deepening regional economic links, and the expectation that Australia could be both a loyal ally and an independent regional actor.

The slow transformation of Australian foreign policy is difficult to understand without considering the even slower evolution of Australian society, which underwent significant cultural and identity shifts in the 1950s and 1960s, emerging in the 1970s as a semi-Americanized society. These societal changes shaped the context in which foreign policy decisions were conceived and implemented. The erosion of the old, white, British-dominated national narrative accelerated by diversified immigration and the dismantling of the remnants of the White Australia Policy altered public perceptions of Australia's place in the world. Between 1975 and 1996 governments treated these changes as given circumstances and not even tried to revers them. The growing Asian presence in everyday life, from education and commerce to cultural exchange, made regional integration more tangible to the electorate. Simultaneously, debates over Indigenous recognition and historical responsibility, especially under Hawke and Keating, reframed Australia's self-image in more post-colonial terms. Economic liberalization and exposure to global markets further reinforced the sense that national prosperity was inseparable from global and regional interdependence.

By the time Howard came to power in 1996, these strategic and cultural transformations had produced a foreign policy environment in which engagement with Asia, commitment to multilateral norms, and reliance on the US alliance were no longer competing visions but established pillars, ready to be reinterpreted and recalibrated to fit his old nationalistic, White Australia-like concepts of national identity.

3.4.1 Fraser Government (1975–1983)

The famous Australian historian Stuart Macintyre wrote in his book that looking back from a distance of half a century, many would claim that Australia lived the last quarter of the twentieth century in the spirit of "self-reinvention" (Macintyre 1999). Australians experienced fundamental changes under the premierships of Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983) and the Bob Hawke (1983-1991). These two governments that led Australia between 1975 and 1991 held profoundly different visions for how Australia should be renewed, yet there was little debate over the underlying assumption that the nation was undergoing a process of rebirth in the coming decades. If Australia was not anymore British and a home for white men then what should it be? This era marked an awakening among Australians to the historical processes through which their nation had come into being. The ever-approaching date of the Australian Bicentenary in 1988 (a commemoration of 200 years since the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788) brought with it both celebratory and contentious dimensions. While the event was intended as a national milestone, it also prompted critical reflection on the legacies of colonization, the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, and the selective narratives embedded in national history. Many argued that a nation cannot be built upon the exploitation of its Indigenous peoples, the seizure of their lands, and the systematic repression of other races. Moreover, the arrival of the First Fleet 200 years earlier did not, in reality, mark the foundation of a lawful settlement of rights-respecting British citizens, but rather established the basis of a penal colony to which convicts were transported as punishment (Millar 1988; Walker and Burns 2018; Warhurst 1987).

These debates on identity, heritage, and historical justice encouraged many Australians to reconsider previously unexamined assumptions about the meaning of nationhood and the inclusiveness of the Australian story (Burgmann and Lee 1988). For many Australians, the lived history of the people did not align with the officially constructed national narrative, an often exclusive, elitist interpretation of the past two centuries. The sixteen years spanning the governments of Malcolm Fraser (1975–1983) and Bob Hawke (1983–1991) were marked by efforts to address the pressing question of how to preserve the cohesion of Australian society when a significant minority viewed the nation's very foundation as an act of aggressive invasion against its Indigenous peoples.

Fraser, a Liberal Prime Minister, sought to balance acknowledgement of Indigenous grievances with a commitment to traditional institutions and symbols, favoring cautious,

incremental change. Hawke, by contrast, embraced a more activist approach, promoting national reconciliation, supporting land rights initiatives, and fostering a more inclusive vision of Australian identity. While their methods and political philosophies differed, both leaders recognized that the growing contestation over Australia's foundational history required a response if national unity was to be maintained.

Malcolm Fraser's victory in the 1975 federal election marked a dramatic and, in some respects, unexpected turn in Australian domestic politics. While his accession to the prime ministership was likely after the unprecedented dismissal of Gough Whitlam, a constitutional crisis that shocked the nation, the subsequent electoral landslide reflected both public disillusionment with Whitlam's government and a rallying of conservative forces (Fraser 2007a). Fraser, who entered the House of Representatives in 1955 at the age of just twenty-five, was among the youngest federal politicians of his generation. His early career unfolded under the tutelage of Sir Robert Menzies, whose pragmatic conservatism and emphasis on stability left a lasting mark on Fraser's political outlook. This grounding made him a reassuring figure to many voters in the volatile mid-1970s, even as the manner of his rise to power ensured that his victory was accompanied by deep political polarization. (Dobell 2015). The Australian political historian Graeme Dobell has argued that Malcolm Fraser's political thought underwent a significant transformation over the course of his career. While in office, Fraser placed strong emphasis on maintaining Australia's traditional alliances, convinced that the nation's global influence and security depended on close strategic ties with the United States. After his retirement from politics, however, he increasingly advocated for a more independent foreign policy, one that prioritized deeper regional engagement and greater autonomy in decision-making. Fraser came to believe that such an approach would not only better serve Australia's national interests but could, in the long run, also benefit Washington by fostering a more self-reliant and constructive partner in the Asia–Pacific.

Following the dismissal of Gough Whitlam in 1975, the historic landslide of the Liberal Party led to rearrangements in Australian domestic politics (Galligan 1984; Howard 1976; West 1976). The Labor Party suffered its worst defeat ever, holding onto only 36 seats in the 127-seat House of Representatives. This gave Fraser's Liberal Party a clear majority (68 seats) and the ability to govern without its coalition partner. Despite this, Fraser chose to maintain the coalition (Twomey 2017). Fraser inherited a slowing economy with an increasing budget deficit from his predecessor which required rapid and swift governmental interventions. The financial crisis of 1973 and the oil price boom seriously damaged all Western economies, including

Australia. The low Post-World-War unemployment rate increased to above five per cent and reached six per cent by 1978. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) Fraser confronted an economic crisis characterized by stagflation. This challenging situation, where prices climbed rapidly while wages lagged, resulted in a 17% inflation rate, a level not experienced in Australia for many years and forced the Reserve Bank of Australia to devaluate the national currency by twelve per cent. (Reserve Bank of Australia 1975)

Amid economic difficulties, Fraser paid significant attention to external affairs as well as advocating the role of racial equality in international politics and engaging with members of the Non-Alignment Movement. Fraser attended the 1981 Havana Summit, demonstrating Australia's interest in the movement and its concerns and achieved "guest" status for Australia in the NAM, allowing for greater participation and influence. Alteration in foreign policy and shift in strategic thinking did not change the fact that Australia was a close partner both to Great Britain with its historical ties and to the United States with its security and military interests.

Fraser deeply believed in the opportunities provided by the Commonwealth and set up a foreign policy agenda that heavily relied on the organization. Historical and cultural reasons were only secondary considerations for Fraser as he prioritized the creation of a new power pole in world politics (Fraser 1975; Mediansky 1981; Millar 1977). It is not a coincidence that he played a crucial role in Commonwealth efforts to dismantle the apartheid system in South Africa by helping the preparation works of the so-called “Eminent Peoples Group” (EPG). Fraser co-chaired the EPG after his term in office, contributed to its establishment in 1985 and helped the work of the Commonwealth delegation to South Africa to reach an immediate settlement, which eventually failed. (Fraser 2006) Australian participation in boycotts and initiatives against the apartheid system however all strengthened the international positions of Canberra by alleviating its exposure to British-American diplomacy, which was rather an unintended consequence than a real goal of the government. Fraser was the last prime minister who believed that the Commonwealth could serve as a primary source of interest advocacy. Later PM Hawke and Keating treated the Commonwealth as nothing more than a secondary platform for negotiation.

Still, both rhetorical and practical steps were taken by the Fraser government to support US efforts. This means that despite the regional focus on foreign policy inherited by Whitlam, he upheld the ANZUS treaty and maintained close defence and intelligence ties with the US. Fraser

fostered good relationships with US Presidents Carter and Reagan and aligned with the US on issues like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the boycott of the Moscow Olympics.

Economic stagnation and internal division of the Liberal Party due to the conservative policies of Fraser brought a landslide victory for the Australian Labour Party in 1983. Fraser shortly after the defeat announced his abduction as a party leader and withdrew from political life. The next thirteen years until the election of 1996 was a period of internal renewal for the Liberal Party. This work has been much earlier done by the Labour Party, which abandoned most of its traditional socialist policies and embraced many market-oriented reforms (O'Reilly 2002). The victory of the renewed Austrian Labour Party (ALP) in 1983 seemed to be an insignificant development for many, nevertheless, it meant the birth of the "third way" and served as an example to the British Labour Party (BLP) in Britain and inspired later politicians like Tony Blair. The British Labour Party one and a half decade later, under Tony Blair, looked to the ALP's experience as a model for its own modernization. It is important to note that the ALP faced an internal identity crisis. The shift away from traditional working-class values created tensions within the party and led to questions about its core principles.

3.4.2 Hawke Government (1983–1991)

Bob Hawke broke with many of Whitlam's traditional approaches, and after his election in 1983 adopted a far more liberal economic agenda. Whereas Whitlam's short-lived government had pursued a rapid, large-scale package of reforms funded through expansionary public spending (policies that contributed to economic instability in the mid-1970s) Hawke prioritized restoring investor confidence, controlling inflation, and integrating Australia more deeply into the global economy. His government floated the Australian dollar, reduced tariffs, deregulated the financial sector, and encouraged competition, signaling a decisive shift towards market-oriented policies.

This transformation was closely linked to his partnership with Treasurer (and later Prime Minister) Paul Keating, whose economic vision complemented Hawke's political pragmatism. Together they oversaw a period of sustained reform from 1983 to 1996, often referred to as the "Hawke–Keating era." This label reflects mostly to the continuity in leadership between the two men and also the shared economic philosophy that underpinned their policies, combining pro-market liberalization with a commitment to the social wage, including Medicare, superannuation, and targeted welfare programs. The result was a restructuring of the Australian

economy that, while controversial in some quarters, laid the foundations for nearly three decades of uninterrupted economic growth. (Bramston 2004).

The Hawke-Keating governments prioritized deregulation, privatization and the creation of sustainable economic growth, unlike the Whitlam government which approached economic reforms from a social perspective with the increase of government spending. Both Whitlam and Hawke believed in the importance of multilateralism and regionalism. The later-formed Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was a result of Hawke's intercession which called for region-wide cooperation after seeing the success of ASEAN. The first APEC meeting therefore took place in Canberra in 1989 November with the participation of twelve countries, including Canada, the US and New Zealand. Initial concerns regarding US participation and the chance that APEC might become a tool of American power projection have paled in their significance after the accession of China in 1991 and Russia in 1998. (Nesadurai 1996) Under the prime ministership of Hawke, Australia was one of the countries that came out in full support of the free trade concept within APEC. Establishing trade relations with China remained a focal point in Australian foreign policy, which was the reason why the events of 1989 and the massacre of Tiananmen Square affected so harmfully the Hawke government. Despite spending years with reconciliation, Australian leadership joined the restrictions imposed on China and Hawke unilaterally offered asylum to forty thousand Chinese students living in Australia. Hawke's decision was impulsive and one-sided, he reasoned that "he simply needed to act" while the government was only later briefed on the developments (Stenberg 2024).

2.4.3 Keating Government (1991–1996)

The ambitious Treasurer of the Labour government, Paul Keating was present beside Hawke from the early years and led a faction in New South Wales holding crucial importance for Hawke. Keating was also responsible for maintaining the fiscal balance and carrying out liberalization (Weller 1985). Still, the main perspective for Keating was to gain the country's leadership without a split in the party, which led to an agreement between Keating and Hawke in Kirribilli in 1988 wherein Hawke promised he would resign after the elections of 1990 (Rayner 2014). Since Hawke managed to win the 1990 elections with a slim majority and refused to step down, the tensions between the two men increased to a degree when Keating turned against the prime minister and called for a leadership spill in 1991 June. Keating lost the ballots and was forced to retreat for a while, but Hawke's popularity had already collapsed in his last years. Economic difficulties and increasing dissatisfaction strengthened Keating's

position in the party and at the end of 1991, he decided to challenge Hawke once again. Keating managed to defeat Hawke and made him resign.

Besides the economic struggles, Keating's popularity was bolstered by his well-created media image. In comparison with the older Hawke, Keating appeared as a strong, young and dynamic figure who is going to be a leader able to rapidly respond to challenges (Morris 1992). Keating took office immediately after the resignation of Hawke and had a well-prepared legislative agenda, including plans for further engagement with Asia, reconciliation with Australian Indigenous people or abolishing the monarchy.

Bramston described Keating as a real "big picture leader" who was not interested in quick fixes or short-term political gains. At the age of forty-seven, Keating was among the youngest prime ministers Australia ever had and only Malcolm Fraser was younger among the post-war period leaders when he took his office at the age of forty-five. He was also the first post-war prime minister who had no university degree, still gaining experience in ministerial leadership providing him an advantage compared to Whitlam and Hawke. (Bramston 2016)

In terms of foreign policy, Keating's attention was divided between Indonesian ties and the APEC. Keating held Indonesia as Australia's most important neighbour and wanted political and trade relations guaranteed, leading to a controversial situation. Australia was the first and sole country in the region that recognized the Indonesian annexation of East Timor in 1976. Keating did not change the official stance of Australia on East Timor even though many human rights abuses were reported. Burchill argues that the good relationship between Canberra and Jakarta was ensured by a secretly negotiated agreement on bilateral security (Burchill 2000). The contradiction between the tolerant attitude towards human rights abuse and Australia's commitment to fight against such violations of international law can be explained by the prevailing interests over principles. Huntley and Heyes underlined the importance of East Timor's example since it served as a wake-up call for the international community, demonstrating the need for new approaches to regional security, and increasing the international pressure on Australia to stop its cooperation with Indonesia (Huntley and Hayes 2000). Jakarta however held a key role in Keating's strategy to strengthen the positions of Canberra with Asia. He believed that the Indonesian presence in East Timor serves not only bilateral relations between the two countries but supports regional stability as well. A weak and internally divided independent East Timor was seen as a potential source of terrorist cells and political turmoil. If

Keating was challenged the Indonesian occupation of East Timor both the bilateral economic relations and the political stability of the island would have been harmed.

In line with Keating's foreign policy, an agreement was signed in 1995 between Canberra and Jakarta deepening further security cooperation. (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 1996) Although the agreement was not a formal military alliance and did not commit Australia to defend Indonesia in the event of a conflict, it raised questions regarding its practical value. It was also highly controversial due to its timing, coming amidst escalating violence and human rights abuses in East Timor. Sukma noted that the agreement was rather a statement of common principles than a real aspiration for the maintenance of regional security. (Sukma 1997) The foreign policy or doctrine of the post-colonized Indonesia was the so-called 'bebas-aktif' (active and free) which was defined by all governments in Jakarta somewhat differently. The annexation of East Timor however was challenged by many in Jakarta claiming that it has undermined the international reputation of the country and brought only trouble to the nation violating the principles of bebas-aktif.

Inflation decreased below three per cent by 1996 and Keating managed to maintain economic growth for the sixth consecutive year with a relatively high, eight per cent unemployment rate (Reserve Bank of Australia 2024). Keating successfully maneuvered against the Liberal Party in the election of 1993 and benefited from the internal division of its rivals. The 1996 Liberal campaign, however, led by John Howard targeted Keating and blamed him for "party politicizing". Howard pointed out that the Labour government put too much emphasis on "social engineering" and served the interests of particular sub-groups of society (Johnson 2007). In the 1996 elections, the Liberal Party achieved a landslide victory, while the ruling Labour Party experienced a crushing defeat, the second-worst in history for a sitting government. This has not only ended a thirteen-year period of Labour government (the longest consecutive rule of the party) but opened the way for a new wave of Liberal nationalism. Both the Howard government's foreign policy and the cultural identity agenda served the transformation of the perception of being Australian.

3.5. John Howard and the Recalibration of Australian Foreign Policy (1996–2007)

When John Howard came to office in 1996, he inherited a foreign policy framework shaped by two decades of gradual consolidation: the security guarantees of the US alliance under ANZUS, the institutional embedding of Australia in the Asia–Pacific through ASEAN, APEC, and other multilateral forums, and an economic diplomacy increasingly oriented towards regional integration (Bramston 2016; Fraser 1975; Weller 1985). Fraser, Hawke, and Keating had each, in different ways, normalized the idea that Australia could be both a committed ally of the United States and an engaged regional actor. The challenge for Howard was not to invent new strategic pillars, but to recalibrate them for a post–Cold War world marked by accelerating globalization, shifting regional power balances, and, after 2001, the disruptive impact of the War on Terror.

Howard's tenure brought a conservative reassertion of alliance politics and national identity narratives, alongside a more selective approach to multilateralism and a pragmatic, often transactional style of regional engagement. His foreign policy reflected both continuity and change: the enduring centrality of the US alliance was combined with a willingness to prioritize bilateral economic and security partnerships, even when this meant sidelining broader multilateral commitments. At the same time, Howard's domestic political discourse, emphasizing Australia's Western heritage, skepticism towards what he called "black armband" views of history, and a reaffirmation of traditional national symbols, shaped how his government articulated Australia's role in the region and the world.

John Howard's rise to power in 1996 had profound implications for Australian national identity. Historian Stuart Macintyre characterized the transition following Paul Keating's electoral defeat as a turn towards populism in Australian politics (Macintyre 2020). Howard's brand of populism was rooted in a deliberate appeal to what he framed as the values of the "mainstream" or "ordinary Australians," contrasting them with the perceived cultural elitism of his predecessors. He positioned himself as a defender of traditional institutions, national symbols, and a cohesive national story, resisting what he saw as excessive political correctness, rapid multicultural change, or historical revisionism regarding Australia's colonial past.

This approach was not merely rhetorical from the side of Howard; it shaped policy on issues such as immigration, Indigenous reconciliation, and national commemoration (Bean 2010; Johnson 2007). Howard often framed debates over the republic, the national flag, and the teaching of history in schools as questions of preserving continuity and unity, thereby tapping into a sense of cultural reassurance for his electoral base. Economically, he combined market-oriented reforms with targeted benefits for key constituencies, reinforcing his image as both a prudent economic manager and a champion of the average voter. In this way, Howard's populism functioned as both a political strategy and an identity project, reasserting a more conservative, Anglo-centric vision of Australia at a time of rapid global and domestic change.

In reality, John Howard was not merely a populist who viewed slogans as political tools, he was also a socially conservative politician who genuinely believed in the importance of traditional values such as family, nation, and religion. Most of them associated in Australia with old, colonial memories of the early 20th century, a slice of history which the country wanted to not to remember for a long time. Howard appeared as a modern representer of such ideas, viewed by many as a sharp reversal from Australia's trajectory over the past decade. Howard himself sensed the anachronism between his thoughts and the public expectation of the 80s Australia when he phrased his famous line in a dinner night of 1986 after he became the leader of the Liberal Party (Kitney 2003). "The times will suit me" (Boucher 2008). This quote from Howard signaled the deep faith of the politician that Australia soon will need ideas that originates from historical experience and relies on unique Australian traditions. Howard needed to wait ten years to have these "times suited". In 1996 after nearly twelve years of Labour governments the Liberal Party has undergone a renewal, and Howard was full of plans just like Whitlam was two decades ago. The 1996 election campaign was indeed rich in market-oriented populist slogans, with Howard deliberately positioning his program in sharp contrast to that of the previous Keating government. Whereas Keating's agenda had placed strong emphasis on supporting immigrants and ethnic minority communities, advancing the integration of Aboriginal Australians, and promoting policies often associated with urban, educated elites, Howard sought to appeal to what he described as the "mainstream" majority. His campaign rhetoric championed economic prudence, lower taxes, and home ownership, while stressing traditional values and a unifying national narrative. By framing his platform as a defence of ordinary Australians against what he portrayed as the elitist and divisive priorities of his predecessor, Howard tapped into anxieties about rapid cultural change, regional economic disparities, and the perceived erosion of shared national identity. (Sawer and Laycock 2009).

Howard successfully tapped into the dissatisfaction of social groups that felt alienated by the Keating government, including working-class Australians employed in agriculture and manufacturing, suburban middle- and lower-income communities, older Australians, and cultural traditionalists. He positioned himself as a champion of the "ordinary Australian," adopting the campaign slogan "For All of Us" to signal inclusivity while implicitly contrasting his vision with what he portrayed as the elitist and divisive priorities of the previous administration (Betts 2003a; Bonnell and Crotty 2008; Darwall 2006). This messaging resonated with voters who believed that rapid economic restructuring, cultural change, and urban-centric policymaking under Keating had left them behind. As political scientist Anne Tiernan Wear observed in her 2008 analysis, Howard's populism was not merely an electoral strategy but a defining and enduring feature of his governance (Wear 2008). Once in office, he continued to frame political debates in terms of defending mainstream values against perceived elite agendas—whether on issues of immigration, national security, industrial relations, or historical interpretation. This sustained use of populist framing allowed Howard to consolidate his political base, maintain high approval ratings through much of his tenure, and shape national discourse around a more conservative, Anglo-centric vision of Australian identity. Wear is right in the way that Howard indeed justified his ideas with the interests of the "mainstream Australians" and repeatedly referred to the interest of the social majority, which ultimately led not exclusively to a victory of the Liberal-National coalition in 1996, but the neglection of aboriginals for a decade.

In a broader context, Australia was not unique in facing these challenges in the mid-1990s, it shared many of the same pressures experienced by other democratic, post-war welfare states.. Like his predecessors, Howard sought to address these questions, although often through markedly different and more conservative approaches. On immigration, he placed strong emphasis on introducing a revised and more selective agenda, framing it as necessary to maintain social cohesion and national security. This stance was motivated in part by public discontent over the scale and composition of immigration during the preceding decades, particularly in relation to Asian immigration following the dismantling of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s. Howard's rhetoric presented selective immigration as a way to preserve cultural stability while still meeting economic needs, a framing that both reflected and reinforced debates over multiculturalism, national identity, and Australia's future demographic profile. (Tran, Guo, and Huang 2020). The composition of Australia's population, however irreversibly lost its original "Anglo-Celtic" being after the White Australia policy was officially

dismantled by the Whitlam government in 1973, opening the way for legal immigration (Jupp 1995). Howard, however, never wanted to restore a racially discriminative immigration system but wanted to preserve the sympathy of anti-migration voters.

Since most immigrants came from China, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, the question of border control and migration became an integral part of Australia's future relationship with the region (Betts 2003b). A racially discriminative regime would have indeed damaged the good relations with neighbours like Indonesia or the more distant Japan. Howard, therefore, initiated a more strict but racially non-discriminative criteria system, where English-speaking immigrants with work experience were favored. We need to note that a significant proportion of Asian immigrants did not speak English and were unexperienced in work, giving European and North American immigrants a decisive advantage. Still, Howard effectively responded to criticism regarding the new law's "anti-Asian" side with the case of Hong Kong and Singapore or Malaysia. The former British colonies had a highly educated English-speaking workforce pool where many sought to move into Australia.

The relation to Asian nations was also subject to change under Howard. Australia saw a shift in its traditional Anglo-American ties since Whitlam initiated a multilateral and regional approach to the country, which was adopted by later governments as well. Howard, however, had other ideas about Australia's future and conceived a country that prioritized bilateralism instead of cooperating with the UN and other IGOs in the name of national interests. Howard did not question Australia's need for regional cooperation. Still, the degree was reconsidered, implying that a non-Asian Christian culture would always be closer to any European country than to China. This was the reason why Howard sought to strengthen the traditional alliance with Great Britain, and the US later did not hesitate to offer assistance to Washington following the 911 terror attacks.

3.5.1 Strategic Reorientation and Alliance Politics

Howard's approach to multiculturalism, immigration, and national identity also had significant implications for Australia's foreign policy orientation. It is important to emphasize that the shift in Australia's external prospects or possibilities during this period cannot be attributed solely to the Howard government's conservative stance on cultural issues. Global security dynamics, particularly the evolving post–Cold War environment and the emergence of new security threats, also played a decisive role. Howard's leadership initiated a process that

ultimately deepened Australia's political and strategic dependence on the United States, but this development required the support and acceptance of what he frequently referred to as "mainstream Australians." Public endorsement was essential to legitimize policies such as closer defence integration, participation in US-led coalitions, and a more security-centric regional posture.

Howard's foreign policy was defined by a triad of strategic considerations.

1. Alliance commitment,
2. Pragmatic regional engagement,
3. Selective multilateralism.

He entered office having inherited a foreign policy framework built during the Cold War and the early post–Cold War years yet operating in a strategic environment fundamentally transformed by the Fall of the Soviet Union, shifting regional power dynamics towards China, and the emergence of international terrorism. This meant reinterpreting long-standing assumptions, particularly the centrality of the US alliance, in light of a less predictable international order. At its core, Howard's strategy heavily built upon the faith in the US-dominated unipolar order where the US alliance played the role of a principal security guarantee for Australia. This manifested through most visibly Australia's participation in the post-9/11 "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq (Blaxland, Fielding, and Gellerfy 2020; Isakhan 2014; Mello 2014). Considering the pragmatic regional engagements Howard managed initially strained relations with Indonesia, especially over the East Timor crisis, towards eventual normalization, expanded bilateral trade agreements in Asia, and asserted an active stabilization role in the South Pacific. While in the case of multilateralism, Howard pursued a selective engagement policy, backing institutions that advanced Australian interests, such as APEC and the WTO, while rejecting the Kyoto Protocol on the grounds of economic cost and unequal obligations for developing nations.

Howard's foreign policy narrative was underpinned by a conservative national identity vision, emphasizing Australia's Western heritage, democratic values, and its role as a liberal-democratic anchor in the Asia–Pacific. This combination of inherited Cold War alliances and adaptive responses to a transformed global order gave Howard's foreign policy both a strong continuity with the past and a distinctly post-Cold War strategic character.

As Bonell and Crotty have noted, the Howard government, along with many conservative members of the Coalition during its first term, sought to subtly reshape the way the average Australian interpreted and understood national history. By emphasizing a narrative that highlighted continuity, stability, and pride in national achievements, while downplaying or reframing more divisive aspects of the past, they aimed to foster a national identity more closely aligned with their foreign policy priorities. This reframing of history served both a domestic political purpose and a strategic one, strengthening the cultural underpinnings of Australia's alliance with the United States (Bonnell and Crotty 2008).

In their attempt, Howard and his allies wished to reframe the perceptions of how the Australian nation was born. They focused on the foundation and rise of a new democratic Anglo-Celtic state in the early nineteenth century, and the aim was to draw attention to the harm and damages that this procedure caused. Interpretation of history profoundly influences the perception of national identities in general, which led to the dichotomy between regionalization and globalization in Australia (Barnes 2001; Huh 2024; Seet and Zhao 2021). This dichotomy could be traced back to fundamental questions and issues of Australia's cultural identity and domestic politics, which are closely aligned with the foreign political behavior of each government. It determined almost every aspect of the government's behavior in the last century. In questions of foreign policy-making, diplomatic relations, economic ties, or military alignment, the regionalization – globalization dichotomy played a pivotal role. Australia's relation to its indigenous people the future of monarchy or immigration were all deeply embedded into this dichotomy, where Howard decided to side with globalization. Globalization, in this sense, refers to supporting the US-led "Rule-based International Order" and preserving the Commonwealth or British ties.

