

POLICY MEMO

# US Support for Australia and the Region Against PRC Coercion: A Six Point Agenda

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The Look Ahead Series is a collection of policy memos examining the challenges that political, military, and business leaders must contend with today to ensure a secure, free, and prosperous world tomorrow.

## Introduction

Since around 2016, Australia has been transitioning away from a “small target” hedging mindset toward a more proactive countering and balancing approach vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China. This is largely a response to the increasingly assertive and coercive activities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is the predominant cause of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety in Canberra and throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The CCP has implemented a sustained and cascading array of economic and diplomatic punishments against Australia in an attempt to intimidate Australia and force changes in Australian policy.

Beijing is explicit that this is the purpose of the ongoing series of punishments against Canberra. In November 2020, its Embassy in Canberra went to the extraordinary lengths of releasing the

infamous “14 grievances” against the Australian government<sup>1</sup> to justify the ongoing punitive measures. These included mainly domestic Australian policies such as restrictions on Chinese investment, the funding of Australian think tanks critical of the PRC, the passing of foreign interference legislation to root out Chinese interference in Australian institutions, and the banning of Chinese firms from the Australian 5G telecommunications roll-out.

Australia is widely seen as the proverbial canary in the mine and needs American support. If Australia can hold its ground and continue to find the courage and creativity to pursue its national interest, then the PRC will suffer an enormous blow. On the other hand, if Australia is eventually cowed by the PRC and relents on key policy settings, then other sovereign nations might well lose the courage to stand firmer against the PRC’s coercion and intimidation.

Strengthening the fortitude of Australian leaders is the assurance that the United States is behind its ally. That assurance was previously given to Canberra by the Donald Trump administration and has been continued by the Joe Biden administration. Indeed, the Biden administration has declared it will go further and do better than the previous administration in reinvigorating and deepening its alliances and friendships with Indo-Pacific nations to better manage the PRC challenge and threat.

This brief has been prepared to assist the Biden team in doing just that. It gives some context to Australia's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy:

- how a nation that is not a superpower is thinking about the PRC's policies and activities in the region,
- why Canberra is taking proactive and forward leaning actions to counter and balance the PRC, and
- what Canberra is hoping will be some priority areas for the Biden administration with respect to the Indo-Pacific approach and strategy by the US.

### Australia's Strategic Environment, Challenges and Objectives

The greatest strategic challenge for Australia is the increasingly strident and coercive behavior of the Chinese Communist Party. Although virtually all Indo-Pacific nations are deeply concerned about the direction the People's Republic of China is heading, there are some considerations relevant to Australia which taken together do not apply to most nations in the region:

- Australia sits at the intersection of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and has a degree of strategic distance and depth from China owing to geography. Unlike the Northeast and Southeast Asian states which stare into the face of Chinese threat and menace, Canberra is better placed to focus on what is important (i.e., maximising Australian sovereignty and helping to shape the strategic environment) rather than to be overwhelmed by the urgent (e.g., responding to a permanent PRC presence in the Australian maritime zone).
- Australia has a genuinely comprehensive alliance with the United States (with extensive military, economic, cultural, and people-to-people integration). Australia is also a trusted partner of every country in the Indo-Pacific region that is apprehensive of the PRC. Perhaps only Japan could claim the same.
- When it comes to trade in many commodities, Australia is heavily dependent on China. Indeed, about one in every three dollars of Australian exports is bound for China. This leaves Australia highly vulnerable to economic coercion.
- Even so, such trade is largely on an arm's-length basis and, in different respects, these economies are not as intertwined with China as other open economies in East Asia. This is reflected in Australia's relatively low reliance on Chinese investment and collaborations to drive productivity, innovation, and the upscaling of the domestic economy. The upshot is that while Australia is deeply vulnerable to the PRC's economic coercion, in other respects Australia has some room for economic maneuver in terms of shaping the future terms of its economic interaction with China.
- Australia is a core participant in every meaningful Indo-Pacific institution, but Australia does so as an independent member rather than as part of any formalized grouping. Therefore, Canberra enjoys a degree of diplomatic independence to lead agendas without first seeking consensus from an unwieldy group of nations with disparate interests.
- Australia does not have any formal territorial or maritime disputes with the PRC or with nations receiving PRC support. This means Beijing cannot use any such disputes



as a point of leverage over Australia as it can with Japan, South Korea, India, and the Southeast Asian claimants.

- Australia shares the strategic culture of the US and the West, and given its location and interactions, has a good understanding of the strategic culture and local perspectives of non-Western nations in the region, especially the maritime states in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations.

