

Armament Culture and the Binding US Alliance: What do the Strategic Policy Documents Reveal About Australian Strategic Culture?

Kamran Nazeer

INTRODUCTION

An official report from the USA describes the Indo-Pacific as “the single most consequential region”.¹ Rory Metcalf aptly reflects this statement when he opines that the Indo-Pacific is “an idea whose time has come”.² However, the understanding of this expanse is at best fuzzy. The honourable Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi described it most objectively as an oceanic expanse “... from

Group Captain **Kamran Nazeer** is a serving officer of the Indian Air Force.

1. Walter Lohman, “Why the Indo-Pacific Is the Pentagon’s ‘Priority Theater,’” The Heritage Foundation, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/why-the-indo-pacific-the-pentagons-priority-theater>. Accessed on November 29, 2023.
2. Rory Metcalf, “Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance,” *Asia Policy*, 26, No. 3, 2019, pp. 79–95, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0043>.

the shores of Africa to that of the Americas”³. India and Australia are two critical players in this geostrategic space. Perhaps the common concern about a rising, increasingly assertive China is bringing them closer together.⁴ Increasing military exercises such as AustraHind, Malabar, and Talisman Sabre, indicate strategic convergence between India and Australia.^{5,6,7} Military cooperation is set to be enhanced further, according to the latest reports.⁸ Moreover, despite a cautious approach, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) remains a critical multilateral alignment for India in the region.⁹ Therefore, we must gain a deeper understanding of Australia’s strategic culture to derive the best possible outcomes from this promising relationship.

In the past few years, Australia recognised a rapid shift in its strategic environment, prompting a review of its security

3. Press Information Bureau, “Text of Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue 2018”, June 1, 2018. Accessed on November 18, 2023. pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1534144
4. “9th India-Australia Defence Policy Talks Held in New Delhi,” <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2111839>. Accessed on August 29, 2025.
5. Saurabh Trivedi, “India Joins Bilateral Military Exercise in Australia,” *The Hindu*, July 13, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-joins-bilateral-military-exercise-in-australia/article69807241.ece>.
6. Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices scheme=AGLSTERMS. AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, “Exercise Malabar Strengthens Maritime Partnerships,” Website, Defence Australia, November 24, 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-11-24/exercise-malabar-strengthens-maritime-partnerships>.
7. Press Release: Press Information Bureau, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2178040>. Accessed on November 25, 2025,
8. “India and Australia Sign a Security Deal”, AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/australia-india-security-military-submarine-7d49e36bbe9f61411fed3146f7bd8919>. Accessed on November 25, 2025.
9. Ghulam Ali, “Territorial Disputes, the Role of Leaders and the Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations,” *Pacific Review*, 73, no. 3, 2024, pp. 533–555, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2185662>.

posture. The National Defence Strategy¹⁰ (NDS) and Defence Strategic Review¹¹ (DSR) were notable public documents from this review process, significantly shaping Australia's responses and perhaps reflecting its strategic culture. These documents provide a reasoned output for policy and actions critical to meeting the realigned objectives. While such documents do offer a reasonable bedrock for strategic discourse and shape the policy contours, there is more than meets the eye. The reasons why states choose different approaches to security and strategy are as disparate as humanity itself. Paranjpe asserts that the underlying reasons for such strategic choices are equally important, as a state's culture will determine its approach to security.¹²

This essay identifies the Australian strategic culture by studying the NDS and DSR through a combined understanding of the independent works on strategic culture by Johnston and Luckham. The analysis will reveal that the Australian strategic culture is driven by an 'arms fetish' and a strong affinity for the USA, which makes the prevailing strategic preferences appear intuitive and effective. For a foundational understanding, we must become familiar with the concept of strategic culture, as

-
10. Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices scheme=AGLSTERMS. AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, "2024 National Defence Strategy and 2024 Integrated Investment Program," Website, Defence, April 17, 2024, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>.
 11. Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices scheme=AGLSTERMS. AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, "National Defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023 | About | Defence," Website, scheme=AGLSTERMS. AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices, Russell, ACT, 2600; contact=1300 333 362, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>. Accessed on April 25, 2024.
 12. Shrikant Paranjpe, *India's Strategic Culture: The Making of National Security Policy* (Oxford, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/deakin/detail.action?docID=6133862>.

articulated by Johnston and Luckham in their explanation of what they call “fetishism for modern armament”. Thereafter, the essay will identify these themes of armament culture and a strategic affinity to the USA, revealing Australia’s strategic culture.

It is reasonable to argue that the documents in the public domain are unclassified versions and may lack details of execution and actual intent. However, that is an unavoidable constraint. Moreover, what is declassified, apart from what is withheld, is also critical as a declaration of purpose and action in the realm of strategic ambiguity.