After 2001, Howard shifted from recovering the fiscal balance to foreign goals and tried to deepen his engagement with the US. The treasury surplus provided a stable financial basis to support the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Crawley 2019). By downsizing government spending, Howard wanted to ease the increasing burdens of Australian participation in US military operations. This eleven years in Australia was a period of consolidation of neoliberalism with nationalistic patterns. Redden described it as the birth of a new "investor-state" that followed not only the road of US political goals but tried to embrace the economic model followed by the US. It supported citizens and markets in the spirit of neoliberalism while it attempted to put welfare institutions in the background parallelly with US political tendencies

(Redden 2017). Establishing a foreign policy that aligned with the strategic aims of the US was also somewhat natural since Republican political traditions greatly inspired Howard. He was a sincere constitutional monarchist who cheered the historical legacy that tied Australia to Britain.

As a cornerstone of the Australian–US military alliance, the ANZUS Treaty remained one of the most debated instruments in Australian foreign policy for two main reasons. First, it is a deliberately flexible cooperation where the text of the contract was written so circumstance-dependently which left wide room for interpretation and serious political uncertainty (Cohen 2024; DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 1997; Siracusa 2005). While this adaptability allowed strategic adjustment in a changing security environment, it also introduced unpredictability: its vague and open-ended wording creates uncertainty over the scope of commitments and leaves open the possibility of unforeseen obligations, which eventually caused problem to Howard as well. Second, ANZUS has been debated because of the depth of US engagement it entails. Critics have argued that Australia might be better served by strengthening regional defence cooperation among states with shared local security interests, particularly as a potential counterbalance to China, rather than relying so heavily on a single great power partner. While China is the principal strategic concern in US defence planning in the twenty-first century, the context in which the ANZUS Treaty was created in the immediate post–Second World War period, and particularly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, was markedly different. At that time, ANZUS was often perceived less as a mutual security guarantee and more as a "blank cheque" that primarily served US great-power interests rather than directly advancing Australia's own national security priorities.

3.5.2 Australia's International Commitments and the Invocation of ANZUS

The ANZUS Treaty was very much a product of the Cold War, designed primarily to prevent the spread of communism in Asia when it was signed in 1951 (Robb and Gill 2015). By the time Howard came to power, the strategic context had shifted, but for him, ANZUS retained immense importance. He regarded it as the ultimate guarantor of Australia's security, offering both deterrence and the political weight of alignment with the world's dominant military power. In Howard's view, the treaty not only provided military protection but also reinforced Australia's standing as a reliable ally in the eyes of Washington, thereby ensuring continued US engagement in the Asia–Pacific (Alves 1987; Schreer 2016; Tow 2005). His government's active participation in US-led coalitions—most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq—reflected this

conviction, as he saw alliance solidarity as both a strategic necessity and a pillar of Australia's national identity in the post–Cold War, post-9/11 security environment. (Cohen 2024; Stewart 1967). The logic itself that drove the ANZUS put less trust in Asian nations that were much more exposed to the infiltration of communist agents and had weaker institutional backgrounds to resist effectively. Critiques of the ANZUS blamed the treaty for its vagueness and isolative effect on Australia, which prevents Canberra from getting involved in regional cooperations. Instead, Australia remains integrated into the Western alliance, which has different security priorities and is distant from Australian shores.

While both ANZUS membership and cooperation with NATO play significant roles in Australia's security environment and appear to serve similar purposes, namely collective defence, it is crucial to distinguish between their specific obligations and operational contexts. ANZUS is a looser, consultation-based arrangement focused on the Pacific region, whereas NATO is a formal, treaty-based collective defence organization with binding commitments under Article 5. But Australia is not a member of NATO. Instead, it participates as a close partner through frameworks such as the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (Burton 2018; Wellings et al. 2018). This status allows for extensive military cooperation, joint exercises, and operational contributions to NATO-led missions, but without the legal security guarantee afforded to full members. The absence of binding collective defence obligations means that Australia's security ultimately rests on its bilateral and regional arrangements, particularly ANZUS, rather than on the NATO treaty's automatic mutual defence clause (Schreer 2016; Siracusa 2005; Tow 2005). But ANZUS possesses a far less developed and nuanced institutional framework compared to NATO or other multilateral defence arrangements. As reflected in Article 4 of the treaty, ANZUS does not constitute a collective defence pact in the NATO sense, rather, it commits the parties only to consult and to act in accordance with their constitutional processes in the event of a threat, leaving the nature and extent of any response open to national discretion. (Department of External Affairs 1997). Article 4 is a clause that "calls the parties for joint military planning and coordination in responses to threats which shall not necessarily be a military response." The fact that Article 4 calls the parties to start joint planning is a mere option whether it will be carried out or not. ANZUS is a necessary but not sufficient basis for collective defense. Once the conditions are given and parties come to a consensus, the outcome can be an action that reminds us to "collective defense" indeed. However, whether a mechanism with such a conditional outcome can be labeled as a "collective defense" is questionable.

Nevertheless the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 marked a watershed in the history of the ANZUS alliance. For the first time since the treaty's signing in 1951, a member invoked Article 4, which calls upon the parties to consult in the event of a threat to the security of the Pacific area. Prime Minister John Howard announced the decision while still in Washington, where he had been on an official visit during the attacks, signaling both the immediacy and the political symbolism of the move. The legal and geographic scope of Article 4 was, however, open to interpretation (Crowley 2013). The ANZUS Treaty defines its operative theatre as the "Pacific Area," yet it leaves this term deliberately undefined, creating an enduring ambiguity over the treaty's precise geographic scope. This ambiguity became central to the legal and political debate surrounding Prime Minister John Howard's decision to invoke Article 4 in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Although the attacks occurred on the US East Coast—thousands of kilometers outside any conventional understanding of the Pacific, Howard and his Coalition government argued that the United States' central role in Asia–Pacific security meant that such an assault posed a direct and immediate threat to the stability of the region. In this reasoning, the "Pacific Area" could not be reduced to a narrow maritime geography, it encompassed the strategic sphere in which US power underpinned the security architecture of Australia and its regional neighbours (Siracusa 2010).

Critics contended that this interpretation represented a significant departure from the treaty's original purpose, which had been to deter and respond to armed threats within Asia and the Pacific during the Cold War. In their view, reinterpreting the "Pacific Area" as a broad strategic sphere in which US global power underpinned regional stability effectively erased the treaty's geographic limits (Dean 2021).. Such reasoning, risked undermining the treaty's clarity and legitimacy, as it could justify Australian involvement in US-led conflicts far from the region on the grounds that any harm to US interests elsewhere might indirectly affect Asia–Pacific security. This approach not only diluted ANZUS's original intent but also increased the danger of strategic overextension, binding Australia more tightly to Washington's global priorities at the expense of its own regional autonomy. This tension between a literal reading of the treaty and a broader, functional interpretation lay at the heart of the post-9/11 controversy.

Furthermore, the legal uncertainty was compounded by the fact that ANZUS is not a NATO-style collective defence pact, since Appendix B contains language agreeing that "an armed attack against one party shall be considered an attack against all," it explicitly conditions this obligation on the attack occurring within the treaty's territorial scope (DEPARTMENT OF

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 1997). The absence of a clear definition for “Pacific Area” created the interpretive space Howard needed. Drawing on this flexibility, Howard framed the invocation not solely on Appendix B but on Articles 3 and 5. Article 3 calls for consultation in the face of threats, while Article 5 outlines possible responses to armed attacks without prescribing a uniform course of action. By invoking these articles, Howard sidestepped a rigid territorial reading, shifting the focus from geography to alliance solidarity and strategic necessity.

From a political perspective, the decision to activate ANZUS was far more than a procedural move. Howard seized the moment to position Australia as a steadfast and indispensable ally, sending a clear signal to Washington that Canberra would stand “shoulder to shoulder” in confronting new global security challenges. Domestically, this was framed as part of the “historical responsibility” of Australia’s generation to uphold the nation’s century-long record of fighting alongside the United States, a lineage Howard traced from the First World War through Korea and Vietnam. In the context of a rapidly changing post-Cold War and post-9/11 security environment, the invocation served both as a reaffirmation of alliance loyalty and as a strategic wager: by proving Australia’s reliability in crisis, Howard aimed to secure continued and perhaps deeper US engagement in the Asia–Pacific, even as Washington’s attention pivoted towards the Middle East.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Howard strategically invoked the ANZUS Treaty to strengthen Australia’s alignment with the United States and to consolidate domestic political support. He framed the crisis through historical parallels, repeatedly referencing the past century in which Australia and the US had fought side by side—from the First World War onwards—in defence of shared values. This narrative presented Australia’s participation in the US-led “War on Terror” as part of a long-standing Anglo-Saxon tradition of mutual defence and solidarity. By invoking Article 4 of ANZUS for the first time since the treaty’s creation in 1951, Howard not only underscored the alliance’s relevance in the post–Cold War era but also used the moment to reinforce a vision of Australia’s identity firmly rooted in its Anglo-American heritage. This framing allowed him to justify deeper military engagement—such as joining Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, while simultaneously transforming the alliance into a potent symbol of national unity and strategic purpose. (Department of State 2021). The vagueness of ANZUS and uncertainties around the interpretation of the text, however, historically proved to be an advantageous feature of the treaty. ANZUS remained in place because of its flexibility and ability to adapt to the changing international environment.

This is the reason why the treaty has never been officially modified since 1951 and has kept its original vagueness under its 70 years of existence.

Without any official modification of the ANZUS treaty, the main text remained exactly the same as it was in 1951 and only the political discourse or the perceptions around its purpose changed over time (Robb and Gill 2015). There were two turning points in the history of ANZUS that shaped the treaty's future and proved to be a watershed in terms of its purpose. The first was when ANZUS ceased to be a trilateral agreement in 1986 as New Zealand withdrew from the contract (Clements 1988). The eleven-year campaign conducted by local civil organizations, like the New Zealand Peace Movement in close cooperation with the New Zealand Labour Party, shaped the social thinking about nuclear energy in New Zealand. The fourth Labour government had no other choice in 1985 than to initiate the rearrangement of the ANZUS treaty with Australia and the US. ANZUS was not explicitly about nuclear cooperation, and New Zealand's withdrawal was neither about the core principles of ANZUS nor about how the U.S. interpreted alliance obligations and nuclear strategy. The unfolding debate around the future of ANZUS raised questions about whether the US has the right to install ballistic missile systems in New Zealand potentially equipped with nuclear warheads or is entitled to harbor nuclear submarines in New Zealand. Since the US had a "neither confirm nor deny" policy regarding its warships carrying nuclear warheads or not, Wellington had no other option than refusing the entry of US warships (Alves 1987; Catalinac 2010; Leva 2023; N. R. Smith and Bland 2024). The tensions escalated when New Zealand's Prime Minister David Lange ordered 1985 a "docking refusal" against the USS Buchanan (a conventionally armed but nuclear-capable destroyer), causing a diplomatic rift. The US has seen this as a breach of contract and suspended its military cooperation with New Zealand. Although New Zealand has never officially left the ANZUS treaty, the U.S. has ceased its obligations toward Wellington.

The second discourse about the future of ANZUS unfolded with the fall of the Soviet Union, which reduced the immediate military threat to the Pacific region. The Post-Cold War security dynamics in the Pacific region needed a broader focus than only military cooperation. After the 911 terror attacks, the treaty provided the legal framework for joint military operations between Australia and the US. The second discourse shifted ANZUS to a more nuanced approach to regional stability. The end of the Cold War brought the alleviation of anti-nuclear sentiment in New Zealand and negotiations restarted between the Washinton and Wellington to revive the military cooperation. Although the ANZUS remained inactive the parties expressed their joint

will to cooperate in field of counter-terrorism, disaster relief, and regional security in the Wellington Declaration in 2010 (Ayson 2023a; Steff 2024).

Australia's military contribution however to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom began in late 2001 with the deployment of Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) units, naval assets, and air support. The initial mission focused on direct action against Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces, intelligence gathering, and special reconnaissance (Blaxland, Fielding, et al. 2020; Williams 2022). Australian forces were withdrawn in 2002 but redeployed in 2005 as the insurgency intensified, demonstrating Howard's sustained commitment to the war effort. Howard framed Australia's involvement in Afghanistan through historical analogies, repeatedly invoking a century-long tradition of fighting alongside the United States and the United Kingdom in defence of common principles. This narrative positioned Australia not merely as a participant in a US-led war but as a core member of an enduring Anglo-Saxon security community. Domestically, the mission bolstered Howard's security credentials, enabling him to present his government as a guarantor of national safety in a new era of global terrorism.

The initial decision to commit Australian forces to Afghanistan after 9/11 enjoyed broad bipartisan and public support, framed by Howard as an act of solidarity under ANZUS and as part of a century-long tradition of fighting alongside the US and UK. This boosted his image as a strong leader capable of safeguarding national security for a while. Over time, however, the political consensus eroded. While Labor initially backed the mission, it later criticized its open-ended nature, mounting costs, and unclear objectives. The Greens and peace movements opposed it from the outset, citing civilian casualties and the risks of prolonged involvement. Public opinion followed a similar trajectory, high support in 2001–2002 gave way to growing division by the mid-2000s as the conflict dragged on without clear resolution. Nevertheless, Howard consistently used the deployment to reinforce a conservative national identity narrative rooted in loyalty to the Anglo-Saxon alliance system, framing Australia's role as being on "the right side of history."

Australia's participation in the 2003 Iraq War was among the most controversial foreign policy decisions of Howard's premiership, shaking many voters' confidence in whether the country was truly "on the right side of history" (Doeser and Eidenfalk 2016; Holland 2010). The government aligned closely with the George W. Bush administration's justification for military action, endorsing the claim that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons of mass

destruction and posed a threat to international security. Howard announced that Australia would contribute a substantial contingent to the US-led "coalition of the willing," framing the decision as both a fulfilment of alliance obligations and a necessary step to uphold the rule-based international order. The initial deployment comprised approximately 2,000 personnel, including SASR forces, F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft, naval vessels, and logistical support units. While the combat role was relatively short-lived combat troops were withdrawn after the initial invasion phase Australia maintained a military presence in Iraq for years, focusing on training local forces, providing security, and assisting reconstruction efforts. Politically, the Iraq commitment reinforced Howard's image as Washington's most reliable ally in the Asia–Pacific. However, it also exposed him to significant domestic and international criticism, with opponents arguing that the war lacked a legitimate mandate and diverted resources from more pressing regional security concerns. Nevertheless, Howard leveraged the deployment to underscore the centrality of the US alliance in Australian strategic policy, portraying the mission as consistent with Australia's historical tradition of supporting its great-power partners in times of crisis.

3.6. Conflicting Views: Howard and Menzies on Neutrality and the War on Terror in 2001

This section examines the foreign policy worldviews of two of Australia's longest-serving Liberal prime ministers, Sir Robert Menzies (1949–1966) and John Howard (1996–2007), through the lens of historical institutionalism to understand their respective approaches to neutrality and alliance commitment during moments of acute international crisis. Both leaders were era-defining figures who held office for more than a decade, shaping not only Australia's strategic posture but also its self-perception as a nation bound to a Western alliance system. For Menzies, that alliance was anchored in the British Empire and, after 1951, supplemented by the US security guarantee through ANZUS, while for Howard, it was the US-led security order of the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era. In both cases, the leaders viewed Australia's security interests as essentially analogous to those of their great-power allies, and in both cases, this translated into unconditional political and military support during contentious international interventions.

The comparative framework here serves two purposes. First, it identifies the structural continuities in Australian strategic thought across vastly different historical periods, namely a persistent belief in the indispensability of "great and powerful friends" and the rejection of full neutrality as either desirable or realistic. Second, it situates these continuities within sharply contrasting geopolitical environments, Menzies operating in the waning years of empire and the height of the Cold War, Howard navigating a unipolar order increasingly defined by the global War on Terror and the economic rise of China. This juxtaposition enables a critical evaluation of whether Howard's post-9/11 policies were a modernized adaptation of Menzies' Cold War instincts or a qualitatively different strategy conditioned by the transformed global order.

This part of the analysis will explore three interlinked dimensions.

1. ***Alliance reflex****:* Menzies' immediate siding with Britain during the 1956 Suez Crisis, despite US disapproval, and Howard's rapid invocation of ANZUS after the 9/11 attacks both reveal a readiness to align with a great power in moments of crisis, even at potential cost to Australia's regional standing.

2. ***limits of neutrality***: both leaders operated from the assumption that Australia's geopolitical circumstances made true neutrality, of the Swiss or Swedish variety, unviable, though the rationale for this position evolved with the international system.

3. ***intersection of foreign policy and national identity***: in both eras, decisions about war, peace, and alliance were inseparable from broader questions about what it meant to be an Anglo-Celtic, liberal-democratic state in a region shaped by decolonization and rising Asian powers.

By drawing out the parallels and divergences between Menzies' and Howard's crisis decision-making, this section highlights how deeply historical identity, alliance traditions, and perceptions of strategic vulnerability continue to influence Australian foreign policy choices, often more so than the specific military or economic facts of a given crisis.

3.6.1. The Alliance Reflex – Comparing the cases of Suez (1956) and 9/11 (2001)

Since both Howard and Menzies were Liberal prime ministers who served the country for more than a decade (Howard for 11 years, Menzies for 16 consecutive years), it is no exaggeration to call them era-defining personalities (Chalmers 2011; Fraser 2007a). They not only strengthened Australia's traditional Anglo-American alliance system but also transformed its social perception, creating the atmosphere of security provided first by the British Empire and thereafter by the US security umbrella and ANZUS. In both cases, the underlying logic was clear: Australia's security interests were perceived as analogous to those of its great-power ally, whether that ally was Britain in the 1950s or the United States in the early 2000s.

This worldview created a foreign policy reflex, one that, in moments of crisis, defaulted to unqualified alignment with the major ally's position. For Menzies, this was most evident during the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser unilaterally nationalized the Suez Canal (Braun 2003; Gray 2021; Moeller 2016). Menzies, regarding Britain's position as self-evidently justifiable, immediately sided with the Eden government's decision to initiate military action alongside France and Israel. He framed this as a defence of freedom of navigation, the rule of law, and Western strategic interests. Yet Menzies' loyalty came at a cost. The United States, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, strongly opposed the Anglo-French-Israeli intervention, seeing it as an act of neo-imperialism that risked destabilizing the Middle East and alienating newly independent states in the developing world (National Research Tomsk State University and Rumyantsev 2023; Peden 2012). Menzies failed to appreciate that supporting Britain's military action could damage Australia's reputation in Asia, then undergoing rapid decolonization, and harm Canberra's political ties with Washington. Indeed, with ANZUS barely five years old at that point, such a move undercut the credibility of Australia's emerging US-oriented security strategy and fuelled perceptions that Canberra was still acting as a colonial extension of Britain rather than as an independent regional player.

Half a century later, Howard found himself in similar position after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. He was in Washington at the time, negotiating future military cooperation with President George W. Bush as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of ANZUS (Department of State 2021). Witnessing the aftermath of the attacks first-hand, Howard announced Australia's full solidarity with the United States and became the first and only Australian prime minister to invoke Article 4 of the ANZUS Treaty, a move akin to NATO's

Article 5 on collective defence. Howard's decision was framed domestically as part of Australia's "historical responsibility" to stand with its closest ally in moments of crisis, a narrative reinforced by references to a century of joint military endeavors with the United States, from the First World War through Korea and Vietnam. Like Menzies in 1956, Howard saw alliance solidarity not merely as a diplomatic courtesy but as a strategic necessity, ensuring continued US engagement in the Asia–Pacific at a time when Washington's focus might otherwise shift to other theatres.

However, just as Menzies' decision during the Suez Crisis was criticized for undermining Australia's credibility in Asia and reinforcing perceptions of Canberra as a colonial extension of Britain, Howard's 2001 invocation of ANZUS in the wake of 9/11 attracted scrutiny for stretching the treaty beyond its original geographic and strategic intent. When it was signed in 1951, the ANZUS Treaty was conceived in the early Cold War context as a mechanism for deterring and responding to armed threats within the Asia–Pacific (Hamburger 2021; Lowe, Bridge, and Lee 2016). Its operative theatre was defined in the text as the "Pacific Area," but without a precise geographical demarcation, an ambiguity that, until 2001, had never been tested in practice. Howard and his coalition partners argued that the terrorist attacks on the US mainland, although physically located on the East Coast, constituted a direct threat to the security of the Asia–Pacific, on the grounds that US strategic dominance was the central pillar underpinning the entire regional security architecture. From this perspective, the "Pacific Area" could not be reduced to a narrow maritime geography; rather, it encompassed the strategic sphere in which US power guaranteed stability for Australia and its neighbours. If that power was attacked, the argument ran, the security of the region itself was indirectly but materially endangered.

Critics rejected this expansive interpretation, countering that it marked a decisive departure from the treaty's original purpose and risked hollowing out the clarity of its obligations. They warned that redefining the "Pacific Area" so broadly opened the door to Australian participation in conflicts with little or no regional relevance, thereby diluting the treaty's focus and increasing the risk of entanglement in US-led operations far removed from Australia's core strategic environment. Some legal scholars noted that if this reading were applied consistently, any attack on US soil, whether in New York, Texas, or Alaska, could be construed as falling under the treaty, eroding the distinction between regional defence and global intervention.

This dispute revealed in relation the Menzies-Howard heritage a deeper tension between two approaches to alliance interpretation: a literal, text-based reading that anchored ANZUS obligations firmly in the geography and threat perceptions of the Cold War Asia–Pacific, and a broader, functional interpretation that linked Australia's security to the global health of US power and influence. Howard deliberately leaned into the latter, invoking not only Article 4 (consultation) but also Articles 3 and 5, which deal with coordinated responses to armed attacks, to sidestep the treaty's geographic ambiguity. In doing so, he reframed ANZUS as a political instrument of solidarity as much as a legal defence commitment. While in both Suez (1956) and 9/11 (2001), the patterns were similar:

1. Both were a crisis involving a great-power ally prompted an immediate,
2. They were high-profile pledge of political and military support,
3. They were justified in strategic terms but underpinned by long-standing historical and cultural alignment

In each case, the decision carried significant risks, not only the risk of overextension in conflicts of uncertain outcome, but also the diplomatic cost of alienating key regional partners. For Britain in 1956 and the US in 2001, Australia's support was valuable, yet for many Asian and Pacific states, these moves reinforced perceptions of Canberra as more loyal to extra-regional alliances than to cultivating an independent or regionally balanced foreign policy. In this sense, both episodes highlight the enduring challenge in Australian statecraft, namely balancing the instinct for solidarity with "great and powerful friends" against the need to maintain credibility and trust within its immediate neighborhood.

3.6.2. Neutrality and the Limits of Independence

The above-described alliance reflex in Australian foreign policy (at least in the cases of Menzies and Howard) raises an obvious counterfactual pattern: Could Australia have chosen a more neutral or independent course during moments of great-power confrontation or did at least have the possibility of not participating in such military actions? This question has periodically surfaced in academic debate, from the interwar years to the early 2000s, both Menzies and Howard approached it from the same starting assumption namely that full neutrality was neither realistic nor desirable given Australia's strategic geography, alliance history, and national identity (Frühling 2018; Gyngell and Wesley 2007; Snyder 1984).

At the start of the 21st century, some commentators speculated whether Australia could adopt a "Switzerland model" of neutrality, preserving traditional trade relationships while avoiding entanglement in allied military campaigns (Cobb 2007). In theory, such an approach might have allowed Canberra to sustain robust economic ties with emerging powers like China or even Russia, while limiting its security commitments to purely national defence. In practice, however, the analogy was flawed in the sense that Switzerland's neutrality was underpinned by centuries of political-military disengagement, geographical insulation, and a European balance-of-power system that made it strategically unthreatening. By contrast, Australia was and remains deeply embedded in the Western alliance network, both institutionally and normatively (I. D. Henry 2020). Neutrality in the Swiss sense would require not only a military detachment from the United States and other allies, but also the dismantling of the historical, cultural, and political bonds that underpin the "Anglosphere" identity. This would mean discarding the very values (liberal democracy, rule of law, market economics) that have been central to Australia's self-image and foreign policy posture since federation. For Menzies, this identity was inseparable from loyalty to Britain and the Commonwealth, while for Howard, it was tied to the US-led liberal international order.

Even in the most favourable strategic circumstances, a genuinely multipolar world in which no single great power could dominate the Indo-Pacific and Australia does not need to rely on a powerful ally, neutrality would require a profound transformation in domestic political culture. It would also depend on an external environment in which neither China nor the United States posed a credible threat to regional stability. Yet, as history has shown, Australian strategic thinking has consistently assumed the opposite: that the Indo-Pacific will always face a potential hegemon (be it imperial Japan, Soviet-aligned states, or a rising China) whose ambitions must be counterbalanced. Even under a hypothetical multipolar equilibrium scenario (modelled on the 19th-century Concert of Europe but applied to the Indo-Pacific) Australia's capacity for genuine neutrality would remain highly constrained and limited. Its structural dependence on great-power support would persist, driven by its export-oriented economy, substantial annual immigration intake, and a long-standing strategic preference for alignment with a culturally similar political ally. In such a system, Canberra theoretically could act as a more impartial regional actor, engaging economically with all powers while avoiding automatic military commitments. However, by the early 2000s this was already becoming a remote and unrealistic prospect. China's accelerating economic rise and growing assertiveness after 2012 undermined the possibility of a benign multipolarity. What emerged instead was a "flawed

multipolarity" in which the United States and China remained the dominant actors, with other regional powers (India, Japan, Russia) seeking to expand their influence without altering the basic US–China strategic competition (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Beránek 2024; Berkofsky 2016; Calabrese 2023).

In this post-9/11 environment, neutrality was not merely difficult, but potentially dangerous to Australia as well. For Howard, the post-9/11 security landscape reinforced the logic of alliance commitment. Terrorism, unlike traditional interstate threats, was transnational and unpredictable, making the intelligence, logistical, and diplomatic resources of a great-power ally all the more valuable. Moreover, Howard's emphasis on the "shared values" dimension of the US–Australia relationship made neutrality politically untenable: disengagement from American-led coalitions would not only have strategic costs but also signal a retreat from the normative commitments of the liberal, rule-based international order. For Menzies, the rejection of neutrality was equally rooted in identity, though in a different historical setting. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the British Empire still maintained a significant presence in Asia, in Singapore, Hong Kong, Brunei, and Malaya and the Commonwealth provided a diplomatic framework in which Australia could project influence while retaining imperial connections (Clute and Wilson 1958; Porter 1999; Waters 2001). For a staunch Anglophile like Menzies, abandoning Britain in favour of a neutral posture would have been unthinkable, especially during the Cold War when communism was framed as an existential threat to democratic freedoms.

In both cases, neutrality was seen not as a pragmatic middle path but as a moral consideration and was treated as a betrayal of the national story Australia told about itself. For Menzies, that story was one of loyalty to the British-led Commonwealth and defence of the "free world" against communist aggression. For Howard, it was one of solidarity with the United States in defending civilization against "barbarous" attacks, a framing he explicitly used in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The result was that, despite vastly different global contexts, both leaders converged on the same conclusion. Australian security and identity were best served by deep alliance integration, not detachment. Where they differed was in the balance between alliance obligations and regional diplomacy. Menzies' support for Britain during Suez risked alienating Washington but reflected a world in which imperial ties still held strategic weight. Howard's unwavering support for the US in the War on Terror risked alienating parts of Southeast Asia but reflected a world in which American dominance was the anchor of regional order.

