

POLICY CHECKLIST

Forging a US-Australia Alliance to Counter Chinese Information Warfare

July 2021

The United States-Australia alliance is built on a bedrock of shared security interests and democratic values. Together, the two nations are well-positioned to establish a unified view of the emerging, advanced digital era in which the comprehensive acquisition and control of information determines global power and order. These policy recommendations, adapted from Patrick Cronin's report *China's Gambit for Total Information Dominance: A US-Australia Response*, examine how the US-Australia alliance can blunt China's bid for global information dominance and compete across the political, economic, and military dimensions of power.

Political and Diplomatic Recommendations

1. Establish an Information Dominance Steering Group as part of the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN). The Biden and Morrison administrations should establish a strategic steering group dedicated to information dominance and inventorying emerging challenges. By reviewing a problem's diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions, the steering group could guide

coordinated and collaborative action between allies.

- 2. Protect free speech by reporting on China's influence and interference with civil liberties outside China's border.** The Biden administration should consider tasking the State Department's Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy, and Labor with preparing a fact-based narrative of China's infringements on freedom of expression, highlighting what is publicly known about China's influence and interference operations beyond its borders. The US should coordinate its report with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to determine how Canberra could produce a similar report.
- 3. Develop a common toolkit for democracies designed to blunt disinformation and malign information operations.** By mobilizing a small group of 10 democracies, including Quad partners, the US and Australia could devise a playbook for countering unwanted foreign interference and malign information operations—both overt and decentralized ones and covert

ones. In preparation for a larger group of democracies, the United States and Australia should take the first step by conducting a joint audit of relevant laws, orders, policies, and best practices within their countries.

- 4. Build alliance discourse power by jointly reviewing lessons learned from the State Department's Global Engagement Center.** The US Global Engagement Center was created in 2016 as an interagency entity for coordinating messaging intended for foreign audiences. A US performance review undertaken in close consultation with Australia's National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator and other Australian officials with experience and expertise could suggest ways to improve countering Chinese disinformation and identify GEC strengths and best practices.

Economic and Technological Recommendations

- 5. Expand the human capacity of a trusted science and technology (S&T) network.** Although officials within Australia's Defence Science Technology (DSTG) and their American counterparts would remain more comfortable working with Five Eyes partners through Five Points, the benefits of expanding S&T cooperation with advanced economies like those of Japan and South Korea would justify the effort required to do so.
- 6. Expand English-language education for Indo-Pacific partners and ramp up Chinese-language training for US and Australian students.** The US and Australia should invest significantly in Chinese-language education opportunities in their own countries, emphasizing primary, secondary, and university education programs. Increased funding in this field of study would reduce colleges' and universities' reliance on foreign-funded Confucius Institutes. It is also important to give partners from non-English-speaking countries the ability to communicate with Americans and Australians. Enhanced English-

language programs would increase the pool of potential employees available to help their countries in areas essential for combating disinformation and working in an advanced digital economy.

- 7. Create a US-Australian supply chain task force to review bilateral cooperation in information and communications technology (ICT) supply chains.** Using the study of bilateral cybersecurity cooperation and the Biden administration's major review of supply chain security as a springboard, Canberra and Washington should establish a joint task force for addressing ICT supply chain issues, beginning this process with a discussion of the findings of the Biden administration's supply chain review.
- 8. Australia and the United States should work together to establish high-standard multilateral digital trade rules and norms.** The US and Australia could unitedly promote standards for data privacy that are consistent with democratic values. Officials from the United States Trade Representative (USTR), Australian DFAT, and the Japanese government should come together to forge a high-standard, multilateral digital trade and economy agreement that could be based upon existing bilateral agreements, including the US-Australia FTA, the 2019 US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement, and the digital-trade and e-commerce portions of recent multilateral agreements, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement.
- 9. Hold an annual infrastructure summit in conjunction with Quad and other partners, thereby emphasizing digital economies and information power, and create a regional infrastructure hub in Southeast Asia.** A high-level forum of like-minded countries would demonstrate democratic support for regional infrastructure, particularly that related to advanced digital economies, and would help revitalize and enlarge the effort begun in 2018 to

conduct a US-Australia-Japan infrastructure forum. This Quad-plus infrastructure summit could pool resources to provide countries in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific with alternatives to China's OBOR.

Security and Military Recommendations

- 10. Forge an Indo-Pacific Code of Conduct with like-minded countries to underscore customary international law and strengthen the ability of ASEAN to negotiate with China.** Negotiations regarding a Code of Conduct between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China have been ongoing for a quarter of a century. China, however, seeks to impose its rules on its smaller neighbors, and it could exploit divisions within ASEAN and leverage the power associated with being these neighbors' top trade partner to block alternative rules of the road. Canberra and Washington could take the lead in working with Japan and other like-minded countries to create and formally announce the adoption of a set of binding principles concerning maritime conduct. The agreement could allow international maritime partners to sign on, thereby boosting ASEAN efforts to negotiate a fair deal with China.
- 11. Draw up an allied plan of action for understanding the impact of increased deployment and integration of unmanned aerial vehicles.** The rapid advent of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, requires concerted analysis of the threats and opportunities these pose within the Indo-Pacific region. Reliance on Chinese-made drones has become an obvious risk for democracies; deployment of drones has heightened deterrence concerns in hotspots; and reliance on UAVs could facilitate information-sharing among regional

partners and develop new operational concepts. UAVs, or drones, can contribute to establishing a common operating picture for actors in the Indo-Pacific region, and a review of this operating picture could help create a blueprint for moving forward.

- 12. Draw up an alliance plan of action to build partners' defense capacity against state or nonstate actor propaganda and disinformation.** Capacity building to defend against China's information operations and malign information power is a growing need. With oversight from the White House and Australia's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, various elements of the two governments—including their defense, intelligence, and diplomatic arms—should implement efforts to enhance allied and partner capabilities to detect, deflect, and defend against disinformation, cyberattacks, and influence operations.
- 13. Create a defense-led but whole-of-government alliance red team to consider system-destruction warfare and scenarios centered on the possible breakdown of deterrence.** The defense departments of the United States and Australia should create a red team incorporating other government agencies and private sector actors whose purpose is to probe their own information-centric system weaknesses and the vulnerabilities of potential adversaries within this same area. Included could be cyber and space domains, undersea warfare, and chokepoint and SLOC security.

For an in-depth exploration of these issues and policy recommendations, read the report [China's Gambit for Total Information Dominance: A US-Australia Response](#) by Patrick Cronin.



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Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org