As students of strategy, let us start by gaining some insight into strategic culture. Thereafter, this essay will attempt to establish if these selected assertions align with the Australian situation and the thesis presented to identify its strategic culture. This connection becomes essential for understanding how strategic culture manifests in the country’s circumstances and responses.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC CULTURE?

Strategic culture is a widely discussed concept, with varied debates and viewpoints. Its understanding has both variance and convergence points. Notwithstanding, *et passim*, there appears to be a consensus that culture shapes how nations behave, making their study fascinating. Kluckhohn and Kelly perhaps give the most succinct description of culture as the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to the social realities around them. They assert that culture explains why people behave as they do, as it has various influences on them.¹³ This brief will focus on Johnston and Luckham’s work. Johnston thoroughly studies the literature on strategic culture before offering his iteration. Among

13. Clyde Kluckhohn, and W.H. Kelly, *The Concept of Culture* (University Libraries Archival Guides, 1945), https://archive.library.unr.edu/public/repositories/2/archival_objects/235318. Accessed on November 25, 2025.

other notable parameters, strategic culture is characterised by these consistent preferences over a protracted period and despite varying circumstances, even when non-cultural factors (technology, economic variations, etc) change. Further, strategic culture manifests in tangible forms, such as policy articulation, both verbal and documentary, and expressions of state priorities like large defence or trade deals. Building on his didactic analysis, he describes 'strategic culture' as,

[A]n integrated system of symbols that establishes strategic preferences regarding the role of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality, the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious.^{14, 15}

Related to this symbolism, Luckham presents the phenomenon of "armament culture," which emerges out of a state's perception of its global interactions. He defines it as "a *fetishism for advanced weapons* that establishes an essential causal relationship between modern weapons, military superiority, and security." According to this concept, a state ascribes primacy to modern weapons as a self-evident truth. It would be a fair argument to say that almost all states ascribe the notion of security to arms and military hardware. However, in this case, the issue is the predominance of an idea, which allows the means of security, i.e., weapons, to supplant the true aims of defence and security, with weapons themselves assuming a central position.¹⁶ These themes of an

14. Paranjpe, n. 12.

15. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

16. Robin Luckham, "Armament Culture," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 10 January 1984, pp. 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437548401000102>.

armament culture and a binding affiliation to the USA will be used to gain insights into the Australian strategic culture.

STRATEGIC CULTURE REVEALED BY THE NDS AND DSR

Armament Culture

National security is a comprehensive and overarching subject with military capabilities forming a subordinate component. The articulation of the DSR and NDS presents an incomplete view of national security in this regard, with the defence subsidiary driving the national security agenda. Australia first promulgated these two documents without articulating a national security policy. The lack of this guiding document was sure to shift the entire focus on what was articulated in the public domain. Unsurprisingly, they captured the narrative and have since been the most quoted and referenced documents in Australia's strategic discourse.¹⁷ Moreover, the repeated references to the 'whole of government' approach should have dictated that holistic national security be given primacy, and that defence strategy be clearly earmarked as one of many contributors. While the documents mention a comprehensive view of national security, the absence of a holistic security strategy makes this even more conspicuous, highlighting a defence-dominated view of security.

Further, since the DSR and NDS are the most significant documents released to declare Australia's security policy, their lexical analysis can help identify trends that can reveal Australia's strategic culture. Thus, a broad Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was conducted as a fundamental linguistic examination within the lexical analysis. In this, the kinds of words or lexical

17. The author's experience of the Defence Strategic Studies Course in the Australian Defence College, culminating in December 2024, indicated that almost all academic content centred around these documents and their strategic guidance.

items in the text were classified and studied for inferences by the analysis of the vocabulary used, to determine whether they tend to use certain types of words and avoid others.¹⁸ Such an analysis revealed clear predispositions in the NDS and DSR. The frequency of defence-related words suggests an apparent inclination towards a military-oriented view in both documents. The AI tool ChatPDF was used for this analysis, and the generated data reveals that the most frequently used words in these documents are strongly militaristic. Defence, force, security, and military are used 388 times in the NDS, and a similar grouping of defence, force, submarine, capability, and technology accounts for 100 occurrences in the DSR. Their use has been in a military context, and they far outrank other words in their frequency and usage. Thus, there is significant data indicating the predominance of a military-driven model of security.

One may argue that this is inevitable in defence documents, but articulating these two documents without first laying out a strategic national security policy was a deliberate choice made by the Australian government. Mere acknowledgement of defence being a contributory part of the broad security calculus is grossly insufficient to reinforce a comprehensive view of security. The same applies to the “compounding security risks” acknowledged in the NDS and DSR.