3.6.3. Identity Politics as a Domestic Driver in the Foreign Policy of Menzies and Howard

While foreign policy is often framed as a response to external events, the political space in which it is made is deeply conditioned by domestic debates over identity, history, and social cohesion. In Australia's case, the legacies of settler colonialism, the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the politics of immigration have been central to defining the limits and possibilities of external engagement. For Australians, foreign policy has long been served as a means of expressing and reaffirming national identity. This is partly because the formative elements of that identity are deeply rooted in places, events, and historical processes that occurred beyond Australia's shores. The very origins of European settlement began outside the continent, with the establishment of penal colonies as an extension of British imperial policy (Cunneen and Allbrook 2023; Garton 1991; de Grijs and Jacob 2021). Likewise, the ANZAC legend (one of the most enduring and celebrated narratives in Australian public memory) emerged from the battlefields of Gallipoli and the Western Front, far from home (Hoffenberg 2001; Packer et al. 2019).

Much of what Australians regard as national achievement has therefore been shaped, directly or indirectly, by the country's external engagements, whether through military alliances, participation in global conflicts, or its evolving role in international trade and diplomacy. This historical pattern has reinforced a worldview in which Australia's security, prosperity, and sense of self are closely intertwined with its relationships abroad. As a result, shifts in foreign policy are not merely strategic recalibrations, they are also acts of identity politics, reflecting and reshaping how Australians understand their place in the world. For both Menzies and Howard, questions of national identity were inseparable from foreign policy, even though they approached them from different historical vantage points and with distinct ideological priorities. For the Liberal Party, foreign policy has often served as a means of anchoring the nation in a familiar and secure framework (drawing on historical alliances, shared Anglo-Saxon heritage, and longstanding strategic partnerships to reinforce continuity and stability) (Bongiorno 2005; Gorman and Melleuish 2018; Irving 2017; Seet and Zhao 2021; Soutphommasane 2019; University of New South Wales, AU and Levey 2019). This outlook tends to treat the past as a source of legitimacy and reassurance, framing Australia's identity in terms of proven relationships and inherited institutions.

By contrast, the Labor Party has often approached foreign policy as a means of healing old wounds and moving beyond aspects of the past that are seen as morally questionable or strategically obsolete. This outlook (of Whitlam or Hawke for example) does not seek to erase history, but rather to prevent the reopening of deep-seated national scars by shifting the focus towards renewal and constructive engagement where minorities are treated as parts of the Australian nation. In this vision, foreign policy becomes a tool for building a more inclusive and forward-looking Australia (one that acknowledges past injustices while aims to define its identity through independent initiatives, stronger regional ties, and contributions to a more equitable international order) (Foley and Manwaring 2025; Yang 2024). In this perspective, international engagement becomes a way of redefining Australia's role in more independent and future-oriented terms (whether by expanding ties in the Asia–Pacific, supporting multilateralism, or advocating for causes such as decolonization and nuclear non-proliferation). The Australian Labor Party historically sought to reimagine the nation's place in the world, sometimes at the cost of distancing it from older alliance narratives (Tout et al. 2025). These are, of course, broad tendencies rather than absolute rules, there have been notable exceptions on both sides, with individual leaders in each party adopting policies that defy these general patterns. Nevertheless, the tension between the Liberal inclination to look to the past for security and the Labor inclination to look to the future for renewal has been a recurring dynamic in the interplay between foreign policy and national identity.

Menzies' Australia was still firmly embedded in the British imperial world, and the foundations of national identity bore little resemblance to the more pluralistic and multicultural vision that existed under the premiership of John Howard. In the mid-twentieth century, the demographic reality was overwhelmingly "Anglo-Celtic", the legacy of restrictive immigration policies such as the White Australia Policy, which had, since Federation in 1901, sought to exclude non-European migrants and preserve a predominantly British-derived population. Anglo-Celtic was used as a term which, beyond its descriptive reference to English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish origins, carried a distinct ideological weight (Hodgins et al. 2016; Johnson 2002; Walden 1988). It denoted not merely ancestry but a normative framework for national identity. It implied loyalty to the British Crown, adherence to Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, Protestant or broadly Christian moral values, and a middle-class code of respectability. This "Anglo-Celtic" identity served as both a cultural ideal and a political project, shaping immigration policy, social norms, and the boundaries of who could be considered truly "Australian." This demographic homogeneity reinforced a political consensus

in Canberra that the "real Australian" was one who embodied British traditions, middle-class respectability. The political elite (dominated by men educated in British-style institutions, steeped in imperial history, and socially connected to Commonwealth networks) shared a vision of Australia as a "better Britain in the South," a settler society that maintained the cultural and institutional heritage of the metropole while enjoying the economic opportunities of the Antipodes. Within this vision, diversity was not seen as an asset but as a potential threat to social cohesion. Menzies himself often celebrated the virtues of British heritage in public speeches, positioning Australia as a stalwart defender of the Empire's values in an increasingly unstable post-war world.

For Indigenous Australians, this meant being positioned outside the imagined national community in both legal and cultural sense (Menzies 2019). Until the 1967 referendum, which amended the Australian Constitution to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census and allow the federal government to legislate specifically for them, they were not recognized as citizens in the constitutional framework. Under Robert Menzies' leadership, official policy operated firmly within an assimilationist paradigm. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were expected to abandon their languages, spiritual practices, kinship systems, and collective identities, adopting instead the cultural norms, religious affiliations, and lifestyles of the Anglo-Australian majority (Chesterman and Galligan 1997). This policy framework was underpinned by a belief in the cultural superiority of British-derived institutions and values, and by a paternalistic conviction that Indigenous peoples could only "progress" by shedding their traditions. Far from fostering genuine inclusion, assimilation entrenched systemic discrimination. Racial segregation persisted in housing, employment, and public life, sometimes formally through legislation, but more often informally through entrenched prejudice. In many towns and rural areas, Indigenous Australians faced legal or de facto restrictions on where they could live, the jobs they could hold, and even the public facilities they could enter, from swimming pools to pubs (Harris et al. 2023; Raeburn et al. 2022).

Educational and employment opportunities for Indigenous communities were systematically limited, with curricula in mission schools and government institutions designed to prepare Aboriginal children for low-paid manual labour or domestic service rather than academic advancement. Welfare provisions, where they existed, often failed to address the structural roots of poverty and sometimes actively reinforced economic marginalization, conditioning aid on

compliance with assimilationist expectations (Healy 2020; Marsden 2020; Rumsey 1989). Social exclusion was compounded by pervasive public prejudice and paternalistic governance structures. Indigenous communities endured disproportionately high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, and poverty, which were interpreted by policymakers not as the consequence of dispossession and systemic inequities, but as evidence of the need for more aggressive assimilationist measures. State and federal authorities retained extensive coercive powers over Aboriginal lives, including control over movement, employment contracts, and marriage permissions in certain jurisdictions. Perhaps the most damaging aspect of this regime was the policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families (a practice now recognized as the creation of the *Stolen Generations which is sometimes described as a genocide)* (KRIEKEN 1999). This was explicitly designed to accelerate assimilation by placing Indigenous children in white foster homes, religious missions, or state-run institutions, severing their ties to family, language, and culture. These removals inflicted intergenerational trauma that continues to affect Indigenous communities today, leaving deep social and cultural scars and fuelling mistrust toward government authorities.

Menzies saw no political or moral imperative to alter this status quo. In his worldview, the cohesion and stability of the nation were best served by maintaining a unified cultural core rooted in British civilization. Indigenous self-determination or the recognition of distinct rights was, to him, incompatible with the vision of a homogeneous Australian identity. Protecting the integrity of that identity by preserving its Anglo-Celtic essence was not only a domestic policy priority but also a reflection of Australia's position in the world, a loyal outpost of the Crown, defending the cultural and political heritage of the Empire in the Asia–Pacific. This perspective both reflected and reinforced the strategic alignment of Menzies' Australia with Britain's imperial interests and later with the Anglo-American alliance system. A society defined by its British heritage was more inclined to see imperial interests as indistinguishable from national interests. The defence of the "free world" against communism, the support for British actions during the Suez Crisis, and resistance to recognizing the People's Republic of China were all consistent with a belief in Australia as an extension of the British-led international order. In this sense, domestic identity politics under Menzies reinforced external alignment, leaving little room for the kind of independent, regionally oriented policy later pursued by Whitlam.

By the time Howard came to power in 1996, Australian society had undergone profound demographic and cultural changes that set it apart from the world Menzies had governed. The

dismantling of the "White Australia Policy" in the 1970s had removed the formal racial barriers that had shaped Australian immigration since Federation, opening the door to a more ethnically diverse society (Jupp 1995). The Whitlam and Hawke–Keating governments had not only embraced multiculturalism as official policy but also tied it to broader narratives of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, and to closer economic and diplomatic engagement with Asia. By the mid-1990s, these developments had reshaped the parameters of public debate, creating both new opportunities and constraints for any incoming prime minister. Howard's response was to position himself as a defender of what he called "mainstream Australia" (Snow and Moffitt 2012). This was a deliberately elastic phrase, designed to resonate with a broad swathe of voters who identified with a majority-focused, socially conservative vision of the nation. "Mainstream" in Howard's rhetoric referred not simply to a numerical majority but to a set of values and behaviours he framed as distinctively Australian—self-reliance, egalitarianism, respect for the law, and a pragmatic approach to social change.

Central to this vision was the concept of *mateship*, a longstanding part of Australian national mythology. Rooted in the egalitarian ethos of the colonial frontier, the ANZAC tradition, and the labouring classes, mateship embodied loyalty, mutual support, and resilience in the face of adversity (Dobell 2018; Dyrenfurth 2007). For Howard, mateship was not merely a historical anecdote, but a moral compass that connected everyday civic virtue with national identity. In speeches, he often linked mateship to the country's military heritage, portraying it as the glue that held communities together during wars, economic crises, and natural disasters. By invoking mateship, Howard could appeal to both conservative nostalgia and a more populist sense of shared belonging, even in an increasingly diverse society (Dyrenfurth et al. 2006). However, the Howard government's application of these ideals was selective. While mateship was invoked as an inclusive civic value, in practice it often functioned as a cultural filter for those who embraced "Australian values" could be welcomed into the fold, but those who appeared to challenge or stand outside them (whether due to language, customs, or political views) were treated with suspicion. This was evident in Howard's approach to Indigenous affairs, immigration, and national security.

The half century that passed since the Menzies-era reflected by Howard's policy of "practical reconciliation" and his pragmatism. Rather than endorsing symbolic measures, such as issuing a formal apology to the Stolen Generations, Howard prioritized programs aimed at tangible improvements in health, education, and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples (Robbins 2007; Rowse 2020). He argued that collective guilt was a divisive distraction, and that the path to equality lay in economic integration and self-reliance. Critics, however, contended that this approach sidestepped the structural and cultural dimensions of inequality, leaving the historical injustices of dispossession and discrimination unaddressed. Howard repeatedly argued that his government had not committed any wrongdoing against Aboriginal people and therefore had no reason to apologize.

On immigration, Howard diverged sharply from Menzies in form but not entirely in function. Whereas Menzies operated in an era of explicit racial exclusion, Howard rejected overt racial criteria but insisted that migrants learn English and adopt "Australian values" as conditions for entry and citizenship. These values were framed in civic, rather than ethnic, terms (democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, and freedom of speech) but their presentation carried echoes of the older Anglo-Celtic cultural dominance (Betts 2003b; Dehm and Vogl 2022; Mackie 1987). In this way, Howard's civic nationalism functioned as a modernized extension of earlier assimilationist ideals: the emphasis was less on racial homogeneity and more on cultural conformity. This positioning served Howard domestically by reinforcing his image as the custodian of social cohesion in an era marked by globalization, heightened security concerns, and debates over national sovereignty. The late 1990s and early 2000s were years in which border protection and counter-terrorism became salient political issues, and Howard leveraged these to reinforce the idea that national unity depended on shared cultural norms and loyalty to the state.

The interplay between identity politics and foreign policy was evident in Howard's Asia–Pacific diplomacy. Domestically, he cultivated a narrative of confidence and stability rooted in two pillars: the Anglo-American alliance tradition and an export-oriented economic strategy centered on Asia, particularly China. Internationally, he pursued a dual-track approach—deepening strategic ties with the United States, especially after 9/11, while simultaneously expanding trade relations with Beijing. This balancing act was possible because, in the early 2000s, strategic competition between Washington and Beijing had not yet escalated into open hostility. Yet Howard's identity politics sometimes constrained regional diplomacy. His reluctance to embrace symbolic reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, combined with a cautious, sometimes sceptical, approach to multiculturalism, limited Australia's soft-power appeal in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. While economic pragmatism drove trade liberalization and regional integration, the underlying narrative of Australia as a predominantly Western,

Anglo-derived nation persisted, shaping perceptions abroad and occasionally reinforcing the view of Australia as an outpost of the West rather than a fully integrated regional actor.

In comparing Howard with Menzies, a throughline becomes evident, since both saw national cohesion and alignment with trusted great-power allies as mutually reinforcing (Fraser 2007b; Gorman and Melleuish 2018). For Menzies, the British Empire was the cultural homeland and strategic anchor; for Howard, the United States assumed that role, with Britain retained more as a cultural reference point than a security guarantor. In each case, debates over identity whether framed as the preservation of British-Australian traditions or the defence of "mainstream values" provided the domestic legitimacy for alliance-deepening foreign policies. The key difference lay in the degree of adaptation required. Menzies governed a society that largely mirrored his worldview, while Howard navigated a far more pluralistic, globally connected Australia. This forced Howard to reframe his traditionalist instincts in the language of civic nationalism, economic opportunity, and inclusive symbols like mateship. Yet both resisted the notion that Australia's identity could—or should—be decoupled from its historical allies, and both regarded domestic unity as a prerequisite for strategic clarity.

Thus, under both Menzies and Howard, the domestic foundations of foreign policy were less about choosing between tradition and independence than about redefining tradition to suit the conditions of their respective eras. This continuity helps explain why Australia has consistently preferred alliance integration over neutrality, and why identity politics, whether rooted in imperial loyalty or civic nationalism, remained a decisive driver when decades later in 2021 AUKUS came to the table.

4. From Confidence to Confrontation: The Long-Term Decline in Australia–China Relations (2007–2017)

This chapter examines the transformation of Australia's relationship with China between 2007 and 2017, a period marked by the gradual erosion of mutual trust and the redefinition of strategic priorities. Building on Chapter 2, which analyzed identity formation and institutional embedding under the Howard government, the focus here shifts to the external dimension of

foreign policy, namely the changing role of China in the regional and global order (Bisley 2018b; He and Feng 2025; Łukasz 2025).

While there is a chronological overlap with the previous chapter, this is not thematic or analytical. Whereas Chapter 2 focused on identity consolidation within the Anglosphere, this chapter examines the external systemic pressures that increasingly challenged that trajectory. The "post-Howard decade" is thus treated as a period of mounting structural tension, as China's rise began to question both the durability of the Rules-Based International Order and the viability of Australia's dual-track strategy of economic engagement and U.S. security alignment (Bisley 2018a; Liu and Hao 2014; Sinaga 2016). From an Australian perspective, this transformation was not only geopolitical, but also normative and institutional. Accordingly, the chapter analyzes how China's ascent gradually narrowed Australia's strategic room for manoeuvre. Drawing on the English School and Historical Institutionalism, it interprets this period as one of intensifying normative contestation acting upon established path dependencies, resulting in the progressive erosion of hedging strategies rather than immediate rupture.

4.1. From Howard's Legacy to a New Strategic Era

The analysis is framed through the lens of the Western International Society (WIS) as conceptualized by the English School (Brown 2001; Bull and Watson 1992; Buzan 2004a; Buzan and Schouenborg 2018). This perspective highlights that Australia's perceptions of China have never been purely material or security-driven, but have been equally shaped by the extent to which Beijing is seen to uphold (or undermine) the liberal norms, legal principles, and institutional frameworks that form the foundation of the WIS. In line with Buzan and Schouenborg's theorization of *sub-global international societies*, the WIS is here understood as a geographically non-contiguous, yet normatively cohesive, segment of international society. Its members are bound together less by territorial proximity than by their shared commitment to a specific set of *primary institutions*, most prominently those associated with liberal democracy, the rule of law, open markets, and multilateral governance. While the specific political character of these states will be examined later in the chapter, it is important to note at the outset that this normative alignment forms the basis of the WIS's collective identity and informs its assessment of China's role in the international order determining Australia's behavior as well.

To understand the later deterioration of Australia–China relations and the structural conditions that made AUKUS conceivable, this chapter begins not in 2007, but in the late Cold War and its aftermath. This period constituted a critical juncture in which Australia consolidated the assumption that economic engagement with China and alliance loyalty to the United States could be maintained simultaneously, embedding expectations about China's integration into the Western-led international order. Accordingly, while there is a chronological overlap with Chapter 3 (particularly regarding the Howard era) this overlap is neither thematic nor analytical. Chapter 3 focuses on domestic political and identity formation processes between the Menzies and Howard governments, whereas Chapter 4 examines the evolution of Australia's foreign policy before, during, and after Howard in response to changing external conditions, most notably the rise of China.

Still, we see that after 1989, US and Australian stances on China diverged at least from one perspective. Australia (with the leadership of Bob Hawke, prime minister) favored maintaining dialogue with China. It chose to pursue practical approaches, while the US was on the side of the isolation of China. Australia did not call for comprehensive sanctions or a complete cut of diplomatic ties. There was no question either to the US or to Australia that a severe abuse of human rights took place in China when the authorities clashed with the protesters at Tiananmen Square. However, unlike Australia, the US imposed economic sanctions, suspended military sales, and placed diplomatic pressure on China (Lee 2020; Mackerras 2014; Seymour 1990). After the Australian PM Bob Hawke announced that Chinese students are permitted to stay in the country for four years to provide asylum against political persecution, Paul Keating took a consultative role. Australia set up two delegations at the request of the Chinese counterpart to inspect and monitor human rights issues in China (Baker 2002).

This was the first case that a Western country received such a request from the Chinese state, and in 1991 and then 1992, the Australian delegation prepared its report wherein it was stated that the maintaining of continuous dialogue is in the mutual interest of each party and further civil rights reforms are needed. The American side, however, was not so cooperative and tried to block Chinese efforts to gain advantages in every way (Boudreau 1991; Economy and Segal 2008). The crackdowns of Tiananmen resulted in the loss of the Chinese bid for organizing the Summer Olympic Games in 2000 to its rival, Sidney. China did not meet all the requirements to secure the right to host the event, which undoubtedly weakened Beijing's chances. However, the bid ultimately failed due to political reasons. The widespread condemnation and international shock following the Tiananmen massacre were fundamentally incompatible with

the spirit of the Olympic Games. As a result of pressure from the US, France, and Britain, the International Olympic Committee rejected China's bid in 1993, causing a significant loss to Beijing's reputation. The initial U.S. response to the news from Tiananmen Square affected not only the Chinese bid for the Olympics. They suspended arms sales and forbade high-level exchanges. The most crucial question, however, was about the suspension or revocation of China's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status, which was demanded by many from US Congress as a symbol of condemnation (Danforth 1993; Dietrich 1999). Australia and the U.S., along with many other democratic nations, viewed symbolic cooperation (such as the Olympic Games), economic ties (particularly trade agreements), and human rights as interconnected. This implied that when China committed human rights abuses, it forfeited its legitimacy for both symbolic and economic cooperation. The H. W. Bush administration first insisted on maintaining the MFN, arguing that engagement with China was more effective than isolation. However, MFN status required annual renewal by Congress, opening the door to constant debates about its revocation.

The Clinton administration promised a major revision of China's entitlement to MFN status and pledged to adopt a normative approach, stipulating that economic cooperation could not proceed without respect for basic human rights (Pregelj 2001; Saunders 1995). Heated annual debates lasted from 1990 to 1994 when Clinton reversed his opinion and claimed that trade should be delinked from human rights. Clinton signed in 2000 the Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with Jiang Zemin, opening the way for WTO accession for China. Australia, in this sense, remained a passive observer of Sino-US relations and adapted a cautious, diplomatic posture after the Tiananmen massacre with the aim of protecting its own economic interests in China. On the level of political communication, both Bob Hawke and Paul Keating agreed with the Bush and Clinton administrations. Still, neither of them desired to impose restrictions on Chinese trade relations. The growing rate of Australian GDP was closely linked to economic ties with China, and Australian firms became increasingly interested in investment opportunities there. Both security and business interests in China were on the rise, prompting Australia to prioritize maintaining a stable relationship with Beijing (He 2024).

Chinese political leaders historically devoted relatively little attention to Australia's positions, priorities, or domestic debates, creating what Beeson and Zeng describe as a persistent asymmetry of interest in the bilateral relationship (Beeson and Zeng 2016). For Beijing, Australia rarely figured as an independent strategic actor, rather, it was viewed

primarily through the prism of its alliance with the United States and categorized (at best) as a capable regional middle power. This perception had practical consequences such as Chinese diplomatic and policy engagement with Canberra was often selective, instrumental, and reactive, shaped more by the ebb and flow of Beijing–Washington relations than by the specific content of Australia's policies. On the Australian side, this asymmetry produced a markedly different dynamic. Policymakers, strategic analysts, and academic sinologists invested considerable resources in studying China's political system, foreign policy objectives, and long-term strategic ambitions.

The aim was not only to anticipate Beijing's moves in the Asia–Pacific but also to craft policy frameworks that could preserve Australian autonomy while managing the growing weight of Chinese economic and political influence. Canberra's sustained effort to understand and respond to China's strategic thinking, a commitment not reciprocated in equal measure by Beijing, became a defining feature of the relationship. It reinforced Australia's role as a "policy-taker" in certain areas of the relationship, compelled to adapt to shifts in Chinese policy while having limited capacity to shape Beijing's priorities in return. (Rozman 2012). Australia is seen as a peripherical country in Chinese views of world politics, regardless of its continent size. During this period, China primarily focused on strengthening its position in East Asia, finishing the economic reforms, and engaging in international cooperation. Australia remained a secondary player in Chinese strategical thinking in the nineties and attracted the spotlight only when it successfully hindered Beijing's effort in the region. The 2000 Sidney Olympic games was an example to this. The close alignment to the US also put Australia in a secondary place in Chinese calculations evoking the feeling that Canberra is not able to follow an independent foreign policy (Dellios 1998). China saw a certain type of US proxy in Australia, willingly or not. Still, it assisted in maintaining American dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, which challenged China's aspirations for regional leadership and hindered the possibility of reforming the current world order. Australia was viewed as a forward bastion of the Western-dominated world order in the Indo-Pacific. While China may have seen Australia as equally important as Australia viewed China, this perception only heightened the hostility toward Canberra. Ultimately, Australia's political stance was shaped to serve interests that conflicted with China's ambitions for rejuvenation. A politically and ideologically neutral (or friendly) Australia to China was only conceivable in a fundamentally different and shifted geopolitical environment which out of sight in the nineties.

In the unipolar moment of the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were genuine expectations in Canberra (shared by many in the West) that China's growing integration into the global economy and institutions such as the World Trade Organization could, over time, foster political liberalization (Ikenberry 2009). The Chinese leadership of the era, including Jiang Zemin and later Hu Jintao, appeared outwardly receptive to gradual reform and engagement with the international community, further fuelling such hopes (Fangjun 2009). However, by the late 2000s, as Howard left office, it had become increasingly clear that WTO membership and the diffusion of free-market capitalism had not produced the anticipated political transformation. The Communist Party retained its monopoly on power, and while China embraced aspects of economic globalization, it showed no willingness to adopt the political liberalism that many in Australia had once considered a plausible outcome (Kalinovsky 2017). Nevertheless, there were expectations not only in Canberra but across the Western world that China would adopt democratic reforms and transition into a fully market-oriented economy, either through collapse, as in the case of the Soviet Union, or willingly and gradually. These hopes of democratic leaders proved to be overly optimistic. Prominent Chinese economists and government officials also started to examine the possibilities for the Chinese transition to a fully market-oriented economy and found that abandoning all roles of the state would be out of China's interest (White 1994). Guo Shuqing, for example, a former chairman of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, argued that China must strike a balance between market-driven growth and stringent regulatory oversight to prevent the destabilizing consequences of financial liberalization. This was a balance Shuqing considered vital for sustaining long-term economic stability." (Chow 2005; Shuqing 1999).

Western interpretations of China's political trajectory in the late 20th century were far from monolithic. Influenced by the example of the Soviet Union's collapse, some scholars and policymakers (including, for example, Francis Fukuyama in 1989) with his "end of history" thesis and political figures such as US President Bill Clinton argued that the dismantling of a centrally planned economy could set in motion rapid, if unpredictable, political transformation (McClelland 2011). In Australia, these views resonated strongly, particularly among policymakers and analysts who saw China's gradual market opening under Deng Xiaoping as the first stage of a longer process of political liberalization. Optimists within this camp interpreted measures such as the decollectivisation of agriculture, the introduction of Special Economic Zones, and Beijing's eventual accession to the WTO as potential stepping stones toward democratic governance. In contrast, more sceptical voices including political scientists

like Andrew Nathan and journalists such as Orville Schell emphasized the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) unwavering commitment to maintaining one-party rule as the central obstacle to democratization. For these observers, the CCP's political monopoly was not a temporary relic but the cornerstone of the regime's survival strategy. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests served as a decisive reference point for both camps since for optimists, the scale and diversity of the demonstrations reflected a genuine societal appetite for political freedoms; for sceptics, the violent crackdown underscored the leadership's determination to defend its authority at all costs. In retrospect, the events of 1989 exposed the inherent contradiction in Western hopes (namely that economic reform alone could catalyze political liberalization) by revealing both the popular demand for change and the state's readiness to suppress it. (Stenberg 2024; Wang 2024; Yahuda 1996).

Political trust between Canberra and Beijing suffered a profound blow in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, driving bilateral relations to one of their lowest points since diplomatic normalization (Boudreau 1991; Wang 2024; Yahuda 1996). For Australian policymakers, the events of 1989 became a lasting strategic and moral reference point, reinforcing perceptions of the Chinese Communist Party's uncompromising determination to preserve its monopoly on power. This episode also sharpened the awareness in Canberra that while China's economic reforms might bring opportunities, they would not necessarily lead to political convergence with the liberal democratic norms valued in Australia and its Western partners.

In the emerging post-bipolar order and especially following John Howard's ascent to office in 1996, the trajectory of Australia–China relations was increasingly shaped by the framework of Canberra's enduring alignment with the United States. Under Howard, this meant pursuing a dual-track strategy: maintaining the US alliance as the bedrock of Australia's security policy while deepening trade and investment ties with China to capitalize on its resource-hungry growth. This balancing act was sustained through careful diplomatic management, with Howard deliberately insulating economic cooperation from normative disputes over human rights, Taiwan, or regional security tensions. By the time Howard left office in 2007, this approach had delivered record levels of bilateral trade alongside a stable political relationship, though the underlying strategic asymmetries between the two countries remained unresolved (Bisley 2018a). Australian sinologists and experts on China who analyzed this period of Australian-Sino relations concluded that Canberra's political alignment influenced its posture towards

China, too (Bosnjak 2017; Searight 2020). Australian sinologist Colin Mackerras, for example, described Australian-Sino relations as a unique bilateral relationship that, in practice, was far from truly bilateral. A bilateral relationship that, in reality, is trilateral, given the unavoidable presence and influence of U.S. interests (Mackerras 2014).

