Constructing Like-mindedness

Australia's Contribution to the ANZUS Alliance through Narrative-based Coalition Building

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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, Australia stood as a steadfast ally of the United States and other liberal democracies, actively engaging in major conflicts and bolstering the global liberal order. Since 2008, faced with China's growing assertiveness, Australia has shifted from a supporting ally of the United States to assuming a more proactive, ideational leadership role. This role, often overshadowed by calls for increased material contributions, deserves greater recognition. Canberra's influence extends beyond traditional security measures to significant ideational contributions. By promoting a narrative of a "rules-based" order, Australia cultivates a sense of solidarity among regional partners, enhancing coalition building. This approach underscores Australia's pivotal role in shaping the regional order. Building on existing scholarship, this article evaluates how Canberra's narrative complements traditional burden-sharing, highlighting its multifaceted contributions to regional stability and security.

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Throughout the twentieth century, Australia stood as a close ally of the United States and other liberal democracies. Actively participating in both World Wars and various regional conflicts during the Cold War, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Australia made significant contributions to the alliances of the Liberal Powers. Since 2001, Canberra has also been a key player in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and currently supports liberal democracies in the Ukrainian War against Russian aggression. These actions underscore Australia's unwavering commitment to the US-led liberal global order.

However, since 2008, China's growing power and assertiveness have prompted Australia to evolve from a mere supporter of the U.S. and the rules-based liberal order to a proactive leader in upholding and promoting these liberal values. By actively engaging in coalition-building and fostering ideational affinity among allies, Australia has taken on a more dynamic role.

This article illustrates this process by examining how and when Australia contributes to the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) military alliance through ideational means. The article is structured as follows: the upcoming section investigates Australia's pivotal contributions to its alliances with the

liberal powers since 1914. This examination highlights Australia's material and political support for liberal democracies during wartime and its steadfast ideological commitment during periods of peace, particularly in the face of rising Chinese influence in the Pacific since 2008.

Next, the article presents a thesis on the crucial role of ideational factors and the propagation of ideas in maintaining the strength and efficacy of security alliances like ANZUS. This perspective is essential in understanding Australia's subtle yet significant evolution into a leadership role within its alliances with liberal democracies, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

The article then explores pivotal historical moments when Australia spearheaded new ideological initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing and expanding ideological alignment by championing liberal values and rules-based concepts of security, peace, and global order in the twenty-first century. Finally, the article concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the findings, analysis, and implications of Australia's position vis-à-vis the United States, China, and other neighboring states in the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia's Participation in the Liberal Global Order: From Supporter to Leader

Australia has consistently aligned with liberal powers and democracies, playing a significant role in global and regional conflicts. Its strategic importance was evident when it joined the British Empire in World War I on 4 August 1914. Motivated by loyalty to Britain and a rejection of the illiberal Central Powers, Australia took on significant roles in military campaigns such as the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915 and major battles like the Somme, Ypres, and Passchendaele. Despite heavy human and material losses, Australia's participation underscored its unwavering commitment and staunch opposition to reactionary and expansionist values.[1]

During World War II, Australia reaffirmed its stance against illiberal values on a global scale. Following Britain's declaration of war on Nazi Germany, Australia formally entered the conflict on 3 September 1939. Australian forces engaged in various theaters before Japan and the United States entered the war on 7 December 1941.[2] Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor led to the US declaration of war on the Axis Powers, solidifying the liberal Allies' military coalition against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy. Australian troops served in North

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[1] For a comprehensive discussion of Australia's involvement in World War I and the multiple effects on Australia's society and economy, *see* Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia's War, 1914-18* (New York: Routledge, 2020). This book was first published in 1995 by Allen and Unwin.

[2] Anthony Macdougall, *Australia and the Second World War, 1939–1945* (London: Waverton Press, 2009).

Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe, participating in critical battles such as El Alamein and the Italian campaign.

The expansion of World War II to the Pacific shifted Australia's focus to this region, where its committed participation became vital. Australia made significant contributions to the Allied efforts in the Pacific theater, including the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Kokoda Track campaign, and the liberation of Papua New Guinea. These actions further demonstrated Australia's dedication to the liberal global order and its resilience in the face of authoritarian aggression.

Canberra's participation in World War II marked a significant shift in Australia's allegiance, moving from a loyal supporter of the British Empire to aligning with the United States and other liberal democracies. This decision reflected Australia's desire to play an independent role in global affairs and demonstrated confidence in its national identity.[3] Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, Canberra actively supported the United Nations security system, the United States, and its liberal, anticommunist allies during various regional conflicts.

Notably, Australia was one of the first countries to send troops to the Korean War under the United Nations' command in response to North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Australian forces played pivotal roles in significant battles, such as the Battle of Kapyong and the Battle of Maryang San. This conflict solidified Australia's commitment to the UN's principle of collective security and its strategic partnership with the United States, as formalized by the ANZUS alliance treaty with the United States and New Zealand in 1951.[4]

During the Cold War, Australia participated in the Vietnam War to support the United States and contain Soviet communism globally.[5] Australian troops were involved in various operations, including the well-known Battle of Long Tan in 1966. The war sparked significant controversy in Australia, leading to public protests and debates about conscription, the nation's role in the conflict, and the human and material costs involved. This domestic outcry and opposition prompted Australia to reflect on how and when the country would align with and defend the liberal values championed by the United States and other democratic partners.[6]

Since 1975, Australia's major foreign policy decisions have demonstrated an unwavering and independent commitment to its alliance responsibilities with the

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[3] Lachlan Grant, *Australian Soldiers in Asia–Pacific in World War II* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2014).

[4] Thomas B. Millar, "Australia and the American Alliance." *Pacific Affairs* 37, no. 2 (Summer 1964): 148–60, https://doi.org/.

[5] David McLean, "Australia in the Cold War: A Historiographical Review," *The International History Review* 23, no. 2 (June 2001), 299–321, https://www.jstor.org/.

[6] Joseph M. Siracus and Glen St. John Barclay, "Australia, the United States, and the Cold War, 1945–51: From V-J Day to ANZUS," *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 39–52, https://www.jstor.org/.