These non-traditional threats have been highlighted as crucial to regional stability. Yet they receive only honourable mentions, without comparable, detailed action plans, such as those outlined for military capabilities. On the contrary, the actions listed in the DSR and NDS demonstrate that the security calculus will be dominated by the “prioritised acquisition of conventionally armed nuclear submarines in the shortest possible time”. Even

18. David Machin and Andrea Mayr, “Analysing Semiotic Choices : Words and Images,” *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036212933>.

the Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) Pillar II is heavily reliant on defence technology, missing large swaths of potential cooperation that could leverage Australia's geographic position and bolster regional stability and security. Thus, despite recognising comprehensive threats, the instrument of choice for national security has been identified as an advanced but conventional piece of military equipment—a clear and tangible manifestation of strategic culture.

One must consider the seduction of modern military equipment and the fetishism for weaponry here. Nuclear submarines represent the cutting edge of military hardware and are considered more advanced than conventionally powered submarines. However, their reach and endurance can arguably convey an intent to engage in an offensive action. Moreover, the choice of conventional submarines could have freed up more of the budget for holistic security needs, like non-traditional threats and anti-Grey Zone defensive capabilities. Despite these arguments, Australia chose nuclear-powered submarines. This conforms to Luckham's thesis about the attraction to modern military equipment, which results in these 'means' of defence replacing the proper 'goals' of national security—underscoring the strategic armament culture prevalent in Australia's strategic documents.

Furthermore, consider Australia's intent in implementing this armament culture, while acknowledging the reduced warning time. If one of the critical triggers necessitating a review was a loss of warning time, as specified in the DSR, and the Australian strategy is denial, as declared by the NDS, perhaps a defensive approach was more suitable, but the envisaged equipment profile does not reflect this intent. To simplify, if the adversary could launch Long Rifle (LR) weapons at short notice, the foremost need would be a robust Air Defence (AD) capability to deny the intended result to the adversary. However, advanced AD systems, likely to deny military objectives to the adversary, do

not figure prominently in the NDS and DSR. Instead, integrated air and missile defence systems, while briefly mentioned, are eclipsed by offensive capabilities such as nuclear submarines and Tomahawk missiles, which are more attuned to a strategy of punishment, as elaborated by Nakao. This resonates with the idea reflected in the NDS: to “deter a conflict before it begins”; and it aligns with deterrence through punishment rather than denial.¹⁹ This indicates the capacity for offensive intent in the Australian strategy through a disposition for an armament culture. The question is, is this strategy of punishment, disguised as denial, suitable for Australia? Perhaps the answer lies in Australia’s binding affiliation with the USA.

AFFINITY TO THE USA

The DSR points to **the** USA as Australia’s principal strategic partner, and the US alliance is central to its strategy. Australia’s offshore deployments and the abrupt abandonment of the French submarine deal for AUKUS exemplify this strong affinity.²⁰ This exceptional position of the USA in Australia’s strategic identity is clearly emphasised in both the DSR and NDS. It can even be argued that the Australian policy has been an extension of the United States policy. In his book *The Sub-Imperial Power*, Clinton Fernandes asserts that Australia is intent on “upholding a US-led imperial order.”²¹ This sentiment is reflected in the scope of the AUKUS deal, which, with the admission of the DSR, is bound to deepen the US-Australia relationship. Fernandes claims

19. Keisuke Nakao, “Denial vs. Punishment: Strategies Shape War, But War Itself Affects Strategies,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3038278>.

20. “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS: Prime Minister of Australia,” March 13, 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-leaders-statement-aukus>.

21. Clinton Fernandes, *Subimperial Power: Australia in the International Arena* (Melbourne University Publishing Ltd, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1176749>.

that Australia has been an enthusiastic supporter of this US-led imperial order and suffers from constant anxiety that the imperial centre, presently the USA, is not sufficiently attentive to Australia. He also contends that public debate on the cost-benefit analysis of this relationship is grossly inadequate.²² This strategic choice of being US-led is assumed to be self-evident. Perhaps this is why the DSR and NDS fail to attach a common yardstick of 'strategic assurance' that is demanded of Beijing, demonstrating a lack of strategic empathy.

Consider Australia's military presence worldwide. The multitude of US bases facilitates Australia's military ubiquity,²³ and it maintains a military presence across the Indo-Pacific—including Butterworth base in Malaysia.²⁴ Concurrently, the United States has maintained a sizeable military presence in the Indo-Pacific even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What is the reason for this binding embrace between Australia and the USA?

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Australia finds the grandiose image of American hegemony worth replicating. Australia has closely observed US hegemony, and the alliance has provided it with profound insight into the USA's global role. Through AUKUS and a deepened relationship, Australia aims to accelerate its own power with US support. In this regard, AUKUS serves as a capability booster for Australia, providing access to strategic technologies swiftly and reducing lengthy development

22. Ibid.

23. "Australian Bases Abroad", Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, December 19, 2011, <https://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/australian-bases-abroad/>.