These factors allow Australia a degree of strategic and political freedom and creativity that does not generally apply to other regional nations. This is apparent in the Malcolm Turnbull/Scott Morrison governments' approach to the PRC, which has three fundamental and related objectives:

- Protect and maximise Australia's freedom of action to make sovereign decisions for Australia free from interference and covert influence; and minimize Australia's vulnerability to any form of external coercion. Fundamentally this is about enhancing sovereign capabilities and strengthening national resilience.
- Help create a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.
- Shape the strategic and normative environment in a way that allows nations to exercise their legitimate sovereign rights and privileges without coercion; and counter and/or deter the PRC from engaging in actions which are contrary to these aims.

For Australia, these three objectives are at the heart of what Canberra refers to as the "international liberal rules-based order"<sup>2</sup> which is aligned closely with the Japanese notion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

### The Importance of the US Role

The US remains the indispensable power for Australia and the region because there cannot be a favorable balance in military, economic or normative terms without the US.

In the military sense, it is about having even better integrated and complimentary capabilities across an expanded range of theatres and geographies to counter the expansionary ambitions of the PRC.

In an economic sense, Australia and others are looking to diversify from one dominant supplier or market. The PRC's ongoing economic coercion of Australia over domestic and foreign policy settings has affirmed the urgency of this.

For Australia, it is not about self-sufficiency but deepening interdependence between friendly and secure nations – and renegotiating and putting some restrictions on the economic relationship with the PRC.

In a technological sense, it is about creating coordinated safeguards when it comes to foreign acquisitions and collaborations, especially in areas of dual civil and military relevance.

The US is more important than ever because diversification and security of supply chains in critical sectors and capabilities depend most of all on US economic presence, involvement, markets, innovation, expertise, and finance. Likewise, the setting of rules and standards depends on a strong commercial presence in that sector, and on the presence of American firms most of all.

Regarding the past four years, Australia welcomed some mindsets and policies of the Donald Trump administration which advanced these objectives. In terms of mindsets Canberra supported, these include:

- Willingness to consider the cost and risk of inaction and not just action.
- Willingness to tolerate disruption as a tactical or negotiating tool to challenge adverse trends or change the conversation.

- Understanding that demonstrating resolve is as essential to effective deterrence as having a well-conceived strategy.
- Willingness to engage the American public in a conversation about the China challenge.

At the same time, Australia privately but forthrightly pointed out to the previous administration when it believed serious errors were made in execution or tone, or both.

Australia also strongly opposed those actions which Canberra believed undermined American standing and/or capability to advance US objectives in the region – all of which are to Australia’s detriment.

Australia did so with knowledge that the comprehensive alliance and relationship is infinitely broader, more profound, and enduring than the relationship between the President and Prime Minister at any given time, as important as that is, and that the strength of the alliance is that it is always looking forward and evolving for the advancement of mutual interests.

### An Agenda for the Biden Administration from the Australian Perspective

Australia is greatly encouraged by the Biden administration’s elevated attention to the Indo-Pacific, and to the clear-eyed assessment that the PRC is the greatest and most comprehensive challenge it faces. This is reinforced by the appointment of individuals to Cabinet-level positions and below with deep expertise and experience.

Australia also quietly applauded some tweaks to structure of appointments, such as the appointment of Dr. Kurt Campbell, a seasoned official with intimate knowledge of Australia and a hard-headed perspective on the region. As the Indo-Pacific coordinator in the NSC, he can ensure an integrated approach to policy and to minimizing different government entities working at cross purposes rather than toward common objectives.

Below are suggestions that will:

- Complement Australian strategic efforts and objectives.
- Increase Canberra’s room to maneuver and make it easier for Australia to become even more proactive and creative in strategic terms.
- Create more space for other players whose interests and values are well aligned with that of the US and Australia.

### Action Item 1: Prioritise the Quad.

Countries in the region are at different stages of understanding and responding to strategic risk. Most are hedging and often paralyzed by uncertainty. The Quad was reinstated by four countries who have an advanced comprehension of the strategic risk (and opportunity) of proactively balancing and countering the PRC’s actions. All four countries have been through a difficult strategic and political journey vis-à-vis the PRC. They all have similar interpretations of PRC blueprints such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Made in China 2025 and, in the case of Japan, India, and Australia, have felt the pressure and pain of the PRC’s intimidatory and coercive economic actions. In the case of India and Japan, they face the martial threat and menace of the PRC constantly. As a result, they are all heading in broadly similar directions vis-à-vis the PRC.