After Howard's defeat in the 2007 general elections, the Labor Party came to power after nearly twelve years of Liberal government, inheriting both the benefits and the vulnerabilities of Howard's dual-track China policy (Day 2025). The new government faced the immediate challenge of navigating the unfolding global financial crisis, which originated in the United States and threatened to destabilize economies worldwide. At the same time, the strategic environment in the Asia–Pacific was shifting as China's economic weight had grown to unprecedented levels, and its political confidence on the international stage was visibly increasing. Kevin Rudd, Australia's new prime minister, brought a unique profile to this moment. A Mandarin-speaking former diplomat with first-hand experience in Beijing, Rudd possessed a deeper understanding of Chinese political culture and strategic motives than any of his predecessors, although with a fragmented party behind him. This background equipped him to engage China in a more informed and sometimes more forthright manner, but it also sharpened his awareness of the limitations in aligning with Beijing's long-term ambitions. Under Rudd (and later under Julia Gillard) Labor adopted a China policy that sought to maintain strong economic ties, recognizing China's role as Australia's largest trading partner, while introducing a more assertive tone on political and security issues without risking the economic achievements including the forming China-Australia Free Trade Agreement.

This period became a watershed in bilateral relations because it coincided with the early signs of Beijing's departure from the low-profile, non-confrontational foreign policy associated with the Deng Xiaoping era. Canberra's rhetorical emphasis on human rights, the rule of law, and regional security (including concerns about the South China Sea) reflected a growing unease with China's trajectory. However, these criticisms remained largely symbolic as Labor prime ministers did not translate into sanctions, concrete policy restrictions, or sustained diplomatic pressure. The result was an uneasy equilibrium as Australia was increasingly willing to voice normative disagreements with Beijing, yet it remained economically dependent on Chinese demand for its resources. This tension between strategic caution and economic reliance would intensify in the years ahead, setting the stage for the sharper deterioration in relations during the mid-2010s. (Baba and Kaya 2014; Laurenceson 2024; Miklaucic 2022).

4.2. The Western International Society and the Changing Global Order

The preceding section traced the evolution of Australia's China policy from the late Cold War years through the early 2010s, highlighting the gradual erosion of a carefully maintained balance between economic engagement with Beijing and strategic alignment with Washington. As this balance began to melt (accelerated by the shifting tone of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping) it became clear that Australia's strategic dilemmas could not be understood solely through the lens of material interests or bilateral diplomacy, the Australia's historical alliances received a renewed attention, especially after the Brexit in 2016. The challenge presented by China's rise was as much normative as it was structural and material, touching on the fundamental values, rules, and institutions that shape Australia's place in the international system.

These systematic and normative challenges posed by China makes the Western International Society (WIS) a critical conceptual framework for the analysis that follows. Rooted in the English School tradition, the WIS is defined by a shared set of liberal norms, legal principles, and institutional arrangements that have historically underpinned the cohesion of a sub-global international society spanning North America, Europe, and key partners such as Australia (Bellamy and McDonald 2004; Buzan 2004a, 2006). Within this order, Australia's identity as a liberal democracy and a trusted middle power has been reinforced by its alignment with the United States and its commitment to a rule-based international order.

Understanding the pressures on Australia in the 21st century therefore requires situating its foreign policy within this normative and institutional context. The post–Cold War "unipolar moment" briefly seemed to consolidate the WIS as the dominant organizing framework of global politics, but the emergence of multipolar dynamics — above all, the rise of China — has posed both structural and ideational challenges to this order. For Australia, these shifts have intensified the interplay between security exposure, economic dependence, and normative alignment, raising fundamental questions about whether the strategic foundations of the WIS can be preserved in an era of contested order.

4.3. The Labor Government and the Limits of Engagement (2007-2013)

After nearly eleven years of governance, the John Howard-led liberal-national coalition suffered defeat in the federal elections of 2007, and a new generation of Labour politicians with

the leadership of Kevin Rudd, secured a tight majority (Australian Government 2007). The six years of Labor government were marked by persistent internal political turmoil, as the party was unable to consolidate unity behind Kevin Rudd and returning leadership challenges destabilized the government. Rudd was ultimately replaced by Julia Gillard, who became Australia's first female prime minister. However, ongoing factional struggles, political maneuvering, and leadership intrigue undermined Gillard's authority and compelled her to govern under conditions of almost continuous crisis management. In 2013, the previously ousted Rudd returned to the leadership and defeated Gillard, shortly before Labor suffered a significant electoral defeat at the hands of the Liberal Party. Despite this instability, the Labor period remains highly significant from an analytical perspective. Its importance lies primarily in the financial and economic reforms introduced during Rudd's first term, as well as in the reorientation of Australian foreign policy toward China after 2007. For these reasons, the dissertation places the main emphasis on the Rudd-led phase of Labor governance, which constitutes the most consequential element of this six-year period in terms of long-term strategic and institutional impact.

The Rudd government's response to the global recession of 2007-2008 came early enough to avoid economic crises by guaranteeing the deposits through the Reserve Bank of Australia preventing the eruption of panic and bank runs. This has made possible for Australia to avoid financial depression and survive the economic crisis relatively smoothly. The government guaranteed deposit-taking up to one million Australian dollars while it initiated two stimulatory spending packages (Lim et al. 2009; Pomfret 2009). Mass layoffs and bank crisis were bypassed, the world economy and first of all the political allies of Australia, particularly the US and Great Britain were heavily affected by the crisis. Economic growth has seen a significant decline in Australia the next years and export incomes became unreliable. China, as a main trade partner of Canberra similarly to Australia remained free from the most sever effects of the economic crisis due to the economic stimulus program launched by the central government (Niquet and Jayaram 2009). Beijing successfully counterbalanced the critical fall of export income and the disappearance of foreign direct investments in the wake of the crisis.

Labour governments between 2007 and 2013 sought to maintain a balanced relationship with China marked by a focus on economic engagement and the avoidance of unnecessary confrontation. The two labour prime ministers, Kevin Rudd (2007-2010) and Julia Gillard (2010-2013) followed two well-distinguishable approach to China, an ideological in the first

three years and then a more practical-one under Gillard (Bennister and Heppell 2016; Bloomfield 2016; Day 2025; He 2024; Manwaring 2016). Kevin Rudd, as a Mandarin-speaking leader with a professional background in diplomacy, approached China through a culturally informed and ideational lens, perceiving it as a principal partner in Australia's regional and global engagement. In 2008, during his address at Peking University, Rudd expressed explicit support for democratic movements and urged the Chinese leadership to undertake political reforms—remarks that, while framed as constructive engagement, were met with marked displeasure in Beijing. (Barme 2008). He was a supporter of regional engagement and advocated for a regional security framework (the Asia-Pacific Community), which China viewed skeptically, fearing it was a hidden containment strategy. Julia Gillard, being less personally engaged with Chinese culture, followed a more pragmatical approach after 2010, focusing on the economic benefits of Australian exports to China and extending the trade relations. This was due to the continuous Chinese demand for Australian export, particularly commodities and minerals (like iron ore and coal) which helped Canberra to maintain not only trade surplus but fiscal stability of the country through higher corporate taxes and royalties (Beeson and Wilson 2015; Minyue 2006). Gillard became Australia's first female prime minister in 2010 after leading an internal party coup against Kevin Rudd, ousting him as leader of the Australian Labor Party. Gillard was aware of the need to restore her popularity, she focused on maintaining reliable public services and social programs, emphasizing the necessity of stable tax revenues and a trade surplus to support these initiatives (Cai, Saadaoui, and Wu 2024).

The South China Sea dispute emerged as a salient issue only in the final year of Labor's tenure, from 2013, during the Gillard government. Throughout this period, Canberra consistently underscored the necessity for all maritime disputes to be resolved in accordance with established principles of international law, with particular reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Afrin 2017; Chowdhury, Hamid, and Mohd Salleh 2024). The Gillard government pursued a balanced and diplomatically cautious approach towards the claimants, avoiding overt alignment with any single party. This stance contributed, at least temporarily, to a reduction in bilateral tensions with Beijing. In May 2013, the government released a new *Defence White Paper*, which reiterated Australia's commitment to stability in the Indo-Pacific and placed strong emphasis on the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes. While reaffirming the U.S. alliance as a cornerstone of national security, the document also sought to signal that engagement with China remained an essential pillar of Australia's

strategic policy. This dual messaging reflected an attempt to reconcile Australia's deepening economic interdependence with Beijing and its enduring strategic alignment with Washington—a balancing act that would become increasingly difficult in the subsequent years as regional tensions escalated (Dobell 2016). Peaceful settlement however was seen by Beijing as only a possibility and not an exclusive way of interest promotion in the South China Sea.

The 2009 Defence White Paper crystallized a dual vision (Barrie 2009; Jha 2009; Tubilewicz 2010). While reaffirming the ANZUS alliance as the cornerstone of Australian security, it identified the rapid modernization of China's military as the most significant long-term strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific. The 2009 *Defence White Paper* explicitly recognized China's economic transformation as both legitimate and beneficial to the region, emphasizing that Beijing's rapid growth had contributed substantially to global and regional prosperity (Satake 2018). This acknowledgment was not merely rhetorical since it reflected the reality that China had become Australia's largest trading partner, underpinning record levels of resource exports and providing a critical buffer against the global financial crisis. However, the document simultaneously cautioned that the opacity surrounding China's long-term strategic objectives, particularly in relation to military modernization and maritime territorial claims, posed potential risks to regional stability. The concern was that a substantial and sustained increase in the People's Liberation Army's capabilities, in the absence of clear indications of defensive intent, could be perceived by neighbouring states as a bid for strategic pre-eminence, thereby fuelling arms races or triggering counterbalancing coalitions.

This dual framing in the Defence White Paper (namely welcoming economic interdependence while signaling unease over strategic ambiguity) lay at the heart of the Rudd government's China policy. On the one hand, Canberra sought to preserve and expand the lucrative trade and investment relationship that had become central to Australia's economic health. On the other, it pursued a hedging strategy, strengthening defence capabilities, deepening intelligence-sharing arrangements with the United States and other regional partners, and reaffirming the importance of a rule-based order in managing disputes. In essence, the White Paper encapsulated the paradox facing Australian policymakers namely how to engage fully with China as an indispensable economic partner while preparing for the possibility, however remote—of coercive or revisionist behaviour that could undermine the Indo-Pacific's strategic equilibrium.

In 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard publicly endorsed the U.S. strategic posture in the Asia–Pacific by signing an agreement to host U.S. Marines on a rotational basis in Darwin. This arrangement, announced during President Barack Obama's visit to Australia, formed part of Washington's high-profile 'Pivot to Asia' strategy (a policy widely interpreted in Beijing as an effort at containment and strategic balancing against China) (Alper 2021; Davidson 2014; Medcalf 2021). Australia's participation in this initiative positioned Canberra as an active supporter of U.S. policies perceived by Chinese officials and commentators as aimed at countering China's regional influence. The following year, in 2012, the Australian government further underscored its security alignment with Washington by excluding the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from bidding on the National Broadband Network contract, citing national security concerns. This decision prompted formal diplomatic protests from Beijing and generated negative coverage in Chinese state media, which portrayed Australia as operating as an extension of U.S. strategic interests in the Asia–Pacific. (Shoebridge 2018).

The Rudd government's China policy was influenced therefore by the duality of economic openness and security cautiousness (Baba and Kaya 2014; Bloomfield 2016). On one hand, Rudd actively promoted trade liberalization and investment, facilitating Chinese access to Australian resources at the height of the mining boom. On the other, he expanded defence spending, modernized naval capabilities, and strengthened intelligence cooperation with Washington and Tokyo (Manwaring 2016; Tubilewicz 2010). His advocacy for an Asia–Pacific Community (APC) in 2008 illustrated an attempt to create an inclusive regional architecture in which both the United States and China could operate as responsible stakeholders. However, Beijing perceived the APC as a veiled attempt to dilute Chinese influence, while some U.S. allies viewed it as unrealistic. The first major normative conflicts under Rudd revealed the limits of this engagement strategy. In 2008, Rudd publicly raised human rights concerns in Beijing during his speech at Peking University, addressing issues in Tibet directly to a Chinese audience in what he called a gesture of *zhengyou*—a "true friend" who speaks frankly (McDonell 2008). This approach contrasted with the more transactional diplomacy of the Howard era and was applauded by rights advocates, but it irritated Chinese officials and signaled a willingness to place values alongside interests in bilateral dealings. Subsequent disputes over Chinese investment in strategic sectors, including the rejection of Chinalco's bid for a controlling stake in Rio Tinto, further strained relations. The arrest of Rio Tinto executive Stern Hu in 2009

underscored the fragility of trust and the vulnerability of Australian business interests when political tensions rose.

Rudd's first term, showed the contradictions in his China policy which had become ever more apparent. Economic interdependence remained deep, but the strategic environment was hardening. The 2009 Defence White Paper's candid assessment of Chinese military power, coupled with high-profile disagreements on governance and human rights, marked a departure from the cautious optimism that had characterized much of the post–Cold War period. Rudd's attempt to balance engagement with principled firmness revealed both the possibilities and the limits of Australia's middle-power diplomacy in an era of intensifying U.S.–China rivalry.

4.4. Tony Abbott and the Return of the Liberal Party: The First Frictions with China

When Tony Abbott assumed office in September 2013, Australia's foreign policy was already defined by an uneasy balancing act. For six years the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard had pursued a dual approach where on the one hand, cultivating deepening economic ties with China, which by then had become Australia's largest trading partner while on the other, preserving and even strengthening the security alliance with the United States. It enabled Canberra to benefit from the "China boom" while continuing to anchor its security in the Anglosphere alliance network. By 2013, however, public opinion polls revealed that anxieties about China's strategic intentions were mounting (Roy Morgan Research 2013). In this climate, Abbott and the Liberal–National Coalition promised a tougher and more security-focused approach, explicitly differentiating themselves from what they presented as Labor's complacent reliance on engagement.

The federal election of September 2013 brought a decisive victory to the Liberal–National Coalition, ending six years of Labor government (BBC 2013). The Coalition secured 90 seats in the House of Representatives compared to Labor's 55, granting Abbott a comfortable parliamentary majority. The result reflected not only voter unease about external security challenges but also deep domestic dissatisfaction with Labor's internal instability and economic performance. The bitter leadership struggle between Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, which saw two prime ministerial changes within three years, had badly damaged Labor's credibility and

has shaken the faith in the stable left-wing governance. Many Australians came to view the party as divided, preoccupied with personal rivalries rather than governing in the national interest. The aftermath of the 2007 economic crisis caused concerns reinforced this perception. Although Australia had weathered the global financial crisis better than most advanced economies, voters grew anxious about rising debt, the sustainability of mining-driven growth, and the impact of carbon and mining taxes introduced under Labor (Pomfret 2009). Abbott capitalized on these fears with a campaign centered on restoring "trust in government," repealing unpopular taxes, and imposing stricter fiscal discipline. The Coalition also appealed to a cultural undercurrent of scepticism toward political elites, presenting itself as more attuned to "mainstream" Australians than a Labor Party portrayed as fragmented and distracted.

Foreign policy therefore intersected with, but did not dominate, the 2013 campaign. For many voters, security anxieties about China and immigration issues reinforced a broader desire for stronger leadership, but the decisive factors were domestic: leadership turmoil, economic uncertainty, and policy fatigue with Labor (ABC News 2013; Taylor 2013b). These conditions enabled Abbott to frame the election as a referendum on competence and stability, themes that resonated strongly with an electorate weary of political infighting. The Coalition's victory thus marked not only a return of conservative government but also a public demand for discipline and clarity, conditions that shaped the tone of Abbott's subsequent foreign policy choices.

This was showed by Julie Bishop, Abbott's foreign minister, encapsulated this rhetorical reorientation in her now well-known phrase: "less Geneva, more Jakarta" (Abbott and Cohen 2018; Taylor 2013a). The slogan carried symbolic weight. "Geneva" stood for the world of distant multilateral forums, human rights councils, and bureaucratic diplomacy, which conservatives often regarded as detached from Australia's immediate interests. By contrast, "Jakarta" represented the Asia-Pacific region, where concrete economic and security challenges demanded attention. In practice, Bishop's message was threefold, first, that the Abbott government would prioritize bilateral and regional diplomacy over multilateral idealism, second, that Southeast Asia (and especially Indonesia) would receive unprecedented emphasis, and third, that Canberra would seek pragmatic alignment with those regional powers most relevant to its economic and strategic wellbeing, including Japan, South Korea, and even, by implication, Taiwan. This shift reflected both an ideological critique of Labor's multilateralism and a broader liberal-national tradition that defined foreign policy primarily in terms of the national interest.

Yet, almost from the beginning, the limits of Abbott's regionalist orientation became apparent. "Less Geneva" did not mean "no Geneva." Australia held a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council between 2013 and 2014 and chaired the 2014 G20 Summit in Brisbane (Calligeros 2012). Both roles required active engagement with global multilateralism, underlining that Australia could not simply turn its back on wider institutional responsibilities. In this sense, Abbott's approach represented less a clean break and more a recalibration: multilateral forums were to be approached selectively and instrumentally, rather than embraced as arenas for moral leadership. This was consistent with the Coalition's sceptical view of international organizations, which were often depicted as inefficient or even hostile to national sovereignty, but it also revealed the tension between rhetorical intent and structural necessity.

While Abbott and Bishop sought to signal a reorientation toward regional pragmatism, the external environment ensured that great-power politics would remain the decisive factor in Canberra's foreign policy (McDonald 2015; Popal 2023). The United States' "Pivot to Asia," announced by President Obama in 2011, had begun to take institutional form precisely during Abbott's tenure. Most visibly, this was expressed in the rotational deployment of US Marines in Darwin, an arrangement that became operational in 2012 and was gradually expanded thereafter (Dian 2015). From Washington's perspective, the deployment was an essential component of its broader effort to deter Chinese assertiveness and reassure Asian allies. From Beijing's perspective, however, the permanent presence of American troops on Australian soil amounted to nothing less than a visible endorsement of US containment. It is no coincidence that Chinese state media began to portray Australia more explicitly as part of Washington's strategic encirclement during these years.

At the same time, China itself was transforming the regional security environment in ways that forced Canberra's hand. Beginning in 2013, Beijing accelerated land reclamation projects in the South China Sea, particularly around the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Within two years, it had created between 809 and 1,300 hectares of new land (Guardian 2016; Zhang 2023; Zhang, Su, and Ding 2017). Satellite imagery revealed the rapid construction of runways, port facilities, and radar installations, leaving little doubt that these "islands" were designed to project power rather than protect the environment (Afrin 2017; DAVENPORT 2018; Sanghi and Mitra 2024). For neighbouring states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, this amounted to a direct encroachment on sovereignty, prompting arbitration cases under UNCLOS and vocal protests (Chen 2015; Singh and Yamamoto 2017). For Canberra, the militarization of disputed reefs cut

to the heart of its own strategic concerns: the freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, vital for Australian trade, was increasingly at risk. These dynamics placed Abbott in a structurally impossible position. On the economic front, his government was engaged in sensitive negotiations to finalize the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA), which promised unprecedented benefits for Australian exporters, particularly in agriculture and services (Hsieh 2018). This created powerful incentives for diplomatic restraint, as open confrontation with Beijing could derail the agreement. On the strategic front, however, Australia was already enmeshed in an alliance network that compelled alignment with Washington's security posture. The Darwin deployment symbolized this embeddedness, but it was also underwritten by decades of defence cooperation, intelligence sharing through the Five Eyes network, and the broader Anglo-American identity that defined Australia's strategic culture.

Abbott initially sought to square this circle by maintaining a cautious neutrality. Public statements avoided directly criticizing Beijing, and Canberra refrained from undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) of the kind pursued by the United States. Yet this balancing act was short-lived. As Chinese activities escalated and the militarization of reclaimed land became undeniable, Australia's silence has broken and grew more conspicuous. Domestically, defence analysts and much of the strategic community warned that passivity would undermine Australia's credibility as a supporter of the Rule-Based International Order (McDonald 2015). Externally, Washington expected its closest ally in the region to take a firmer stance. The structural reality was clear as economic caution could delay confrontation, but it could not prevent it. By 2014–2015, the contradictions of Abbott's position were visible to all sides. Canberra continued to deepen economic integration with China through ChAFTA while simultaneously tightening its security cooperation with Washington. Chinese state media and officials increasingly portrayed Australia as a mere extension of American power, suggesting that Beijing no longer viewed Canberra as an independent actor (黎堡 2016). These were the first tangible frictions of the post-Howard decade. Abbott's rhetorical promise of "less Geneva, more Jakarta" had been overtaken by structural dynamics that bound Australia to the emerging great-power confrontation in the Indo-Pacific.

The net effect of these dynamics was a progressive structural lock-in that narrowed Canberra's room for manoeuvre irrespective of the Abbott government's regionalist rhetoric. Alliance management, intelligence integration through Five Eyes, and the visible manifestation

of the U.S. presence in Darwin together created entrapment risks if Australia remained too passive, and abandonment risks if it distanced itself from Washington in the face of Chinese assertiveness (Dian 2015). What began as a promise of "less Geneva, more Jakarta" thus collided with a reality in which great-power rivalry set the outer bounds of feasible policy, and multilateral roles (UNSC 2013–2014; G20 Brisbane 2014) made a clean withdrawal from global forums neither practical nor desirable. At the same time, economic interdependence deepened on a separate track. The negotiation (and shortly thereafter the conclusion) of ChAFTA embedded key Australian sectors more tightly into Chinese demand structures, amplifying the costs of overt political confrontation (Hsieh 2018). This dual-track posture (security alignment with the United States and accelerating commercial ties with China) proved inherently fragile once maritime militarization in the South China Sea became incontestable fact (Ranabhat 2024; Raymond and Welch 2022). As reclamation totals climbed and dual-use infrastructure appeared on the Spratlys and Paracels, Canberra's defence of freedom of navigation and UNCLOS-based order converged ever more closely with Washington's position, even as Australian exporters anticipated the gains promised by market opening (McDevitt 2015; Strating 2023).

Beijing has also undergone a perceptual shift concerning Australia (voiced in official commentary and state media) followed a rather unfriendly tone, which was a logical consequence of the Abbot government's behaviour. Canberra was increasingly framed as a "US ally" in the Indo-Pacific contest, not as an independent regional balancer. That reframing mattered, because it recoded otherwise routine policy choices (e.g., alliance exercises, intelligence cooperation, capacity building with Southeast Asian partners) as elements of a U.S. containment architecture. In this climate, even actions taken below the threshold of confrontation generated diplomatic friction, eroding the space for the "quiet prudence" that had characterized earlier Australian China policy. Late-2015 developments further exposed institutional seams in Australia's external economic governance and risk screening. The controversy surrounding the long-term lease of Darwin Port by a Chinese-owned company, though negotiated at the Northern Territory level fed a wider political debate about critical infrastructure, investment screening, and the national security externalities of sub-federal decisions. While these issues crystallized fully under Abbott's successor, the trigger conditions were already present: a security environment trending toward militarized competition and an investment environment only partially adapted to the new risks. In short, the tail end of the Abbott period seeded the agenda that the next government would be compelled to prosecute.

The real deterioration of the Australian-Sino relations however were the results of the 2016 arbitral award on the South China Sea, since it supplied the legal and normative hinge that Australia utilized against Chinese expansion in the region. It accumulated tensions and transformed into an overt values-inflected posture. Australia's support for the award's implications centered on UNCLOS interpretations, sovereign rights within EEZs, and the non-recognition of expansive historic claims aligned neatly with its long-standing advocacy of the rule-based international order (Singh and Yamamoto 2017; Strating 2022). But whereas under Abbott this alignment was framed largely in strategic-pragmatic terms (sea-lane security, alliance assurance), the conditions were now set for a successor government to elevate the normative register, to link investment screening, technology supply-chain decisions, foreign political influence safeguards, and regional diplomacy to a coherent legal-normative narrative about order maintenance.

In this sense, the Abbott years should be read less as a failed bid for regionalism than as the transition point from hedging to constraint. It was a period in which structural forces compressed policy choice and exposed vulnerabilities in Australia's economic-security interface. The Darwin Marines, the acceleration of reclamation and militarization in the South China Sea (809–1,300 hectares between 2013 and 2015), the sensitivities around ChAFTA, and the first overt discursive downgrading of Australia in Chinese official narratives collectively prepared the ground for the next phase. The years after 2013 and Malcolm Turnbull's tenure would convert these structural pressures into institutional and normative responses, tightening foreign interference rules, recalibrating FDI screening, sharpening positions on maritime law, and reframing China policy explicitly in terms of rules, transparency, and sovereignty. The move from pragmatic restraint to an explicit normative turn is therefore best understood as the logical sequel to the Abbott-era structural lock-in, rather than a discretionary change of tone.

4.5. Malcolm Turnbull and the Normative Turn

When Malcolm Turnbull assumed the prime ministership in September 2015, it was not through an electoral landslide but by ousting his predecessor, Tony Abbott, in an internal party ballot (ABC News 2015; BBC 2015; Steketee 2014). The leadership change reflected deep frustrations within the Liberal Party, where Abbott's increasingly unpopular style, his polarizing decisions, and falling opinion poll numbers had convinced many colleagues that the Coalition faced defeat at the next election unless a change was made. Abbott had won a

commanding majority in 2013, but by mid-2015 his standing had collapsed (Massola 2015). Controversies such as his "captain's picks" in policy, a series of unpopular budget measures, and what critics saw as a combative, overly ideological approach eroded both public trust and party unity. Turnbull, by contrast, was regarded as a centrist modernizer, with a more urbane and pragmatic persona. His elevation to the leadership was widely seen as a pragmatic survival strategy by the Liberals rather than an expression of ideological renewal. The very fact that Abbott had been toppled after less than two years in office underscored the instability within the Coalition and proved that the main reason of why the voters ousted the Labor government two years earlier, namely the internal division and power struggles are very much present within the Liberal Party too. Instead of a confident governing party, the leadership spill projected the image of a government fighting to manage its own direction. Abbott's removal therefore represented not only a shift in leadership but also a crisis symptom, the Liberals were grappling with internal divisions over policy style, strategic priorities, and electoral viability (Michael J. Green 2015; Paul Strangio 2016).

For Australian foreign policy and especially for China-policy, this transition mattered because Abbott and Turnbull embodied two very contrasting approaches towards the questions of regional stability. Abbott had emphasized a more combative security posture, often framing issues in stark terms of allies versus adversaries. Turnbull, while no less committed to the US alliance, initially sought to temper this rhetoric with a language of pragmatism and inclusion. Yet the structural pressures of the regional order from Chinese island-building in the South China Sea to controversies over Chinese investment in Australian infrastructure soon pushed Turnbull toward a more assertive stance (Hurst 2019; Remeikis 2018; Toohey 2018). What began as a leadership correction within the Liberal Party would therefore evolve into a deeper reorientation of Australia's foreign policy narrative, laying the foundations of what scholars increasingly describe as the country's "normative turn." One of the earliest and most consequential episodes that shaped Turnbull's foreign policy was the controversy surrounding the lease of the Port of Darwin to the Chinese company Landbridge Group in late 2015 (Strating 2017). The Northern Territory government, seeking foreign investment to modernize its infrastructure, awarded Landbridge (a private Chinese logistics firm with links to the People's Liberation Army) a 99-year lease worth A$506 million. At first glance, the transaction seemed to fit into the long-standing pattern of encouraging Chinese capital to flow into Australia's resources and infrastructure sectors. But the strategic implications were far greater than anticipated, and proved to be a major miscalculation.