United States and ANZUS. This steadfast allegiance, coupled with a strong commitment to liberal economic and political values in the evolving global order since the late 1990s and early 2000s, has earned Canberra a reputation for trust and reliability in global affairs.

In this context, Australia has provided unequivocal material and ideational backing for the GWOT, efforts to counterbalance Chinese expansionism in the Pacific, and Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Australia invoked the ANZUS treaty for the first time and joined the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. Australian forces participated in combat operations, trained Afghan security forces, and contributed to reconstruction efforts. Additionally, Australia took part in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent operations, supporting the Coalition Provisional Authority and training Iraqi security forces. Australia's commitment extended to global counterterrorism efforts, including intelligence sharing and domestic security measures to prevent terrorism.[7]

Since 2008, in response to Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia has supported freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.[8] Canberra has also condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and contributed to international efforts to support Kyiv's defense capabilities through nonlethal military aid, training, humanitarian aid, and economic sanctions against Russia.[9] These actions underscore a significant shift in Australia's international stance, reflecting a proactive and multifaceted approach to regional and global security.

In East Asia, the relationship between China and Australia over the past sixteen years has woven a complex tapestry of economic cooperation, strategic competition, and evolving geopolitical dynamics.[10] As of 2024, Australia emphasizes regional security and global geopolitical issues more than purely national and regional economic interests.

Prior to 2010, Beijing and Canberra enjoyed strong commercial relations. The two countries experienced a period of robust and harmonious interactions, marked by significant growth in bilateral trade. For example, China became Australia's

[7] Isaac Kfir, *18 Years and Counting: Australian Counterterrorism, Threats and Responses* (Barton, Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 2019), http://www.jstor.org/.

[8] Rory Medcalf and James Brown, "Defence Challenges 2035: Securing Australia's Lifelines," Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 2014, 4–5, http://www.jstor.org/.

[9] Tim Watts MP, "Two years on, Australia stands with Ukraine" (press release, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Canberra, Australia, 24 February 2024), https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/.

[10] Peter K. Lee and Andrew Carr, "Australia's Great-Power Threat Perceptions and Leadership Responses," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (October 2022), 77–99, https://www.jstor.org/.

largest trading partner in 2007,[11] and the signing of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) in 2015 further boosted their economic ties, particularly in agriculture, natural resources, and education.[12] As a result, China consistently ranked as the top destination for Australian exports and one of the leading sources of its imports.[13]

Additionally, despite a significant decrease since 2018, Chinese investments in Australia increased exponentially from 2007, focusing prominently on the mining, real estate, agriculture, and infrastructure sectors.[14] Sino-Australian economic cooperation also extended to education and tourism. Chinese students constituted Australia's largest group of international students, contributing significantly to the Australian educational sector.[15] Furthermore, there was a significant influx of Chinese tourists to Australia, which became a major source of revenue for the country's tourism industry. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted this sector after 2019.[16]

The significant influence of the Chinese economy on Australia's foreign policy decisions has led Canberra to implement policies cautiously to avoid upsetting one of its major economic partners. For example, in 2008, the Rudd government withdrew from the initial talks of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to position Australia as a mediator between Washington and Beijing.[17] Australia aimed to balance its economic relationship with China and its security alliance with the United States.

As part of this strategy, Australia hosted the Marine Rotation Force at Darwin (MRF-Darwin), resulting from a 2011 agreement between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard. This security arrangement aimed to enhance defense cooperation between the United States and Australia.[18] By taking a

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[11] Australian Embassy China, "Australia-China Relationship Overview," n.d., https://china.embassy.gov.au/.

[12] "China–Australia Free Trade Agreement" (fact sheet, Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024), https://www.dfat.gov.au/.

[13] "Australia," *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, 2024, https://oec.world/; and "Australia's trade in goods with China in 2020" (fact sheet, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 9 March 2020), 2024, https://www.abs.gov.au/.

[14] Doug Ferguson et al., *Demystifying Chinese investment in Australia 2024*, 20th ed., (Sydney: The University of Sydney and KPMG, April 2024), https://assets.kpmg.com/.

[15] Greg Navarro, "China-Australia Ties: Chinese Students in Australia Continue to Increase," *China Global Television Network*, 15 November 2023, https://news.cgtn.com/.

[16] Henry Belot, "Chinese Tourism to Australia Still in the Doldrums After Pandemic Travel Bans," *The Guardian,* 3 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/.

[17] Indrani Bagchi, "Australia to pull out of 'quad' that excludes China," *Times of India*, 6 February 2008, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/.

[18] "Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama Announce Force Posture Initiatives" (press release, The White House, 16 November 2011), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/.

two-pronged approach, Australian officials sought to demonstrate that they could maintain solid commercial ties with China while sustaining a strong security alignment with the United States without having to choose between them. This strategic approach allowed Canberra to maintain a neutral position between the two countries throughout the early 2000s. Indeed, Australian officials remained convinced that choosing between their economic partner and security patron was unnecessary at that juncture.[19]

However, despite Australia's cautious efforts to pursue a moderate stand in its relations with China since 2008, Chinese assertiveness and the potential threat to regional security and peace have increasingly moved Australia to adopt a sterner position vis-à-vis Beijing's aggressive military and political designs in the Indo-Pacific. For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promoting extensive infrastructure investments in the region, has raised concerns in Australia about strategic implications and debt-trap diplomacy.[20] Consequently, China's actions prompted Australia to adopt several policies that placed both countries on a collision course.

Faced with the dangerous prospect of war and threats to its national security versus continued economic cooperation, Canberra has sought closer strategic alignment with the United States, taking a more active role in the relaunched Quad initiative. This policy has increased tension with China. Compounding this strain, Australia's stance on the South China Sea disputes, advocating for freedom of navigation and overflight, exacerbated its diplomatic friction with Beijing. Ultimately, Australians appear to be tilting toward securing themselves and the region instead of overlooking the potential Chinese threat in exchange for purely economic benefits and interests.