As a response, the Quad is emerging as a flexible, action-orientated, and responsive grouping of four countries with formidable national capabilities with each member offering uniquely important geo-strategic positions and assets on China’s periphery. It is unburdened by superfluous processes and has a built-in institutional surge capacity based on strategic need and circumstance.

The Quad is becoming a way for India to entrench itself into the strategic architecture of the region and for Australia to engage India in a way which might not be possible bilaterally. Southeast Asian maritime states are also increasingly

comfortable with the advancing relevance and role of the Quad and see its existence as a strategic asset for the Indo-Pacific region rather than as a threat to “ASEAN centrality.”

The Quad is now a platform to discuss and even coordinate policies in the economic, finance, infrastructure, and technological areas in addition to maritime and military areas. It may also become a useful platform to pursue limited intelligence sharing arrangements on issues that affect all four members.

The Quad is a sufficiently flexible and adaptable institution with which to engage other powers seeking to counter aspects of the PRC’s policies (through an ad hoc Quad Plus mechanism) such as Vietnam and even European powers such as France.

### Action Item 2: Assist Southeast Asian states to increase their strategic agency and put a higher price on their sovereignty.

Australia sees Southeast Asia as not just the pivotal sub-region in the Indo-Pacific but also the soft underbelly in the region most susceptible to Chinese coercion, influence, and expansion. Indeed, while limiting Chinese presence and influence in the South Pacific is seen as protecting the country’s “backyard,” Southeast Asia is at the heart of the country’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Except for Vietnam, Southeast Asian states have deep hedging (rather than balancing or countering) instincts due to their proximity to the PRC, smaller size, limited capabilities, and economic integration and reliance on the PRC. There is also the constant fear of being left to fend for oneself against a hostile PRC.

This means that while one can identify pockets of bold thinking in this sub-region, the prevailing inclination is to “never back a side before the result is obvious,” “do the strategic minimum,” and receive maximum security goods for minimum risk, price, and commitment. In short, they are often inclined toward free

riding and the expectation that they dictate the pace and level of strategic competition with China even as they receive strategic cover or are direct beneficiaries of the activities of the US and allies.

It is easy for the US and allies to become frustrated with some Southeast Asian states. But the more constructive approach is to understand their domestic and external vulnerabilities and work within these. Australia has found that rather than seek comprehensive agreement on fundamental strategic objectives which will not be forthcoming, it is more useful to partner with countries on specific and practical collaborations that advance their capacity to protect their sovereignty from encroachment or coercion and improve their capacity to exercise their rights and privileges.

For example, this might involve cooperation on terrestrial, sea, and undersea infrastructure guided by protocols which strengthen national resilience and sovereign capability; arriving at mutually beneficially conventions and practices in newer domains such as cyber and space; building in-house capacity to monitor and protect their own sovereign and maritime territory; or encouraging and supporting these states to use international law and conventions as a weapon and a shield to defend their sovereign rights and privileges.

Making the case for changes to US and allied military capabilities and posture must include credible arguments showing how these developments will bring net strategic and security benefits to independent countries. Without these arguments being made and without getting key states in Southeast Asia on board, the US and allied future capacity to operate flexibly, in an expanded range of geographies, and with ad hoc surge capacity, will be limited.

It is also important to use ASEAN-led institutions to advance the US and allied objectives whilst realizing their purpose and limitations at the same time.

Although not a genuine strategic entity, ASEAN exists as the self-appointed gatekeeper of regional diplomatic protocol. Full engagement is time consuming and frequently frustrating but inadequate engagement is interpreted by Southeast Asians as arrogant and a prelude to disengagement. This means that every American administration must fully engage with ASEAN yet seek meaningful cooperation at a bilateral or mini-lateral level.

Although not an action-orientated entity, ASEAN is still consequential in diplomatic contexts. Its forums and processes can be used to deeply influence the diplomatic conversation. The PRC is skilled at using ASEAN to sell its narratives and norms to the region.

For example, Australia has fought hard against Beijing using ASEAN forums and processes to deemphasise the primary importance of international law in resolving disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing has cleverly cast these disputes as a PRC-ASEAN issue not concerning other countries and one in which the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (of which it is a signatory) is not relevant. This leads to the perverse public narrative that US and allied military activities in the region are fundamentally provocative, and are the primary cause of instability, rather than illegal and coercive Chinese expansionary activities. As another example, the PRC has managed to connect its BRI with ASEAN's "connectivity agenda" which offers diplomatic and public credibility to Beijing's flagship outward-looking blueprint.