It is crucial to understand that Darwin was not simply a commercial asset for China, it was a node of strategic significance. Since 2011, US Marines had been rotating through Darwin as part of Washington's "Pivot to Asia." For American policymakers and defence analysts, the idea that a Chinese company with government connections would control the port's commercial operations raised profound concerns about security, surveillance, and leverage. Senior American and Western policymakers have frequently articulated concerns that instances of economic concessions granted to China are often accompanied by the initiation of covert intelligence activities. Within Australia, the deal triggered a wave of criticism from defence experts, opposition politicians, and media outlets, who framed it as a sign of naivety in allowing national security vulnerabilities to be exploited (Guardian 2017).

For Turnbull, the Darwin episode was a turning point (Guardian 2015). Although the lease itself could not be revoked since the contract was legally binding, it underscored the inadequacy of Australia's existing foreign investment screening mechanisms (ABC News 2022). Until then, oversight was primarily economic, with security assessments often treated as secondary considerations. In the aftermath of the Darwin controversy, Turnbull's government began overhauling the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) process, introducing stricter scrutiny for foreign acquisitions of critical infrastructure such as ports, electricity grids, and telecommunications assets. This was not merely bureaucratic fine-tuning but the first step in a broader shift as Chinese capital was no longer viewed as politically neutral, but as a potential tool of strategic influence (Financial TImes 2017).

The Darwin Port lease had three enduring consequences in this sense. First, it exposed the tension between Canberra's openness to foreign investment and the imperative of national security. Second, it highlighted the degree to which Australia's alliance with the United States imposed constraints on its economic policy autonomy, Washington expected vigilance against perceived Chinese encroachment. And third, it helped propel the Turnbull government onto a path that would increasingly frame China policy in normative terms: defending sovereignty, transparency, and the integrity of democratic institutions. What began as a local economic decision thus became emblematic of the broader transformation of Australian foreign policy under Turnbull.

This was the reason why by 2017, a series of controversies had surfaced and sharpened concerns in Canberra about the scale and nature of Chinese influence in Australian society. The most high-profile episode was the Sam Dastyari affair, in which a Labor senator was revealed

to have accepted financial support from Chinese-linked donors and subsequently echoed Beijing's talking points on the South China Sea (Michael Remeikis 2017). This scandal crystallized broader anxieties about political donations, influence networks among Chinese-language media, and the mobilization of Chinese student associations on Australian campuses (Hamilton 2018a). Collectively, these developments convinced policymakers that existing regulatory frameworks were no longer sufficient to safeguard the integrity of democratic institutions.

In December 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull introduced sweeping legislation on foreign interference and espionage, marking the most significant overhaul of Australia's national security laws in decades (Hurst 2019). The new legal framework had three main patterns:

1. **Criminalized covert foreign interference** in the political process, making it illegal to engage in activities on behalf of a foreign principal that sought to influence Australian politics without transparent disclosure.

2. **Banned foreign political donations**, a direct response to controversies surrounding Chinese-linked contributions (Toohey 2018).

3. **Tightened lobbying and transparency requirements**, obliging agents acting for foreign governments to register under a new scheme (BBC 2017).

Turnbull framed the legislation as a defence of Australia's sovereignty and democratic values. In his announcement he pointedly declared that "the Australian people stand up," echoing Mao Zedong's phrase from 1949, a rhetorical flourish that underscored both the symbolic weight of the reforms and their implicit targeting of Beijing (Phillips 2017). The government's narrative was explicit, Australia was not only protecting its national security but also positioning itself as a model democracy, willing to confront authoritarian interference with transparent, rule-based responses (Strating 2018).

The reaction from Beijing was immediate and hostile. Chinese state media accused Canberra of "McCarthyism" and "Cold War hysteria," while Foreign Ministry spokespeople lodged formal protests (BBC 2017). The perception in Beijing was that Australia was no longer a pragmatic trading partner but a frontline state in the Western normative contest with China

(Wilson 2017). As a result, bilateral relations deteriorated sharply, high-level visits were curtailed, trade negotiations slowed, and trust between leaders eroded.

In this sense a Historical Institutionalism lens reveals how structural legacies shaped these decisions. Australia's alliance with the United States and its integration into the Anglosphere had created path dependencies that limited its freedom of manoeuvre. Once concerns over foreign influence became salient, the institutional weight of the alliance, combined with domestic traditions of liberal democracy, channeled Canberra's response in a direction that was both normative and securitizing. The Foreign Interference laws were not an isolated innovation but the outcome of an institutional trajectory in which previous episodes, such as the Cold War anti-communist vigilance, the ANZUS framework, and even earlier restrictions on foreign political influence, set precedents for how foreign threats were defined and countered. The Turnbull government's normative turn was both an act of agency and a product of institutional constraint. Agency was evident in the rhetorical framing and the legislative innovation that inspired other democracies. Yet the deeper institutional logic meant that once the issue of Chinese political influence became politicized, Australia's room for pragmatic compromise was sharply reduced. The confrontation with Beijing was therefore not simply the product of short-term politics, but a reflection of Australia's embedded identity as a liberal-democratic state aligned with the Western international order.

At the same time, the legislation was widely watched abroad. Analysts in Europe and North America saw the new Australian law as a pioneering framework that later inspired similar laws in other democracies confronting questions of foreign influence (Hurst 2019). In this sense, the Foreign Interference Act was not just a national security measure but also a normative statement about Australia's role in defending liberal democratic standards globally (Hamilton 2018a). Thus, the passage of the 2017–2018 reforms marked a decisive moment in Turnbull's foreign policy since it was the institutionalization of the "normative turn**"**, where the defence of sovereignty and democracy became as central to Australian statecraft as alliance management or economic pragmatism.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration's landmark ruling in July 2016 on the Philippines' case against China under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) categorically rejected Beijing's "nine-dash line" claims over the South China Sea (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016). For Canberra, this was a watershed moment. Until then, successive Australian governments had managed to maintain a careful balance between preserving

economic interdependence with China and aligning with the United States' strategic posture. The Tribunal's decision made neutrality increasingly untenable. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government openly welcomed the ruling and called on China to respect the outcome in line with international law (Medcalf 2017). This was the first instance of Australia's explicit normative confrontation with Beijing. The government's rhetoric was framed in terms of the "rule-based international order," underscoring principles of sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and the integrity of international law (Strating 2019). For Australia, these were not abstract ideals as nearly two-thirds of its trade passed through contested waters, and any erosion of maritime law would directly affect national prosperity. For Australia, the concept of the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO**)** was equal to it national sovereignty. It carried both normative and strategic significance. At one level, it functioned as an identity marker, situating Australia firmly within the Western liberal tradition. Australia in the RBIO by presenting itself as a defender of international rules, could claim membership in what Hedley Bull (1977) called the "society of states" and, more specifically, in the solidarist strand of the English School that emphasizes shared values and legal norms (Bull 2012). For a middle power located on the geographic periphery of Asia but culturally embedded in the Anglosphere, invoking the RBIO provided a framework through which Australia could legitimize its presence as more than just a regional actor (Buzan 2004a; Strating 2019).

At another, more practical level, the RBIO was understood as a strategic guarantee, that China wanted to damage under the case of South China Sea dispute. Australian policymakers frequently described the rule-based order as a shield against great-power coercion (especially authoritarian state coercion), emphasizing that without widely accepted legal norms, middle powers like Australia would be left exposed (Bisley 2018a; Ikenberry 2009). The emphasis on "freedom of navigation" in particular reflected not only universal principles but also Australia's material dependence on maritime trade routes passing through the South China Sea. Upholding UNCLOS and international arbitration was therefore not an abstract legal preference but a matter of direct national interest. The political discourse surrounding the RBIO allowed successive Australian governments to reconcile competing pressures. Economically, Canberra remained deeply tied to China, strategically, it was anchored to the United States and the Anglosphere alliance system. By framing its choices in terms of defending universal rules rather than siding with one great power against another, Australia sought to cast its alignment as principled rather than opportunistic. Yet, as Beijing increasingly interpreted such rhetoric as

hostile, the RBIO evolved from a pragmatic diplomatic language into a central axis of confrontation between China and Australia.

Although Beijing's reaction to the Australian comments on approving the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration was swift and uncompromising. Chinese state media consistently accused Australia of acting as an **"**American puppet**"**, echoing earlier claims that Canberra was sacrificing its autonomy to serve U.S. containment strategies (BBC 2016). The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued formal démarches, while official commentaries portrayed Australia as a frontline state in the Western effort to constrain China's rise. This not only froze high-level dialogue but also deepened the perception gap between Beijing and Canberra, what Australia considered a defence of legal norms, China perceived as ideological hostility.

The deterioration in Sino–Australian relations after 2016 was not only structural but also increasingly personalized in the tense exchanges between Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and President Xi Jinping. While the Abbott years had already produced the first frictions, Turnbull's premiership marked a decisive break, as Beijing came to perceive Canberra as one of the most outspoken regional challengers of China's strategic ambitions. At the heart of this estrangement was a clash of political styles and normative visions. Turnbull, a liberal internationalist by conviction, openly framed Australia's foreign policy in terms of defending liberal democracy and the rule-based order (Remeikis 2018). In contrast, Xi Jinping was consolidating an explicitly authoritarian and centralized model of governance, articulated through the "China Dream" and the Belt and Road Initiative (Xi 2017). For Beijing, Canberra's foreign interference legislation, its public support for the Hague ruling, and its increasingly vocal advocacy of democratic norms amounted to an ideological alignment with Washington's containment strategy.

Diplomatically, the result was a visible cooling of high-level engagement which opened the door to a deepened bilateral cold war. Whereas the early 2010s had seen frequent leader-to-leader meetings and cooperative language around the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (signed in 2014), by 2017 bilateral visits were postponed or downgraded, and ministerial dialogues became increasingly acrimonious (Bisley 2018a; Wilson 2017). The Turnbull–Xi rift led to the practical collapse of trust between Canberra and Beijing. What had once been managed as pragmatic differences over trade or security now took on the character of a systemic dispute about political values and influence. Turnbull's insistence on Australia's sovereign right

to legislate against foreign interference and step up in normative questions like the case of the South China Sea were read in Beijing as evidence that Canberra had crossed from cautious hedging into active opposition. In turn, Xi's hardening authoritarianism and more aggressive diplomatic style (sometimes referred to as the so-called "wolf-warrior diplomacy") reinforced the Australian perception that engagement could no longer be separated from ideological contestation (Cha 2020; Medcalf 2020a).

4.5.1. The Significance of Turnbull's Normative Turn

The shift in Australia's foreign policy under Malcolm Turnbull was a **"**normative turn" in the sense that it was a transformation that transformed values and legal principles that previously shaped Sino-Australian relations and moved from being rhetorical accessories to serving as the central framework of strategic orientation. Unlike his predecessors, who largely balanced material interests with great powers, Turnbull increasingly framed Australia's international role as one of defending liberal norms against authoritarian encroachment.

Whereas the governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard pursued a pragmatic hedging strategy, cultivating deepening economic ties with China while anchoring security in the U.S. alliance this duality allowed flexibility but was rooted in material calculations (Bisley 2013; White 2012). Tony Abbott, in turn, introduced a sharper security focus but remained constrained by the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement negotiations, which encouraged caution and muted criticism of Beijing (Hsieh 2018). By contrast, under Turnbull, normative arguments themselves became the language of statecraft: questions of sovereignty, transparency, and the defence of the rule-based international order were no longer framed merely as instruments of interest but as constitutive of Australia's national identity. From the perspective of the English School, this amounted to a shift from a pluralist conception of international society, which emphasizes coexistence and order, toward a more solidarist orientation, which foregrounds common values, democracy, and legality as criteria for legitimacy (Bull 1977; Buzan 2004a). Australia's insistence on defending the Hague Tribunal's ruling on the South China Sea, its introduction of foreign interference legislation, and its tightening of foreign investment rules were framed as measures that transcended narrow national interest. Instead, they were justified as contributions to sustaining the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO)**,** positioning Australia as a custodian of global norms rather than merely a regional stakeholder.

The Darwin Port lease controversy in 2015, the foreign interference legislation (2017–2018), and the support for the Hague ruling in 2016 each constituted critical junctures, moments when exogenous shocks created conditions for institutional and discursive innovation (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007:200; Pierson 2004). Once adopted, these measures became institutionalized in the policymaking apparatus, setting Australia on a path-dependent trajectory where norm-based language increasingly structured strategic decisions. Even when governments changed, the frameworks remained, illustrating how short-term political shocks consolidated into long-term policy commitments. The normative turn also reshaped Australia's identity narrative in the sense that political discourse of the Turnbull era was no longer presented simply as a pragmatic middle power balancing between China and the United States, but as a liberal democracy on the frontline of systemic contestation (A. H. Henry 2020). This framing allowed policymakers to portray alignment with Washington and Tokyo not as acts of dependency, but as principled commitments to shared rules. At the same time, it made accommodation with Beijing increasingly difficult: Chinese officials interpreted Canberra's position not as neutral concern for international law but as deliberate ideological hostility (Wilson 2017).

In this sense, the normative turn created both opportunities but there were many new constraints as well. It enhanced Australia's credibility among Western allies, deepened its role in the U.S.-led alliance system, and provided the discursive foundations upon which future initiatives such as AUKUS could be legitimized as norm-defending rather than merely power-balancing projects. But on the other hand it also locked Canberra into a confrontational stance with Beijing, reducing flexibility and foreclosing avenues of pragmatic compromise. The turn toward normativity thus represented not just a tactical shift, but a structural redefinition of Australia's foreign policy identity in the twenty-first century.

5. The Road to AUKUS: Escalation and Diplomatic Cold War (2018-2021)

Chapter 5 examines the most sensitive phase of deterioration in Sino–Australian relations, tracing the trajectory from internal divisions within the Liberal Party after 2018 to the diplomatic and economic confrontations of the COVID-19 era where Australia positioned itself clearly against China. While earlier chapters have sought to illustrate how historical identity, institutional legacies, and strategic alignments shaped Australia's foreign policy trajectory, the period under study here aims to reveal how those long-term currents crystallized into a direct confrontation with Beijing. This chapter has a crucial importance because it illustrates the intersection of domestic political contestation, external strategic pressure, and economic interdependence at the moment when Australia moved irreversibly onto the path that culminated in the abandonment of relative foreign policy autonomy, balancing between China and the US and ultimately led to the AUKUS pact.

This chapter proceeds in three steps. First, Section 4.1 analyses the leadership struggles within the Liberal Party that followed Malcolm Turnbull's resignation in 2018. These intra-party conflicts were not merely personal rivalries but exposed a deeper ideological divide over how to balance security concerns and economic pragmatism in dealing with China. The securitization of China discourse, adopted by Scott Morrison (the PM who later in 2021 signed AUKUS) as both a survival strategy and a legitimizing narrative, marked a turning point, namely it transformed China from a complex economic partner into a primarily strategic and political threat.

Second, Section 4.2 explores the COVID-19 origins dispute, where Canberra's call for an independent investigation into the outbreak served as the immediate trigger for open confrontation (T. T. Nguyen et al. 2020:1). This demand, framed by Morrison as an assertion of sovereignty and responsibility to the Australian public, provoked a hostile Chinese response and led to sweeping trade retaliations. What had been building for years within the Liberal Party as political discourse now translated directly into material economic costs.

And third, the subsequent sections show how the trade conflict and the end of the China-driven boom revealed the structural vulnerabilities of Australia's economic model. This exposure accelerated Canberra's search for new security and economic frameworks, including diversification through free trade agreements and, most importantly, deeper alignment with its Anglosphere partners.

Demonstrating that the deterioration of Sino–Australian relations was not an accidental or isolated development but the culmination of overlapping domestic and international dynamics is crucial to reveal the mechanisms behind the AUKUS deal. The combination of Liberal Party factionalism, securitization of China, and economic coercion set the stage for Australia's embrace of AUKUS in 2021 were all structurally embedded features of Australian politics creating a path-dependent track. By disentangling the political and economic dimensions, the aim here is to clarify how internal debates within Canberra translated into external strategic choices, ultimately embedding Australia more firmly within the Anglosphere security architecture.

5.1. Division in the Liberal Party after 2018

The destabilizing effects of factionalism became a defining feature of Australian politics after the fall of Kevin Rudd in 2010. Not only the Liberal Party, but the earlier Labor governments from 2007 already suffered from internal divisions. Rudd's removal by Julia Gillard in 2010 was not the product of electoral defeat but of internal party maneuvering, underscoring how leadership instability rose from within rather than without (Rayner 2014). This precedent contributed to the (false) electoral sentiment that the Liberal Party would represent a more united government. Internal party divisions proved contagious across the political spectrum as it normalized the use of leadership spills as a mechanism for resolving disputes, embedding a culture of intra-party rivalry that undermined governing authority, which famed the governments in the 2010s (Greg 2015).

Factionalism first gripped the Labor Party, but it soon "spread" into the Liberal Party. Tony Abbott's premiership (2013–2015) revealed growing dissatisfaction within Liberal ranks, as his inability to balance economic pragmatism with hawkish rhetoric on China alienated both moderates and conservatives. While Abbott championed free trade agreements with Beijing, he simultaneously courted security hardliners by framing China as a strategic threat (De Silva 2023). Tony Abbot survived the first leadership spill in but months later he lost his party's

confidence. Abbot's inconsistency eroded his authority and culminated in his replacement by Malcolm Turnbull in 2015.

Turnbull's leadership sought to bridge these internal divisions by combining institutional reforms with cautious engagement. His decision to ban Huawei from participating in the national broadband network exemplified this dual approach as it satisfied security hawks while being framed in legal–institutional terms that appealed to economic pragmatists concerned with foreign investment rules (Wilson 2021a). Yet the compromise ultimately pleased neither side and Turnbull faced a confidence crisis in 2018. Conservatives regarded Turnbull as too cosmopolitan and hesitant, while moderates considered him increasingly beholden to right-wing pressure (Curran 2019). The culmination of this tension was the 2018 leadership spill. Peter Dutton, representing the conservative faction, challenged Turnbull's authority, triggering a crisis that resulted in Turnbull's resignation and the elevation of Scott Morrison. This episode confirmed that factionalism had matured into a structural pathology of Australian politics, weakening governing capacity and making coherent foreign policy increasingly difficult to sustain (Beeson and Zeng 2016; Tiernan 2007). By the time Morrison assumed leadership, the securitization of China had become not merely a matter of external strategic necessity but also an instrument of internal legitimacy, linking party survival directly to the framing of Australia's largest trading partner as a political and security threat.

The leadership crisis of 2018 ultimately exposed and deepened long-standing divisions within the Liberal Party over China policy and broader foreign policy orientation. Malcolm Turnbull's removal from office was not only a product of dissatisfaction with his leadership style but also reflected an ideological struggle over the balance between economic pragmatism and security-driven approaches to the Sino-Australian relationship (Curran 2019). Peter Dutton, representing the conservative right of the party, promoted a harder security line that closely echoed the rhetoric of U.S. "China hawks," portraying Beijing as an existential threat to Australian sovereignty (Wilson 2021a). Scott Morrison, who emerged as a compromise figure in the leadership spill, initially sought to straddle the competing factions but gradually leaned into securitizing rhetoric to consolidate his legitimacy within the party and before the electorate (Medcalf 2020a). This securitization of China served as a foreign policy adjustment but it was also a domestic political strategy. Faced with internal fractures, Morrison amplified discourses of "sovereignty," "foreign interference," and "strategic competition" to position himself as the defender of mainstream Australian interests (Feng 2022a). Such framing resonated strongly

with voters who perceived China as an increasingly assertive power, particularly after high-profile controversies involving Huawei and foreign investment screening mechanisms. The political logic was clear, adopting a harder line on China neutralized internal dissent while bolstering Morrison's credentials as a decisive leader during a period of uncertainty.

A cause-effect chain was revealing as factional struggles within the Liberal Party generated pressure for a securitized narrative of China, which in turn yielded short-term domestic legitimacy at the cost of long-term diplomatic deterioration. In this sense, the Liberal Party's internal dynamics were not simply reflective of external pressures but actively shaped the trajectory of Australia's China policy during a critical period of transition (White 2019).

5.2 The Economic Exposure to China

While the political debate within the Liberal Party hardened along securitized lines, the economic reality of Australia's dependence on China created persistent tensions. By the late 2010s, China accounted for nearly one-third of Australia's total exports, dwarfing any other trading partner (Drysdale and Findlay 2020). The resource sector was the most visible pillar of this dependence: iron ore exports, worth more than AUD 80 billion annually, were indispensable to the federal budget, as royalties and corporate tax revenues from mining companies such as BHP and Rio Tinto directly funded public spending (Garnaut 2021). Beyond iron ore, liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments to Chinese markets were rapidly expanding, locking in long-term contracts that further tied Australian fiscal health to Chinese demand (Wilson 2021b). This economic dependency (or rather interconnectivity since the Chinese also needed these Australian products) coupled with an increase of political tensions meant serious challenge to Australian enterprises and created a wide dissatisfaction.

Agriculture was another critical segment of economic interdependence, since China had become the largest destination for Australian barley, beef, and wine exports, with Chinese consumers accounting for around 40% of the wine industry's overseas sales prior to 2020 (Adekunle, Greenaway-McGrevy, and Zhang 2020). This dependence reflected the structural composition of the Australian economy, which, despite its status as a high-income country, has long relied on the export of primary commodities and resource-intensive goods rather than diversified manufacturing (Garnaut 2021). Agriculture, alongside mining, forms a central pillar of the "two-speed economy," in which export-oriented rural and resource sectors generate the bulk of trade surpluses, while service and manufacturing sectors remain comparatively smaller

contributors to external earnings (Connell 2020). Within this framework, China's role as a near-monopsonistic buyer gave it disproportionate leverage. When we consider the barley industry, for example, exported more than two-thirds of its output to China before the imposition of tariffs in 2020. Similarly, Australian beef producers, particularly in Queensland and New South Wales, were heavily exposed to Chinese demand for premium meat products, while winemakers in South Australia depended on middle-class Chinese consumers as their most lucrative market (James 2021a). The dairy and wool sectors were equally reliant, with Chinese textile mills and food processors constituting the single largest destination for exports.

The significance of this dependence went beyond economics as it had direct political risks. Rural constituencies, often considered the Liberal–National Coalition's electoral heartland, were particularly vulnerable to Chinese trade retaliation. When Beijing imposed tariffs and informal restrictions on barley, beef, and wine in 2020, the immediate economic impact was felt in regions that traditionally delivered votes to the government. This heightened the domestic political stakes of the dispute, as Canberra's securitization of China risked alienating key constituencies whose livelihoods were threatened by deteriorating trade relations (Wilson 2021b). Consequently, agriculture's dependence on China exemplified the broader contradiction in Australia's political economy and the very sectors most central to national prosperity and rural political identity were those most exposed to the vulnerabilities of strategic confrontation. The structural reliance of Australia's export economy on Chinese demand thus ensured that foreign policy decisions reverberated deeply within domestic politics, transforming international disputes into electoral challenges at home (Laurenceson and H. Zhou 2020).

The education sector provided a third pillar of dependence besides agriculture and industry. By 2019, Chinese students represented more than one-third of all international enrolments at Australian universities, generating billions in tuition fees that cross-subsidized research and domestic student education (Laurenceson and M. Zhou 2020). Chinese tourism played a comparable role as Chinese visitors constituted the largest group of inbound tourists, with associated spending supporting urban economies and service industries. Yet this reliance came with political and security complications since Australian security agencies repeatedly warned that large flows of Chinese students, while economically beneficial, also created avenues for state-linked influence and surveillance (Hamilton 2018b). Confucius Institutes, embedded within many Australian universities under the guise of cultural exchange, were criticized as vehicles for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda and instruments for monitoring

dissent among Chinese students abroad (Joske 2020). Reports highlighted that some student associations maintained direct links with the Chinese embassy, raising concerns about the silencing of debate on campuses, particularly around issues such as Hong Kong, Tibet, or Xinjiang (Feng 2022b).

These developments not only underscored how economic interdependence in education intersected with national security vulnerabilities and what at the first glance appeared to be a lucrative sector but also shed light on what it became a site of contestation about sovereignty, academic freedom, and foreign interference. Thus, while universities, cities, and service industries profited immensely from Chinese demand, Canberra increasingly perceived the sector as a double-edged sword, simultaneously indispensable to prosperity and penetrated by Beijing's influence. This multidimensional reliance meant that any significant disruption in the bilateral relationship carried systemic risks for Australia's prosperity. Unlike political rhetoric, which increasingly framed China as a security threat, the structure of the economy revealed that Australian growth and fiscal stability were deeply embedded in Chinese demand. This contradiction sharpened after 2018, as securitization of the bilateral relationship clashed with the entrenched realities of trade, investment, and service-sector dependence.

This divergence created a structural contradiction as political discourse increasingly framed China as a threat, the economic interdependence between the two countries remained profound (Laurenceson and M. Zhou 2020). Canberra's rhetoric emphasized sovereignty, foreign interference, and alignment with U.S. security priorities, yet the material basis of prosperity was still deeply tied to Chinese demand. The gap between political securitization and economic dependence grew wider after 2018, producing uncertainty for business actors who saw foreign policy decisions directly affecting market access. At the structural level, this imbalance gave Beijing a stronger hand. Whereas Australia could not quickly diversify its export profile, China had the capacity to weaponize trade measures against politically sensitive sectors such as wine, barley, beef, and coal without jeopardizing its own core economic needs (Wilson 2021a). The asymmetry was evident: Australia's economic reliance limited its freedom of manoeuvre, while China's retaliatory capacity created vulnerabilities that could be exploited in moments of political confrontation.

A factional divisions within the Liberal Party not only reshaped the political narrative on China but also sharpened the contradiction between economic dependence and security discourse. By securitizing the relationship, political leaders exposed the fragility of an economic model

heavily dependent on a single market, creating the preconditions for the confrontation that unfolded during the COVID-19 dispute.

5.3. COVID-19 Origins Investigation and Trade Retaliation

In late December 2019, Australian authorities issued several warnings and reports regarding the potential impact of Covid-19 on the country, based on early intelligence from the World Health Organization (WHO) and allied partners in the Indo-Pacific (T. Nguyen, Dao, and Le 2020). Nevertheless, the Australian Department of Health did not immediately recommend imposing travel restrictions. Through most of January 2020, the government limited measures to basic airport screening of passengers arriving from Wuhan at major international hubs such as Sydney and Melbourne. This relatively cautious approach reflected an attempt to balance public health concerns with the economic importance of Chinese tourism, which represented the single largest inbound visitor group at the time (McCann et al. 2022).

A significant policy shift occurred, however, on February 1, 2020, when Australia became one of the first Western countries to impose a comprehensive travel ban on all foreign nationals who had been in China within the previous 14 days. The decision marked a departure from WHO guidance, which at that stage did not recommend broad travel restrictions, and it pre-empted similar actions by other advanced economies such as the United States and members of the European Union (Seneviratne et al. 2024). Australian citizens and permanent residents stranded in China were repatriated but placed under mandatory 14-day quarantine. The government's choice of Christmas Island as the quarantine site sparked political controversy, as the facility had previously been used by the Howard government as an offshore detention center for asylum seekers (a deeply symbolic association that critics argued stigmatized returning Australians and framed them within a securitized discourse) (Townshend 2020).