24. Department of Defence; address=Russell Offices scheme=AGLSTERMS.AglsAgent; corporateName=Commonwealth of Australia, "RMAF Butterworth (Malaysia)," Website, Defence, January 3, 2024, <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement/rmaf-butterworth-malaysia>.

timelines for such capabilities. Therefore, I believe Australia's strategic culture, although evolving due to the changing landscape of American hegemony, is likely to remain closely aligned with the US. This is not a situation without its fair share of complications and strategic challenges. Australia's geography, surplus goods, and, consequently, its trade, all align with a very different geostrategic trade affinity: China. This is a tight rope to say the least. Canberra has embraced this dichotomy rather than demonstrating a strategic stasis.

It appears that Australia believes that the inconsistent situation of deriving security and strategic leverage from the USA, while maintaining a strategic adversary—China—as its largest trading partner, can be normalised and effectively managed. Perhaps its ability to handle Chinese sanctions post-COVID has given Canberra the confidence to address the emerging strategic environment with bold action. Still, Australia is attempting a strategic balancing act with a state that is its largest trading partner and importer of a third of its exports, accounting for about 26 per cent of its trade. This trade with the strategic adversary has grown by approximately 9 per cent over the last five years, surpassing the trade figures with the US.^{25, 26} Furthermore, trade with the USA has been complicated under the Trump administration. The US has imposed a 10 per cent baseline tariff on most imported goods, effective April 9, 2025. Most goods originating in Australia are

25. "Australia's Strategic Trade Dilemma: Economic Ties with China vs. Defence Alignment with the US," ECAG, AUSTRALIA, <https://www.ecag.com.au/the-ecag-navigator-journal-1/australia-s-strategic-trade-dilemma%3A-economic-ties-with-china-vs.-defence-alignment-with-the-us>. Accessed on November 25, 2025.

26. "Background Paper: The Australia-China Trade and Investment Relationship", Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/in-force/chafta/negotiations/background-paper-the-australia-china-trade-and-investment-relationship>. Accessed on November 25, 2025.

subject to this tariff on import into the US.²⁷ Yet, Australia has had a muted reaction to the US tariffs. The Australian Industry Group has expressed relief that, on a comparable scale, “Australia has come off rather lightly”, and that it has been “spared the very high reciprocal tariffs or the need to negotiate for a lower tariff deal”. The report rather triumphantly remarks that they “only have to contend with the 10 per cent baseline tariff”. It goes on to further underplay the effect of such tariffs on its economy.²⁸ Therefore, Australia’s strategy exemplifies a divergence between security and economics driven by a strategic culture that favours the US-led alliance. This culture presents the US alliance as intuitive and highly ‘efficacious’—a manifestation of consistency in strategic choices over varied circumstances driven by its strategic culture.

CONCLUSION

Australia faces a daunting strategic environment with a shifting balance of power that demands a change in its posture towards national security. The NDS and DSR articulate the consequent evolution of Australia’s view of national security. Examining these documents through the lens of an ‘arms fetishism’ and a binding alliance with the USA offers an understanding of Australia’s strategic culture. In the absence of a national security policy, the DSR and NDS dominate Australia’s strategic narrative. Through these documents, Australia derives its security from modern military equipment, replacing its actual security goals with these tools of security instead. Among these, the most significant military hardware envisaged for Australia’s defence is the nuclear

27. “Latest on US Tariffs, Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/trade-and-investment/latest-us-tariffs>. Accessed on November 25, 2025.

28. “Research Note: The Impact of US Tariffs on Australian Industry,” October 21, 2025, <https://www.australianindustrygroup.com.au/resourcecentre/research-economics/economics-intelligence/2025/the-impact-of-us-tariffs-on-australian-industry/>.

submarine, which appears misaligned with the stated deterrence strategy of *denial*, and is better suited to a strategy of *punishment*. The decision to acquire these submarines through AUKUS is emblematic of Australia's most significant strategic influencer: the USA. AUKUS aims to accelerate Australia's power accretion and replicate the US' hegemonic image. Therefore, Australia's strategy hinges on the US-led global order, and it is thoroughly invested in its perpetuation. Hence, a study of the DSR and NDS reveals that Australian strategic culture is driven by an arms fetish and a strong affinity to the USA, which makes the prevailing strategic preferences appear intuitive and efficacious.

It is fair to acknowledge that the lack of a strategic national security document in the public domain does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. Notwithstanding, the NDS and DSR dominate the public discourse, and repeated references to these documents indicate that the other departments accept them as the primary guides for policy. Therefore, this basic approach, which is defence-centric in its view of national security, peace, and resource allocation, drives Australia's strategic choices. Guided by its strategic culture of arms fetishism and US affinity, Australia's choices will be tested on the anvil of reality in the times to come.