Australia is hoping that the Biden administration will use ASEAN platforms to challenge China's narratives, reshape the regional conversation, and define the diplomatic agenda. Australia would lend its strong support to that approach.

Finally, Australia is keenly aware that the Southeast Asian zone (except Singapore) are populated with low- and middle-income per capita economies. The PRC knows this and has developed specific strategies to extend its influence.

At the most general level, the BRI offers the promise of immediate and guaranteed benefits.<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asian states know many benefits are transient, the gains heavily weighted toward the PRC, and that Beijing will demand subservience and is using the offerings to achieve strategic and political objectives, many of which are against the longer-term interests of smaller states. But such guaranteed and immediate gains are very attractive to many political and economic elites in the region.

In contrast, the US promise of a free and open rules-based order is less clear about the immediate gains on offer and "what's in it" for Southeast Asian elites and individual countries. This means there are poor incentives for smaller states to risk the immediate gains on offer and offending the PRC in the process – a permanent great neighbor – for unclear and uncertain benefits at a future time.

Australia knows the US and allies must offer smaller states immediate options, alternatives, and tangible reasons to choose their preferred system of rules. This increases the importance of economic agreements such as the CPTPP. It also requires a growing presence for US and allied firms, finance, technology, and know-how to provide non-PRC alternatives and opportunities for regional entities.

### Action Item 3: Bulk up the infrastructure building component of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

Issuing warnings to smaller economies that the BRI is about creating a hierarchical Sino-centric order will not be sufficient. When it comes to nations that are of high geo-strategic and economic importance to the US and allies in regions including maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, they need immediate alternatives.

The good news is that even though the PRC is successfully positioning the BRI as a complement to regional schemes such as ASEAN's connectivity agenda<sup>4</sup> (through creating seamless or efficient networks through harmonising standards,



digital and physical infrastructure, digital, freer movement of people between borders), regional economies want US and allied alternatives.

Countries such as Australia and Japan have done much to restructure significant parts of their overseas development assistance (ODA) and development programs to provide finance for high quality infrastructure, both physical and digital, which make sensible strategic and economic sense. The idea is to deploy Australia's finance, expertise, and relationships to build resilient and democratic political economies who are not overly dependent on the PRC.

The US has begun this process of restructuring the way its overseas development assistance is deployed to better aligned with strategic objectives.

But the region needs much more, and Australia is hoping the Biden administration will move quickly. The financial muscle of the US, including that of the private sector, is unmatched. The convening ability of the US in leading the collective efforts of Indo-Pacific liberal democracies to lend their weight is irreplaceable.

The PRC cannot achieve its objectives in East Asia and the Pacific through the BRI if there is coordinated action to counter the BRI in strategically important economies. But it needs the US to lead the joint effort.

Indeed, the same US mindset (coordination of ODA, finance and convening power) would also apply to the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines into the region to counter the PRC's politically motivated efforts in this area.

**Action Item 4: Work with France and Germany to get the EU on board to advance common economic, supply chain, and technological objectives.**

The PRC believes the European Union is crucial for achieving its global ambitions, just as Southeast Asia is of

similar importance to its regional ambitions. For example, the BRI includes Europe because Beijing needs to access the enormous European domestic consumption market for the BRI to succeed. It sees Europe as the front door to access innovation and as a back door to secure technologies from the US and elsewhere. European nations have an entrenched role in global institutions and the defining of acceptable norms.

In summary, the PRC would like to see Europe play a diminished role in defending human rights and the rule of law, which would weaken efforts to create a balance in favor of liberal-democratic nations and counter China in multilateral forums. The great PRC fear is that the US and EU will effectively coordinate policies in providing a check on Beijing's power and actions.

If the PRC sees Europe in such elevated terms, then so should Australia.

Canberra is well respected in European capitals but due to geographical distance and size its influence is relatively limited. It is clear the key states remain France and Germany as Paris and Berlin tend to determine what occurs in Brussels.

Australia is also aware that on almost all issues of global concern, key European nations must be brought on side. These issues include reform of global bodies such as the World Trade Organisation and World Health Organisation; protecting intellectual property and illegitimate technology "leakage"; properly defining and defending human rights; climate change; conventions on cyber security and data protection; and more.

It is the same with the US (and Australian) desire to counter and protect against the PRC's predatory economic practices. For example, the creation of reliable supply chains and trusted technological eco-systems in allied and friendly economies needs European cooperation.