These developments were crucial because China reacted sharply to these measures, condemning them as politically motivated, discriminatory, and excessive (Costantino, Heslop, and MacIntyre 2020). Chinese state media accused Canberra of aligning with Washington's emerging containment agenda under the guise of public health, while the Morrison government maintained that the measures were based solely on epidemiological advice and the protection

of Australian citizens. The episode set the tone for how Covid-19 would become both a public health emergency and a political-security issue, foreshadowing the broader deterioration of Sino-Australian relations over the course of the pandemic. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic meant a significant blow to Sino-Australian relations in the sense that it seriously affected not only political ties but tourism and trade (McCann et al. 2022; T. T. Nguyen et al. 2020; Seneviratne et al. 2024).

In April 2020, the Morrison government launched an initiative calling for an international investigation through the World Health Organization (WHO) into the origins of Covid-19. While framed as a contribution to global health governance and the defence of the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO), the proposal was widely criticized for being rushed and diplomatically uncoordinated (Nick Bisley 2021c). Notably, Morrison failed to secure prior support from major partners, including Washington, where then-candidate Joe Biden had not yet articulated a position on the issue. Canberra's move thus appeared unilateral rather than embedded in a broader coalition strategy, leaving Australia exposed as the face of international criticism toward China (Zhang 2022). From Beijing's perspective, the call for an inquiry was not a neutral act of public health diplomacy but an overtly political move. Chinese officials accused Canberra of acting as "Washington's deputy sheriff" in Asia, suggesting that the initiative was less about pandemic transparency and more about containing China's rise. Chinese state media amplified this framing, portraying Australia as an instrument of American influence in the Indo-Pacific rather than an independent actor. This perception deepened long-standing Chinese concerns that Australia had abandoned its hedging strategy in favour of unqualified alignment with U.S. interests.

The consequences of this misstep were profound. By linking the inquiry to RBIO principles, Canberra sought to position itself as a normative leader in global governance. Yet without careful multilateral preparation, the initiative instead eroded trust with Beijing and triggered perceptions of bad faith. Within months, China initiated an unprecedented campaign of economic coercion, targeting Australian exports such as barley, wine, beef, and coal in retaliation for what it regarded as an unfriendly and confrontational policy stance (Wilson 2021b). Thus, what began as a public health appeal for transparency escalated into a defining rupture in Sino-Australian relations one that fused pandemic diplomacy with questions of sovereignty, alliance politics, and Australia's strategic identity.

As retaliation against Australia's investigation initiative, China launched an economic coercion campaign aimed at pressuring Canberra to withdraw its call for a WHO inquiry. Beijing effectively used Australia's economic dependence on exports to China by imposing substantial tariffs on key Australian products, including barley (80%), wine (200%, which virtually devastated the trade), and beef (ABC News 2023; Butler and Davidson 2020). Additionally, China initiated a significant campaign discouraging tourism to Australia. The Chinese response also extended into the political and diplomatic realms, temporarily suspending all high-level interactions between the two countries. The most impactful restriction affected the coal trade when China unofficially banned Australian coal imports in late 2020 (Todorov 2024). Chinese ports were instructed not to permit entry to Australian ships, forcing them to remain offshore. Given that Australia was the world's largest exporter of metallurgical coal—an essential component in steel production—and China sourced nearly 40% of its coal requirements from Australia, the ban significantly disrupted both economies (Xiang, Kuang, and Li 2017). The coal trade was the primary economic connection between the two nations, and its suspension in 2020 was only normalized in 2023 after two years of restrictions. During this period, China was compelled to restructure its coal supply chains, turning to alternative suppliers like Indonesia, India, and Russia, which provided predominantly lower-quality coal. Australia, benefiting from robust global demand, quickly found replacement markets in India, Japan, and South Korea. Before the ban, Australian coal exports to China had reached approximately 92 million tons annually (Raj 2023). However, the trade only partially recovered following the gradual easing of restrictions in 2023, requiring an additional year to fully restore to the volumes of the pre-ban degrees. In 2024, Australia's coal exports to China stood at roughly 80 million tons.

The two-year coal ban fundamentally changed China's dependency on Australian natural resources, reducing Canberra's role to only the third-largest coal supplier to China by 2025. China recorded historically high coal imports of 547 million tons in 2024, predominantly sourced from Indonesia (237 million tons), Russia (94 million tons), and Australia (83 million tons) (Daisy 2024; Reuters 2025).

5.4. After 2020: End of the Trade Boom

The period starting with the embargos on Australian products proved to be a watershed moment. From the early 2000s until the late 2010s, the "China trade boom" was the defining feature of Australia's economic trajectory (James 2021a). Driven above all by Chinese demand for iron ore, coal, and liquefied natural gas, Australia experienced an unparalleled period of prosperity. Mining royalties allowed state governments, especially in Western Australia and Queensland, to fund infrastructure and social services, while the federal budget was consistently supported by corporate tax revenue from resource companies (Drysdale and Findlay 2020). The boom also had redistributive political consequences as while mining states became wealthier and more politically influential, manufacturing regions in the southeast faced relative decline, accentuating Australia's economic dependence on resource exports (Connell 2020).

At the same time, services, particularly education and tourism, grew into major export industries, both underpinned by Chinese demand. The cumulative effect of these dynamics was to tie Australia's growth model to China across multiple sectors, creating what scholars referred to as a "three-pillar dependency" on resources, agriculture, and services. For much of this period, Canberra embraced an "engagement paradigm." Policymakers assumed that deepening trade interdependence would help stabilize the broader relationship, economic prosperity would create mutual interests that could moderate political disagreements. The notion that China would evolve into a "responsible stakeholder" within the regional and global order was widely shared, not only in Australia but also among other advanced economies (Armstrong 2017). In practice, this meant that even as political disputes surfaced, over human rights abuses, the South China Sea, or foreign interference, economic ties continued to expand, cushioning bilateral frictions.

In the longer term, however, the economic rupture consolidated a strategic reassessment. The bipartisan consensus that emerged concluded that Australia could no longer rely on China as the engine of its prosperity. Instead, policymakers argued for diversification of export markets, pursuing new trade agreements with India (the 2022 Australia–India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement) and deepening links with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN states. Canberra also reinvigorated domestic debates on economic sovereignty, with greater emphasis on "resilience" and reducing vulnerability in critical sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and technology (Wilson 2021b). Strategically, the end of the trade boom marked

a deeper identity shift as well. Where previously Australia had tried to reconcile its economic dependence on China with its security alliance with the United States, this balance became untenable. The collapse of the engagement paradigm narrowed Canberra's choices like defending sovereignty and the Rule-Based International Order increasingly required alignment with like-minded partners, even at economic cost. The 2020 Defence Strategic Update codified this perception, naming China's "coercive statecraft" as the most significant regional challenge and signaling a turn toward long-term strategic competition (Beeson and A. Chubb 2021).

Thus, the Covid-19 dispute and subsequent trade war represented a material disruption and the symbolic closure of the "China boom" era as well. The period of easy growth, budget surpluses, and political stability gave way to a new strategic reality in which prosperity could not be separated from geopolitics. In its place emerged an Australian identity as a "frontline defender" of the RBIO and an integrated member of the Anglosphere, laying the groundwork for Canberra's eventual embrace of AUKUS as the institutional expression of this strategic realignment. The events of 2020 decisively shattered this assumption. The pandemic dispute revealed that far from moderating tensions, economic dependence could be weaponized in moments of political disagreement. The imposition of tariffs on barley and wine, the suspension of beef imports, and above all the coal ban demonstrated China's willingness to leverage Australia's trade reliance for coercive purposes (ABC News 2023; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2025; Wilson 2021b). In doing so, Beijing signaled that prosperity was conditional on political compliance, undermining the very logic that had underwritten two decades of economic strategy. The "China trade boom" was no longer a guarantee of stability but a vulnerability that could be turned against Canberra.

On the economic front, Canberra accelerated efforts to diversify trade partnerships, signing the Australia–India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement in 2022 and advancing negotiations with the United Kingdom and the European Union (Medcalf 2020b; Raby 2020). Japan and South Korea remained vital markets, while ASEAN states were increasingly framed as alternative growth engines, even though none could substitute for China's sheer scale. These diversification strategies were often more symbolic than structural, but they reflected a political determination to reduce vulnerability and reclaim a sense of economic sovereignty. Domestically, the shock of the sanctions amplified debates over resilience in critical industries. Policymakers placed renewed emphasis on building domestic manufacturing capacity, securing supply chains in energy and technology, and developing critical minerals as a hedge against

overdependence on a single market (Nick Bisley 2021b). The language of "national resilience" and "economic sovereignty" became a permanent fixture of Australian policy discourse, shaping budgets, industrial policy, and public expectations alike.

Strategically, the rupture narrowed Canberra's room for manoeuvre in the U.S.–China rivalry. If the engagement paradigm once allowed Australia to hedge, the collapse of the boom entrenched the perception that defending sovereignty and the Rule-Based International Order could not be divorced from aligning more closely with Washington and other Anglosphere partners. This logic culminated in the announcement of AUKUS in September 2021, which was presented domestically not merely as a defence procurement arrangement but as the institutional embodiment of a new era in which prosperity, security, and identity were fused (Beeson and A. Chubb 2021). China will remain its largest trading partner in absolute terms, but Canberra will invest in regional partnerships, critical industries, and normative coalitions to offset Beijing's coercive leverage (White 2019). The end of the trade boom decisively altered its self-perception, embedding economic policy within the broader project of strategic alignment that ultimately led to AUKUS.

6. The AUKUS Pact and the Anglosphere

The announcement of the AUKUS security partnership in September 2021 represented a decisive moment in Australia's strategic trajectory and marked the culmination of Australia's strategical fears which were traced throughout this dissertation. While previous chapters examined the interplay between domestic factionalism, economic dependence on China, and the collapse of the "engagement paradigm," this chapter shifts the focus to the institutional outcome that crystallized these pressures amid the deepening trade war between Canberra and Beijing, namely the trilateral pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

AUKUS is significant not merely as a defence procurement arrangement centered on nuclear-powered submarines (which are surely useful tools balancing against China), but as an institutional manifestation of deeper historical, normative, and identity-based currents which tied Australia to its Ango-Saxon allies in the 20th century. This partnership builds upon longstanding patterns of Anglosphere cooperation, particularly the Five Eyes intelligence alliance and the ANZUS security treaty, yet also represents a qualitative shift, as the explicit framing of Australia as a "frontline defender" of the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO) in the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, AUKUS was in 2021 not only a reaction to the immediate challenge posed by a more assertive China, but also the product of path-dependent institutional evolution and a reaffirmation of Anglosphere solidarity. Whereas earlier Australian foreign policy elites often articulated their strategic alignment in terms of a broad Western solidarity, AUKUS represented a significant narrowing of this framework. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Western International Society (WIS) is best understood as a solidarist constellation divided into three overlapping but distinct pillars: the European Union with its project of continental integration, the Anglosphere centered on the United States-UK axis with the participation of former settler dominions, and a group of democratic allies in Asia and beyond whose partnership with Washington rests on shared liberal values rather than common history. The emergence of AUKUS reinforced one of these pillars (the Anglosphere) at the expense of a wider and more inclusive notion of Western unity (Ahrens and Diez 2015; Barnes and Makinda 2022; Buzan 2014b).

AUKUS was a watershed for the "western world" as well by privileging a community defined by common language, shared imperial legacies, and embedded intelligence and defence cooperation, which signaled that Australia's identity was most securely anchored within this narrower circle rather than in the wider West. While Canberra continued to affirm its support for the RBIO as a universal framework, in practice its most consequential commitments were made to partners with whom it shared cultural proximity and historical intimacy. This dynamic inevitably created tensions with the European Union, which interpreted AUKUS as a betrayal of intra-Western trust, and highlighted the fragility of the idea that the West could act as a singular political community. In effect, the pact exposed the layered nature of the WIS, economic interdependence may span continents, but the deepest bonds of strategic trust were reaffirmed in the Anglosphere (Bennett 2007; Clayton and Newman 2023a; Egedy 2022; Hayton and Wellings 2025).

In this sense, AUKUS was not simply a functional response to China's rise but an identity-constituting act within the WIS. It privileged the solidarist Anglosphere over a relatively pluralist wider West, revealing that cultural and historical affinities can carry greater weight in moments of strategic rupture than abstract appeals to universal liberal norms. For Australia, this meant that defending the RBIO did not require uniform cooperation with all Western democracies, but rather closer integration with those allies whose institutions, strategic cultures, and identities had been intertwined for over a century.

The purpose of this chapter therefore is threefold. First, it situates the formation of AUKUS within the broader historical and geopolitical context of alliance politics particularly within the Western International Society, highlighting how Canberra's choices were shaped both by material concerns and by inherited strategic traditions (5.1). Second, it systematically examines international reactions to AUKUS, drawing upon the perspectives of the three signatory states as well as those of China and France, whose responses illuminate competing visions of regional order and alliance legitimacy (5.2). Third, it integrates the empirical material with the dissertation's theoretical framework by analyzing the strategic, normative, and identity dimensions of AUKUS. Here, the English School and Historical Institutionalism provide interpretive lenses to understand why this pact resonated so strongly within the Anglosphere and what it reveals about Australia's evolving national identity and place in international society (5.3).

Taken together, the author believes these sections effectively demonstrate that AUKUS cannot be reduced to a procurement decision or a tactical alignment. Rather, it embodies a broader strategic realignment, namely the end of hedging, the narrowing of policy options, and the consolidation of an identity that anchors Australia firmly within the Anglosphere as a defender of the RBIO. In doing so, the chapter reveals how the interplay between domestic politics, economic shocks, and identity narratives ultimately produced one of the most consequential alliance decisions in contemporary Australian history.

6.1. Trilateral Alliance Formation

The announcement of AUKUS on 15 September 2021 by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, President Joe Biden, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson marked one of the most consequential alliance decisions in Australian history. At its core, the pact centered on the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia, a capability previously shared only between the United States and the United Kingdom under the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement (Baylis 2008; Mills 2014; UK government 1958). The submarines were widely recognized as the most visible and controversial element of the agreement, but they were only part of a broader agenda encompassing cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea warfare (Townshend 2022).

The formation of AUKUS was the product of both immediate strategic pressures and long-term institutional evolution. On the one hand, it was a direct response to the accelerating rise of China's military power and the increasingly coercive turn in Beijing's foreign policy, which had been acutely felt in Australia since the trade disputes of 2020. On the other hand, Australia's embrace of the RBIO also represented the latest stage in a much longer historical development. The roots of this trajectory can be traced back to the imperial ties of the British world-system, in which Australia was not merely a dominion but an integral part of a global security order structured around the Royal Navy and imperial preference in the Far East (Dean 1976).

The collapse of the British Empire after 1945 and the retreat "East of Suez" did not sever these bonds but rather reconfigured these historical institutions. The 1951 ANZUS Treaty institutionalized Australia's transition from a British-dependent dominion to a U.S.-anchored ally, binding its security policy to the evolving American-led order in the Pacific (Alves 1987;

Robb and Gill 2015; Tow 2005). This alliance was not simply functional as it carried an ideological weight, presenting Australia as part of a trans-Pacific liberal community with shared values of democracy, rule of law, and free enterprise (Beeson and D. Chubb 2021). The early Cold War also saw the consolidation of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, which drew Australia into an exclusive circle of Anglophone states (the U.S., UK, Canada, and New Zealand) (Battersby and Ball 2023; Cartmell 2023; O'Neil 2017). Beyond its obvious strategic value, Five Eyes cultivated an enduring sense of political kinship in ways that extended well beyond intelligence sharing. Membership in this exclusive network was perceived as a marker of trust and reliability since only a handful of states were granted access to the most sensitive defence and intelligence information of the Anglosphere. This exclusivity reinforced a sense of belonging to an "inner circle," where Canberra was not simply a peripheral ally but a co-owner of the institutions underpinning Western security.

The club-like nature of Five Eyes (reinforced by common language, legal traditions, and political cultures) played a major role in normalizing the idea that Australia's destiny was inseparable from that of other English-speaking democracies who stood against the Soviet Union in the 20th century and are threatened by the emerging Chinese power in the 21st century. For policymakers in Canberra, participation in this network became a constant reminder that Australia was not an isolated middle power on the periphery of Asia, but rather part of a global Anglosphere bound together by both security and civilizational identity which legitimized AUKUS as a tool for national self-defence (Clayton and Newman 2023a). We need to note that this identity dimension carried important implications. First, it created domestic political legitimacy for close alignment with Washington and London, since such alignment could be framed not only as pragmatism but as a natural expression of cultural affinity. Second, it contributed to a structural narrowing of strategic imagination. If Australia's core identity was Anglosphere-centric, alternative futures (such as deeper integration into Asian regionalism as Whitlam wanted) appeared less legitimate or even potentially threatening. This was also true to the ethnic composition of the country (Kurti et al. 2024). Five Eyes reinforced a collective mission as well. It was established in the name of defending liberal democracy in the face of authoritarian challenges, a narrative that became especially prominent in the post-9/11 era and later during the intensification of U.S.–China rivalry (Beeson 2020).

Seen from this angle, Five Eyes was not a Cold War intelligence alliance, but a socializing institution built on the ruins of the core of the British Empire that tied Australia's national self-

image to the preservation of an English-speaking liberal order. This sense of political kinship explains why Canberra so readily interpreted challenges from Beijing not only as security threats but as attacks on the very identity of the community to which it belonged. Seen in this historical institutionalist light, contemporary references to the RBIO did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they reflected an inherited tradition in which Australia repeatedly sought to anchor itself within Anglosphere security frameworks. From empire to alliance, from ANZUS to Five Eyes, each arrangement embedded Canberra more deeply in a community characterized by trust, interoperability, and shared political identity (Bisley 2013; Cohen 2024; White 2019). The eventual embrace of AUKUS in 2021 thus represented less a rupture than a logical culmination of a new institutional expression of the same historical developmental-path to secure prosperity and sovereignty through belonging to an Anglophone order.

The trilateral dimension of AUKUS reflected a deliberate narrowing of security partnerships to those with the greatest degree of historical confidence and technological trust (Girardi and Van Hooft 2021). Unlike multilateral forums such as the Quad, which include diverse partners like Japan and India, AUKUS was built around a cultural and linguistic community whose members already cooperated on the most sensitive intelligence matters. As analysts noted, the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology was possible only because of decades of institutionalized trust and common identity that made such a step politically imaginable (Dalton and Levite 2023; Dean et al. 2024; O'Connor, Cox, and Cooper 2023). The pact thus institutionalized what had long been implicit, namely Australia's security future lay not in hedging between partners, but in doubling down on its Anglosphere identity.

Still we see that AUKUS was an ill-prepared and less carefully staged act of political communication. For Morrison, the joint press conference with Biden and Johnson was an opportunity to frame national debate around "big picture" questions of sovereignty and security, overshadowing contentious domestic issues (BBC News 2021a; Guardian News 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affaires Malaysia 2021). Media coverage in Australia and internationally was intense, dominating headlines for days (P. Jain 2021). The announcement was prepared under secrecy for several months, which created confusion among other allied countries excluded from prior consultations. Moreover, the optics of the press conference produced unintended controversies, most infamously when President Biden, after thanking Johnson, appeared to forget Morrison's name (S. Jain 2021). While trivial in substance, the incident reverberated across social media and undercut the government's attempt to present AUKUS as a seamless

expression of allied unity. For Morrison, what was designed as a moment of statesmanlike leadership instead became a reminder of Australia's junior status in the alliance hierarchy.

At the same time, the diplomatic signaling embedded in AUKUS remained unmistakable. For Washington, it reaffirmed the centrality of alliances in the Indo-Pacific strategy and demonstrated that the United States was willing to share its most sensitive technologies to build local capacity against China (Beránek 2024). For London, it embodied the "Global Britain" narrative in the post-Brexit era, offering a visible demonstration of continued strategic relevance outside Europe (Landsman 2021; Ricketts 2022). For Canberra, it consolidated a decades-long evolution from hedging and engagement towards unambiguous alignment. By accepting the risks of Chinese retaliation and the costs of submarine acquisition, Australia signaled that sovereignty and deterrence now took precedence over economic pragmatism (Medcalf 2020a).

6.2. Reactions to AUKUS

The announcement of AUKUS in September 2021 was poorly prepared in diplomatic terms. While the Morrison government succeeded in securing bipartisan support at home, with both the Liberal and Labor parties endorsing the deal as a historic step to enhance national security, it failed to anticipate the degree of backlash from key international partners. Prime Minister Scott Morrison portrayed AUKUS as a necessary measure to "help Australia to keep itself safe", yet Labor's leadership strongly criticized his government for mishandling the diplomacy, accusing him of "blindsiding" France, disrespecting allies, and unnecessarily damaging Australia's international reputation (Kelly et al. 2021). Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong, then opposition leader and shadow foreign minister, argued that while the alliance itself was justified, Morrison's failure to engage in advance consultations risked eroding Canberra's credibility as a trustworthy partner (BBC 2021c).

Internationally, the announcement triggered a wide array of reactions that can broadly be grouped into three categories. The first group, composed mainly of U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan and India, welcomed AUKUS as a stabilizing force and a necessary counterweight to China's growing influence. Although their perspectives differed, Japan as a

formal treaty ally and India as a non-aligned power, their support reflected a shared interest in containing Beijing's strategic expansion (Chalivet 2022; Tsuruoka 2021).

The second group consisted of countries that did not openly oppose AUKUS but voiced strong concerns about its implications. These included Indonesia, Malaysia, the European Union, and New Zealand, all of whom emphasized risks of nuclear proliferation, regional arms racing, and the exclusion of key stakeholders from consultation processes (M. Marafona 2021a; Ministry of Foreign Affaires Malaysia 2021; N. R. Smith and Bland 2024). For ASEAN states in particular, the pact raised fears that regional security matters could be decided unilaterally by great powers, undermining ASEAN's established role as a convening actor and mediator in Southeast Asia.

The third group comprised states that explicitly condemned AUKUS, either as a betrayal or a strategic threat. France, whose multibillion-dollar submarine deal with Australia was abruptly cancelled, framed the decision as a "stab in the back" and a grave affront to European strategic credibility (Chrisafis and Boffey 2021). China, by contrast, opposed AUKUS not for economic losses but because the alliance was inherently aimed at countering its rise, prompting Beijing to cast the pact as a Cold War-style bloc politics and a destabilizing move in the Indo-Pacific (R. Falconer 2021). Other states such as Russia and North Korea also criticized the deal, echoing concerns about nuclear proliferation and regional instability.

Taken together, these reactions highlight the deeply divisive nature of AUKUS. Far from being universally celebrated as a contribution to the Rule-Based International Order, the agreement fragmented the international community along geopolitical and identity-based lines, welcomed by those seeking stronger deterrence against China, tolerated with caution by those worried about proliferation and exclusion, and opposed outright by those directly harmed or strategically targeted.

6.2.1. France and the European Union

Among all international responses, none was as vocally indignant as that of France and it was not without a good reason. The cancellation of the so-called "contract of the century" (the AUD 90 billion (EUR 56 billion) agreement with Naval Group for the construction of 12 conventional submarines) was perceived in Paris not only as a commercial setback but as a profound humiliation (Chrisafis and Boffey 2021; Politico 2021). There was a prolonged and

highly competitive tender process involving German and Japanese companies before Australia decided to accept the French offer. When the Australian government selected France's Naval Group (then DCNS) as the preferred partner in April 2016, the French celebrated it as a symbolic victory (Bangkur and Kurniawan 2025; Holland and Staunton 2024).

The decision was formally announced under Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, while the intergovernmental agreement between Australia and France was signed in December 2016, establishing the political and strategic framework of cooperation. The program, as it was already mentioned, proposed the construction of 12 Attack-class submarines, a conventionally powered design of France's Barracuda-class nuclear submarine, adapted to Australian requirements. Beyond the acquisition of platforms, the agreement was explicitly framed as a strategic partnership rather than a purely commercial contract, serving French strategical interests in the region as well. The French-Australian cooperation would have inherently involved the provisions for technology transfer, sovereign capability development, and the localization of production, with the majority of the submarines to be built in Adelaide. This was intended to foster Australia's domestic defence-industrial base, ensure long-term operational autonomy, and embed France as a key Indo-Pacific security partner (Imansyah and Drajati Nugrahani 2024).

After multiple rounds of negotiations between France and Australia, a Strategic Partnering Agreement was signed in February 2019, marking the transition from political commitment to contractual execution. By this stage, the program had reached an advanced planning phase, with design work underway, industrial arrangements established, and significant financial and political capital invested on both sides. Although the program was increasingly criticized within Australia for cost overruns, delays, and capability limitations (particularly in terms of range, endurance, and future strategic relevance) it remained formally effective until its abrupt termination in September 2021 and if AUKUS did not come the actual works would shortly began (Murphy and Hurst 2021; Nair 2022; Politico 2021). But the unilateral cancellation of the Franco-Australian submarine agreement in favor of AUKUS represented a fundamental reorientation of Australia's strategic priorities and alliance commitments. From the French perspective, the case signaled a downgrading of France's role as a trusted security partner in the Indo-Pacific and underscored the persistence of Anglosphere-centered alignment patterns in Australian strategic thinking foreshadowing serious diplomatic confrontations between the parties.

President Emmanuel Macron denounced the announcement as a “stab in the back” and, in an unprecedented move, recalled France’s ambassadors from Canberra and Washington for consultations (Willsher 2021). French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described Australia’s actions as a “betrayal of trust,” emphasizing that such behaviour was unworthy of allies (DeYoung, Miller, and Kuo 2021; FRANCE 24 2021:24). These gestures marked the gravest diplomatic rift between France and its Anglosphere partners in decades. The recall of ambassadors, typically reserved for adversaries rather than close allies, was intended to signal the depth of France’s indignation and to elevate the submarine dispute into a matter of national honour and credibility. Domestically, Macron sought to frame the incident as an attack not only on France but on Europe’s collective standing, linking it to his broader push for “strategic autonomy” within the European Union. This allowed him to use the crisis to reinforce his long-standing argument that Europe should not rely exclusively on the United States and its Anglosphere allies for security guarantees (France 24 2021). Internationally, the rupture raised questions about the cohesion of Western alliances. By equating the cancellation with a breach of trust among democracies, French leaders highlighted that AUKUS risked undermining the very rule-based order it claimed to defend. In doing so, Paris sought to portray the fallout as a test case for the credibility of transatlantic solidarity at a time when unity was urgently needed in confronting both Chinese assertiveness and Russian revisionism.

The rupture carried substantial economic consequences too. The Naval Group contract had been one of the largest defence export projects in French history, expected to support thousands of jobs in France and Australia well into the 2030s (Le Monde 2023; Murphy and Hurst 2021). Its abrupt termination dealt a severe blow to the French defence industry, eroding Naval Group’s international reputation and causing losses estimated in the billions of euros due to sunk investments in infrastructure, design, and research already undertaken (Holland and Staunton 2024; Imansyah and Drajati Nugrahani 2024). Yet beyond the economic costs, the diplomatic symbolism was arguably more damaging as Paris had already invested significant political capital in projecting itself as a resident Indo-Pacific power, underpinned by its territories such as New Caledonia, Réunion, and French Polynesia. The submarine partnership with Australia had been designed as a cornerstone of this strategy, anchoring France’s claim to play a central role in shaping regional security architectures (Heisbourg 2021). Its cancellation suggested that Anglosphere partners had deliberately sidelined France, calling into question the credibility of Europe’s role in the Indo-Pacific (M. Marafona 2021b).