Following Australia's decision to counter Chinese assertiveness, even at the expense of economic gains, Canberra has adopted a bolder foreign policy. First, it accused China of cyberespionage targeting its government and private sector entities, straining bilateral ties.[21] Second, Australian decision makers have raised allegations of Chinese interference in Australian politics and academia, further complicating their relationship.[22] These assertions have further complicated their

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[19] Katherine Lee and Elad Bruhl, "The Deterioration of Australia-China Relations: What Went Wrong?," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 3 (2024): 326–47, https://doi.org/.

[20] Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, and Jonathan Pryke, "Ocean of debt?: Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific," Lowry Institute, 21 October 2019, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/.

[21] Max Mason and Andrew Tillett, "Leaked Documents Reveal Australia Targeted by Chinese Hackers," *Financial Review,* 26 March 2024, https://www.afr.com/; and Paul Mozur et al., "Leaked Files Show the Secret World of China's Hackers for Hire," *New York Times*, 22 February 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/.

[22] Amy Searight, "Countering China's Influence Operations: Lessons from Australia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8 May 2020, https://www.csis.org/.

relations. Third, in the diplomatic arena, Canberra introduced laws aimed at countering foreign interference, widely perceived in Beijing as targeting China, leading to additional diplomatic tensions. Lastly, Australia's call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 in 2020 in Chinese laboratories met with strong opposition from China, resulting in trade sanctions on Australian goods.[23]

Despite the shift from relatively friendly relations to increased tension and confrontation, Canberra and Beijing have maintained high-level diplomatic engagements.[24] Policy makers in both capitals have expressed a willingness to overcome their differences and cooperate on global issues such as climate change and regional peace and stability.[25] Additionally, China and Australia actively participate in regional fora such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), allowing for continued dialogue despite their profoundly differing strategic objectives. Through their participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), both countries have found common economic grounds despite broader geopolitical and strategic tensions.

Thus, contemporary Sino-Australian relations since 2008 reveal a dynamic interplay of economic cooperation against growing strategic and diplomatic strains. As regional and global security scenarios evolve, Sino-Australian relations will continue to oscillate along the cooperation-and-conflict continuum. Their actions and decisions will be crucial for regional security, peace, stability, and prosperity. Ultimately, Australia will prioritize security and peace over purely economic objectives. Australia's track record since 1914 indicates that even at high economic costs, its grand strategic position is to remain close to like-minded states that support and strengthen a regional and global liberal economic and political order.

The Chinese case, along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has further solidified Australia's two-pronged involvement in global affairs. On the material side, Australia has moved swiftly to strengthen its military inventory and regional projection. It has increased its military budget and revamped many critical defense systems through domestic industries and external procurements, such as the September 2021 agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. As reported in March 2023, "Under the Aukus pact, Australia is to get its first nuclear-powered subs—at least three—from

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[23] Jeffrey Wilson, "Australia Shows the World What Decoupling from China Looks Like," *Foreign Policy*, 9 November 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/.

[24] Stephen R. Nagy, "Middle-Power Alignment in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Securing Agency through Neo-Middle-Power Diplomacy," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (July 2022), 161–79, https://www.jstor.org/.

[25] Kirsty Needham, "China, Australia Raise Climate Change, Security at Pacific Leaders' Summit," *Reuters*, 24 August 2023, https://www.reuters.com/.

the U.S. The allies will also work to create a new fleet using cutting-edge technology, including UK-made Rolls-Royce reactors."[26]

The military and political engagements from 1914 to 2024 underscore Australia's commitment to international alliances and its desire to contribute to global peace and security. Experiences in several wars and external threats have shaped Australia's defense policies and its role on the world stage. While these actions demonstrate Canberra's commitment to liberal ideals and notions of security and peace, a critical dimension often overlooked is Australia's increasing leadership in fostering political affinity and constructing like-mindedness among its alliance partners and neighbors. Its involvement in maintaining a rules-based global order is vital to world affairs and its alliance with the United States.

This historical narrative illustrates Australia's evolving role in world affairs, from following the British Empire and supporting the US-led liberal, anticommunist global order to becoming an actor increasingly asserting its leadership within the liberal world and its alliance responsibilities. This ideational component serves as the adhesive that maintains the affinity, integrity, and efficacy of coalitions, particularly long-running military alliances like NATO and ANZUS, during times of relative international peace. The crucial role of ideas, political affinity, and constructing like-mindedness among allies has been pivotal in the protracted operation of modern military alliances since the end of World War II.

Australia's case provides valuable insights into the debate about burden-sharing and contributions among allies. While some focus solely on the material contributions to alliances, it is essential to consider the crucial role of ideas, political affinity, and the development of like-mindedness in maintaining alliance cohesion and effectiveness. Although Australia has not faced heavy criticism for burden-sharing compared to other allies, there have been calls for the country to increase its material contributions to its alliance with the United States, particularly in strengthening military capabilities to enhance deterrence.

However, Canberra's role extends beyond conventional material security measures. For example, Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles highlight Australia's valuable contributions through its geographical location, regional expertise, and soft-power

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[26] Kathryn Armstrong, Frances Mao and Tom Housden, "Aukus deal: US, UK and Australia agree on nuclear submarine project," *BBC*, 14 March 2023, https://www.bbc.com/; and Jeremy Feiler, "Embassy: Australia, U.S. Bolster Cooperation in Anti-terror War," *Inside the Pentagon* 19, no. 2 (9 January 2003), 18–20. http://www.jstor.org/.

ability.[27] In addition to these contributions, Australia actively shapes regional order by promoting and using narratives of a rules-based order.

The research presented in this article indicates that Australia's role in shaping narratives of order constitutes a significant ideational contribution that complements traditional burden-sharing perspectives. This article assesses Australia's ideational impact on the US-led regional security framework and contends that Australia's narrative of order serves as a proactive strategy to foster coalition-building by cultivating a shared sense of like-mindedness among regional partners. The following sections outline the theoretical framework guiding our research and critically examine pivotal historical moments when Australia introduced new ideational initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, guiding the alliance toward embracing and expanding ideational affinity through the promotion of liberal values and rules-based concepts concerning security, peace, and global order in the twenty-first century.