The US is uniquely placed to engage with France, Germany, and the EU more broadly to advance these common objectives, and to ensure the EU and individual nations do not sacrifice long-term interests for short-term or transient gains in having the relationship with the PRC that the PRC wants. The US needs to take the lead in convincing the EU that the forward-leaning Indo-Pacific strategies of the US and allies are well aligned to the interests and values of European powers.

### Action Item 5: Advancing Taiwan's economic and diplomatic relevance serves the Indo-Pacific objectives of the US and allies.

Australia is acquiring a renewed appreciation for the strategic, economic, and political importance of an autonomous Taiwan.

In recent times, Australia has pursued a free trade agreement only to be warned off doing so by the PRC. More generally, the PRC is making considerable attempts to dictate the “One China, Two Systems” policy for Australia and other regional countries. Australia, like others, needs US cover to deepen its relationship with Taiwan.

The other side of the story is helping Taiwan reach out into the region as an autonomous entity. The greater Taiwan's economic presence and importance to the world, the better positioned it is to reduce its dependency on the PRC and maintain its strategic and economic autonomy. In this context, the twin threats are the narrowing of Taiwan's diplomatic space and the hollowing out of its economic strengths which are being increasingly captured by the mainland, a deliberate and sustained PRC objective.

Consequently, deepening the economic relationship with Taiwan in strategic ways will assist the latter in achieving greater economic distancing from the PRC and reduce the extent to which the PRC can capture and dominate supply and value chains in the future, especially in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sectors.

Fortuitously, the US and Taiwanese economies are largely complementary, and this should become even more so.

Any Taiwanese firm shifting high-end and high-value processes from the PRC back to Taiwan is an economic gain for Taiwan and a strategic gain for the US.

It is also a US strategic gain if Taiwanese firms shift resources and processes to other advanced economies in the region (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia) as this is consistent with the objective of reducing collective reliance on PRC-based supply chains for strategic/high-end products and the preventing of PRC firms from disproportionately (or illegitimately) reaping the benefits of upscaling when interacting with foreign firms.

Options might include:

- Prioritising a US-Taiwan free trade agreement and/or other sector specific agreements.
- Explore and fast-track industry-level initiatives to enhance US-Taiwan-allied innovation. This might include support for Taiwan's “Asian Silicon Valley” based in Taoyuan to promote the development and commercialisation of advanced technologies which will help Taiwan to emerge as a high-tech hub and link to other high-tech clusters in advanced allied and friendly economies.
- Offer Taiwan diplomatic support for its membership of the CPTPP (even if the US remains a non-member.)

### Action item 6: Recognizing climate change is not just an environmental issue but a geo-strategic and geo-economic one.

While there are pockets of sincerity inside the PRC system, much of the CCP's approach to climate change is cynical and opportunistic.

The Biden administration should reject the seductive notion that the important issue of responding to climate change sits apart from the competitive elements of international politics.

In fact, the PRC uses climate change policies to advance its strategic, economic, and diplomatic interests. The lowering of carbon emissions is generally secondary to these prior objectives. This applies to China's illegitimate gaming of the renewable and alternative energy sectors (through subsidies and predatory market practices) and the use of climate change cooperation to create divisions between the US and allies.

In this context, climate change policies ought to be coordinated and aligned with the Indo-Pacific and global strategic objectives of the administration.

## Conclusion

The world is watching to see whether Canberra will stand its ground. Australia is becoming known for not taking a backward step when its sovereignty and national resilience is at stake but is also looking to America and other allies and partners for support. Offering that support to Canberra will further strengthen not only Australia's resolve but also the determination of other nations to defend their national interests against PRC coercion.

*The author has had informal discussions with Australian political leaders, principal advisers, and senior officials which have informed some of these views. However, the brief represents the personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian government.*

## Endnotes

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## About the Author

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John Lee is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. He is also a non-resident senior fellow at the United States Studies Centre in Sydney, Australia and adjunct professor at the University of Sydney.

From 2016 to 2018, he was senior national security adviser to Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop. In this role, he served as the principal adviser on Asia and on economic, strategic, and political affairs in the Indo-Pacific region.

Lee was also appointed the foreign minister's lead adviser on the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, the first comprehensive foreign affairs blueprint for Australia since 2003, written to guide Canberra's external engagement for the next ten years and beyond.

His articles have been published in leading policy and academic journals in the United States, Asia, and Australia. He is the author of *Will China Fail?*, published in 2007 and updated and reissued in 2009.

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