At the European level, the episode resonated as a symbol of the fragility of transatlantic trust. The timing was particularly sensitive, coinciding with the release of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021, which was intended to demonstrate Europe's commitment to balancing China's rise (Satoru 2021). Many in Brussels interpreted AUKUS as a deliberate snub, undermining Europe's ambitions in the region. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel openly criticized the secretive and exclusive nature of the negotiations, stressing that Europe should be treated as an equal partner in strategic affairs (Cheng 2022; Egedy 2022). Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, expressed regret that member states had not even been informed at an informal level, underscoring the perception of exclusion (FN 2021). The diplomatic fallout spilled over into economic domains. Ongoing negotiations for the Australia–EU free trade agreement, which had been progressing steadily since 2018, were temporarily suspended after the crisis. Although talks resumed, analysts note that political trust was severely eroded, and progress slowed significantly, with some European officials privately questioning Canberra's reliability as a partner (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019).

The French and EU reactions demonstrated that AUKUS was more than a trilateral procurement arrangement. For France, it represented a direct assault on its Indo-Pacific ambitions and a public humiliation of its global role; for the EU, it underscored the persistence of an "Anglosphere-first" logic in Western strategic planning. The crisis thus symbolized a widening divide between the transatlantic and Anglosphere dimensions of the Western alliance system, highlighting the costs of Australia's deepening strategic realignment.

6.2.2. China: Strategic Hostility and Propaganda War

Among all international responses, China (alongside France) was the most vocal critic of AUKUS. While the official joint statement announcing the pact did not explicitly mention Beijing, the strategic orientation of the agreement left little doubt that it was aimed at constraining China's regional ambitions (White House 2021). For Beijing, AUKUS symbolized both a military challenge and an ideological affront: a trilateral bloc of English-speaking nations committed to defending what they termed the "rule-based international order" (Curtis and Walker 2021). Chinese officials and state media quickly framed the alliance as a hostile move, warning that it risked triggering a "new Cold War" (R. Falconer 2021; PRC Foreign Ministry 2021b).

Beijing's rhetoric emphasized several themes. First, Chinese diplomats depicted AUKUS as a violation of international law, accusing the United States and its partners of undermining non-proliferation norms by transferring nuclear-propulsion technology to a non-nuclear weapons state. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian declared that the agreement "seriously undermines regional peace and stability, intensifies the arms race, and undermines international non-proliferation efforts" (BBC 2021a). Similarly, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng dismissed AUKUS as a bloc of "Anglo-Saxon states" imposing a divisive Cold War mentality on the Indo-Pacific (PRC Foreign Ministry 2021c). Chinese commentaries frequently invoked treaties such as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Agreement to argue that AUKUS violated the very principles it claimed to uphold.

Second, AUKUS was framed by Beijing as definitive proof that Australia had abandoned its strategic autonomy. For decades, Chinese analysts had debated the extent to which Canberra retained independent agency within its alliance with Washington (Andrews 1985). The AUKUS announcement seemed to resolve that debate in Beijing's eyes as Australia was now portrayed not as a middle power balancing its economic ties to China against its security alliance with the United States, but as an unquestioning extension of American strategy in the Indo-Pacific (Townshend 2020). Chinese state media revived the long-standing trope of Australia as Washington's "deputy sheriff," a label dating back to the Howard era but now used more forcefully to depict Canberra as a subordinate actor in a containment strategy aimed squarely at China (Pan 2025:202; Smith 2022). This rhetoric was intended not only for domestic audiences, to rally nationalist sentiment, but also for international observers in Southeast Asia and the Global South, where China sought to portray AUKUS as a relic of Cold War–era bloc politics.

The *Global Times*, a party-owned tabloid with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party, went further, explicitly warning that Australia had "turned itself into an adversary of China" and could be treated as a "frontline target" in the event of conflict (Helen Davidson and Blair 2021). Such language implied that Canberra had forfeited the buffer role of being a secondary power and had instead placed itself directly on the fault line of U.S.–China rivalry. Prominent Chinese commentators echoed and amplified this narrative (Gao 2023). Victor Gao, a well-known foreign policy analyst with links to Chinese state institutions, declared that Australia's choice risked making it "a potential target for nuclear strikes" in any future confrontation, framing the AUKUS decision as not merely reckless but existentially dangerous (McKenzie

2021). By circulating such warnings, Beijing sought to highlight the costs of alignment for Australia, portraying the alliance as both a provocation and a gamble with national survival. Beyond deterrent rhetoric, this discourse served a strategic function as it aimed to fracture domestic Australian debates by appealing to latent anxieties about dependence on the U.S. security umbrella and the potential costs of entanglement. By labelling Australia as a mere appendage of American power, China sought to delegitimize Canberra's claim to act as an independent stakeholder defending the Rule-Based International Order and instead cast it as an instrument of U.S. hegemony.

Third, China sought to delegitimize AUKUS in the eyes of third parties by emphasizing its allegedly destabilizing consequences for the regional order and damages the international law. Beijing consistently argued that the pact would accelerate militarization in the Indo-Pacific, risk provoking an arms race, and undermine the role of ASEAN as the central platform for regional dialogue and conflict management (H. Davidson and Blair 2021; PRC Foreign Ministry 2021c). In official statements, Chinese diplomats framed AUKUS as a unilateral move that bypassed existing multilateral institutions, thereby eroding trust and marginalizing voices of smaller states whose security would nonetheless be directly affected (Zhao 2021). A major component of this narrative was Beijing's warning that nuclear-propulsion technology transfer, even if limited to conventionally armed submarines, set a dangerous precedent that might encourage other regional states to pursue similar capabilities. Chinese officials claimed this risked creating a "domino effect" of proliferation, eroding international non-proliferation norms and the authority of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (BBC 2021a; PRC Foreign Ministry 2021b). In this way, China attempted to invert the AUKUS members' own argument about defending the Rule-Based International Order, by presenting the alliance as a violator of that very order.

Beyond the legalistic and security-oriented framing, China also deployed a powerful symbolic critique. By casting AUKUS as a "small clique of Anglo-Saxon states," Beijing deliberately evoked historical memories of Western colonial dominance in Asia (PRC Foreign Ministry 2021c). This narrative was targeted not only at domestic audiences but also at Southeast Asian and Global South countries, many of which had experienced Western imperialism first-hand. By linking AUKUS to colonial-era alignments, China sought to position itself as the defender of postcolonial sovereignty against the reassertion of Western hegemony (Cheng 2022). In doing so, Beijing hoped to draw contrasts between its own regional initiatives,

such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which it presents as inclusive and development-oriented, and what it characterized as the exclusive, security-focused, and racially coded nature of AUKUS. The rhetorical framing of AUKUS as a "revival of imperialist security structures" thus aimed to resonate with ASEAN states wary of being sidelined and to appeal more broadly to international audiences sceptical of Western interventions (Curtis and Walker 2021; R. Falconer 2021). While many Indo-Pacific states remained cautious and avoided fully endorsing Beijing's position, the effectiveness of this narrative lay in its ability to exploit pre-existing anxieties: fear of a regional arms race, distrust of nuclear technology, and resentment of great-power exclusionary practices. By emphasizing these themes, China attempted to erode the legitimacy of AUKUS without necessarily convincing other states to align openly with Beijing's opposition.

There is a need to note that despite the intensity of Beijing's opposition, its efforts met with limited resonance internationally even though some the criticism was not without basis. Western allies broadly accepted the AUKUS members' argument that nuclear-powered but conventionally armed submarines did not violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or broader non-proliferation norms, particularly since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was closely involved in monitoring the arrangements (IAEA 2024). Officials in Washington, London, and Canberra repeatedly stressed that fissile material used for propulsion would remain under strict safeguards, and that the submarines themselves would carry only conventional weapons. This distinction proved crucial in shaping international perceptions, since it enabled AUKUS to be framed not as a precedent for nuclear weapons proliferation but as an extension of longstanding naval technology cooperation among allies (Nick Bisley 2021c; Reilly 2012). Neither the United Nations nor major non-proliferation bodies mounted significant opposition. Even within fora where non-aligned states often voice criticism of nuclear issues, such as the Conference on Disarmament or the Non-Aligned Movement, no sustained campaign emerged against AUKUS. While some experts and NGOs warned of a dangerous precedent, the absence of coordinated institutional resistance reflected the fact that many governments did not perceive AUKUS as an immediate threat to global arms control regimes (Dalton and Levite 2023) .

In this sense, Beijing's attempt to frame AUKUS as illegitimate way of cooperation or at least destabilizing it fell flat outside its own domestic and aligned audiences. For many governments, Chinese critiques were perceived less as an impartial defence of international law

and more as a predictable extension of great-power rivalry with the United States. Even where concerns about proliferation or regional militarization existed, they were typically expressed in cautious and technical terms, rather than echoing Beijing's sharper rhetoric (Reilly, 2022). By contrast, the AUKUS narrative, anchored in the language of defending the "Rule-Based International Order", resonated with Western allies and several Indo-Pacific partners as a legitimate response to shifting strategic realities (N. R. Smith and Bland 2024). Canberra, London, and Washington stressed that AUKUS was a defensive arrangement designed to strengthen deterrence rather than escalate confrontation. This framing helped reassure partners such as Japan and India, who were sensitive to nuclear issues but also deeply concerned about China's expanding naval presence in the East and South China Seas (Chalivet 2022; Tsuruoka 2021).

The only regional state to align closely with China was North Korea, which denounced AUKUS in nearly identical terms, accusing Canberra of "triggering a chain of nuclear arms race" and destabilizing Asia-Pacific security (BBC 2021b; BBC News 2021b). Pyongyang's alignment with Beijing's language reinforced the perception that China's opposition was less about principle and more about bloc politics, since the North Korean regime predictably mirrored Chinese positions in most global disputes. Yet beyond Pyongyang, Beijing found few willing partners to amplify its message. ASEAN states voiced unease but ultimately declined to side with China; New Zealand distanced itself from the nuclear submarine component while carefully avoiding alignment with Chinese criticism (Ayson 2023b). Even within Europe, where France condemned AUKUS, other governments treated Chinese objections as politically self-serving. For most states, Beijing's condemnations were therefore read not as principled objections grounded in international law, but as part of its broader contest for regional primacy against the United States and its Anglosphere allies.

China's reaction to AUKUS could be summarized by the combination of ideological condemnation, accusations of illegality, and the intensification of its propaganda campaign against Australia. It reinforced the portrayal of Canberra as a subordinate actor within the U.S.-led security order, while attempting (unsuccessfully) to rally broader international support against the pact.

AUKUS has fundamentally altered Beijing's strategic perception of Australia. Whereas previous disputes (over foreign interference, 5G bans, or human rights) had been treated by China as episodic irritants within an otherwise pragmatic partnership, the decision to

institutionalize security cooperation with Washington and London was viewed as a structural realignment according to some analysts even a bet on the success of US in the region. From Beijing's perspective, AUKUS signified that Australia had definitively chosen sides in the emerging great-power confrontation, transforming from a difficult but economically useful partner into a committed adversary (Townshend, 2020; Bisley, 2021).

This shift carried profound consequences for bilateral relations. Economically, it legitimated in Beijing's eyes the continuation of coercive trade measures (tariffs, import bans, and restrictions on services) no longer as bargaining tools but as instruments of punishment designed to deter others from following Canberra's path. Diplomatically, it froze high-level dialogue: between late 2020 and 2022, ministerial-level meetings were almost entirely suspended, reflecting Beijing's refusal to treat Australia as a partner with whom disagreements could be managed compartmentally (James 2021b). Since then the high-level relations have been normalized but the trust between the two countries yet to be restored. Most importantly, AUKUS recast Australia's strategic position in Chinese security thinking. By acquiring nuclear-powered submarines under U.S. and U.K. assistance, Canberra openly tied its long-term military capabilities to Washington's Indo-Pacific posture. Chinese commentators and officials interpreted this as proof that Australia had forfeited any remaining strategic autonomy and placed itself in the "first line of fire" of any future confrontation over Taiwan or the South China Sea (H. Davidson and Blair 2021; McKenzie 2021). In the event of escalation, Australia was no longer perceived as a secondary actor but as a legitimate military target whose bases, ports, and communication facilities were integral to U.S.-led operations.

In effect, AUKUS not only ended China's willingness to tolerate Australia's dual-track approach (security with the U.S., trade with China) but also placed Canberra's own security at greater risk. By embracing the pact, Australia entrenched its role within the Anglosphere bloc, but at the cost of being singled out by Beijing as a symbolic and practical frontline adversary. This marked a decisive rupture, what had once been economic dependence managed under political tension turned into open strategic antagonism, with Australia accepting greater vulnerability in exchange for deeper integration into the U.S.-led security order.

6.3. Strategic, Normative, and Identity Dimensions

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, the significance of AUKUS lies not only in the material sphere of security considerations but in its broader consequences for how Australia defines its place within the international order. The trilateral pact was framed as a response to the immediate strategic challenge posed by China in a way where implications go well beyond the realm of defense policy. To understand why AUKUS matters, it is necessary to disaggregate its effects across three interlinked dimensions:

1. Strategic effects
2. Normative effects
3. Identity-based effects (on Australia)

In the view of the author this tripartite framework allows us to situate AUKUS within a spectrum of developments that have simultaneously transformed Australia's external alignment, its claims about international legitimacy, and its self-conception as a political community. The strategic dimension addresses how AUKUS alters Australia's hard security posture, its role in regional deterrence, and its exposure to risk in great-power competition. The normative dimension highlights the clash of competing principles, particularly the invocation of the "rule-based international order" as justification versus China's rejection of this framing as exclusionary and illegitimate. The identity dimension captures how AUKUS reinforced Australia's long-standing trajectory as an Anglosphere power and shed light on domestic narratives about loyalty, trust, and national purpose.

Separating these dimensions is not to suggest they exist in isolation but exactly on the contrary, as earlier sections of this chapter have already suggested, strategic decisions are justified through shared normative arguments (primary institutions in English School terminology), and both rest upon deeper identity claims. By analyzing them in turn, however, we can better see how AUKUS consolidated a path-dependent logic that has increasingly narrowed Canberra's choices, from balancing engagement and alliance in the early 21st century, to embedding itself firmly within an Anglo-American-led bloc by the 2020s.

6.3.1. Strategic Dimensions

At the most immediate level, AUKUS emerged at the beginning of a transforming world order, where Australia had to adapt its strategic posture to offset the intensifying dynamics of great-power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region (Calabrese 2023; Karajgikar 2025). While Canberra had long balanced its U.S. alliance commitments with deep economic ties to China, the trilateral pact marked a decisive turn away from hedging and towards alignment. Strategically, this decision had three main implications: the restructuring of Australia's military posture, the recalibration of its regional role, and the exposure to heightened risks in a potential conflict scenario.

The whole reason of AUKUS, namely the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology, was not simply a procurement choice but a major reconfiguration of Australia's force structure (Beeson and D. Chubb 2021). Nuclear-powered submarines extend Canberra's reach far beyond its immediate maritime approaches, providing the endurance and stealth capabilities necessary to operate across the Indo-Pacific (Hattendorf 2022). This capability aligns with U.S. and British doctrines of sea-denial and forward presence, effectively integrating the Royal Australian Navy into an Anglosphere deterrence architecture aimed at constraining Chinese maritime expansion (Australian Government 2021b). To operationalize this, AUKUS established what has been described as a "two-pillar system." The first pillar covers the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and related naval capabilities, while the second pillar focuses on cooperation in advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, quantum computing, and undersea system (Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) 2023; Christianson et al. 2023; Medeiros 2022). The dual structure ensures that while submarines remain the flagship element, the alliance extends into broader domains of strategic competition, embedding Canberra in the technological as well as military foundations of Anglosphere security planning.

Under the submarine plan, Australia will initially acquire between three and five Virginia-class submarines from the United States, with the first delivery expected in the early 2030s (DeYoung et al. 2021; House 2024). In parallel, the United Kingdom and Australia will begin joint development of a new "SSN-AUKUS" class, to be constructed in Adelaide, with the first vessels projected to enter service in the early 2040s. In total, Canberra plans to field a fleet of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines by mid-century, creating a force structure of unprecedented capability for a middle power. Yet significant doubts rose about the wisdom of

allocating such vast amount of money and resources to the acquisition of eight submarines while other elements of the Royal Australian Navy remain underdeveloped. Moreover, the protracted timeline (decades) for the construction of the SSN-AUKUS fleet risks leaving Australia strategically exposed until their eventual delivery. The very scale of this investment, estimated at over AUD 350 billion across several decades, locks Australia into a long-term strategic trajectory from which reversal is nearly impossible (ABC News 2021; Sheridan 2023). This not only represents the single largest defence project in Australian history but also creates interdependencies with the U.S. and the U.K. for technology, maintenance, and operational integration. In effect, Australia's naval future has been permanently reoriented toward nuclear propulsion, with profound implications for defence planning, alliance management, and regional deterrence.

By committing so openly to the US through AUKUS, Canberra elevated its role within the Washington-led alliance network in ways that positioned Australia as a cornerstone of Indo-Pacific deterrence, granting it not only access to nuclear-propulsion technology but also deeper integration into the intelligence, cyber, and advanced defence industrial cooperation of the Anglosphere. This step was understood by allies and adversaries alike as Canberra's acceptance of a frontline role in countering China's maritime assertiveness and shaping the regional balance of power (Medcalf 2021). For regional partners this move carried dual messages. On one hand, it reassured states such as Japan and South Korea (both longstanding treaty allies of Washington) that Australia was willing to share the burden of deterrence and contribute meaningfully to regional security architectures. On the other hand, it differentiated Australia from countries like India or members of ASEAN, which continued to pursue more hedging strategies. Whereas Japan, South Korea, and India could calibrate their engagement with both Washington and Beijing to maintain diplomatic room for manoeuvre, Australia's trajectory increasingly defined it as a core member of an anti-China coalition, reducing its ability to remain neutral in disputes that did not directly concern its interests (Nick Bisley 2021a; O'Connor et al. 2023; White 2019).

From a purely geopolitical perspective the strategic benefits of this integration were considerable. Australia is about to gain access to the most advanced technologies in submarine propulsion, undersea surveillance, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence, significantly enhancing interoperability with U.S. and British forces. These capabilities promised to expand the Royal Australian Navy's operational range, strengthen deterrence by denial, and ensure that

Australia remained a credible contributor to any coalition response in the South or East China Seas. Canberra also benefitted from the implicit extension of American security guarantees by tying its force structure so closely to U.S. strategy, Australia reinforced expectations that Washington would be compelled to defend Australian assets in a crisis. Yet these gains came with costs that should not be forgotten. Australia's diplomatic flexibility shrank considerably as it became increasingly difficult to maintain constructive relations with Beijing or to position itself as an independent broker in regional disputes. Several analysts argue that with AUKUS, Australia has put itself in a high-stakes gamble, placing all its bets on the United States and on the assumption that Washington will ultimately prevail over China (ABC News 2021; O'Connor et al. 2023; Sheridan 2023). Given the extended timescale of AUKUS and the numerous potential changes in government and strategic priorities before 2050, such reliance appears less the product of long-term planning than of sheer assumptions. Canberra's participation in AUKUS also created friction with some Southeast Asian neighbours (most notably Indonesia and Malaysia) who worried that the pact would fuel regional militarization and undermine ASEAN's centrality in security dialogues (Djalal 2021; Li 2022; J. Marafona 2021). In effect, Australia accepted a form of "strategic narrowing" its role in the Indo-Pacific but its options for hedging or recalibration in future geopolitical shifts were significantly curtailed.

Based on these developments we could claim that AUKUS solidified Australia's transformation from a middle power balancing economic dependence on China with a security alliance with the United States into a fully embedded security actor in the Anglosphere system. This heightened deterrence posture was strategically valuable but came at the price of reduced diplomatic maneuverability and increased vulnerability to retaliation from China.

There is a need to mention the strategical risks as well that AUKUS caused to Australia. There were exposures to strategic risks in ways that went beyond the symbolic domain of diplomacy and condemnation that some states communicated toward Australia. Australia by joining AUKUS made itself a likely target for Chinese countermeasures in the event of future escalation. Chinese state media consistently portrayed Australia as a "frontline" adversary, warning that the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines placed the country squarely within the strike plans of Beijing in the event of conflict (Childs 2024; H. Davidson and Blair 2021; B. Falconer 2021; McKenzie 2021). In practical terms, this meant that Australia's security environment shifted from one based on geographic insulation (protected by distance and by its

status as a secondary actor) to one dependent on the credibility of deterrence and alliance solidarity. Australia's northern approaches, including critical infrastructure hubs in Darwin and the broader Northern Territory, are now perceived by both Canberra and Beijing as potential targets. For the first time since Japan's defeat in the Indo-Pacific eighty years ago, Australia once again faces the prospect of a northern neighbour, in this case China, posing a potential military threat to its territorial integrity (Kovner 2021). The vulnerability this time however extends further to cyber infrastructure, maritime supply chains, and even energy exports, all of which could be disrupted in the event of Chinese retaliatory action.

The timing of AUKUS is somehow also ironic. While the risks of Chinese countermeasures are immediate, manifest in economic coercion campaigns and more assertive military posturing in the South Pacific, the military benefits promised by AUKUS are long-term and back-loaded. The first U.K.-built submarines are not expected to be operational until the early 2030s, and Australian-built vessels may not arrive until the 2040s (Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) 2023; Hattendorf 2022). This creates a strategic "capability gap," whereby Australia is more exposed as a target but has not yet acquired the very systems that are intended to provide deterrence. Moreover, AUKUS risks entrenching Canberra's dependence on the Anglosphere (ALDRICH and KASUKU 2012). By binding itself to a forward-leaning deterrence framework, Australia gains credibility and visibility as a regional security actor, but it also reduces its capacity to recalibrate should geopolitical conditions change. In this sense, Canberra has traded flexibility for commitment by accepting the possibility that its territory and assets will be seen as legitimate targets in a future bloc confrontation. In sum, the strategic dimension of AUKUS well illustrates how the pact transformed Australia's security posture in a double-edged manner. It elevated Canberra's profile, strengthened interoperability, and embedded Australia within the most advanced military technology-sharing arrangement in its history. Yet these advantages came at the price of heightened exposure, the loss of ambiguity made Australia more central to U.S. strategy, but also more vulnerable to retaliation from Beijing. These consequences illustrate the enduring trade-offs inherent in abandoning strategic ambiguity, Australia has secured unprecedented military access and alliance credibility, but only by assuming greater risks of becoming a primary target in any Indo-Pacific crisis.

This duality also recalls an unsettling historical precedent. While AUKUS is anchored in the enduring solidarity of the Anglosphere, reliance on great-power allies carries intrinsic risks. During the Second World War, the "Singapore strategy" demonstrated that even the closest

partnerships were ultimately contingent as Britain, confronted with existential threats in Europe, prioritized the defence of its own territory and left Australia dangerously exposed to Japanese expansion (Hack and Blackburn 2004; Liddell Hart and Hart, B.h.liddell 2011; Paterson 2008; Steward 2017). The fear today is that, in a severe Indo-Pacific contingency, the United States, like Britain before it, might privilege its immediate national defence over Canberra's security commitments regardless to the jointly operated assets. In such a scenario, Australia would confront the most adverse outcome of its AUKUS alignment, having abandoned strategic ambiguity, it could become an early target of Chinese coercion while lacking guaranteed protection from its principal ally. Paradoxically, such an eventuality might serve as the real trigger for a long-debated but often deferred goal, achieving genuine strategic self-reliance as the foundation of Australia's security identity as Whitlam imagined it.

6.3.2. Normative Dimensions

Beyond the material and strategic implications, AUKUS also carried profound normative significance. As highlighted in the opening of this chapter, the alliance was never framed merely as an arms deal but as a political performance embedded in broader identity and institutional framework of the International Society. This makes it essential to examine the normative dimension of AUKUS, since the pact was publicly justified not only as a means of enhancing Australia's security but as a contribution to defending the so-called *Rule-Based International Order* (RBIO) and the liberties of "freedom-loving nation" (Guardian News 2021; Jain et al. 2019; U.S. Department of State 2023).

Norms matter here because they shape the legitimacy of strategic choices of AUKUS countries. Without legitimacy, AUKUS cannot credibly serve as a defender of rules. By presenting AUKUS as a guardian of freedom of navigation, non-proliferation, and open trade, its members sought to anchor the initiative within a familiar liberal framework that resonates across the Western alliance system (Dugard 2023; Strating 2019). Yet this claim is deeply contested. For critics, the very transfer of nuclear propulsion technology contradicts the non-proliferation principles the RBIO is supposed to uphold, raising doubts about the coherence of the justification (Fleck 2023; Hurst and Borger 2023). For others, the exclusive and secretive character of AUKUS undermined regional inclusivity and multilateral consultation, weakening the credibility of its normative appeal. Placing the debate in this normative register helps us

understand why AUKUS divided international opinion. It highlights a wider contest over the meaning of order, between a Western, liberal vision grounded in universal rules, a Chinese, sovereignty-centered conception of international society and the multilateralist expectations of actors such as ASEAN and the EU. In this sense, the normative dimension of AUKUS is not peripheral but a core element of the cooperation, for it reveals both the alliance's claim to legitimacy and the fragility of that claim beyond the trusted circle of the Western International Society (WIS).

From the moment of its announcement, AUKUS was explicitly framed by its members as a contribution to safeguarding the *Rule-Based International Order* (RBIO). Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, U.S. President Joe Biden, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson each emphasized that the pact would strengthen freedom of navigation, uphold international law in the Indo-Pacific, and reinforce collective security in a period of rising geopolitical uncertainty (Australian Government 2021a; UK government 2021; White House 2021). The RBIO narrative provided a legitimizing framework for a controversial initiative by embedding AUKUS in the defence of shared global norms, its architects sought to neutralize criticisms that the pact was destabilizing or divisive. At the heart of this framing was the assertion that AUKUS would serve global goods (such as open sea lanes, non-discriminatory trade, and regional stability) rather than narrow national interests, although China always doubted that "global goods" are really good equally to everyone as they were pictured as power tools of Washington. But in Canberra's domestic discourse, this helped transform a costly and long-term procurement program into a broader moral commitment where Australia was not simply buying submarines, but defending a liberal order that guaranteed its prosperity and security (Garlick and Qin 2024). In Washington and London, meanwhile, the invocation of the RBIO linked AUKUS to the wider strategy of shoring up liberal internationalism against authoritarian challenges, especially those posed by China.

Yet the normative coherence of this justification has been contested. The most obvious contradiction lies in the area of non-proliferation. For decades, Western states had argued that transferring nuclear propulsion technology to non-nuclear-weapon states would set a dangerous precedent (Dalton and Levite 2023; Narine 2023). By agreeing to provide Australia with such technology, AUKUS stretched the normative boundaries of the very order it claimed to protect. Critics, including Chinese officials and several ASEAN states, argued that the initiative risked

undermining the credibility of the non-proliferation regime, potentially encouraging other states to pursue similar exemptions (PRC Foreign Ministry 2021a; N. R. Smith and Bland 2024).