The Power of Discourse in Contributing to US Alliances

US alliances remain essential pillars within the international system, providing collective defense, deterrence, and cooperation among allied states. Realist interpretations in international relations argue that these alliances function similarly to other defensive military pacts, enhancing the security of member states and amplifying their combined strength.[28] By pooling resources and capabilities, allied states foster interoperability and readiness, ensuring a unified response to existing and emerging threats.[29] From this perspective, alliances emerge as crucial mechanisms through which states unite to deter adversaries and safeguard against potential aggressions.[30]

In the post-Cold War era, states confront a significant shift in the nature of threats. US alliances have adapted to this evolving international security landscape by assuming broader and more diverse responsibilities.[31] However, the resurgence of great power competition has refocused the efforts of US alliances on confront-

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[27] Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, "Burden-Sharing: The US, Australia and New Zealand Alliances in the Pacific Islands," *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July 2021), 1045–65, https://doi.org/.

[28] Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

[29] Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[30] Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

[31] Nikoloz G. Esitashvili and Félix E. Martín, "NATO's Internal Deepening, Endurance, and Expansion: Economic Incentives and Gains as an Explanatory Complement to Realist Alliance Theory," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 3 (2020): 17–45, https://doi.org/; and John S. Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 5 (Winter 1994–1995): 763–87, https://doi.org/.

ing the complex challenges posed by states seeking to revise the prevailing international order.[32] These revisionist states aim to challenge the existing US-led global order and employ assertive tactics to subtly alter the status quo. As competition intensifies between the United States and its allies on one side and revisionist powers on the other, tensions have arisen regarding the equitable distribution of responsibilities and contributions among allies.

Following the realist tradition, the discussions in international relations have primarily focused on material power-balancing dynamics. This viewpoint emphasizes that allies must augment their financial, logistical, and military capabilities to bolster the collective power of US alliances, enhancing their ability to deter and defend against threats. Nonetheless, these discussions often neglect the intangible contributions of alliances. Beyond material inputs, allies can also enhance and consolidate the collective power of their alliances through various intangible means. Power extends beyond tangible resources to encompass nuanced social attributes that defy easy quantification.[33]

Among these social dimensions, the capacity to shape knowledge through discourse emerges as a potent yet frequently overlooked source of power.[34] This discursive dimension of power, strategically wielded through distinct speech acts and discourse practices, constitutes an intriguing facet of power dynamics deserving deeper exploration. It is closely intertwined with the framing and control of narratives and the promotion of meticulously crafted norms.[35]

The active role of allies in wielding language and communication as instruments of power becomes apparent when examining the historical engagement of US alliances. These alliances are not passive entities but actively strive to uphold the existing liberal international order and counter challenges from other influential nations. Through language and communication strategies, allies actively promote narratives that reinforce their envisioned world order, leveraging intangible sources of influence to bolster their alliances and operations. As Andrew Hurrell contends, the "capacity to produce and project proposals, conceptions, and theories of order

[32] Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine, "Tracing the Modes of China's Revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: A Comparison with Pre-1941 Shōwa Japan," *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 51, no. 1 (March 2021): 83–99, https://doi.org/.

[33] Peter Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2010); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[34] Peter Digeser, "The Fourth Face of Power," *Journal of Politics* 54, no. 4 (1992): 977–1007.

[35] Karl Gustafsson, "Is China's Discursive Power Increasing?" The 'Power of the Past' in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 3 (July–September 2014), 412, https://www.jstor.org/; and Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, 8.

is a central part of the practice of power."[36] Therefore, employing power through discourses of order represents a significant way allies contribute intangibly to the order-sustaining goals of their alliances.

Beyond their tangible contributions in terms of hard power, allies actively participate in constructing and perpetuating the established order through discursive means. In essence, they strategically deploy their ontological and discursive power to advance the alliance's objectives in maintaining order. As Brittany Morreale notes, *ontological power* entails "the ability to influence the behaviors of others to align with or reinforce a nation's desired worldview. It centers on the creation of a 'brand' that communicates an existential world order, value system, and collective identity to partners."[37] Similarly, *discursive power* involves "the production of effects through the mobilization of particular discourses."[38] Allies harness these forms of power by mobilizing distinct concepts of order, disseminating narratives that articulate what a legitimate order should encompass and how it should function. Such discursive contributions assume heightened significance given the multifaceted competition faced by the United States and its allies across their regional domains of influence. As analysts have observed, regional rivalries in areas like the Indo-Pacific have evolved into a "battle of narratives."[39]

Within this domain of geopolitical competition, allies like Australia assume a pivotal role in mobilizing and disseminating ideas of order through strategic narratives.[40] These narratives serve as *mechanisms of reiteration*, perpetuating and institutionalizing discourses that define what constitutes a natural, commonsense, legitimate, and collectively beneficial world order. Through this process, such narratives propagate a distinct vision of global order that has the potential to shape perceptions, inspire alignment, and build legitimacy.[41]

Accordingly, these narratives, categorized by Alister Miskimmon and his colleagues as *international system narratives*, also function as proactive *mechanisms for coalition-building*, producing an overlapping sense of like-mindedness among re-

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[36] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.

[37] Brittany L. Morreale, "Ontological Power: Narrative in a New Era of Competition," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 3 (May–June 2022): 25–40, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

[38] Gustafsson, "Is China's Discursive Power Increasing?," 412.

[39] Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2020).

[40] Alice Dell'Era and Félix E. Martín, "Mobilizing Ideas of Order: Burden-sharing in the US–Japan and ANZUS Alliances," *Asian Politics & Policy* 16, no. 2 (April 2024): 191–208, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/.

[41] Morreale, "Ontological Power," 26.

gional partners.[42] In doing so, they become valuable in coalition-building efforts, influencing the environment within which more tangible and practical forms of contribution are situated. Indeed, these narratives are instrumental in framing actions and reinforcing the ideological framework that supports them.[43]

In essence, contributions to US alliances extend beyond material resources to encompass complex webs of discourse and narrative construction. While hard power remains crucial, the intangible dimensions of power wielded through discourse emerge as equally essential assets in navigating the intricate dynamics of contemporary geopolitical competition. The following section explores how Australia actively contributes to these evolving trends.

Australia and the Mobilization of the Rules-Based Order

While not a primary target of extensive burden-sharing criticisms like other allies, Australia has encountered calls to augment its material contributions to its alliance with the United States. Like other US allies, these calls emphasize the need for Canberra to strengthen its military capabilities to bolster the alliance's overall deterrence capabilities. Despite Australia's identity and role as a global *middle power*, Canberra's capacity to sustain its alliance with the United States through conventional measures of material power is constrained.[44] Nevertheless, this does not diminish Australia's role as a *pivotal power* capable of influencing the geopolitical, strategic, and economic dynamics of a region undergoing transition.[45]

Ranked only sixth in comprehensive power in the Asian region, Canberra is acknowledged for wielding more influence than typically attributed to states with similar resource limitations.[46] Middle powers like Australia can shape the international environment through avenues beyond pure hard power. While there is no

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[42] Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013); and Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

[43] Dell'Era and Martín, "Mobilizing Ideas of Order."

[44] Andrew Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?: A Systemic Impact Approach," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84, https://doi.org/.

[45] Anthony Bergin, "Time for Australia to Stop Calling Itself a 'Middle Power'," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 8 January 2019, http://www.aspi.org.au/.

[46] Lowy Institute, "Australia," *Asia Power Index 2023*, 2024, https://power.lowyinstitute.org/.

consensus on the exact criteria defining *middle powers*,[47] many recognize their capacity to exert influence through niche diplomacy and norm entrepreneurship.[48]

In alignment with this perspective, Gareth Evans, Australian Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996, articulated during a speech in Santiago that:

> the characteristic method of middle power diplomacy is coalition building with 'like-minded' countries. It usually also involves "niche diplomacy", which means concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field. Countries which are not powerful enough in most circumstances to impose their will may be persuasive enough to have like-minded others see their point of view, and to act accordingly.[49]

Considering the above points, it can be argued that Australia's role in advancing the objectives of its alliance with Washington extends beyond traditional material security measures. Instead, it encompasses a diverse array of tools more character-istic of how middle powers wield influence. For instance, Wallis and Powles un-derscore Canberra's significant contributions through its geographical positioning, regional expertise, and soft power.[50]

Moreover, Australia actively shapes regional dynamics by mobilizing and advo-cating for narratives of a rules-based order (RBO). As further discussed below, the mobilization of RBO discourses by middle-power allies, such as Australia, repre-sents a crucial yet often overlooked method for allies to advance alliance objectives and contribute to practices that maintain international order.[51]

The phrase *rules-based order* gained prominence in the early 2010s as an alterna-tive to the prevailing concept of a *liberal international order*. It generally refers to a framework of norms, values, rules, and institutions that formed the foundation of the postwar global order. In essence, a RBO aligns closely with the principles of the liberal international order, seeking to uphold a system of global governance rooted

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[47] Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power?"; Jeffrey Robertson, "Middle-Power Definitions: Confusion Reigns Supreme," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (2017): 355–70, https://doi.org/; and Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al., *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[48] Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo, "Regional Security Strategies of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (May 2015): 185–216, https://doi.org/; Andrew F. Cooper, ed., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Andrew Carr and Daniel Baldino, "An Indo-Pacific Norm Entrepreneur?: Australia and Defence Diplomacy," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (2015): 30–47, https://doi.org/.

[49] Gareth Evans, "Middle Power Diplomacy" (speech, Santiago, Chile, 29 June 2011), https://www.gevans.org/.

[50] Wallis and Powles, "Burden-Sharing."

[51] Dell'Era and Martín, "Mobilizing Ideas of Order."

in democratic principles, human rights, free trade, and the rule of law. However, unlike the more clearly defined liberal international order, the concept of a RBO is often perceived as more ambiguous and subject to varying interpretations.[52]

References to the RBO have become prevalent in the foreign policy and diplomatic discourse of various international actors, with Australia emerging as an early advocate of this linguistic shift. As early as 2008, the RBO began to feature prominently in speeches and statements by key Australian officials. For instance, in the 2008 National Security Statement, then–Prime Minister Kevin Rudd identified the RBO as a foundational principle guiding Australia's national security strategy.[53] Under his leadership, the concept of the RBO gained traction within Australian security discourse. While not explicitly using this specific term, the *2009 Defense White Paper* articulated a distinct set of principles that laid the groundwork for the RBO narrative.[54]

Subsequently, the discourse surrounding the RBO has continued to evolve within Canberra's strategic frameworks and the pronouncements of senior officials. It was prominently featured in subsequent strategic documents, including the *2013 National Security Strategy* and the *Defence White Paper* during the Gillard government.[55] The concept has since been consistently integrated into successive strategic publications, including the *2016 Defence White Paper*, the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, and most recently, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, and the latest *2024 National Defence Strategy*.[56]

[52] Ben Scott, "Rules-Based Order: What's in a Name?," *The Interpreter*, 30 June 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/; and Peter Beinart, "The Vacuous Phrase at the Core of Biden's Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, 22 June 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/.

[53] "The First National Security Statement to the Parliament Address by the Prime Minister of Australia The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP" (press release, 12 April 2008), https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/.

[54] Nick Bisley and Benjamin Schreer, "Australia and the Rules-Based Order in Asia: Of Principles and Pragmatism," *Asian Survey* 58, no. 2 (2018): 302–19, https://doi.org/.

[55] *2013 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013), https://www.defence.gov.au/; and *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security* (Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2013), https://apo.org.au/.

[56] *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2016), https://www.defence.gov.au/; *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), https://www.dfat.gov.au/; *Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020), https://www.defence.gov.au/; *Defence Strategic Review* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023), https://www.defence.gov.au/; and *National Defence Strategy* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024), https://www.defence.gov.au/.