A further source of normative tension or rather contradiction lies in the secretive and exclusive nature of the negotiations that led to AUKUS. The pact was negotiated in utmost confidentiality over many months, with even close allies such as France left completely unaware until the public announcement in September 2021 (Myrick 2023). This approach produced an immediate sense of betrayal among excluded partners, but it also raised a broader question of legitimacy. If AUKUS was truly designed to defend and reinforce the Rule-Based International Order (RBIO), why was it not pursued through transparent, multilateral channels? By excluding regional organizations such as ASEAN, as well as allegedly trusted allies in Europe, the AUKUS states appeared to contradict the very principles of openness, consultation, and inclusivity that they routinely referring when speaking of the RBIO. The paradox was particularly strong and stark given that Western rhetoric often highlights procedural legitimacy (rule-making through dialogue, collective decision-making, and adherence to international norms) as a distinguishing feature of liberal order compared to authoritarian alternatives (Buchan 2008; Dugard 2023). In this light, the "clandestine" nature of the negotiations resembled the very kind of great-power deal-making that the RBIO was supposed to transcend. As this dissertation intends to explain, it was not a coincidence that AUKUS countries did not involve European nations. Normative dimensions were overwritten by identity dimensions.

This contradiction gave critics an opportunity to argue that the RBIO was being instrumentalized rather than upheld. For Paris and Brussels, the secrecy confirmed that the Anglosphere states privileged their own trusted security community over genuinely inclusive multilateralism, casting doubt on claims that AUKUS served universal norms (March and Olsen 1998; Narine 2023). For ASEAN members, the precedent suggested that small and middle powers could be marginalized when major powers deem it expedient, undermining ASEAN's long-asserted centrality. For Beijing, the secrecy was evidence that Western states do not practice the transparency they demand of others, thereby discrediting the normative legitimacy of the RBIO in Chinese eyes. Thus, the manner in which AUKUS was created not only produced diplomatic fallout but also revealed deeper normative ambiguities. The pact's content could be defended as strengthening deterrence and protecting liberal order, but its process highlighted the selective and often exclusive way in which the Anglosphere defines and enacts that order.

For ASEAN members in particular, the lack of consultation clashed with the ethos of "inclusive regionalism," raising concerns that AUKUS institutionalized a hierarchy of trusted partners rather than an open and rule-based system (ASEAN Secretariat 2022; J. Marafona 2021; Sinaga 2016; A. Smith and Bland 2024). Western allies, however, broadly accepted the normative framing of AUKUS as compatible with the RBIO. The United States and the United Kingdom emphasized that the submarines to be built would be nuclear-powered but conventionally armed, thereby avoiding a direct breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) early involvement was highlighted as evidence that the process would be legally compliant and subject to robust oversight (IAEA 2024). For many Indo-Pacific partners, Japan and India in particular, the risks of proliferation were considered secondary to the greater danger posed by unchecked Chinese expansion. In this sense, the RBIO justification of AUKUS illustrated both the power and the limits of normative framing utilized by Anglosphere countries. It allowed Canberra, Washington, and London to present their initiative as a principled defence of global order, thereby legitimizing it among Western allies. But the contradictions inherent in this framing, especially the tension between non-proliferation norms and nuclear propulsion transfer, and between inclusive order and exclusive club, ensured that the normative consensus remained partial, fragile, and deeply contested outside the Anglosphere core.

These contradictions can also be understood through the lens of the English School interpreted within the framework of International Society, particularly the mentioned Western International Society (WIS). As Buzan and Schouenborg argue, the WIS is not a universally accepted concept but a contested analytical framework highlighting how Western states institutionalize their own norms and values within global society (Buzan and Schouenborg 2018; Schouenborg 2011). AUKUS exemplified this, while presented as a universal defence of the RBIO, in practice it consolidated an "Anglosphere-first" security community. This has also showed that the WIS operates less as an inclusive Western collective and more as a tiered system in which the Anglosphere forms the inner core, while continental Europe and regional partners are peripheral. For ASEAN, the secrecy suggested that inclusive regionalism (the idea that all stakeholders should have a seat at the table) was undermined. For France and the EU, it confirmed the perception that the Anglosphere could act unilaterally, sidelining European contributions even in areas where they had clear strategic stakes. For Beijing, the exclusivity was evidence that the RBIO was not a neutral set of universal rules but a political project of the Anglosphere, imposed selectively and with little regard for inclusivity.

6.3.3. Identity Dimensions

The identity dimension of AUKUS is crucial because it demonstrates how the agreement functioned not only as a strategic and normative project but also as a landmark of belonging and alignment. As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, AUKUS symbolized the culmination of a long historical trajectory of Australia's Anglosphere orientation from imperial ties under the British Empire, through the ANZUS Treaty of 1951, and the Cold War establishment of Five Eyes, to its present institutionalization in AUKUS (Battersby and Ball 2023; Benvenuti 2018; N. Bisley 2021; Cohen 2024).

Identity (and particularly the transformation of Australian national identity) matters in relation to AUKUS because it shapes both the interpretation of material commitments and the legitimacy of strategic choices. By becoming a "frontline defender" of the Rule-Based International Order, Australia reinforced its self-conception as a middle power whose security and prosperity are inseparable from its membership in the Anglosphere (Hayton and Wellings 2025; Townshend 2022). This identity-based framing legitimized the risks of AUKUS by embedding them within a larger narrative of cultural affinity, political trust, and historical continuity. Since domestically, this identity performance received bipartisan endorsement in Australia as Scott Morrison's Liberal government framed AUKUS as a historic step to "keep Australia safe," the Labor opposition also supported the alliance, even as it criticized the failure of diplomatic groundwork (Kelly et al. 2021; Wong 2021). This bipartisan convergence or partial agreement illustrates how deeply Anglosphere identity is embedded in Australian political discourse (although not always with positive connotations), limiting space for alternative strategic imaginaries such as regional hedging or greater reliance on multilateral institutions.

From the early twentieth century, Australia's security was understood through the lens of imperial defence, anchored in the British world-system. Today at the identity level, AUKUS reinforced the idea that Australia is not simply hedging between great powers but aligning with its "natural" partners. This reduces the cognitive dissonance of choosing sides in the U.S.–China rivalry by framing alignment with the Anglosphere as a continuation of long-standing historical patterns, rather than a departure. In doing so, AUKUS strengthens the narrative that Australian security and prosperity are inseparable from the fate of the Anglosphere, even if this comes with heightened risks of entanglement in U.S.-led conflicts (White, 2019; Medcalf,

2021). Yet, the identity dimension of AUKUS has also generated critical debates in Australia's intellectual and political circles. For some commentators, the agreement marks a retreat from the long-standing project of (a truly independent and Australian) *Asian engagement* that successive governments from Whitlam to Rudd sought to cultivate (Curran 2014). That tradition emphasized integration with regional institutions such as ASEAN, balancing Australia's Anglo-American ties with a diplomacy of inclusivity and bridge-building in the Asia-Pacific (Cotton 2013; Gyngell and Wesley 2007; Wesley-Smith and Finin 2021). By contrast, AUKUS foregrounds cultural and historical affinities with the Anglosphere at the expense of such regional engagement, signaling to Southeast Asian partners that Australia prioritizes its Euro-Atlantic heritage over its Asia-Pacific neighbourhood.

Australia's Anglo-Celtic heritage and its close ties with Britain and the United States have played a profound role in shaping national identity and, by extension, alliance formation. Yet these traditions are not universally accepted as the sole or exclusive foundations of the country's foreign policy orientation. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating for example captured this critique forcefully by dismissing AUKUS as the "worst decision by an Australian government in over 100 years," arguing that it entrenches dependence on the United States while marginalizing Australia's Asian relationships (Bramston 2016; Keating 2023). In Keating's view, AUKUS represents a failure of independent middle power diplomacy, a tradition that has historically allowed Australia to carve out space between major powers and exercise influence disproportionate to its material capabilities. Other critics warn that by doubling down on Anglosphere identity, Canberra risks not only alienating regional neighbours but also constraining its ability to act as a broker of multilateral cooperation (Nick Bisley 2021a, 2021a).

The emphasis on Anglosphere solidarity also sits uneasily with the multicultural transformation of Australian society and might question the social transformation that has taken place in the last five decades. Since the 1970s, the dismantling of the 'White Australia' policy and the embrace of multiculturalism have reshaped national identity, embedding Australia more deeply within the Asia-Pacific through migration, trade, education, and cultural exchange (Ang 2018; Jakubowicz 2016; Kurti et al. 2024). This evolution has not only broadened the demographic composition of the nation but also cultivated an expectation that foreign policy should reflect a pluralist, regionally attuned outlook. Critics argue that AUKUS runs exactly against this trajectory by re-asserting a narrower Anglo-Western vision of Australia, thereby producing a disjuncture between domestic social realities and external strategic narratives.

This identity tension raises broader normative questions about representation as well. Whose Australia is being projected abroad, and whose voices are excluded from the making of strategic choices? These questions are far from being only rhetorical, for Australia carries a historical burden arising from its treatment of Indigenous peoples, communities that suffered most under the very policies prevailing during the decades of Anglo-American relations, whether in the era of the British Empire or later under the ANZUS framework of the 1950s. For many within Asian-Australian communities, as well as advocates of multicultural diplomacy, the privileging of Anglosphere alignment risks perpetuating a hierarchy of belonging, where some identities are deemed more legitimate than others in shaping the nation's international role.

The identity dimension of AUKUS reveals on the one hand, that coherence and international legitimacy by embedding Australia firmly within the Anglosphere and the rule-based international order (RBIO) is far from being a closed question in Australia. On the other hand, it constrains Australia's strategic imagination by narrowing the range of identities available for foreign policy, foreclosing, in particular, the more independent and regionally oriented middle-power diplomacy that leaders such as Gough Whitlam and Kevin Rudd once championed. The outcome is that identity becomes simultaneously a resource for alignment between Anglo-Saxon nations and a source of friction within Australia, underscoring the normative trade-offs embedded in AUKUS and the extent to which foreign policy choices are also choices about who Australia conceives itself to be.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation set out with a seemingly straightforward research question: *"To what extent was Australia's accession to AUKUS in 2021 determined by its Anglosphere identity and sense of belonging, as explained through the English School and Historical Institutionalism?"* Still the answer, as we demonstrated across the empirical and theoretical chapters, is anything but straightforward. The study has argued that Australia's embrace of AUKUS cannot be fully understood through the dominant lenses of realism, liberal institutionalism, or even conventional constructivism but requires a deeper, more history-focused analysis. Realist accounts would treat AUKUS as a rational reaction to China's rise, liberal institutionalism would stress institutional incentives and interdependence while constructivism might highlight norm diffusion and socialization. While each of these approaches captures an element of truth,

they ultimately overlook the deeper historical and identity-based structures where the English School and Historical Institutionalism helped us to understand what shaped Canberra's choice.

The central argument advanced in this dissertation is that Australia's accession to AUKUS was not a sudden or purely functional strategic calculation, but rather the reaffirmation of a historically embedded identity trajectory rooted in the Anglosphere**.** By approaching the problem through a combined theoretical lens of the English School and Historical Institutionalism, this dissertation has reframed AUKUS as the predictable outcome of long-term identity patterns and institutional path-dependencies, rather than as an unexpected reaction to contemporary power shifts.

In answering the main research question of this study, namely, "*to what extent"* was Australia's accession to AUKUS influenced by normative and identity-based factors, the findings suggest that such factors played a significant role. At the same time, this dissertation recognizes its own limitations: the analysis has deliberately focused on identity and normative dimensions, even though these were clearly not the sole drivers of Canberra's choice in the face of China's rise. Strategic and practical considerations, especially the fear of Chinese coercion, remained central to the calculations of the Australian elite where material and security considerations were present at least as strongly as the ideational ones. Nevertheless, the study shows that identity elements provided an indispensable layer of meaning and legitimacy. They acted as a kind of connective tissue within the Anglosphere, helping to frame Australia's decision not only as a strategic necessity but also as a reaffirmation of cultural belonging and shared historical experience which was only reinforced by the emerging threat posed by China.

7.1 Added Value and Theoretical Innovation

The most straightforward contribution of this study lies in its theoretical synthesis of the English School (ES) and Historical Institutionalism (HI) which have been thoroughly used and consistently applied in this study. Historical Institutionalism and the English School rarely appear together within the discipline of International Relations, despite the fact that they complement and reinforce each other in many respects. The ES emphasizes the role of international society, norms, and identity in shaping state behaviour, whereas HI highlights the constraining power of historical legacies, critical junctures, and self-reinforcing institutional paths. Brought together, they enable a historically sensitive, normatively attuned, and structurally coherent framework where Australia's decision to join AUKUS could be

approached in a more nuanced way. The theoretical innovation of this study could be summarized in two points.

1. From the ES, this dissertation borrowed the notion of sub-global international societies (Buzan & Schouenborg 2018), focusing on the Anglosphere as a normative community within the broader Western International Society. The ES also provides the conceptual vocabulary of legitimacy, identity, and shared values which illuminate why Australia interprets its alliances as cultural bonds as much as strategic necessities.

2. From HI, the study applied the tools of path dependency and critical junctures. It showed that Australia's early identity choices (imperial loyalty, reliance on Anglo-American protection, and alignment with "kith and kin" networks) created self-reinforcing institutions (ANZUS, Five Eyes, forward defence doctrines, military interoperability) that narrowed the scope of future choices. At key moments (critical junctures),the fall of Singapore in 1942, the "East of Suez" withdrawal in 1968, the Vietnam War, the Howard government's support for the War on Terror, and the COVID–19 disputes with China, Australian leaders found themselves returning to the Anglosphere path not because alternatives were absent, but because alternatives lacked symbolic resonance and institutional continuity.

The added value of this framework as presented above is twofold in the sense that it first, advances the English School by demonstrating empirically that sub-global societies (like the Anglosphere) do not merely exist as analytic categories but actively shape state decisions by embedding identity and legitimacy claims. And second, it advances Historical Institutionalism by applying it to questions of alliance politics and identity, showing that path dependency is not only material or institutional but also ideational. Together this dissertation concludes that ES and HI are able to reveal Australia's decision for AUKUS is both historically over-determined and normatively legitimized.

7.2. Core Findings

This dissertation leads to three major findings:

1. AUKUS and the example of Australia reinforces the claim that identity-based alliances endure beyond material necessity**.** AUKUS illustrates that alliances can persist and do

evolve not only because of external threats but because they are perceived as "natural" extensions of shared identity. Australia, the UK, and the US did not merely cooperate out of utility but reaffirmed a sense of belonging to a common Anglosphere family.

2. Path dependency narrows strategic imagination and poses a certain degree of restriction on foreign policy reforms. While Canberra could have pursued alternative trajectories, greater reliance on multilateral institutions, regional engagement through ASEAN, or a "Fortress Australia" model of self-reliance (as it has already tried) these options were politically costly and lacked popular legitimacy. The Anglosphere path, by contrast, was deeply institutionalized, emotionally resonant, and historically normalized.

3. Sub-global societies (the lower structures of the Global International Society) are not only able to shape the broader global order but actively do so. By reinforcing one pillar of the Western International Society (the Anglosphere) AUKUS revealed that the global order is not monolithic (as Hedley Bull perceived it more than half a century earlier) but layered. In English School terms the pact privileged the solidarist Anglosphere over the more pluralist wider West, exposing the tensions within the Western International Society and highlighting how sub-global societies act as cores of strategic trust in times of uncertainty.

7.3. Broader Implications

Reframing AUKUS as an identity-anchored, path-dependent outcome carries some other implications worth considering here. First and foremost, it demonstrates that not only Australia's strategic future will remain structurally constrained by its Anglosphere orientation, regardless of shifts in the regional balance of power but other core members of the Anglosphere (Canada or New Zealand) might join in the future. Since Canberra's foreign policy choices are not simply dictated by calculations of relative power or economic benefit, but by deeper cultural and historical attachments that repeatedly narrow the horizon of legitimate alternatives other, AUKUS could trigger former "white dominions" where an expansion of the trilateral alliance is conceivable. Australia's example showed that even in moments of crisis (whether after the fall of Singapore, during the Vietnam War, in the era of the War on Terror, or amid the COVID–19 trade war with China) leaders in Canberra reached for the Anglosphere as the identity framework that provided both legitimacy abroad and reassurance at home.

Second, this conclusion suggests that AUKUS entrenches Australia's dependency on Anglo-American security structures precisely at a moment when the global order itself is under immense pressure**.** By privileging the Anglosphere over wider Western (European) or Asian partnerships, Canberra has effectively bound its long-term defence planning to a sub-global society whose cohesion cannot be taken for granted. The most salient and straightforward example is the disruptive effect of Donald Trump's presidency on the transatlantic order. His return to the White House has again demonstrated a willingness to confront the established rules of international society with the blunt force of unilateral revision, from challenging NATO's credibility to undermining cooperation with Canada and the European Union. While such behaviour may at times be tactical posturing (as Trump is famous for it), an attempt to secure favourable bargains before eventually recalibrating, it nonetheless introduces profound uncertainty into the alliance system on which Australia relies. For Australia, this certainly creates a structural vulnerability. AUKUS ties its security to the continuity of Anglo-American leadership, yet that very leadership is now subject to unprecedented volatility. If Washington, under the influence of "America First" impulses, were to reduce or condition its Indo-Pacific commitments, Canberra could find itself locked into a strategic path without viable alternatives. The pact thus embodies a reassurance where the risks and stakes are immensely great. AUKUS asserts sovereignty by embedding Australia in its traditional family of allies, but it simultaneously narrows future strategic imagination in ways that leave the country particularly exposed to the domestic upheavals of its partners.

Third, this dissertation implies that AUKUS was an act of identity declaration as well with considerable impacts on Australian society. By reaffirming Anglosphere solidarity, the Australian government has made a clear value choice, effectively committing the nation for decades to a tradition that resonates more with imperial legacies than with multicultural inclusion. This choice is not merely external, it projects an internal narrative of belonging that may marginalize alternative identity choices, whether multicultural, Asia-oriented, or Indigenous. This might hold crucial implications as Australia in the first quarter of the 21st century still struggles to find proper answers to the problems of its own minorities In this sense, AUKUS risks being perceived not as the alliance of an inclusive Australia, but as the project of a narrower, more elitist Australia, one that caused once immense pain and suffering to non-Anglo-Celtic people in this country. The "old Australia" favourited Anglo-Saxon heritage at the expense of recognizing the pluralism that has been a hallmark of its society since the dismantling of the White Australia Policy from the 70s. If Australia takes such orientations, this

would carry great political and social costs. By privileging a historically exclusive identity framework, AUKUS may inadvertently undermine the social legitimacy of foreign policy in the eyes of communities who do not identify with the Anglosphere narrative as well. This could erode decades of progress in multicultural recognition and reconciliation with Indigenous and immigrant Australians, placing achievements of recent decades in parentheses. The very identity logic that sustains AUKUS internationally (its appeal to shared values, culture, and history) may therefore generate contestation domestically, as segments of Australian society perceive it as a step away from inclusivity and toward a more exclusionary self-conception of the nation.

AUKUS also might have undesired implications to international posture of Australia. Normatively the above mentioned potential tensions do not remain confined to domestic politics. If AUKUS comes to be interpreted at home as a project of "one Australia" rather than "all Australians," it risks weakening Canberra's capacity to speak with legitimacy abroad. A foreign policy that appears detached from the lived diversity of its own population is more vulnerable to external criticism and less able to mobilize broad-based domestic support. In this sense, AUKUS might not only entrench strategic dependency but also expose Australia to a legitimacy deficit in both its internal and external dimensions, strong in its Anglosphere commitments, yet fragile in its resonance with the plural society it claims to represent.

Fourth, this study shows that sub-global societies can act as power cores within the global order, structuring international trust and legitimacy in ways that transcend material incentives. The Anglosphere has proven resilient because it offers not only interoperability and intelligence-sharing, but also a symbolic "family of nations" narrative. However, this comes at the price of fragmenting the broader Western International Society, weakening the possibility of a unified liberal order and hold the potential that it falls apart to separated blocs. AUKUS is thus stabilizing for its own members and a destabilizing one for Western liberal cohesion.

7.4. Limitations and Future Research

As no dissertation can claim to be exhaustive, and this study is no exception, there remain four particular areas where the argumentation is incomplete. While this dissertation has sought to offer a historically grounded and theoretically innovative account of Australia's route to AUKUS, its scope and methodology inevitably entailed limitations that need to be acknowledged.

7.4.1. Limitations of the Present Study

First, the focus on Australia's perspective**.** This dissertation has deliberately concentrated on the Australian case, seeking to uncover how Canberra's identity, historical legacies, and institutional path dependencies shaped the choice for AUKUS. This focus was necessary to maintain analytical depth and coherence, yet it also led to selectivity and the strategic cultures and domestic debates of the other two AUKUS members (the United States and the United Kingdom) were intentionally missed out of the analysis. While occasional references were made to British imperial legacies or American leadership, no systematic examination of their internal drivers was attempted, although the US might have a decisive role in the future of AUKUS. Still as a result, the dissertation cannot claim to offer a fully relational analysis of how AUKUS was conceptualized, justified, or contested across all three capitals.

Second, the omission of technical, legal, and operational aspects**.** The research consciously avoided an in-depth treatment of the military-technical dimensions of AUKUS, such as the nuclear-propulsion technology transfer, interoperability procedures, or export control regimes that all going to determine the success or failure of this project These issues are crucial for assessing the feasibility and sustainability of the pact, but they belong more properly to the disciplines of defence studies, international law, and security engineering requiring us to conduct a fundamentally different analysis by its nature. The decision to prioritize identity, history, and institutional analysis inevitably left these aspects underexplored.

Third limitation is the case of reliance on elite narratives and historical case studies. The methodological emphasis on political elites, historical junctures, and formal alliance structures provided clarity for the argument, but at the cost of excluding other layers of analysis such as public opinion, civil society, media discourse, and minority perspectives that were only indirectly addressed. Given Australia's multicultural transformation, this omission limits the study's capacity to capture the full spectrum of identity contestation surrounding AUKUS. Moreover, by privileging English-language sources and mainstream scholarship, the analysis may have underrepresented alternative voices, especially from Indigenous and non-Anglo communities.

Fourth is the temporal limitations. The study concentrated on the historical trajectories leading up to the announcement of AUKUS in September 2021 and its immediate aftermath. It did intentionally not attempt to forecast the long-term implementation of the pact or its potential

transformation over the coming decades. While references to future uncertainties were made (particularly regarding U.S. domestic politics and the volatility of the international order) the empirical scope necessarily ended with the early years of AUKUS, leaving the question of its long-term durability open.

7.4.2. Future Research Directions

Despite these limitations (or rather because of them) this dissertation points out and holds a few promising directions for future inquiry where both the AUKUS pact and the Anglosphere could be better examined.

A first promising possibility for the continuation of this dissertation might be the application of a specific "comparative perspective" to analyze the Anglosphere through AUKUS**.** Future research could systematically examine how AUKUS is framed in Washington and London, and potentially in Ottawa and Wellington and explore how different members of the Anglosphere understand the trilateral cooperation. Do U.S. policymakers view the pact in identity-affirming terms, or primarily as a tool of strategic competition with China? Or how do British elites reconcile AUKUS with the Global Britain narrative and post-Brexit realignments? Such comparative work would enrich our understanding of whether AUKUS is sustained by shared identity across all members, or whether asymmetries in perception create fragilities in the alliance.

The second possible continuation is focusing on the alternative strategic trajectories for Australia**.** This line of research could explore the counterfactuals under what conditions might Australia pursue deeper engagement with ASEAN, cultivate closer ties with China, or rely more heavily on multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations or the Quad. As this dissertation wished to reveal regional autonomy still has serious political support within Australian elites (especially within the Labor Party) even though such perspectives were put into the background for a while. This dissertation argued that such paths lacked legitimacy and resonance, they still remain conceptually and politically significant and could eventually resurface in the future. Examining the potential for deviation from Anglosphere dependency would shed light on Australia's strategic resilience in an era of systemic flux.

Third is the domestic contestation and identity pluralism in Australia. Further research should investigate how AUKUS is debated within Australian society beyond elite circles.

Surveys, even discourse analysis, and ethnographic approaches could illuminate whether Anglosphere alignment resonates with the wider public or is contested by multicultural and Indigenous perspectives. This research would both methodologically and theoretically be a heavily different study compared to the present dissertation where the international system, concepts of national identity and historical analysis of Australian foreign policy gave the main framework. This option would be particularly valuable for assessing the long-term domestic legitimacy of AUKUS in a society whose identity is increasingly plural and Asia-oriented, but would distance itself from the discipline of International Relations at once.

Fourth possibility is testing the ES–HI framework in other contexts**.** Even if we consider the combination of these two theoretical systems useful, there are plenty other cases where the English School and the Historical Institutionalism could be applied. This dual, combined theoretical lens developed here could be utilized in other cases, where history and identity shape alliance politics. Potential examples include Canada's ambiguous relationship with the United States, New Zealand's cautious distancing from nuclear-related commitments or other segments of the Western International Society (WIS) like NATO's internal divisions between eastern and western members, or the EU's struggles to forge a coherent defence identity. Beyond the West, the same framework could be used to analyze BRICS or other postcolonial groupings where shared identity and institutional path-dependencies shape strategic choices. Such applications would both refine and stress-test the ES–HI synthesis, contributing to a more general theory of identity-driven path dependency in international relations.

The fifth possibility for the continuation of this research, the long-term trajectories of AUKUS is a straightforward one. After discovering the ideational, conceptual and historical backgrounds of AUKUS, any future research should track the unfolding of AUKUS itself. How will implementation challenges, cost overruns, or shifts in U.S. domestic politics affect its viability? Will Canada or New Zealand be drawn into the pact, expanding its scope? Will Trump-era style unilateralism re-emerge in ways that destabilize the alliance, or will institutional inertia prove resilient? These questions are crucial for understanding not only AUKUS but also the adaptability of identity-based alliances in the twenty-first century.

7.5. Concluding Thoughts

In sum, while the author of this dissertation has wished to explain why Australia joined AUKUS in 2021 through the combined insights of the English School and Historical

Institutionalism, it is aware that a wider research agenda is also opened up by this study. By acknowledging its own limitations and pointing to future directions, the author recognizes that the question of AUKUS is far from settled - if it could be at all. The dynamics of alliance politics, identity formation, and institutional path dependency are not permanent, static features but they are constantly evolving, inviting further scholarly engagement long after this research is “concluded”.

If this analysis has demonstrated anything, it is that historical narratives and identity concepts all had a decisive role in the formation of AUKUS. It showed that Australia’s choices cannot be reduced to short-term strategic calculations, but must be understood as part of longer historical continuities and cultural attachments that resonates far beyond Canberra.

AUKUS, in this sense, is a reminder that international politics cannot be understand without the proper historical framework and it is always about identity as much as interests. Whether the pact endures, falters, or transforms in the coming decades, its meaning will continue to be contested both within Australia and across the wider Western International Society. This research does not claim to have provided a definitive answer, instead, it aspires to have offered a framework through which future scholars and policymakers alike might ask sharper questions about the nature of international politics. This work has been a reflection on Australia, on the Anglosphere, and on the enduring power of history to shape the architecture of global order in uncertain times.

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