Australia's discourses and rhetoric surrounding the rules-based order (RBO) have coalesced into a structured "three-step narrative," encompassing key elements that shape its foreign policy stance:[57]

1. **Identification of an International Order Based on Rules**: Australian officials emphasize the essential features of what they perceive as the established international order. They assert that order hinges on adherence to rules, promoting open, transparent, and cooperative interactions grounded in the rule of law.[58]

2. **Articulation of Threats to the RBO**: This narrative highlights actions that contravene established rules as destabilizing forces challenging the current order. Early formulations of this view were evident in Prime Minister Rudd's 2008 speech, where he juxtaposed China's concept of a "harmonious world" with the notion of being a "responsible stakeholder," arguing that adherence to rules is fundamental to global harmony. Over time, the perception of threats to the RBO has intensified, particularly as revisionist states increasingly challenge the rules and norms underpinning it.[59]

3. **Perception of Adverse Effects of Undermining the RBO**: Australian strategic documents, such as the *2023 Defence Strategic Review*, explicitly identify threats to the RBO, such as China's actions in the South China Sea.[60] Such behaviors are seen as jeopardizing the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, which directly impacts Australia's national interests. This narrative underscores the distinction between an order based on rules versus one based on might, asserting that only the former can safeguard the rights and security of all states, regardless of size or power.[61]

As part of this narrative, Canberra has committed itself to protecting the RBO, viewing it as essential to its core strategic interests. This commitment has become a foundational aspect of Australia's comprehensive foreign policy and security

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[57] Melissa Conley Tyler, Allan Gyngell, and Bryce Wakefield, eds., *Australia and the Rules-Based International Order* (Deakin, Australia: The Australian Institute of international Affairs, 2021).

[58] Kevin Rudd, "The Australia-US Alliance and Emerging Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region, The Brookings Institution, Washington" (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 31 March 2008), https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/; Julie Bishop, "Indo-Pacific Oration II" (speech, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 18 July 2017), https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/; and Frances Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific: Australia's Perspective" (speech, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 29 April 2019), https://www.dfat.gov.au/.

[59] Rudd, "The Australia-US Alliance and Emerging Challenges."

[60] Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific"; *National Defence Strategy*, 6; and *Defence Strategic Review*, 23.

[61] Adamson, "The Indo-Pacific"; Scott Morrison, "Address to Asialink 'Where We Live'," (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 25 June 2019), https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/.

practices. Consequently, the RBO narrative shapes Australia's broader vision for global security and informs its interactions with regional and international stakeholders.[62]

In short, Australia's deployment of the RBO narrative serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it acts as a mechanism for reiteration within official foreign policy and security rhetoric, seeking to legitimize and garner consensus around the desirable attributes of the established order. Secondly, it operates as a normative tool, promoting a rules-based approach to maintaining global order, which is crucial amidst evolving geopolitical challenges.[63]

In alignment with this stance, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* unequivocally affirmed that "Australia will continue to be an active and vocal advocate for a rules-based international order."[64] This commitment was echoed by then–Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, who emphasized Canberra's imperative to "define a new rules-based order and encourage very strongly all major state actors to accord with these rules."[65]

Accordingly, the integration of RBO discourses into Australia's official rhetoric signifies its active engagement in shaping and reinforcing US-led ordering practices.[66] By employing the RBO narrative, Australia actively contributes to advocacy efforts that uphold the prevailing conception of international order.[67] This role positions Australia not merely as an observer but as a proactive influencer in the ideational framework within which it operates.

Secondly, the RBO narrative serves as a framework for framing Canberra's policies and engagements with like-minded partners. It operates as a *mechanism for coalition-building*, facilitating closer external relations underpinned by shared commitments to an RBO.[68] Australia's adeptness in forging defense networks and diplomatic ties has consistently earned it favorable rankings in categories such as the Asia Power Index.[69] These relations are frequently framed around the mutual pursuit of an RBO, underscoring Canberra's efforts to foster cooperation across a spectrum of initiatives.

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[62] Bisley and Schreer, "Australia and the Rules-Based Order in Asia."

[63] Rebecca Strating, "Norm Contestation, Statecraft and the South China Sea: Defending Maritime Order," *Pacific Review* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1–31, https://doi.org/.

[64] *Defence Strategic Update*, 24.

[65] Ben Scott, "Why Australia Hasn't given up on a Rules-Based World Order," *Australian Financial Review*, 27 July 2020, https://www.afr.com/.

[66] Alexandra Homolar and Oliver Turner, "Narrative Alliances: The Discursive Foundations of International Order," *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (January 2024): 203–20, https://doi.org/.

[67] Carr and Baldino, "An Indo-Pacific Norm Entrepreneur?"; Strating, "Norm Contestation, Statecraft and the South China Sea"; and Homolar and Turner, "Narrative Alliances."

[68] *National Defence Strategy*, 50.

[69] "Australia," *Asia Power Index 2023*.

References to the RBO are routinely integrated into Australian officials' discourse concerning a wide array of cooperative endeavors. These include bilateral engagements, such as those with Japan and the United States; trilateral partnerships involving Japan and India, India and France, India and Indonesia, as well as quadrilateral arrangements with the United States, Japan, and India, and the United States, Japan, and the Philippines. These cooperative frameworks exemplify Australia's commitment to leveraging the RBO narrative to strengthen partnerships and promote shared strategic objectives on the global stage.

For instance, Australian officials have frequently emphasized that their shared commitment to upholding the RBO forms the foundation of Canberra's close partnership with Japan, another key US ally in the Indo-Pacific region.[70] This mutual interest underpins a web of initiatives through which Canberra and Tokyo collaborate, all justified and framed in the context of advancing a regional and international order based on rules. Canberra's RBO narrative has been instrumental in linking Australia to Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Commentators have noted Canberra's proactive role in shaping the Indo-Pacific construct, which aligns closely with the principles of the RBO.[71]

While Australia has not independently issued its own FOIP vision or strategy, it frames its increasing diplomatic and military engagements in the region within the broader narrative of safeguarding the RBO.[72] This reliance on the RBO narrative legitimizes Australia's cooperative efforts with regional partners as essential for building and maintaining regional order.[73] The RBO narrative also serves as a signaling mechanism to the United States and other allies, facilitating coordination and alignment on shared strategic objectives.[74]

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[70] Julie Bishop, "Japan National Press Club" (speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 15 October 2013, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/; and Julie Bishop, "Address to Australia New Zealand Chamber of Commerce in Japan (Anzccj), Tokyo" (speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 February 2016, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/.

[71] Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*.

[72] Lavina Lee, "Australia and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Strategy for the Defence of a 'Rules-Based Order'," in *The Indo-Pacific Theatre: Strategic Visions and Frameworks*, ed. Srabani Roy Choudhury (London: Routledge India, 2022), 50–72.

[73] Ryosuke Hanada, "The Role of U.S.-Japan-Australia-India Cooperation, or the 'Quad' in FOIP: A Policy Coordination Mechanism for a Rules-Based Order," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/.

[74] In this respect, Natalie Klein argues that the use of the RBO discourse should be complemented with a rhetoric more narrowly emphasizing international law, given the inherent distinction between rules-based order and international law. *See*: Natalie Klein, "Australia's Maritime Security Challenges: Juggling International Law and Informal Agreements in an International Rules-Based Order," *International Law Studies* 99, no. 1 (2022): 375–407, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/.

Interestingly, the RBO narrative has also been employed to contextualize AU-KUS, the trilateral partnership between Canberra, London, and Washington announced in September 2021. This partnership gained attention for its historic decision by the United Kingdom and the United States to transfer nuclear-powered submarine technology to a third party for the first time since the 1950s. In their initial joint statement announcing the initiative, the three members emphasized that they were "guided by our enduring ideals and shared commitment to the international rules-based order."[75]

However, as noted by Jamal Barnes and Samuel Makinda, the launch of AUKUS coincided with actions perceived as challenging the RBO it aimed to protect.[76] Despite initial tensions between France and Australia over the canceled submarine agreement, Australia has managed to avoid significant negative backlash. In fact, relations with France, while not restored to their pre-AUKUS closeness, have been advanced under the banner of promoting "an international order based on the rule of law and agreed norms."[77] This approach resulted in the issuance of a New Agenda for Bilateral Cooperation and the initiation of discussions for a Reciprocal Access Agreement.

In our view, Australia's strategic framing of AUKUS through the RBO narrative played a crucial role in mitigating negative repercussions and shielding the initiative from domestic criticism and skepticism. By presenting the partnership as a necessary step to uphold an RBO under strain, Canberra positioned itself as a proactive defender of international norms and stability.[78]

Overall, as a mechanism for reinforcing and fostering coalitions, the RBO narrative serves as a conduit to cultivate a shared sense of like-mindedness between Canberra and its partners, thereby legitimizing deeper cooperation. While the notion that the United States and its allies and partners uphold similar values and principles is not new and has frequently been emphasized in their relationships, the characterization of these entities as *like-minded* has gained traction as they adopt discourses centered around the RBO. *Like-mindedness* is often cited as a fundamental quality for building coalitions against revisionist powers seeking to disrupt the

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[75] "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS" (press release, The White House, 15 September 2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/.

[76] Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda, "Testing the Limits of International Society?: Trust, AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security," *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (July 2022): 1307–25, https://doi.org/.

[77] "Australia-France Roadmap – A New Agenda for Bilateral Cooperation" (fact sheet, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023), https://www.dfat.gov.au/.

[78] Criticism in Australia covered different areas: concerns over the lack of domestic consultations, concerns over the potential for nuclear nonproliferation, as well as concerns over increased dependency on the United States. *See*: Patricia O'Brien, "2 Years On, AUKUS Continues to Raise Questions," *The Diplomat*, 15 September 2023, https://thediplomat.com/; and Shirley Scott, "The Strategic Interplay between AUKUS, the NPT, and the Rules-Based International Order," *Security & Defence PLuS*, 21 October 2022, https://securityanddefenceplus.plusalliance.org/.

status quo.[79] However, the exact definition of *like-mindedness* remains elusive, with some attributing it to shared values while others highlight shared interests.[80]

Australia has also embraced the concept of like-mindedness, although, according to Melissa Conley Tyler and Megan Vu, senior officials have exercised caution in its use compared to foreign policy analysts and think tanks.[81] The authors suggest that Australian officials tend to avoid framing relations in ways that suggest rigid divisions into exclusive blocs, particularly the portrayal of a "West" versus "the rest" dichotomy.[82] To understand Australia's interpretation of *like-mindedness*, one can examine the language employed by former Foreign Minister Evans:

> The concept of "like-mindedness" has been changing in interesting ways. In the past the countries in whose company Australia certainly felt most comfortable were those sharing the abiding values of Western liberal democracy, the living standards of advanced industrial societies, and preferably speaking English as well: Britain, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and occasionally the Scandinavians and some other West Europeans. And other countries – I would assume the Latin Americans for a start – had their equivalent comfort groupings. But for all of us these days, the term "like-minded" much more often describes those who, whatever their prevailing value systems, share specific interests and are prepared to work together to do something about them.[83]

This suggests that Australia has shifted away from linking like-mindedness exclusively with the West and instead views it as an issue-based dimension. In this context, Australia's deployment of the RBO narrative allows it to foster a broadly resonant perception of like-mindedness. For Canberra, like-minded partners encompass those actors, whether major, middle, or smaller powers, with whom it can collaborate to uphold an RBO. Collaboration with such actors is normalized as they all seek to protect themselves and navigate potential challenges from more powerful states.[84]

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[79] Andreas B. Forsby, "How 'Like-Mindedness' Became the Key Attribute of the China Containment Strategy," *The Diplomat*, 9 February 2023, https://thediplomat.com/.

[80] Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Navigating the Narratives of Indo-Pacific: 'Rules,' 'Like-Mindedness', and 'De-Risking' in the Eyes of Southeast Asia," *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 9 (2023): 51–56, https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/.

[81] Melissa Conley Tyler and Megan Vu, "The Translator: 'Like-Minded Countries'," *The Interpreter*, 11 April 2024, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/.

[82] Conley Tyler and Vu. "The Translator."

[83] Evans, "Middle Power Diplomacy."

[84] Malcom Turnbull, "Doorstop—Hong Kong" (speech, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 12 November 2017), https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/.

Given Australia's engagement with a diverse array of global actors, many of whom do not fit the traditional mold of like-minded partners, the RBO narrative acts as a catalyst for a more inclusive concept of like-mindedness centered on an interest in a stable and rules-based international environment. This approach resonates more broadly across a larger group of actors and helps mitigate the often-polarizing rhetoric of its American ally, which tends to focus more on the "democracy vs autocracy" dichotomy.[85]

In essence, Australia's strategic use of the RBO narrative significantly contributes to reshaping the discourse on order and like-mindedness at the global level. Australia broadens the range of potential partners by adopting a more issue-oriented interpretation of like-mindedness. It fosters a broader coalition committed to maintaining the stability of the existing global order. By influencing the ideational framework within which the US–Australia alliance operates, Canberra actively supports a critical aspect of the alliance's overarching mission to establish order. This reliance on discursive strategies demonstrates Australia's deployment of ontological and discursive forms of power. Such strategies go beyond mere rhetoric, catalyzing substantial cooperation and collective coordination in an increasingly intricate and uncertain global landscape.

Conclusion

Australia's commitment and engagement in the international system and the Indo-Pacific are grounded in a fundamental principle that guides its foreign policy: safeguarding national security and promoting regional peace, stability, and prosperity. As extensively discussed earlier, Australia has consistently opposed authoritarianism, revisionism, expansionism, militarism, and aggression against sovereign states. Since 1914, it has steadfastly aligned itself with liberal international principles and norms that counter these destabilizing forces, aiming to uphold global and regional security, peace, and prosperity.

From the late-2000s onward, Canberra has expanded its role within its alliance with the United States and in the broader international community. The rise of China and its increasing assertiveness, coupled with perceptions of potential US decline and disengagement from global affairs, have compelled Australia to evolve from a supporting ally of the United States in maintaining and securing the rules-based liberal order to assuming a more proactive, ideational leadership role. During this period, Canberra has emerged as a proactive advocate and promoter

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85 Nicole Gaouette, "Biden Says US Faces Battle to 'Prove Democracy Works'," *CNN*, 26 March 2021, https://www.cnn.com/.

of international order by actively deploying and mobilizing discourses and narratives centered on an RBO.

As highlighted earlier, Australia's reliance on the RBO narrative reflects its use of ontological and discursive power to advance the alliance's strategic objectives. Firstly, this narrative allows Canberra to articulate and shape a distinct vision of order that aligns closely with that of its alliance partners. Secondly, by consistently relying on such narratives, Australia moves beyond mere rhetoric to foster broader alignment with a diverse range of like-minded regional and global partners. In doing so, Australia plays a pivotal role in shaping the ideational landscape within which more practical forms of cooperation can be realized, thereby contributing significantly to coalition-building efforts based on shared values and principles.

This approach presents several limitations and challenges. Firstly, the narrative relies on a vague and ambiguous interpretation of rules and the rule of law, which exposes it to criticism regarding clarity and consistency.[86] Secondly, while Australia strongly advocates for the RBO, the narrative can be perceived as selective and inconsistent, as evidenced by the AUKUS case. Thirdly, and significantly, the narrative risks exacerbating Australia's already strained relations with Beijing. While not explicitly directed at China, Australia's emphasis on a rules-based narrative revolves around norms that China is frequently accused of violating, inadvertently contributing to a covert, indirect securitization process.[87]

Moreover, Australia's enduring economic reliance on China poses a formidable challenge. Despite discussions about diversifying away from China, Beijing remains Australia's primary trading partner. Even as Canberra seeks to broaden its economic ties, China's substantial economic role complicates Australia's ability to robustly confront perceived Chinese actions contrary to the RBO. While Australia can leverage its RBO narrative in foreign policy and security discourse, it exercises caution to avoid potential retaliatory measures. Striking a balance between these competing priorities remains a nuanced and delicate challenge for Australian policy makers.

Despite these limitations, mobilizing narratives of an RBO remains a crucial component of Canberra's dual strategy toward China. On one hand, Australia has intensified its security commitments within ANZUS by reaffirming traditional liberal principles, bolstering its leadership and dedication to the alliance both

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86 Scott, "Rules-Based Order"; Ben Scott, "But What Does 'Rules-Based Order' Mean?," *The Interpreter*, 2 November 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/; Stefan Talmon, "Rules-Based Order v. International Law?," *German Practice in International Law*, 20 January 2019, https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/; and Stewart Patrick, "World Order: What, Exactly, Are the Rules?," *Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2016): 7–27, https://doi.org/.

87 Alice Dell'Era, "Securitizing Beijing through the Maritime Commons: The 'China Threat' and Japan's Security Discourse in the Abe Era," *Pacific Review* 37, no. 1 (January 2024),147–80, https://doi.org/.

ideationally and materially through enhancing coalition deterrent capabilities and defending the rules-based global order. On the other hand, Australia has actively sought to engage politically and economically with its Indo-Pacific neighbors while managing its relationship with China.

Central to Australia's concerns are China's assertive actions across the Strait of Taiwan, the Philippines, and the wider Indo-Pacific region, which Canberra perceives as undermining the RBO. If China's economic growth were not coupled with aggressive military expansionism and threats to Australia's national security and regional stability, Canberra might continue to pursue a robust economic and political relationship with China while upholding its liberal economic and political principles at regional and global levels.

In navigating these complexities, Australia finds itself in a challenging position. It must balance bolstering its military and deterrent capabilities and leadership within ANZUS and among regional partners, with the imperative to engage economically and politically with China without appearing to endorse or enable behavior that undermines regional stability and the RBO. Australia aims to avoid a policy of containment, akin to the British appeasement policy toward Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, while also refraining from outright appeasement that might embolden China's expansionist tendencies.

Therefore, Australia continues to pursue a prudent policy that emphasizes soft-power dimensions and avoids either extreme of confrontation or appeasement toward China, seeking instead to maintain stability and uphold the RBO in the Indo-Pacific region. ✪

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